

# Setting Sons

©Jack Frost & The Hooded Crow



©wyrdjax 2009  
[Books Online](#)

# Chapter 1

---

Reef Debyal sat behind his huge mahogany desk and looked very irritated indeed that he'd been distracted from his money counting. Reef was in his mid forties and was a very imposing man. He had deep-set dark eyes and black, cropped hair and his solid six foot frame was dressed in a smart but comfortable black tunic. He'd inherited his late father's jewellery sales business and properties, and now Reef was twice the success his father had ever been. Opposite him sat Kim, Reef's first wife and one of three, also mother to three of Reef's seven children. Kim was ten years younger than her husband and had been wed to him for ten years, since she was legally old enough at fourteen. Kim sat sturdily, with an air of firmness and confidence, although her eyes remained downcast, as was done, until she was told otherwise.

"Damn the slut." Reef heaved at last. "Showing enough to cause talk."

"Yes." Kim replied, eyes still downcast.

"You may speak Kim." Reef waved his permission for his wife to converse with him, rather than be confined to 'yes' or 'no' answers. Kim raised her eyes to look at her husband and hoped the anger and resentment at his own stupidity and arrogance didn't show through. The slut in question was a servant in the Debyal household and Reef couldn't even remember what she looked like, let alone her name. It seemed she was sixteen and now had a belly full of child, courtesy of Reef. She obviously had no husband to bribe, pay off, or coerce into keeping quiet as to the parentage of the bastard child.

"See a place is bought for her in State Seven, Kim." Reef said in annoyance at this inconvenience. Kim nodded. State Seven was the poorest State by far and like another world compared to the environment of the Debyal family. One more bastard of a single mother would never be noticed.

"Reef what if this girl demands attention after the child is born?" Kim asked.

"Demand?" Reef snapped. "A woman making demands?"

"No of course not. I'll rephrase that." Kim lowered her eyes automatically at the admonishment. "What if the child inquires about its parentage via its mother?"

"Hardly Kim. Every woman has her price and this serving girl ... er ..."

"Enid."

"Enid, yes. She's no exception. She'll keep her mouth shut. Trust me."

\*\*\*

Eight months later and it looked like Enid wasn't to be given the option of silence or voice. Her poverty stricken life during her wretched pregnancy had made her weak and sickly. Despite this, tears of pure love and joy streamed down the young girl's face when she heard the loud, healthy cry of her new-born daughter. Tears of grief soon replaced the happiness when it became obvious that the Enid wasn't going to survive. She was too sick and feverish to even suckle the infant.

Midwife Lalin settled the baby and tended to Enid as best she could. It was a losing battle.

"Suzanne! Sit with mother and child. I could no more sit and watch needless death than I could suffocate them myself. Stay with them." The old nurse's voice was tinged with anger as she dragged her hair up into a knot on the top of her head, then covered it with a cloth cap so it was out of sight of the men-folk, as was done. Lalin then struggled, cursing, into her suppressor, which was a series of tight, boned and stiffened sheets of linen the flattened Lalin's bust that had long since flattened of its own accord. This was also 'as it was done'.

It was Justine, wife three, that answered the door of the Debyal Mansion. She visibly stiffened when she saw Midwife Lalin standing on the step.

"My husband threw you out of this household, charlatan. You cannot come begging for re-employment." Justine said haughtily.

"That I'd never do, Lady Debyal, nor have I the need to. Would you please tell Lord Debyal I have need to speak to him urgently?" Lalin looked evenly at Justine. Justine had given birth to two consecutive daughters and this was, in turn, after wife two, Nancette, had just given Reef a Daughter too. Reef had declared the Midwife incompetent and fired her before Justine's last daughter had finished her first feed. Justine had agreed wholeheartedly with Reef, thus deflecting some of the 'blame' away from herself.

"Lord Debyal is busy, old crone. You are in no position to decide what is important to him and what is not." Justine snapped.

"What is it Justine?" Kim said from inside the house. "You'll disturb Lord Debyal and he will not be ... you!" She glared at Lalin, who glared right back. Kim was definitely not a stupid woman. She knew that Lalin was still working and she knew where. State Seven. The hospital was a slum, like the rest of it, with no lighting, heating, and very

few drugs. Lalin was a midwife and Kim remembered very well the last time she'd had business to attend to in State Seven. "I'll deal with this, Justine." Kim dismissed the younger wife. Lalin was still kept on the step, but heard Lalin's reasons for calling. The serving girl had the fever. Kim merely shrugged.

"The drugs needed are available, Lady Debyal." Lalin tried not to snarl. "Obviously neither Enid or the hospital can afford these expensive medicines."

"Lord Debyal is not a charity." Kim said flatly. "He was good enough to make provisions at the time. What happens now is out of his hands."

"It will be anything but that if that baby has no mother to raise it." Lalin nodded. "You with me?"

"Stay there." Kim set her jaw and closed the door on Lalin.

\*\*\*

"So you're telling me that useless bitch can't even give birth properly?" Reef stormed. "So she gets herself sick? What do I care if she lives or dies? She's nobody! Tell Lalin I'll have her publicly flogged for disrespect if she pesters my household again."

"Reef if the girl dies, who will raise the child?" Kim said meaningfully, giving Reef the chance to seethingly digest this. He banged his hands on the desk and Kim cowered slightly.

"Damn it to hell!" He roared. "Do I deserve this? Do I?" Kim shook her head and tried not to look too terrified of her husband's temper. "I'll look kindly on the slut. This will cost me a damned fortune! Pay for her medicines, Kim. I'll contact an associate of mine who owns a small farm. She can work her keep there and I'll come to some arrangement regarding the upkeep of the boy. I do not need this!"

"Boy? What boy?" Kim asked quietly.

"What? What boy do you think? You stupid woman! That slut's bastard of course!" Reef bellowed and Kim swallowed hard. "What?"

"Reef, the baby is a girl." Kim nodded slightly. Reef looked at her as though he hadn't understood her. Then he started to laugh. Kim watched him nervously.

"You are even more stupid than I first thought! Girl? Female? Why the hell are we having this blasted conversation?" Reef ranted, turning a dangerous shade of purple. "Don't you think I have enough dead wood to support with the three daughters I have here? Tell that old hag out there she's not getting a penny! You hear me? If the slut dies, she dies. That's her problem, not mine!"

"The baby?"

"You are sorely testing me, Kim." Reef snarled. "As far as I'm concerned, there is no baby!"

# Chapter 2

---

Drea's earliest memories were of cold. The orphanage nurseries were cold. The grey walls were cold. The hard, stone floors were cold. Most of the staff were cold. The orphanage itself stood on a hill where the winds swept relentlessly from all four directions. In time, no one noticed the cold, or the bleak surroundings. They were alive, at least.

"Drea!" Madame Jilly came trotting out into the yard where Drea and three other children were feeding the goats. Drea's face broke out into a wide smile. She looked forward to the days when Madame Jilly was there. Madame Jilly sang and smiled and played and made the children laugh. She also sat in lessons with them while Master Fox droned on about rules and propriety. Master Fox taught both sets of lessons, one for girls and one for boys. The laws and expectations of society were drilled into every little head, even in the orphanage.

"Oh look at the state of you Drea Silver!" Madame Jilly wailed, looking at Drea's grubby face and hands.

"I'm feeding goats, Madame." Drea laughed. "It's not easy to stay clean!"

"You grub!" Madame Jilly took the feed bads from Drea and gave them to another girl. "Come with me."

"But I haven't finished ..."

"Stop arguing! You really are a woeful child." Madame Jilly rolled her eyes then smiled at Drea. Drea took Madame Jilly's hand and was led to the orphanage's grey, stone washroom.

"Bath?" Drea said in surprise. "Madame Jilly it can't be my turn already. I think you've made a mistake." She nodded as Madame Jilly began filling the tub with the usual cloudy cold water.

"No I haven't." Madame Jilly hefted another bucketful. The orphanage, as well as many other buildings, had no hot water.

"Are you sure? One ... two ... three weeks ... Eeep!" Drea wriggled as Madame Jilly began pulling Drea's tatty smock from her.

"Drea this is a very special occasion." Madame Jilly stopped and smiled at Drea.

"Eleven years old already. I remember when you were brought here by a crooked old nurse."

"You've looked after me well." Drea said seriously, peeling off the suppressor that had absolutely nothing to suppress. Drea had been forced into the infernal thing a year ago, then her hair had been pulled and tugged into a knot and covered with a cloth cap. This was the decent way that girls presented themselves. If a strand of hair was loose, or a suppressor not tight enough, then a sound beating was in order with a birch. Drea and the birch were quite well acquainted. "May I ask what the special occasion is? It isn't my birthday." Drea frowned. Her birthday being the day she was handed over to the orphanage.

"We're getting very special visitors, Drea." Madame Jilly said, helping Drea into the tub. Drea's breath caught in her chest as her body hit the cold water. "Lord Cassidy Hellion and his party have travelled all the way from Brightplain!"

"Brightplain!" Drea said in awe. Master Fox had told them all about the other Zones. There was Brightplain, Demihold and this one which was Crull. Brightplain sounded like a fairytale to Drea. Warm water, hot sunny days and short barmey nights. It had beaches with golden sand and bright blue seas and castles made from white polished stone.

"He's travelling with two of his wives en route to Demihold on business. Lord Hellion has the finest vineyards in the land and many, many shops and stalls."

"Why is Crull the poorest Zone, Madame Jilly?" Drea asked as Madame Jilly unknotted her long, fair hair to wash it. Madame Jilly sighed sadly.

"It always has been. That's the curse of being stuck in the middle, literally. Any troubles between Brightplain and Demihold and Crull is in the direct crossfire. Master Fox will have told you this in lessons."

"Well not really, Madame Jilly. Those lessons are for the boys, not us." Drea frowned. Jilly scowled and scrubbed Drea's hair with a soggy cake of soap that was used for everything.

Madame Jilly was quite well learned, courtesy of her teacher father. The man had been hanged as a radical extremist when one particular Cell was running Crull. In Jilly's forty year life, there'd been a total of eighty-two Cells running Crull. One Cell merely attacked, terrorised and overthrew the next and it was ordinary people who suffered. Due to the strict laws on women and education, Madame Jilly kept her intelligence guarded. For her to give a political opinion could see her jailed and beaten in public as an example.

"You're right, child. Those are men's problems." Jilly forced a smile and almost choked on the words. It was to dissuade Drea, and the other children, from asking

questions in less tolerant company. "Oh and they're welcome to it! Yes? Yes I should say so! Anyway I was talking about Lord Cassidy! Drea he often picks good girls from places like this. Good girls who can work hard and who know their manners." She helped Drea from the tub and the child stood and shivered on the cold stone floor.

"Go to Brightplain?" Drea said through chattering teeth. "For ever?" She turned her huge blue eyes towards Madame Jilly. Those eyes that looked twice as huge due to the thinness of Drea's little face. Jilly knelt in front of Drea and draped a towel round her.

"Drea it's a chance in a million, Precious." She smiled, rather sadly.

"But I don't want to go." Drea said earnestly. "I like it here with you and the other children and even Master Fox is OK sometimes. I don't want to be a slave, Madame."

"Oh darling. It's for the best." Jilly could feel her tears welling as she brushed a strand of Drea's hair away from her eyes. Drea was very special to Jilly. She was different because she had a keen, intelligent and independent mind. Any life would be better than one in a Crull orphanage, wouldn't it? Jilly sighed sadly. Drea was right. She'd be a serving girl to a Brightplain landowner, nothing more. Drea had so much more inside her and Jilly knew it.

Master Fox had ordered Madame Jilly to 'scrub up a few of the older ones.' He was pretty eager to lessen his burdens and had told Jilly that this would mean more food for the 'realistic prospects.' Namely, the boys. Master Fox recommended that Drea be included, even though he got her name wrong and called her Dawn. He originally referred to her as 'the little skinny one who was birched last week.' That actually applied to quite a few, but Jilly knew who he meant. Drea had angered Master Fox by refusing to cry.

\*\*\*

Drea stood in Master Fox's staff room and tried not to cry. Madame Jilly had knotted Drea's hair and decorated it with pretty shells before covering it with a cap. She was dressed in the least frayed pair of leggings in the orphanage and a freshly ironed smock. Two other girls aged twelve and fourteen were also there and they bubbled with excitement that Drea simply did not share. Maybe Lord Hellion would like the other two better. Drea was only eleven after all. Maybe there would only be room in the carriage for the big two.

"I can sew and also do laundry." Fourteen year old Gemma was chattering enthusiastically. "I often help Madame Hesod in the kitchens too, and I'm clean and tidy." Lord Cassidy Hellion nodded slowly. He was a very fine man indeed, dressed

in black leggings and a white tunic. He was some fifty years old and had bright sparkling eyes and his long grey hair was drawn back into a tail at the nape of his neck. Next to him sat two of his wives. One was in her thirties and had an elegant, faintly lined face. The other wife was only in her late teens so the fine lines had yet to appear around her dark eyes. Lord Hellion shifted his eyes to twelve year old Lulu who looked delighted.

"I can sew too, and help in the kitchen. I clean the sculleries and the out buildings. I'm also good at tending to the animals."

"Master Fox." Lord Hellion had a surprisingly soft voice, yet it was still firm and decisive. "You have a very commendable set of polite girls here. For that I give you credit. Girls, Master Fox. There are some men out there with wives of her age." He nodded at Gemma who went scarlet. "Responsible young ladies aren't the same as polite, obedient girls." Drea felt like clapping her hands. He didn't want them! They wouldn't have to go away!

"I beg you make allowances for excitement and exuberance, Lord Hellion." Master Fox forced a smile, although he was far from happy at this criticism. "All my young ladies are excellent workers who know their places. They're very knowledgeable on matters that concern them. That one there, Bree, she can run a kitchen according to a budget. She was taught to by Madame Jilly. I'm sure you'd agree that household budgeting is very important." He nodded eagerly.

"You may speak, Bree." Lord Hellion permitted, looking at the tiny figure at the end of the line.

"Thank you Sir. Drea, Sir. My name is Drea, not Bree." Drea muttered and Master Fox almost had a fit at her audacity.

"Is it now?" Lord Hellion flicked a smile of amusement. "You aren't from the center cities. Your colouring is too light."

"I'm sorry Sir, I don't know. I was raised here and know nothing about my parents." Drea said quietly.

"I see. So can you run a budget?" Lord Hellion asked.

"Most of the time, yes sir."

"Most of the time?" Lord Hellion laughed. "Not all of the time? I don't mean tea parties for your friends, I mean a proper household, or at least a part of it. For example, could you work out a household food budget?" He glanced in amusement at his first wife.

"That would depend on where the provisions were coming from and how much news I was privy to, sir." Drea said and Lord Hellion raised his eyebrows at her in surprise. "We have no money in Crull, sir. Demihold tried to help us by just stamping more coins and sending them through the banks. It sent the economy down, you see." Drea frowned at the floor. "So our money isn't worth anything and our produce is so scarce and distributed so strictly that a budget for a household here would be different to a budget for a household in Brightplain, sir." The entire room fell into a suffocating silence. The only change in the atmosphere was due to the hot steam coming from Master Fox's nostrils. He was furious with this blatant display of disrespect.

"You may speak, Maya." Lord Hellion permitted his younger wife. "Drea, you may converse with Lady Hellion." Master Fox almost choked and clearly did not think that Drea should converse further with anyone at all.

"How old are you Drea?"

"I'm eleven Lady Hellion. I'll be twelve at Yule Time. You?"

"Mouth!" Master Fox sobbed. "Your impudence is completely intolerable, Fay! You'll regret every minute of this, I promise you." He snarled.

"Why would you ask such an impertinent question of Lady Hellion?" Lord Hellion ignored Master Fox and even wafted his hand at him!

"I beg your forgiveness Lord Hellion, Lady Hellion." Drea mumbled. "My question was not meant to be impertinent. I worded it foolishly. I've never seen a real Lady, let alone two. Your wives are truly beautiful, Lord Hellion. That was my sentiment."

"You manipulative little hag!" Master Fox rasped. "Mistress Jilly! Take this brat to the west outhouse and lock her in it. I'll deal with her after Lord Hellion has left." Madame Jilly nodded obediently even though she was nearly in tears. Drea, in her own child-like way, had tried to 'put Lord Hellion off' even though it meant the thrashing of a lifetime from Master Fox.

"Thank you Drea." Lord Hellion's voice was slightly raised, quashing any further orders or instructions from anyone. Madame Jilly paused with her hands above Drea's shoulders. "Leave her, Madame." Master Fox was purple with rage. "As you say, Master Fox, excitement and exuberance."

"Which is no excuse for disobedient insolence. I beg your forgiveness, Lord Hellion. She'll be severely pun ..."

"What wine would be served with braised meat, Drea." Lord Hellion interrupted Master Fox. "You can speak."

"According to what I've been taught, a dark red one, sir." Drea answered quietly. "Madame Jilly has told me that there's one called Jooblang Saya. We have none here." Jilly caught her breath when Drea mentioned one of the Hellions' own wines. Had that been a guess? Jilly was quite sure she hadn't told Drea such a thing. Why would she?

"Baked fish?"

"A white one, sir. One that's described as brut. I'm sorry, I don't recall any names of white ones." Drea replied.

"Very good." Lord Hellion smiled. "I'm impressed, Master Fox."

"Er ... yes." Master Fox eyed Drea suspiciously.

"If I ordered wine here sir, there'd be nothing left for food for a month or two." Drea pointed out.

"You were not given permission to speak!" Master Fox howled and Lord Hellion winced more in irritation than anything else.

"You may speak Drea." He said in exasperation. This was becoming tiresome indeed. How was he meant to choose a member of his staff when she was being subdued like this? "So you know what wine to order with what?" He prompted.

"Well I would need to know if the wine was to be imported over the Zone borders, sir." Drea nodded. Taxes are imposed at the borders and the taxes in Crull are very high. If the wine was to pass through this Zone, then it would quadruple the price." Master Fox opened his mouth for another explosion and Lord Hellion looked sharply at him.

"You seem to have an abnormal knowledge of Zone affairs, Drea. It isn't healthy. I don't approve of young ladies concerning themselves with business and commerce." Lord Hellion said sternly.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I was trying to answer your questions truthfully and fully." Drea apologised.

"Understandable." Lord Hellion nodded. "Gidra?" Wife one nodded slightly. "Maya?" Another imperceptible nod. "Master Fox, this one comes with me. We will go and draw up the necessary papers and leave the girl with the women."

"Just her?" Master Fox said in disappointment. "The other two are older. Like you said, that one's old enough for marriage and I'm sure she'd make a devoted wife for one of your associates." He tried.

"Oh? I think Drea would make a better one." Lord Hellion smiled and Drea almost burst into tears. Did he mean that?

The men left the staffroom leaving Drea with the two Ladies Hellion and Madame Jilly.

"May I ask clarification, Lady Hellion?" Madame Jilly spoke first and Lady Gidra nodded. "Does Lord Hellion intend Drea as a future wife for someone? Please forgive me, but if I'd known I would have presented some of the more ... developed ... girls." She said awkwardly.

"No, don't worry yourself, Madame Jilly. Lord Hellion has a whimsical way of getting his point over. The days of extremely young brides are passing quickly, Madame Jilly. Not a bad thing either. Our men are realising the problems entailed." Lady Gaia nodded slowly.

"Absolutely." Madame Jilly agreed in relief. "As for Drea's knowledge of Zone matters, it isn't as deep as was portrayed just then, Lady Hellion. Her knowledge is based on matters of a domestic nature only." She lied.

"Her knowledge is based on her having a good block on her shoulders." Lady Maya laughed and Drea looked up in surprise. Madame Jilly nudged Drea in the back.

"Thank you Lady Hellion." Drea said automatically.

"Really Maya, your modern ways will get you in very hot water one of these days." Gidra shook her head.

"I'll be as modern as you like if it would get me in it. My bath water was freezing." Drea said seriously. Lady Maya snorted a laugh and Lady Gidra tutted loudly. "Oh! Oh a metaphore! I beg your pardon, Lady Hellion." Drea muttered.

"She's precious!" Lady Maya laughed. "Gidra ask Cassidy if she can tend chambers. He'll listen to you. Shirell's baby is due in four months so ..." Lady Gidra held up her hand.

"Maya, please." She sighed at Maya's simplistic outlook.

Shirell was twenty three and the next wife up from Maya who was eighteen. Aurora was thirty and Gidra was thirty-eight. Gidra had given Lord Cassidy Hellion two sons, now aged eighteen and twenty. Aurora had given him another son, aged thirteen, and a daughter, aged eleven. Shirell had already mothered one three year old daughter and had another child on the way. Maya, as yet, was childless.

"I don't think Madame Jilly's excellent lessons will have extended to tending chambers." Lady Gidra looked at Madame Jilly

"No, Lady Gidra." She sighed. How could it have? Madame Jilly had noticed a turn of interest from Drea once the conversation was left to the women, and now her curiosity was obvious on the subject of families and domesticity. Jilly was happy and sad at the same time. Happy because Drea was perhaps going to get a decent chance in life, sad because no child should be so overawed at the mere mention of family life, simply because it was a tragic absence.

"Oh bah!" Lady Maya was undeterred. "She's as keen as a blade! So will you ask him, Gidra? Yes?"

"I'll mention it." Lady Gidra conceded. "What's your full name, child?"

"Drea Silver, Lady Hellion. I think the midwife made it up." Drea answered politely. The old crone who'd brought Drea to the orphanage told Master Fox that the child had been named after the hospital cat.

"Well, Drea Silver, despite Lady Maya's giddy enthusiasm you will not be there for the entertainment. You'll be expected to work hard and to do as you're told at all times, day or night. I seriously doubt your duties will extend to anything as responsible as budgeting and I absolutely do not want to hear of opinions being voiced by you on those matters. Good grief girl, are you trying to get yourself birched as a rebel? You will wear your hair knotted and covered at all times in public, and that includes the time you spend in female company too. You will not make eye contact with any males whatsoever, be it indoors or out. You will not leave the house unless you are in the company of a male servant, or a senior housekeeper. In mixed company you will remain downcast and silent until ordered otherwise. Do you understand?" Lady Gidra paused for breath.

"Yes, Lady Hellion. I've been taught how to conduct myself in a proper way." Drea answered, rather defensively.

"I'm pleased to hear it." Lady Gidra said shortly. "Go and pack your belongings. We leave in an hour."

"I could pack and repack them in five minutes, what there is of them." Drea said. Gidra tutted, Maya held back a laugh, Madame Jilly cringed.

# Chapter 3

---

Drea Silver drifted into service quite impassively. Brightplain was an improvement on Crull both poverty-wise, and climatically, but Drea had been very disappointed not to find it as palatial and idyllic as she'd dreamed. She accepted the disappointment, naturally, and it was soon forgotten during the two years that Drea spent on the very bottom rung of the staff ladder doing jobs that no one else would do. Despite this, Drea was still enthralled at the snippets of conversation she heard about the Hellion family, as a family, but obviously no one discussed such things with her directly. Lady Shirell had produced a son, then a daughter, and Lady Maya had given birth to a son when she was twenty-one. Lord Cassidy Hellion's oldest son, Taybor, was twenty-three and already moulded to be his father's successor. Lord Jasper Hellion was twenty-one and made the radical decision to attend the university. Drea had only ever seen him once, not long after her arrival in Brightplain. He was studying business and finance and would eventually assist Taybor in the running of the Hellion estates.

Drea's first jump up the ladder came when she was fourteen and was asked to wait on tables. A huge banquet was being held in honour of one of the younger son's birthday. Waiting tables turned out to be an inaccurate description and Drea found herself being ordered to stand in unobtrusive places holding trays of food and refreshments. Even though Drea's eyes were downcast, she was aware of another serving girl making her way through the shadows towards her. The serving girl nodded curtly and took Drea's silver, food laden tray from her. Drea's confusion was soon replaced by sheer fright when she heard a man's voice behind her.

"Scullery. Now!" Master Ray's voice growled and Drea's stomach lurched. She had no idea what she'd done this time, but she knew she was in for a beating, hence the location. "Withdraw backwards, you slovenly slut." Drea nodded slightly and did so. As soon as they were out of sight of the celebrations, Master Ray grabbed Drea by the arm and dragged her along the corridor towards the scullery. "You are an utter disgrace! How dare you appear in public like that? You shameful whore!"

"I dressed in the clothes Madame Chez told me to, Master Ray." Drea protested, seconds before she was hurled into the scullery wall. Master Ray spun her round and grabbed half a dozen stray hairs at the nape of her neck that were causing the offence. They'd obviously tangled and worked loose due to the heat. The offensive hair was ripped out by the roots and Drea had to clutch her cloth cap to her head to prevent it coming off completely. This left her chest and ribs exposed for Master Ray's fists, then a heavy wooden meat tenderiser. All Drea could do was curl up against the wall

and hold her cap on her head to cover her knotted hair.

The beating wasn't out of the ordinary for Drea, nor for any of the other women, but prior to today, it mattered little if Drea carried on her duties with visible bruises as she was below stairs. Master Ray's latest onslaught had left Drea with big ugly bruises on her arms and an inch long cut on her neck from the meat tenderiser's sharp surface. Madame Chez also called her a whore, and a useless bastard, then she'd thrown a change of clothing at Drea, including a tunic with elbow length sleeves rather than shoulder straps.

Drea's muscles screamed as she held the platter of dainty cakes in front of her. The effort of standing still while her body ached and burned was almost unbearable.

"So if I marry Kalin this Yule, Gisele in the Spring, Sef at High Sun, and Zeel in the Autumn, I think I should have it covered!" Lord Taybor Hellion's loud laugh rumbled round the Hall as he helped himself from Drea's tray.

"Make it three years at least, brother." Lord Jasper's unfamiliar voice was more like his father's and not as brash as Lord Taybor's. "Zeel is only thirteen."

"Agreed. Far too young for my liking, anyway." Taybor said.

"I never did see the attraction in that." Jasper sighed.

"City university talking there, Jas. Your high flying college notions won't change traditions."

"Probably not. No it's not the college influence, Tay. It's just ... not attractive. Think of the duties, I mean *all* the duties of a wife and tell me how any man could be comfortable with a child bride. Thirteen is not attractive in that way."

"This one's not bad." Even though Drea's eyes were to the floor, she knew Lord Taybor was ridiculing her. Lord Jasper tutted loudly. "How old are you girl? You may speak. Remain downcast." "I'm fourteen, Lord Hellion." Drea answered quietly.

"See? Fourteen and not bad at all." Taybor guffawed, obviously tormenting his younger brother.

"Fourteen, thirteen, still the same." Jasper argued. "I'd say she was closer to fifteen actually. Not that it makes a difference, but it is noticeable." There was a silence. "Oh yes. You may speak."

"I'll be fifteen at Yule Time, Lord Hellion." Drea answered.

"Told you!" Jasper sniffed at his brother. "Are you alright?" Another silence. "You I

mean girl. Are you OK?"

"Yes sir." Drea wondered why he'd asked. She hadn't realised she was swaying on the spot.

"What the hell have you done to yourself?" Jasper pushed Drea's cheek to one side, exposing the cut on her neck. "That looks quite deep, Tay."

"Oh stop fussing, Jas. The servants are a different breed. They have hides like tanned leather for a start." Taybor helped himself to more wine.

"Does that include its colour?" Jasper pushed up one of Drea's sleeves. "How did you get these injuries, girl?"

"For crying out loud Jas." Taybor laughed. "A few bruises? Landor!" He spied his younger brother at the far end of the Hall. "Come on Jas, Landor will drain that wine jug." He elbowed his way through the crowds towards Landor.

"What's your name, girl?" Silence. "Permission to speak." Jasper heaved. "In fact, permission to speak until I tell you to shut up."

"Drea Silver, sir."

"What? Look, permission to look at me, OK? I can't hear a thing you're saying." Jasper said in irritation.

"I cannot, Lord Hellion, not in mixed company and certainly not company of such standing. Drea Silver, sir." Drea repeated her name.

"Absurd." Jasper sighed heavily.

"The midwife named me after the cat, Lord Hellion." Drea muttered.

"Huh? No! No I don't mean your name is absurd. I mean all this muted submission is absurd." Lord Jasper clarified and Drea was extremely shocked. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Right, Drea Silver, get yourself below stairs and get the cut tended to. Tell Madame Chez that I sent you." He took the tray from Drea, then summoned another serving girl to go with Drea.

"Thank you, Lord Hellion." Drea mumbled as she retreated.

Most of the festivities had dwindled down, leaving only a few of the men in the dining room drinking wine. The mood was far from relaxed, however.

"Jas, listen to me." Taybor said patiently. "A few bruises and a cut on a serving girl. It happens. OK? You aren't so far up on your college cloud you haven't seen it before. Drop the city talk, Jas, it's irritating."

"If all you can come up with is the college boy crap then you have no answers, Tay. It doesn't take a college education to see what happened there! She's been battered!" Jasper pointed to the door and the servants in general.

"Oh battered my arse. Sometimes it needs a slap in the right direction! If any woman, not just the servants, slips up, then it's a good man's duty to check her for it." Taybor shook his head. "By the Stars, you'd think it was something abnormal! You don't even know what she did to deserve it!"

"No and nor do you." Jasper shot back. "She's a serving girl Tay! She's hardly in a position to have committed some heinous criminal act, is she? Checked is fair enough, but don't you think that was a bit excessive? You even commented on how unsightly those injuries were."

"She likely deserved it." Taybor said stubbornly.

"And who dishes out these punishments?" Jasper asked and Taybor looked confused.

"Does it matter? Ray, I suppose. He's the only man down there." Taybor shrugged. "I honestly can't see the issue, Jas. The odd beating never hurt anyone. What if the girl makes the same mistake because she wasn't chastised for it? What if it leads to her disgracing herself? Whatever the reason, Ray gave her a beating for her own good Jas. Now hand me my pipe, you milkmaid." Jasper tossed the pipe onto his brother's lap.

"A milkmaid would be a man who backed down from another man." Jasper said flatly. "There's no honour, or glory, in inflicting injuries on a fourteen year old girl half your size."

"Hey! Back up there Jas! It wasn't me who beat the wench!" Taybor protested.

"No, just condoned it." Jasper left Taybor to his pipe.

Madame Chez was roughly prodding the cut on Drea's neck with a rag when Master Ray walked in. He did not look at all happy with all the fuss.

"Needs cleaned up, so I'm told." Madame Chez dropped the rag back into the dishwater.

"Told? Told by who?" Master Ray yelled. "I do the telling around here! Back to your

work, Madame Chez." He glared at Drea as Madame Chez simply shrugged and ambled away. "So you thought you'd come crying to Chez? What the hell for? What is that going to achieve?" Master Ray pushed Drea against the sink. "If I see fit to teach you a lesson, then there isn't a soul can say otherwise. Do you understand?" The last three words he hammered home by Master Ray's fists to Drea's collar bone.

"Lower your hand, Master Ray." Lord Jasper's voice made Drea look up in sheer shock and alarm. She quickly amended her eye level and prayed no one had noticed. "What seems to be the problem?"

"No problem, sir." Master Ray bobbed his head on his skinny neck. "She just needs a lesson in manners, Lord Hellion."

"Having a cut on her neck is bad mannered?" Jasper asked purposefully.

"No of course not sir. She decided to take it upon herself to disrespect me by complaining to Madame Chez about a punishment from me that was fully deserved." Master Ray simpered. When Jasper nodded slowly, Master Ray took this as a sign that Lord Hellion was on his side here. "Oh sir you wouldn't believe some of them down here." Master Ray nodded. "One tiny scratch but did she accept it? No sir. She went for sympathy from a fellow woman, undermining me in the process."

"Did you get that cut cleaned up?" Jasper gave Master Ray a withering look.

"She's fine, sir."

"I wasn't asking you." Lord Jasper snapped. "Permission to speak, Drea."

"Yes, sir, Thank you." Drea said weakly. She was so sore and exhausted and confused. She was also certain that this was going to earn her a thrashing from hell off Master Ray. Drea felt her head being turned to one side.

"Sir, she's fine! It's ... "

"Master Ray." Lord Jasper turned to look at the servant. "It was me who sent the girl to Madame Chez. Do you understand?" Master Ray blinked a few times in panic. "The swelling around that cut means it's beginning to fester. It needs cleaned." Jasper looked at the filthy rag bobbing around in the dishwater with disgust. "If it becomes infected, then I'll suggest to my father that money for her medicines is taken from your wage. Get out." He shouted and Master Ray stumbled through the door in in alarmed bewilderment.

Drea felt Lord Jasper's fingers on the wound on her neck and panicked.

"S ... sir! Sir you can't ..."

"Clean this cut? I can you know." Jasper began wiping the cut with his own handkerchief.

"I mean ... mean ... you shouldn't be doing it. I'm a servant." Drea babbled. "Is it festering?"

"No. That was for Master Ray's benefit. It is quite deep though, it'll need covered." He began rummaging through cupboards until he found a clean towel to tear up for bandages. "I'll see that better dressings are sent down here but this will do for now. Wear a wrap over the bandage."

"A thousand thanks, Lord Hellion. It feels much better now." Drea mumbled in shock. "I should have worn a wrap to begin with. I'm stupid."

"I doubt that. From what I've seen it's the ones who can have a thought of their own that get the beatings. The docile ones rest in their resignation." Jasper emptied the water bowl and put away the bandages. "So do you want to tell me what this is all about?"

"Nothing, sir. I made a blunder and was punished for it. I didn't mean to cause so much fuss, Lord Hellion." Drea felt tears welling in her eyes and her muscles were burning in exhausted pain. She felt Lord Jasper's hands on her elbows and it was just as well he steered her onto a chair before she collapsed. "I'm not usually such a weakling, sir. Please forgive me."

"For goodness sake." Jasper heaved. "Drea, what happened? Don't say 'nothing' because that's not an adequate answer and look up!"

"Look ... "

"Yes! I can't hear a thing you're saying." Jasper said in exasperation. "There's no one else here apart from me." Drea peeped up without lifting her head and saw Lord Jasper sitting on the table, still dressed in his smart, blue, dinner clothes. He looked very much like his father and he wore his long dark hair in the same pony-tailed style. Drea also noticed that he had Lady Gidra's wonderful high cheekbones and deep blue eyes. Lord Taybor must have been a throwback. He was big and loud and had a mass of unruly hair that was left free to flow in all directions. He was like neither parent in the slightest.

"It really was nothing, sir, I swear. The heat had caused a few strands of my hair to knot and become visible below my cap. I was punished for such a disgraceful neglect of myself. It won't happen again, Lord Hellion." Drea nodded.

"I knew it. Something and nothing." Jasper rubbed his eyes. "Could he not have got one of the other girls to draw your attention to it discretely? It wasn't intentional

afterall. That, and that, is not necessary." He pointed to Drea's injuries. Drea said nothing because she didn't know what to say. Not necessary? She had appeared in public in a shameful and unpresentable way. "Were you raised like this, Drea? Were you always punished in such a severe way for these types of things?"

"I was raised in an orphanage, Lord Hellion. Master Fox taught us how to behave. Lord Hellion and the Ladies Hellion brought me here when I was eleven and I'm truly grateful to them for my home and job." Drea answered.

"Well deflected." Jasper smiled. "So yes you were raised with it. Orphanages are noted for it. Having said that, you'd think you'd be better off in a place like this."

"Oh I am sir! I swear I am! Like I said, Lord Hellion ... "

"Hasn't been below stairs for years, neither has my mother. I'm not saying the staff shouldn't know their places, Drea, but learning and accepting where you are doesn't have to be battered into you." Jasper shrugged.

"With respect, sir, what do you want me to do? Hit Master Ray back?" Drea asked and Jasper started to laugh in genuine amusement.

"Oh I'd love to watch. Hopefully me putting in an appearance down here will make him think twice about his harshness for a while."

"I didn't mean to cause so much trouble, sir." Drea couldn't hide the weary sigh. She was very good at 'not meaning to cause trouble' and had the scars to prove it. "I didn't mean to be a burden."

"My father called Jalilla a burden only last week." Lady Jalilla was Lord Jasper's fourteen year old sister, Aurora's daughter. "A gold pendant he'd bought her was from here in Brightplain, and not trendy Demihold. She sulked so he ordered her another one from Demihold." Jasper rolled his eyes.

"Actually the price of gold in Demihold is falling, so her Brightplain one will be worth more in a year or so." Drea commented, then realised she shouldn't have. "I'm sorry, Lord Hellion." She quickly lowered her eyes.

"Actually, you're right." Jasper said in surprise. "Do you often familiarise yourself in the economy?"

"No, of course not sir." Drea muttered.

"Me either, it's dull and boring, isn't it?"

"No, not at all." Drea answered. "It doesn't really affect me directly, sir, but it's

interesting to see the how the economies of the Zones effect each other."

"Is it?" Jasper looked doubtful.

"Oh yes, and not only in the monetary market. It was quite obvious that Brightplain's citrus fruit prices were going to increase sharply because of the hard winter we had. It would have made more sense to introduce gradual price increases at the onset of the growing season to avoid panic by a sharp, last minute increase. Because of that sharp increase, Crull and Demihold ordered fruit from Demihold and the Brightplain orchards lost out." Drea shrugged, then remembered who she was talking to. Big mouth! "Er ... well I was only interested because I know Madame Chez had to fork out extra for citrus fruit, that's all. Yes. She should have pre-ordered during the growing season." She fiddled with the hem of her tunic.

"Maybe you should have advised her." Lord Jasper laughed in surprise.

"Oh I did. She called me a rebellious bastard and told Master Ray. Excuse the bad language, sir. I was quoting." Drea cringed and wondered how big a hole she was going to dig for herself here.

"I see. What did that earn you? The belt? Meat hammer?" Jasper said in disgust.

"The broom handle, sir." Drea said quickly. "I've said too much, Lord Hellion. I have a wistful imagination and a running mouth. I don't want to get anyone in trouble. I shouldn't concern my silly self in things that don't concern me. I'm sorry"

"It's fine, Drea. Master Ray's harshness should subside a bit knowing I could pop in here at any time." Jasper smiled and stood up. Drea winced in pain as she tried to do likewise. "Go to your room and rest, Drea."

"I will, Lord Hellion. Thank you." Drea automatically gave Lord Jasper a quick smile, then struggled down to her room. Jasper raised his eyebrows for a split second, then left the kitchens.

# Chapter 4

---

Drea was ordered to scrub the yards. Even though the chore was muscle wrenching, at least she was out of sight and not drawing attention to herself.

"Drea! In here!" Madame Chez's loud rasping voice grated from the yard door. Drea got up from her knees and her stomach sank. This couldn't be good. Master Ray was bound to be furious at being put in his place by Lord Jasper, in front of Drea. Drea felt a lump forming in her throat as she picked up her water pales and trudged into the kitchen. She doubted her body could take another beating so soon.

"Drea Silver?" Drea looked at Madame Dabbs in surprise. This tall, elegant woman looked very much out of place in the kitchens. Madame Dabbs was a Lady's attendant and therefore not below stairs very often. Drea nodded and glanced at Madame Chez.

"Are you sure you have the right one, Madame Dabbs?" Madame Chez sneered at Drea. "Look at the little horror!"

"Is there another Drea Silver down here?" Madame Dabbs asked aloofly. "I think not. Ah Master Ray." Master Ray was on his way over like a whirlwind.

"What is this? You again girl! Why must you be a constant thorn in my foot?!" He yelled in Drea's face. "Madame Dabbs! What is your business here?" Madame Dabbs' jaw tightened, even though her eyes remained downcast. She was clearly not impressed at being spoken to in this way, nor was she accustomed to it.

"My business is to inform Drea Silver that her position will be changing." Madame Dabbs said stiffly.

"Says who?" Master Ray seethed. "And into what?"

"She is to assist in chambers as a lady in waiting." Madame Dabbs stated and Drea almost fainted.

"A what?" Master Fox erupted. "Don't be foolish, woman!"

"Lady Maya found her suitable three years ago, I believe." Madame Dabbs informed him. "Her young age at the time went against her. Her name was mentioned again and Lady Maya's memory and opinions were revived."

"Ridiculous!" Master Ray spat. "With all respect, this proves a woman's inability to appoint appropriate staff. I'll see Lord Hellion ... "

"Lord Hellion mentioned her name to begin with." Madame Dabbs interrupted smugly. "Lord Jasper, but still a Lord Hellion." Drea almost fainted again after only just recovering from the last episode. Master Ray was utterly dumbstruck, for a change, and Drea felt a wonderful smugness melting her astonishment like a warm glow. "I have appropriate clothing for you, Drea, in that bundle on the table. You must also wear this at all times as a token of your status in the household." Madame Dabbs handed Drea a gold cuff that would be worn round her upper arm. "I'm asked to tell you that it's Brightplain gold." Madame Dabbs shrugged and Drea had to lower her head further to hide a smile. "You have one hour to tidy yourself up and report to me on the first floor. Use the back stairs. I'm sure Master Ray is as proud of you as you are of yourself."

"She'll be back." Master Ray snapped. "Get out of my sight girl." Drea nodded obediently and scurried off to get ready for her new job.

\*\*\*

Three weeks of sheer bliss passed for Drea. She was given her own room with a proper raised mattress instead of a wooden board. She had a table with a mirror and three cupboards and a wash basin of her very own. Her absolute favourite luxury were the carpets. Her own room had a mat covering but Drea loved the feel of that too beneath her bare feet. The rooms of the Ladies Hellion, and the younger children, were all on one floor and all carpeted with a thick pile that was a delight to walk on in slippers. Drea now had to wear beautiful red trousers that were loose and flowing and trimmed with a gold hem. Her tunic was replaced by a soft red vest that was light against her skin and her matching red cloth cap was threaded with gold strands that matched her trousers. In Drea's eyes, she was a Princess rather than a lady in waiting. She soon made friends with another girl of similar age and in a similar position. Mayte was a native Demiholder and was raised in an orphanage until she was sold to a family when she was eight. The family hit some sort of financial crisis during dealings with Lord Cassidy Hellion. Lord Hellion had 'relieved' his associate of Mayte, knowing that as a native Demiholder she'd also be able to speak Northhold, Demihold's original native tongue.

"Did you really ask that?" Mayte giggled as the girls sat on Drea's bed, awaiting the hour of their working day. Mayte had been helping Lady Gidra with needlework and her and Lady Maya had been talking about their first meeting with Drea at the orphanage.

"I did and it was unforgivably rude of me." Drea smiled. "By the Stars, Master Fox

would have whipped my skin off if he'd got the chance." They'd referred to Drea asking Lady Maya her age. "Come on, we'd better get to work." Drea hopped off the bed and opened the door. Lord Jasper almost knocked on Drea's head. "Eep! Er ... forgive my clumsiness Lord Hellion." Drea backed into her bedroom and Mayte jumped to her feet in panic.

"No worries." Jasper said. "Actually I'm pleased you're both here. Part of my college ... Bah! Look, both of you look at me. OK? This really does irritate me. Look wherever you like and speak as much as you like. Got that?" Drea and Mayte looked up but remained quiet. Poor Mayte was on the verge of a swoon. "Anyway I need to correspond with another college student and he's from North Demihold. The dratted man speaks more Northhold than anything else. Basically I need a crash course in the language. Mayte?"

"Begging your pardon sir, I'm sure there are finer teachers than I. I'm only a servant, and a girl." Mayte blinked in astonishment.

"And a Demiholder. I'm sure there are other teachers too but they'd charge a fortune and I simply can't see the sense of trekking around Brightplain when I have someone born speaking the language, right here in the house. I could sort out your duties with Lady Gidra, so that won't be a problem. I'd be very grateful Mayte." Jasper nodded encouragingly.

"You would? I ... I mean ... yes, it would be a great honour, Lord Hellion. The gratitude is all mine." Mayte stammered.

"That's wonderful, Mayte. I appreciate it very much." Lord Jasper beamed. "Now then Drea!" Drea glanced at him then squirmed her toes into her slippers so she could feel her mat. This was a security blanket for when she got nervous.

"Well what, sir? Forgive my slowness. I must have missed the question, Lord Hellion." Drea said in confusion.

"Northhold! You fancy it?" Lord Jasper nodded at Drea.

"You want me to go to Northhold?" Drea asked in surprise and Jasper just looked at her.

"Let's start again. If Mayte is willing, would you like to learn the Northhold language with me. At the same time. Mayte teaching us both." Drea looked at the mat and chewed her lip. "I'll sort out your duties too. It'll be OK." Jasper clarified.

"Why would you want me there, Lord Hellion?" Drea asked quietly.

"For propriety's sake, Drea. It wouldn't be proper for Mayte and I to be cooped up in

a room together, apparently." Jasper rolled his eyes. "So yes?"

"Sir I'm very honoured but maybe I'm not the ideal person to accept this privilege." Drea muttered.

"Oh? You were the first one I thought of." Jasper frowned. "You're intelligent and have the capacity to learn. Forgive me, I presumed that capacity extended to languages. No worries, I'll ..."

"It does!" Drea blurted. "I do, I mean." She grimaced. "Lord Hellion, my very limited learning in the orphanage stopped when I came here, aged eleven. What little reading and writing I learned, wouldn't be a sound enough basis to take on a second language. Most of our lessons were verbal." Drea burned red and looked at her slippers.

"You were yelled at until it sank in." Jasper exhaled loudly. "Drea I'm so sorry. In no way did I intend embarrassing you. I forgot how abysmal Crull orphanages are." Drea just nodded. "I'm confused though. I have seen you reading. I saw you just yesterday in the delivery yard with a book." Drea pulled a book from under her pillow and handed it to Lord Jasper. It was predominately pictures with large lettered monosyllabic words beneath them. Drea felt very stupid indeed and incredibly ashamed. She'd tried a few times to teach herself to read and write, without much success. When Drea got her new job, she promised herself to master it. Who ever heard of staff above stairs that where illiterate?

"You were teaching yourself?" Jasper was fighting to keep his emotions in check. They were a jumble of surprise, shock, pity and a huge admiration for Drea. Mayte was just completely shocked. She'd had hundreds of very intelligent conversations with Drea!

"I'm sorry, Lord Hellion. I should have said sooner that I couldn't read or write very well. I know you put forward my name to Lady Hellion for this position. I've disgraced you, sir. I'm sorry." Drea felt hot tears rolling down her cheeks and she hung her head so Lord Jasper wouldn't see her face. "I'll pack my things."

"You certainly will not." Lord Jasper stated. "This is probably the most remarkable thing I've ever seen!"

"Please, Lord Hellion, I realise the shame of my deceit. Please let me leave and handle the guilt of my mistake without suffering your ridicule too." Drea snivelled.

"Gah!!" Lord Jasper erupted and flung his arms in the air. Both Drea and Mayte jumped and glanced at each other. "Bah! You hear? Bah! As much as I value our ways and traditions I will never, *ever* understand this innate masochism you women have! What, eh? What? Do you feel a bit put out when there are no beatings being dished out by people like Ray? Is that it? Do you fill in the gaps by beating yourselves up?" He ranted and Drea was mortified to feel a titter rising through her body. "Drea when

did I mention disgrace? When did I ever mention shame? Deceit?" Drea opened her mouth to answer. "Shushushush! I was not ridiculing you! Understand? The strength you're showing here puts me to shame, for one. I'd never have the strength of will to teach myself anything. Hence the university and my request for Mayte's help. Are you listening?" Drea swallowed hard and nodded. "The laws we have regarding women and education are suffocating and rigid and yes I'm aware I could get a severe dragging for what I've just said. Drea, even with our laws, women can still be educated enough for basic literacy and numeracy."

"The foundation learning is usually acquired at a much earlier age than fourteen." Drea sighed and replaced her book. "I can hardly wander off from my position here in favour of an education, can I? Basic or otherwise. Thank you for your kind words, Lord Hellion. They mean a lot to me." She smiled weakly.

"I'll do it." Lord Jasper said decisively. "I'm not a qualified teacher but I think I can manage the basics. Mayte will be teaching me to read and write too. What's the difference?" He shrugged.

"Well quite a lot actually, sir." Drea laughed nervously in utter astonishment. "You're a Lord of the house for a start, and a man. Sir, the sons of the Lord of the house don't teach the servants how to read."

"And the servants don't tell the sons of the Lord of the house what the said sons should and shouldn't do. Right?" Lord Jasper grinned at Drea's bewildered expression.

"Er ... yes, I think so. Will it be OK sir?" Drea blinked in shock.

"Of course it will." Lord Jasper tutted. "We'll spend half the lesson with Mayte in charge, then the other half with me in charge. Deal?"

"Oh I can't make deals, Lord Hellion. I've nothing to bargain with." Drea smiled.

"You jest? I have shares in at least six businesses here in Brightplain, two in Crull, four in Demihold. You advise me on buying and selling and I'll have you writing literary works of genius in no time."

\*\*\*

Drea actually picked up more Northhold by ear than Lord Jasper did by text. Her and Mayte could hold a basic conversation in the language, even though Drea couldn't write a single word of it. Her own lessons with Lord Jasper were somewhat hampered by Drea apologising, grovelling, and begging forgiveness for every mispronounced word and wrongly written letter. Lord Jasper's way of dealing with this annoyance was to ignore it. He displayed extraordinary patience and Drea soon learned that she wasn't going to be punished for saying a word wrong, or writing a letter back to front.

Once Drea began to see it as a non-issue, it ceased to be one, much to Jasper's relief.

"Um ... you sure?" Lord Jasper frowned at his books and accounts. Drea nodded. They were both sitting outside on the library-come-classroom veranda after lessons. "The value of these shares depends totally on factors inside Crull's own economy. Taxations don't effect them drastically."

"There won't be anything to have shares in. That plantation is on the outskirts of State Three." Drea shrugged.

"Yes and it's the best arable farming land on the continent." Jasper nodded.

"The outskirts of State Three where it meets State Four is right on a political divide. Your plantation is under State Three and it's all a bit chaotic just now due to the run-up for another Cell takeover. At the moment, the plantation employs a high number of poor people and children, as do most farms in all Zones. It's a common political ploy to brandish the 'people' flag, Lord Jasper, and the Cell waiting in the wings is crying anti-oppression very loudly. When they get in, they'll take the poor downtrodden workers out of there then no one else will do the work. It'll collapse and be left to dereliction. Sell up. The lot will crash to zero within three weeks." Drea nodded and smiled at Lord Jasper.

"Reason enough for me." Jasper laughed and scribbled notes in his books.

"Busy?" Lord Taybor's loud voice startled Drea so much she fell off her chair and into the veranda railings.

"Me or Drea?" Jasper asked absently.

"What are you doing, Jas?" Taybor asked while glowering at Drea.

"Paperwork. Oh Drea speaks Northhold. She was helping my conversation skills." Jasper closed his accounts books.

"By giving you an economic climate prediction of Crull?" Taybor asked suspiciously.

"By translating this Northhold report. Just as well she did, Taybor. Crull will never publish broadcasts on their own mess but Demihold does, in Northhold." Jasper rolled his eyes. "Did you want me for something?"

"I did." Taybor stated. "A business colleague of father's is celebrating the birth of his first son. Unfortunately his wife and child are confined under the midwife's watch for a few days. Women's troubles of some sort. Anyway, Baron Clay Setti is having his celebrations here. You're invited."

"Thank you. I barely know the man but the birth of a son is very worthy of celebration. Speaking of which, how are your wedding plans coming along?" Jasper asked his brother.

"How should I know?" Taybor laughed. "Mezii and her lot are welcome to sorting all that out. All I know is that it coincides with her eighteenth birthday." He shrugged. Drea almost burst into tears when the chair scraped noisily on the concrete as she tried to set it upright, thus drawing Taybor's attention to herself again. "Actually, you could save me a huge headache girl." Lord Taybor looked at Drea. "I have friends in North Demihold. I think it would be a token of respect if they received my wedding invitations written in their own language." Drea felt the panic rising and closed her eyes to stop herself looking up at Lord Jasper in terror.

"Taybor! Surely a token of respect would be for you to write them yourself." Jasper said quickly.

"Nonsense. I'll even dictate." Taybor ripped a sheet of paper from Jasper's book and put it on the table with a pencil, in front of Drea.

"I'll do it, for goodness sakes." Jasper sat down. "Slowly, so I can translate."

"Give her the pencil, Jas." Taybor said quietly.

"Tay ... "

"Give her the pen!" Taybor snatched it from Jasper and threw it at Drea. Drea's insides were knotted and she gulped back tears of terror. "No? Yes, I suppose it is a complicated language to write." Taybor said and Jasper nodded in agreement. "So write it in our own language, then translate it at your leisure." He glared at Drea. "Lord Taybor Hellion humbly requests ... what's wrong girl? Write!"

"Enough! Taybor, please. Enough." Jasper took the pencil and paper away from Drea.

"You should remember who you're speaking to Jasper. I am the oldest son." Taybor said darkly. "Why did I do that? I'll tell you why. It's the deceit, Jas, the deceit! You aren't the first to have a romp with a serving girl but your arrogance prompts you to hide it with lies to your own brother! Why? Did you think I'd mind? Did you think I'd be outraged? Shocked? Bed her all you like, Jas but do not set her aside as more important than the rest of them, then surround it by lies." He shouted. Drea was shaking with fear. She was terrified and bewildered.

"Drea, go indoors." Lord Jasper said calmly. "Go. Go to your room." Drea nodded, sobbed, and fled from the veranda. "I shouldn't even dignify your outburst with a reply, but I will." Jasper looked at Taybor. "For a start, I do not need a romp with any

serving girl. If I *did* need a romp then I'd do it under a different roof than my father's roof. Of course I respect your position of our father's oldest son but I've never at any time geared my behaviour solely around that. I do mean that most respectfully, Taybor. If my behaviour ever does outrage you in any way, you tell me. You were correct about deceit but not the way you're thinking. As you so rudely exposed, the girl can neither read nor write to any great standard and that's something that shames her a great deal. She was struggling, unsuccessfully, to teach herself. I offered to help her. Nothing more. The deceit employed was to spare her feelings. Yes servants do have feelings Taybor. I also know that my own language lessons would be impossible without her. She's obliged to sit in on my lessons because my own teacher is a woman. There you have it." Jasper looked evenly at his brother.

"I don't believe I'm hearing this!" Taybor shouted. "Jas you cannot single out one serving girl and treat her as one of our own!"

"Well slight exaggeration there, Taybor. So in order to *not* treat her as one of our own, what do you suggest I do? Our traditions are all upheld, Taybor. She keeps her hair covered and her eyes downcast in my presence. She speaks only when I permit it, and she does as I ask her. I think that defines the 'them and us' status, Taybor, don't you?" Jasper said flatly.

"And the gifts?" Taybor most certainly was not giving up.

"Gifts? What gifts?" Jasper asked in confusion.

"That arm cuff is solid Brightplain gold, Jas. I've noticed the stamp a few times. Don't try and tell me the other girls have them too because they do not. The others are plated trinkets produced from Madame Dabbs' store rooms. That one is high grade Brightplain gold and from a gold merchant, if not a goldsmith. They were used back in the days of Sultans and Emperors, not now." Taybor glared at Jasper and Jasper said nothing. "Tell me now she's 'nothing more'"

"Taybor it is nothing more." Jasper sighed wearily. "I won the cuff playing cards, actually. I didn't run out and buy it especially. I don't know if you remember, Tay, but she was the one I was concerned about at Landor's party when Master Ray had beaten her black and blue. Oh I don't know, Tay." Another sigh. "I just thought she deserved a bit of compassion. Compensation maybe. I don't know. The only thing you can accuse me of is being too soft-hearted. You can't accuse Drea of anything at all. The arm cuff she's completely ignorant about. The lessons, my concern over her literacy, this rather casual environment, are all my doing, Tay. Drea just does as I ask."

"I don't like the sound of this, not one little bit. Back away Jas, I telling you. I'll have her sent back below stairs. She's a little scrag anyway! How old is she?" Taybor said menacingly.

"She's sixteen today."

# Chapter 5

---

Drea was astonished and overwhelmingly relieved when Madame Dabbs told her she was to take the extra duty of waiting tables for the celebratory feast for Baron Clay Setti's son. That indicated that Lord Jasper had explained to Lord Taybor that nothing improper was afoot. She'd fully expected to be sent below stairs in disgrace to face Master Ray and his punishment. Drea had been shocked to her bones when Lord Taybor had said those things. It had actually taken a few seconds for her to comprehend what he was saying. Lord Jasper must have also convinced his brother that Drea's active brain was of no importance. He'd told her many times that it was a small issue as far as her position in the staff went. Drea suspected differently.

Drea and Mayte had changed into their white clothes, which meant they'd be in close proximity to the dining tables. Drea shakily told Mayte of her ordeal on the veranda and Mayte was shocked and astonished.

"Such a conversation should not have been held in front of you, Drea." Mayte said supportively. "Or in front of any woman!"

"Mayte, people aren't thinking that are they?" Drea asked in concern. "The household and the staff? They don't think I'm some ... some ... slutty favourite of Lord Jasper's do they? I couldn't stand that." Her lip trembled.

"No of course not. I've heard nothing. It's a ridiculous notion! Drea if that was speculated, you'd be back in the scullery or even out on the streets!" Mayte pointed out.

"Yes. Yes of course." Drea nodded. "Lord Jasper stopped Lord Taybor from humiliating me, Mayte. He stood up to him right in front of me. He shouldn't have done that. It was wrong."

"But you're pleased he did." Mayte grinned.

"Yes and that feels wrong too." Drea frowned. "I'm not pleased that Lord Jasper risked a fight with his own brother because of someone like me. I suppose I'm pleased that he cared enough to think about my feelings. No one's ever stood up for me, yet Lord Jasper's done so on a few occasions. Why would he do that, Mayte?"

"He's not like Lord Taybor, Drea. Lord Taybor is very much a steadfast traditionalist who lives right here on the grounds all the time. Lord Jasper's met different people

from many places. Our traditions and ways aren't held so rigidly by everyone outside and Lord Jasper sees this." Mayte said knowingly.

"At the University?"

"Mainly, yes, I'd say. There are no women there, obviously, but he bound to hear other men talking about their women-folk. All that aside, he's a much more mild-natured man than Lord Taybor. Lady Aurora and Lady Maya were discussing it once and they reckon Lord Taybor is very much like Lord Cassidy's late half-brother. Lord Jasper is like Lord Cassidy." Mayte nodded.

"How come I never overhear any of these conversations?" Drea laughed.

"Oh I know where to stand." Mayte laughed too.

The dining hall hosted around fifty men, all friends of the Hellions. All three Lords were there as well as Duke Landor, all seated along the top table with the main guest, Baron Clay Setti, and two of his brothers. Lord Taybor was quite naturally commanding the conversation with tales and anecdotes that had the guests roaring with laughter. The current anecdote was about a fifteen year old Lord Jasper and the twenty-two year old daughter of an associate of Lord Cassidy. This associate was determined to gain Lord Cassidy's favour and marry his rather plain-looking daughter off to Lord Jasper.

"Tell them where you hid!" Lord Taybor boomed and Jasper smiled. "Go on! I'll tell them. Our sister found him in her wardrobe with the frills and ribbons!" Everyone roared with laughter.

"Seven years is a big gap when you're fifteen!" Lord Jasper laughed too. "Thing is, father knew full well I was in there and said nothing!"

"Did you?" Taybor boomed and Lord Cassidy smiled and nodded. "In retrospect, it was a shrewd move, Jas. Your children would have looked like gut-blocked horses, without a doubt."

"Ack! Go on, spoil my dinner!"

"Something to wash it down with. Wine!" Taybor waved his hand and Drea moved noiselessly forward with two jugs of wine. "Ah that's bet ... well hello." Taybor grinned at Drea and Jasper glanced at him. "Pity she didn't look like this one, eh Jas?" Jasper smiled weakly and concentrated on his meal. "Drea, wasn't it? Speak."

"Yes, Lord Hellion. Drea Silver." Drea nodded her lowered head.

"Gid'al te sou qui utterent Northhold, can'ot gid?" Taybor switched to Northhold and

looked at Jasper. "Utterent."

"Posti, Lord Hellion. Jo utts en lil Northhold." Drea answered quickly and Taybor looked more than surprised. Jasper smiled slightly at his dinner. Taybor had asked Drea if she was the one who spoke Northhold and Drea had replied perfectly, telling him that she spoke a little of the language.

"Brains and beauty!" Taybor guffawed. "What do you think, Jas? You're the college boy. She your type?"

"Many people know two languages, Tay, even women." Jasper replied, refilling his glass.

"Oh don't be so offhand Jas! I think you're astounding, Drea." Taybor announced and Jasper gave him a warning look. "I don't mind complimenting pretty girls, especially on their birthday. Speak, girl."

"Thank you, Lord Hellion." Drea muttered in complete embarrassment due to all the attention she was receiving.

"My future wife will need a lady in waiting. It would certainly be a plus to see a pretty one like you in the chambers every day." Taybor ran his finger over Drea's arm cuff. "Would you like that? Speak."

"It would be an honour to serve the future Lady Hellion." Drea swallowed hard.

"Oh? What about me? I'm sure you wouldn't object to the odd request by me also?" Taybor feigned offence.

"OK Taybor, knock it off." Jasper said quietly.

"Pardon? I didn't quite catch that, Jas." Taybor lied.

"You're embarrassing the girl. Knock it off." Jasper repeated.

"That bothers you, brother?" Taybor ran his hand over Drea's cuff again.

"I think it's unnecessary." Jasper glanced at Drea, then refilled his glass.

"You don't like me complimenting the serving girls?" Taybor said innocently. "True, I don't do it often but you have to admit, Drea is something else." He lifted Drea's chin with his fingers. "Strange I've never really noticed you before. There again you've never been sixteen before."

"I said knock it off!" Jasper snapped loudly and glances were exchanged between the guests. "You're embarrassing yourself, Taybor."

"By being a man?" Taybor raised his eyebrows.

"Groping the serving girls is hardly impressive." Jasper glared at his brother and Taybor smirked back at him.

"Especially not this one eh Jas?"

"Drea, could you go and make sure the other guests have wine please." Jasper said stiffly. Drea bobbed her head and withdrew quickly and with much relief. She headed for the other side of the Hall completely and could almost feel Mayte's shock and alarm.

"I think she quite liked me." Taybor shrugged and Jasper sighed loudly in exasperation. "Oh come on! You don't have the monopoly on pretty girls, dear brother."

"I don't even have a part share in pretty girls!" Jasper exclaimed. "Just lay off, Tay. If that was meant to be funny, then it was in very bad taste."

"Would you take on so if I'd complimented the dark skinned girl over there?" Taybor pressed.

"Are you going to back off?" Jasper snapped testily. "It's gone, Tay. Past. Old."

"Yes, you're right. I'll go later and wish her a happy birthday in private."

"You'll go nowhere near her!" Jasper retorted automatically, then cursed himself a hundred times over. "You can be a very cruel man, Taybor Hellion. I have no idea what sort of pleasure you get from provoking me like this, nor do I know your reasons. I really wish you wouldn't. Are you so desperate for attention that you have to resort to attempting to embarrass your own brother in front of guests? Why, Taybor? Because I'm an easy target?"

"You take too much to heart, brother." Taybor said dismissively. "And speaking of hearts, yours belongs in your chest, not with a common serving girl."

The celebrations never recovered from the flatness, in Jasper's opinion. The next few hours were tiring and strained and Jasper was grateful when the guests began to disperse, thus giving him the opportunity to excuse himself.

Jasper stood in his room, hands in pockets, and glared out of the window at nothing. He'd often despaired at the extreme faces of his brother. It was often like living with a

host of people at the same time. Jasper was absolutely livid by not only Taybor's obnoxious behaviour tonight, but also because of the way he'd turned his cruelty towards his own brother in such a public situation. What had he done to deserve that? Jasper heaved a sigh when there was a knock at his door. It was Lady Gidra, his mother, with a flask of mulled wine for her son.

"News travels fast." Jasper accepted his wine. "I'm surprised to see you here and not father. Please tell him I intend to apologise to him for that ... farce ... tonight." Gidra nodded. "How's his anger levels? On a scale of irked to livid."

"Well he's not too impressed." Gidra replied. "He's tearing into Taybor as we speak."

"Fantastic." Jasper said sarcastically. "So I may as well stay awake and wait for mine."

"No, no. Your father believes that Taybor was in the wrong." Gidra shrugged.

"Yes he was. I shouldn't have dignified his jibes with a reaction though. I'll apologise to father tomorrow." Jasper nodded.

"And the girl?" Gidra asked.

"I'll apologise to her too. Taybor should too but he won't."

"You missed the point on purpose there." Gidra pursed her lips and Jasper exhaled loudly. "Was your outrage because Taybor laid his hands on the girl? I do agree with you, actually. It is unnecessary and I told your father as much."

"Good." Jasper turned to frown out of the window again.

"'Good' isn't an answer to my question. As a man, and a Lord of the house, you can tell me to be quiet. As my son, to his mother, I hope you won't." Gidra said quietly.

"Don't be absurd, mother. Have I ever ordered you around? No I have not." Jasper said in irritation. "No, Taybor should not be touching the face of any woman in public in that manner. He's the one who spouts traditions and their values and that's one of them. I don't like hypocrisy." Gidra nodded slowly. "This is wearing me out." Jasper rubbed his tired eyes. "I've been teaching her to read and write in exchange for her sitting in on my own lessons as a chaperone. Nothing wrong in that."

"Rather unconventional, but not strictly wrong, no." Gidra shrugged. "She seems to have the good end of the deal there, Jasper. I have any number of girls who could sit in, literate ones."

"Perhaps. I doubt they could run my stocks and shares like Drea does." Jasper looked evenly at his mother. He was surprised when she merely nodded and didn't react with shocked outrage, as he'd expected. "Am I to take it you already know?"

"I suspected." Gidra smiled. "Drea Silver lectured your father on border taxation on wine and food produce when she was eleven." Jasper snorted a laugh then covered his mouth with his hand. He couldn't help it. Gidra also lowered her head to hide a smile.

"I'm sorry, this is serious." Jasper said with an involuntary grin.

"Oh Jasper. How did I get two sons so unlike?" Gidra sat on the bed, next to her son. "Has it occurred to you that Taybor's behaviour tonight was to protect you, and maybe Drea too? Our system is hugely more tolerant of educated women than it used to be, but it's still strictly within its own rigid traditions. Do you understand what I mean? Our society is still very much male orientated. Maybe that was Taybor's way of dissuading the association between you and Drea for both your protections."

"Actually, no. I hadn't thought of that." Jasper conceded. "Even so, mother, his methods were obnoxious and very hurtful. They also weren't very effective. He actually drew attention to a link between Drea and myself with his vulgar display."

"He did. He made you jealous." Gidra said bluntly and Jasper stood up abruptly. "I see I'm right."

"He was ridiculing me because of my compassion, mother. It's a trait I can't do anything about, it's part of who I am." Jasper said.

"Yes it is. Your father's the same. That's one of the things he's yelling at your brother."

"I'd better go down. It sounds like father's standing my ground down there and he shouldn't need to." Jasper said heavily.

"No, stay here, Jasper. An out and out fight is not what anyone needs at this hour. Taybor knows how far to go with your father and he can't exploit your feelings for the girl if you aren't there." Gidra rested her hand on her son's arm.

"You steered that conversation well, mother." Jasper flopped into a chair.

"I know my own son. Dalliances with the staff are not an option for you." Gidra shrugged.

"Certainly not!" Jasper replied firmly. "Absolutely and categorically no. Whatever else Taybor is roaring in all directions, I will stand firm on that, mother. I have not

dallied anywhere and I do not want that assumption made by anyone. Not for my sake, but for Drea's. It's untrue."

"You care about her a great deal, Jasper. Far more than expected for a serving girl, even an exceptional one." Gidra said gently.

"I know." Jasper said sadly. "Just don't let anyone jump to that conclusion, mother, please. It's untrue and it's hurtful. She's done nothing to deserve that sort of gossip and it would be extremely unfair." Jasper smiled weakly. "Just keep them off her back, do it for me, mother. I can watch my own back, Drea can't." Gidra exhaled loudly and Jasper smiled.

"I may not need to. Lady Maya would probably slap anyone she heard speaking ill of the girl. If I didn't know better, I'd swear she was your mother, not me."

"Lady Maya?" Jasper laughed.

"She adores the girl and has done right from the start. Lady Maya had Drea picked out as special a long time ago." Gidra smiled. "But I doubt she sees her as you do. At least Lady Maya can follow up on her feelings and befriend Drea."

"OK, mother, you've no need to clarify it further." Jasper rubbed his eyes again. "As I said, no dallying. Just knowing she's here is fine."

# Chapter 6

---

Jasper kept a low profile for a while and stayed in his rooms with his college books. Everyone needed to cool off a bit, Jasper included and Taybor most definitely. Jasper trusted his mother and Lady Maya to handle any unsavoury gossip and the best way he could help in that was to simply keep out of the way. One morning found him scowling in frustration at a letter he'd received from the university. It was from his Demihold colleague and try as he may, he simply could not translate the wretched thing fully. It was part of his studies so an accurate translation was important. He left his rooms and headed for the Ladies' floor of the house and got the attention of a maid outside the chambers. He requested that the maid went to ask either Lady Gidra or Lady Maya for Mayte to be excused from her duties for half an hour. He was rather surprised when both his mother and Lady Maya came into the ante-room with Mayte and another girl who Jasper didn't recognise.

"Oh. Good thinking, Ladies. I'm sure this young lady won't mind sitting with us. I won't keep them long." Jasper nodded. Lady Gidra nodded and Lady Maya positively seethed. Obviously this confused Jasper and he asked the two serving girls to wait for him in the hallway. "Lady Maya? Is this because I didn't ask for Drea? I do still need her to help me, I just thought the mood needed to simmer down a bit." Lady Maya looked at Lady Gidra. "What? Surely you aren't waiting for permission to speak! It's me, Jasper!"

"She's gone." Lady Gidra said. Jasper just stared at his mother while his stomach hit the floor. "Both myself and Lady Maya tried, Jasper. We were powerless. Your father and Taybor reached a compromise because your father argued against Taybor's assertions of a scandal. Drea's gone with her dignity and honour intact, Jasper."

"She's ... she's been sent away?" Jasper sat down heavily on a chair. "Sent away? Sent where?"

"She'll be fine, Jasper. She'll be looked after ... "

"Sent where?" Jasper shouted at his mother for the first time in his life.

"Crull."

"Wh .. what?" Jasper half sobbed.

"A customer of your father's who owns one of the very few vintners agreed to ... to ...

have her." Gidra moved closer to Maya.

"Have her how?" Jasper closed his eyes and tried to breath. The fact that there was no answer gave him his answer. "Where's father?"

"Jasper it's done. Drea's been gone for three days. Let it go, Jasper." Gidra said desperately.

"He's in his study." Maya said angrily. She was clearly furious at this so called compromise. Jasper ran from the ante-room.

Jasper crashed into his father's office like a whirlwind.

"Jasper. I expected you sooner." Lord Cassidy said.

"Couldn't you at least have consulted me? Informed me? Included me somehow? I had to find out when I asked for my language lessons!"

"Sit down and lower your voice." Lord Cassidy looked at his younger son. Jasper sat down and tried to calm down too. "Murdoch Call. He's a good customer of ours and has a very respectable trade in Crull's State Three. He has the financial means to support her, Jasper. She has her freedom, son. Are you going be begrudge the fact that she's no longer a servant?"

"No." Jasper hung his head in utter dejection and Cassidy felt a wave of pity for him.

"There's no reason why she shouldn't be happy, son. Murdoch Call is fifty-eight ... "

"How old?!" Jasper's head snapped up.

"Fifty-eight and therefore quite well established in society and more than capable of supporting a household." Cassidy explained.

"Fifty-eight? Father, what number wife is she?" Jasper was almost afraid to ask.

"Four." Cassidy said quietly. He's been dreading this meeting with his son. Cassidy saw a great deal of himself in Jasper, including a compassion and freedom that their traditions had suppressed in himself. "Murdoch has three sons, two are married and so are in line to succeed the business. The girl won't have that pressure at least. He also has daughters."

"So he really had no need to take another wife." Jasper tried to swallow the lump in his throat. "He did it as a favour to you. Right?" Cassidy nodded and felt very, very, drained. "All because Taybor made an issue where there wasn't one, then roared and bellowed in his usual style to get his own way. An adult man throwing a tantrum.

That tantrum has forced an innocent young woman into yet another situation that doesn't want her. Her parents didn't want her, the orphanage didn't want her, that bastard in our kitchens didn't want her. Even her job here above stairs was just that, a job. Now she's been ordered into a marriage where her established husband and his established family won't want her either. I hope you're both proud of yourselves."

"You'll mind your manners." Lord Cassidy couldn't have sounded angry if he'd tried. The dark and well hidden form of his conscience was telling him Jasper was exactly right.

Cassidy's memory was thrown back to the skinny, pale girl dressed in orphanage rags and a cap that was far too big for her tiny head. She'd stood in the orphanage Master's dingy office and lectured him on border taxes. Cassidy now realised this for what it was. It was the same as the child's rude question to Lady Maya. It had been a ploy to enable her to stay in that awful orphanage because it was the only security she'd ever known. No one wanted her. She was female.

"Son, nothing could have come of you and her." Cassidy tried.

"Father, I know!" Jasper said desperately. "I know! I'm not stupid! Any feelings I had for Drea were kept strictly to myself, despite Taybor's crude insinuations. Don't you understand? Just having her here and un-abused in the Ladies' chambers was enough for me. That's all I could hope for and I accepted that. Now, at Taybor's loud insistence, she's been sent to a man three times her age, into a private household. I'd never doubt your judgement of character and I'm sure he is a respectable businessman but a private household is just that. Private. The doors are closed, father and she is an unwanted burden after all. I'll be returning to the University tonight. My three month break doesn't seem quite so appealing now."

"You'll be here for Taybor's wedding?" Cassidy said in alarm. This had been far more impactful than even he'd expected.

"Yes, out of a courtesy he doesn't deserve, and only because it's that particular occasion. I'm sorry father. I can't stay here when all Taybor has to do is shout and swear and everyone complies, especially when it affects peoples' lives, like it has Drea's." Jasper stood up and left his father's study.

\*\*\*

Drea had dressed in her red clothes at six thirty. At seven she'd been summoned to Lord Cassidy's study. By seven thirty she'd been clad in a stiff and heavy white dress and a thick white veil. Her eyes had been downcast and they streamed with tears of fear and complete bewilderment. By nine fifteen she was married to a man she'd never seen before. Drea couldn't help the sobs that racked her body when she saw her husband for the first time as they boarded a carriage headed for Crull. He was tall and wirey and walked with stooped shoulders. He had a permanent scowl that trenched

his face and pinched his features. He had watery blue eyes and thick grey eyebrows that matched his grizzled hair. The hair that was yellow-stained at the front with pipe smoke. Added to all that, he was a million years old.

Murdoch Call told Drea exactly where she stood. She was his fourth wife because the Hellions had paid him to take her on, and she should be grateful for it. Wife one was Petra, aged forty. Wife two was Jolue, aged thirty-five. Wife three was Jasmine, aged thirty. It was as though he reading from a pre-written list. Son one was Heindel, thirty five, married, heir to the business. Son two was Michael, twenty-four, married. Son three was Kirk, fifteen, school. Two married daughters, Josephine and Madella. One betrothed daughter called Ruby. Drea felt cold and numb. Murdoch may as well have been talking to someone else. It seemed unreal and unimportant to Drea. What had happened?

Crull was still Crull. It was still bleak, still cold, still poor. Murdoch's business was, in fact, two adjoining shops on one of State Three's gloomy and crowded streets. Drea's new home was an old, tired looking four story house wedged in the middle of a terrace. The front door opened straight into the street and the back door opened into a damp yard with slimy moss walls.

Murdoch barked Drea's name to his other wives, then everyone ignored her. Petra eventually noticed that Drea was still standing there with a bundle of possessions at her feet. She let out a weary sigh and showed Drea to her room in the attic. No carpet, not even a mat. No curtained window, only a bare skylight. A hard board with a thin foam roll was her bed, and she had one hole-ridden stack of drawers.

"You'll settle in before you start sharing chores and pulling your weight." Petra nodded curtly. "I'll have Ruby bring you up some supper."

By midnight, Drea got the impression her supper had been overlooked. She curled up on her bed, covered herself with a blanket, and cried.

\*\*\*

Two years passed and Drea was no more accepted into the Call family than she'd been at the start. She was ignored for the most part, even by Murdoch, and that suited Drea just fine. Drea got her first glimpse at her husband's vile temper after six months, but it had been directed at Petra. The woman had lost a tooth, courtesy of Murdoch's belt buckle, for not pressing the creases into his trousers in a satisfactory way. The fact that Petra hadn't done the laundry, Jolue had, didn't seem to matter. Petra accepted her punishment and continued in her role. Drea's hatred of Murdoch began to set in. The only thing she was thankful to her husband for was the fact that he'd never demanded his marital rights from Drea. He'd squeeze and paw her as they passed in the house, but he never pursued the issue further. This was the topic of discussion one evening as the wives sat around the kitchen table. Murdoch was out at a meeting and wouldn't be home until late.

"He doesn't need to." Jolue said sagely. "He has his sons."

"No." Jasmine shook her head. "He's still a man, Jolue. It's because he doesn't see her as a wife. She was exchanged for a contract from the Hellions. Part of a business deal, not a woman."

"Well he didn't think it out very well." Jolue said. "Money's tight and the Hellions' pay-off won't last forever. Did he think of the extra mouth to feed once the contract's up? I don't think so."

"It's matterless." Petra spoke up. "She's here so we make do. It's no use bemoaning her lack of use, even as a bed warmer."

"See what a selfish oncost you are?" Jolue said nastily to Drea. "You don't put anything at all into this household. If you were in the slightest bit grateful you'd sell that arm cuff for a start. What good is jewellery to you?"

"It's not jewellery as such, Jolue." Petra said, pushing up Drea's sleeve to expose her Brightplain gold arm cuff. She was a servant for the Hellions remember? The Ladies' maids wear them."

"So it's definitely of no use!" Jolue exclaimed. "I'm surprised Murdoch permits her to wear it."

"I don't think he has much choice." Petra looked at Drea. It wasn't the first time the wives and sniped at Drea to sell her cuff. She'd refused. She'd always refuse.

"Out!" Murdoch was home and not in a good mood. The wives jumped to their feet and Murdoch pointed at Drea. "Not you. The rest of you, out!" Drea sat back down as the others left.

"Have you eaten, Murdoch? I could make ... "

"I'm fine." Murdoch snapped. "Keep that damned arm covered. You hear me?"

"Yes Murdoch, I always do." Drea began to make a pot of tea for her husband.

"Wretched, damned thing. My wife wearing a Slave Band." Murdoch spat.

"Oh Murdoch they aren't only worn by servants these days. They're more of a piece of jewellery now, not a marker or a token." Drea tried to pacify Murdoch.

"Yours is a Slave Band." Murdoch snarled and Drea lowered her eyes automatically. One thing that had lost its rigidity in Crull was the speech permitting rules. A woman still had to shut up when ordered, but at least the whole conversation process was less

tedious and strained. Lowering of eyes was still regarded as a sign of utmost respect and was still deemed very important. Murdoch often swung from extreme to extreme and could suddenly reinforce the full, strict, communication rules when it suited him. "Yours will always be a Slave Band. Won't it?" Murdoch growled and Drea felt frightened.

"I ... I could take it off." Drea said reluctantly. Take it off but never part with it.

"Don't you dare!" Murdoch yelled and startled Drea, as well as confusing her completely. "The Hellion contract is the only stable one I have these days. You'd see it ruined with your stupid actions?"

"No, of course not, Murdoch." Drea shook her head. "Murdoch, I don't understand what you mean."

"Don't lie to me!" Murdoch screamed and Drea flinched against the sink. "I know why you cling to the blasted thing! Makes you feel important, does it? The only thing you have over me? The only thing I can't do anything about?" His lip curled into a sneer and he spat on the floor in front of Drea. "It seemed such a trivial stipulation at the time, a whim. By hell it's sorely irritating me in the long run. Lord Cassidy Hellion told me that the cuff stays with you. I can't take it from you, I can't insist you sell it. It's the single possession that is solely yours and that really, really angers me!" Murdoch ended up roaring.

Drea's head was reeling. Lord Cassidy had said that? Lord Jasper had sent her the cuff as an 'in' joke regarding Brightplain gold. Drea could still recall the conversation about Lady Jalilla's pendant. The cuff meant the world to Drea, it was everything to her. No monetary value could ever be put on it. It represented a short, short time in her life when she was truly happy. She hadn't realised how happy she'd been until it wasn't there any more. Brightplain had been her fairytale dream when she was a little girl and Drea had seen her dream, even if it was only for a brief time. She'd steeled herself for the day that Murdoch would demand the cuff for barter. Drea had been prepared to object as far as her role of a wife would permit. That day had never come and now Drea knew why.

"I'll keep it out of sight, Murdoch." Drea glanced at her husband's twisted, snarling face. "You've no need to be irritated by it, it's an object."

"It's the mark of a dirty serving girl!" Murdoch roared. "Do I treat you as a servant? Do I?" Drea cowered and shook her head. "Who took you in at a level far above your status? Me! Who's given you a roof over your head and food on your plate? Me! I've ensured that you're seen as an equal to a wife and not some common slave!" He was now on his feet and purple with rage. Drea's fear was actually subsiding as she heard her husband's ravings. The fear was being replaced by a cold, cutting hatred. Drea calmly watched Murdoch work himself into a frenzy and wondered if this one would bring on a seizure from which he'd never recover. "Water!" Murdoch panted and Drea

obliged with a glass. His colour gradually settled down and his breathing became more controlled. Drea felt very disappointed. "Am I a good husband Drea?" Murdoch asked pathetically and Drea's oppressed temper bubbled dangerously. "I think I am. I work hard to provide for my family and of my four wives, only you don't appreciate it. You're like a stone, Drea, emotionless and cold. You refuse to fit in with the other women and any conversations are forced and strained. You'd be in the gutter if it wasn't for me, yet you show no gratitude at all. Why is that?"

"I am grateful, Murdoch." Drea lied. "And I do my part for the family. I share in the chores and I even care for Taly's children when she asks me to."

"You've never been a part of this family, Drea. Never!" Murdoch was getting worked up again. "Do you know why? Because you don't want to be, you ungrateful little bitch." He hurled the glass at Drea and it struck her on the forehead. Luckily it didn't shatter until it hit the floor. Murdoch darted at Drea as she went to pick up the sharp glass with a towel. He snatched the cloth and made it into a rope. "Pick it up." He snarled quietly, whipping Drea across the neck with the towel. Drea picked at the broken glass with her fingers. Once she had most of it in her hands, Murdoch grabbed her. He squeezed Drea's hands into fists over the sharp shards. He squeezed harder and Drea felt the glass slicing into her skin, followed by blood streaming between hers and Murdoch's fingers. "Cry, Dam you." Murdoch growled. Drea felt sick with the pain, but still swallowed hard and blinked back the tears. "Get the hell out." Drea nodded and calmly left the kitchen.

\*\*\*

Jasper Hellion had been home twice only, in two years. Once for Taybor's wedding and once for the birth of his daughter. Taybor had taken on the air of aloofness that was expected, given his firstborn's gender and that sickened Jasper to his stomach. The baby girl was beautiful and Jasper had no qualms at all in telling both parents this. Taybor had told Jasper the child's name was Alice. Mezii corrected the mistake and told him it was Celia. Lady Gidra was naturally delighted with her granddaughter and had shoo'd Jasper out of the way incase he made Celia cry. His mother's excuse for a reason to cuddle the new baby in private. Jasper found himself sitting in the garden, watching the sunset, with Lady Maya.

"Did you ever try and find her?" Maya squinted at the fading orange sun. This was the first time anyone in the household had mentioned Drea in two and a half years. "I tried. I was limited because I have to go through your father, obviously."

"You did?" Jasper was surprised and very touched. Lady Maya could have got into quite a bit of trouble doing that.

"Just to know if she was safe would have done." Maya sighed. "I didn't even get that far. It was all taboo straight afterwards. I got nowhere."

"I tried the university channels. I got nowhere either. Crull is like a swamp, once anything enters it, it's lost. All my inquiries lead me straight back here because this Murdoch Call man's a low priority customer of father's." Jasper said sadly. "Six months of brick walls and my options were drying up. She'll be almost nineteen now. Nineteen at Yule Time."

"Do you ever stop thinking about her?" Maya asked. "I don't do it constantly but every so often I'll see something, hear something, and it reminds me of her."

"I've never stopped thinking about her." Jasper hung his head. "I've tried and better tried to give myself a shake. I've told myself over and over that it was going nowhere. It couldn't, could it. Maybe it was selfish of me to want to keep her here in sight."

"And you believe that as much as I do." Maya smiled. "Do you think she's happy? I hope and pray every day that she is."

"I have to believe it." Jasper replied. "If I start to question that, I'd go insane. She'll be happy. She'll make a good wife and mother." He visibly flinched. "Ah who am I kidding eh?" Jasper exhaled loudly. "Oh she will make a good wife and mother but she'll die inside, Maya. Her brain, her keen-ness, her curiosity, her spark. It'll die. Forgive me but I'll damn Taybor for the rest of my life if that happens."

# Chapter 7

---

Murdoch Call's youngest daughter married a businessman son of a businessman and the wedding day was on Drea's twenty-first birthday, not that anyone knew or cared. The business was actually a single shop on the corner of two streets but it was respectable.

There had been slight changes in the Call household but none of them for the better. Murdoch's horrendous mood swings had become even more horrendous, and more extreme, despite bottles of pills from the physician. After the first direct outburst at Drea when she was eighteen, she hadn't been exempt since. Mercifully, and probably due to Murdoch's advancing age, Drea had still been spared any bedroom attention and for that she'd be eternally thankful.

Ruby's wedding celebrations were held in the local community hall and only Ruby's mother, Jolue, was to attend with Murdoch. Jasmine had been somewhat put out by this and had retreated to her room in a full blown huff as soon as Murdoch had left the house. Petra tutted loudly and tackled a pile of socks, stockings, suppressors and shirts that needed stitched and darned. Drea sat at the table to share in this chore that was meant to be Jolue's.

"You're as ham-fisted as a blacksmith." Petra criticised Drea's needlework. Actually Drea was quite good but Petra was exceptional and put Drea's efforts to shame. "Here, sew these buttons on."

"Where did you learn to sew, Petra?" Drea asked, threading her needle.

"I learned from necessity. I lived with my widowed mother and younger brother from the age of six. New clothes were unheard of. My high standards of work have been maintained by thrashings from Murdoch if it's not up to scratch." Petra said stiffly. Drea had noticed the bruises to Petra's upper arms and a slight swelling to her lip. Neither had been there the previous evening. "He'll be full of drink later. You'd better clear off to bed."

"Leaving you with the full brunt of it." Drea stated. "Someone once asked me if us women had an inborn masochistic need. I see his point now." Petra smiled and shook her head. "Yes I know, I'll learn one of these days." Drea smiled too. "Petra am I really so rebellious? I honestly don't see myself as such. I'm the quietest person in the house."

"That's a form of rebellion in its own right, Drea. You don't want to be here and you never have done. Added to that, you weren't meant to be a part of this household. You

were part of a trade off, and you knew it. That's a lot of resentment, Drea. We're here, the Hellions aren't. You hate Murdoch and it shows."

"I know I shouldn't, Petra, it's wrong. I have shelter, food and warmth ... well tepidness ... thanks to Murdoch." Drea sighed.

"And for that we owe him. Right?" Petra broke off her cotton thread. "We pay our debts daily with bruises, cuts and broken bones. Yes, he's easy to resent."

"He resents me too Petra. I was forced on him, remember? Oh I know he got a contract and all that but it's still force." Drea nodded.

"It is. Especially coming from someone like Lord Cassidy Hellion." Petra agreed.

"That's only partially correct Petra." Drea let out another sigh. "Lord Cassidy endorsed the deal, yes, but it was on the demand of his son, Lord Taybor. I was seen as an unwanted distraction and I committed the horrendous sin of learning to read and write." She was now literate enough to handle normal day to day things. The grand university works of literature that Lord Jasper had once promised were now only distant impossibilities, but she she could read and write as well as any other woman in Crull's State Three. "I showed far too much initiative for a serving girl."

"But that makes no sense." Petra mused and reached for another sock. "Why go to all the trouble? Business deals? Contracts? Why not just turn you out? It happens."

"Well Lord Taybor's strict traditionalist views weren't held quite so strictly by Lord Cassidy, and certainly not by Lord Jasper." Drea fiddled with the shirt buttons and knew Petra was watching her. "Lord Jasper argued that I was entitled to learn. He stood up for me, Petra."

"Pff! Not well enough, obviously."

"Our friendship was ... was ... misconstrued by Lord Taybor. Marrying me off to Murdoch was a compromise and a way to get me out without disgrace. If Lord Cassidy hadn't done that, it would have caused a rift between his sons." Drea muttered. She'd had a lot of time to think about all this.

"Well aren't you the popular one?" Petra smiled. "Fairytale belong in books, Drea. This is real." She held up a particularly dismal specimen of underclothing belonging to Murdoch and Drea started to laugh. "Yep! Piss stains and all! Ah make the best of it, Drea. Mooning and moaning over mansions and lords will only make you miserable. That's not for the likes of us. This is as good as it gets for us ordinary womenfolk. There is nothing else, girl, nothing better out there." Drea looked at the forty-five year old woman sitting opposite her. Petra looked every bit as old as Murdoch, maybe older. Her face was gaunt and thin and her lips were pale. She

looked haggard and weary and her whole appearance was one of unhappy resignation. The likes of us. Ordinary womenfolk.

A loud crash had both Drea and Petra jumping to their feet and running from the kitchen. Murdoch, blotched and florid with drink, had hurled Jolue through the door and was now kicking her viciously as she tried to curl up on the floor.

"Fun evening then." Drea muttered quietly to Petra.

"He's getting worse." Petra muttered back. "Go, Drea. Go to bed."

"Whispering?" Murdoch lurched round and staggered into the wall. "Women whispering in my house?"

"No Murdoch, we were just ... "

"Did I tell you you could speak?" Murdoch backhanded Petra across the face. Drea pulled Jolue up from the floor and pushed her towards the stairs. Jolue clutched her damaged ribs and tugged Drea's hand to follow her. Drea shook her head and pushed her again and Jolue fled up the stairs. Murdoch had his belt off and had wrapped it round his knuckles. The first blow doubled Petra over and knocked the wind clean out of her, causing her to let out a heavy sob. "Did I tell you to cry?" Murdoch screamed and the next blow almost took Petra's head off.

"Murdoch!" Drea jumped in front of her husband. "Murdoch stop!" Murdoch glared, panting, at Drea, then went to punch her full in the face. Drea ducked then grabbed his arm with both hands. Murdoch swung round with an astonishing strength and dragged Drea clean off her feet, but still, she clung onto Murdoch's arm. "Petra! Petra go to Jolue!" Drea cried.

"You slutty little bastard!" Murdoch punched Drea in the stomach with his free fist and she crumpled to the floor. "You are a slut!" He howled, booting Drea savagely in the back. "I took you on knowing you were a slut and you do this to me? Slut! Slut!" He landed blow after blow on Drea with his belt buckle. "Even the slut of Lord blasted Jasper Hellion is still just a slut!" He screamed. "Did you think I didn't know? Do you think I'm stupid? I know everything, you whore!"

"Murdoch stop it!" Petra staggered over. "Murdoch you're going to kill her!"

"And there isn't a court in the land could blame me." Murdoch stood and panted for breath. "I show the little whore charity and she throws it in my face. She stands there day after day with Jasper Hellion's slut band round her arm as though she should be proud of it." He wheezed. "Water!" Petra ran into the kitchen and Drea struggled to a sitting position against the wall. Murdoch was sweating profusely and was a

frightening purple colour as he fumbled for his pill bottle. He lurched over and sat on the sofa, dropping his medication as he did so. Drea watched her husband grope feebly for his tablets as Petra came back from the kitchen. Drea looked at Petra and Petra glanced back at Drea. Drea staggered to her feet and swayed slightly on the spot. Sheer hatred and contempt oozed from her as she watched the blotchy, bloated bully flounder like a newborn babe. Petra swallowed hard and returned to the kitchen, where she emptied the water into the sink, then sat at the kitchen table, alone. Drea watched. She watched every flail and every weak movement of her husband. She watched every facial twist and every noiseless gasp. Drea watched until Murdoch's body lay silent.

\*\*\*

Heindell Call buried his father and assumed the role. After a lengthy inquest it was announced that Murdoch Call had died from a heart attack aggravated by alcohol. The man had taken ill whilst alone and couldn't reach his medication in time. Jasmine was to stay in the house as she was mother to nineteen year old Kirk. Jolue was taken in by her daughter, Ruby, and her husband and that was a huge relief to Murdoch's other two daughters. Michael Call was in Demihold and Heindell was the oldest son.

"I suppose you'll have to come with me." Heindell complained to Petra, his mother. "Michael can't shift you all the way to Demihold."

"And Drea?" Petra asked. Drea was sitting quietly, out of the way, next to the kitchen door, while 'the ends were tied up'.

"What about her?" Heindell asked in irritation.

"She has no sons, Heindell. No family at all." Petra told her son what he already knew.

"That isn't my responsibility. Do you honestly think I can afford extending charity to strangers?" Heindell scowled and Drea flinched at how much like Murdoch he was. She hadn't really noticed before.

"She has nowhere to go, Heindell. What will she do?" Petra pressed.

"Mother I don't know and I care less. Are you ready?"

"I won't leave her." Petra said and Drea felt a bolt of alarm when Heindell's colour changed.

"Petra! Petra it's fine." Drea darted over and took the older woman's rough hands. "I'll be fine. I always am." She forced a smile. "Now go with Heindell and stop being

foolish!"

"Where will you go?" Petra looked so old and so very, very lost. The years of abuse had suddenly vanished and left Petra empty. Her life had certainly taken its toll.

"I'll think of something." Drea hugged Petra's bony frame. "Come on, away with you." Petra nodded dumbly and followed Heindell.

\*\*\*

Drea sat in a dirty, shabby office that the latest Cell had set up in what used to be the theatre. A dark skinned man in a military uniform sat opposite Drea and two more soldiers stood behind her.

"Look. What do you want me to do?" 'General' Hobbly shrugged his shoulders at Drea. "This isn't a hotel. Leave before I have you arrested."

"This is my whole point, sir." Drea said patiently. "I have no home. I'm a widow with no children and I'm homeless. I'm experienced in many domestic areas, sir. All I need is a job and a roof."

"You aren't listening, girl." Hobbly sighed. "Women do not have jobs. Got that? The few that do, nurses and the like, have respectable working husbands. Now I've been very tolerant here. Are you aware that I could have you arrested for being outdoors without a male relative?"

"I am sir, yes. I have no choice but to be outdoors and unescorted. Homeless and family-less." Drea tried again.

"So you're telling me you're a vagrant." Hobbly stated. "Which is also a criminal offence. Last chance, girl. You either leave here now or I'll have Scapa here lock you up for vagrancy and harassment." Drea nodded miserably and stood up. "You should thank me."

"Yes. Thank you General Hobbly." Drea mumbled and left the building.

It took three days for Drea to walk to the orphanage. The freezing wind numbed her bones and her feet were blistered and swollen. Hunger gnawed at her stomach and drained on her strength. Drea collapsed in tears when she found her orphanage. It was deserted and derelict. Half of it had crumbled to the ground and it was now no more than a lifeless shell. Drea crawled into the rubble and was completely exhausted and dejected. Was this some sort of retribution for her part in Murdoch's death? Was she being punished for her selfishness? She was going to die in the cold and alone. She was going to die in the place she grew up. The orphanage.

"I'm sorry, Jasper. I ..." Drea slid gratefully into blackness.

She barely heard the stomp of booted feet and hardly saw the glancing flash of torches. Words wouldn't register as she was hauled from her dark sleep. 'Beggar' and 'jail' meant nothing to her at all.

\*\*\*

Jasper dropped the 'Lord' as soon as he'd left University. He was now Mr Jasper Hellion and worked for the Brightplain government as Minister for Zone affairs. The position was a nightmare. Demihold and Brightplain were usually quite co-operative when it came to matters economy. Often the ties that existed were little more than tentative and required a lot of encouragement and mediation which could be achieved through communication. Unfortunately Crull was right in the middle, geographically. Correspondence and communication was virtually impossible due to terrorist Cell activity that was ripping the place apart and dragging the other two Zones with it. The place was a mess.

"Some sort of intervention is unavoidable." Minister Chu-Fan contributed needlessly. "The idiots in charge now couldn't run a bath, let alone a Zone. The support what ever's relevant to themselves and stuff the rest. Ale houses and brothels are safe anyway."

"And wine shops." Jasper smirked, referring to his own family business. "They are still running aren't they? Well as well as anything in Crull can run." Jasper stopped smiling.

"Yes. Disgusting. Crull is starving and that joke of a Cell values vintners, smoke vendors and arms dealers." Chu said flatly.

"Disgusting, yes." Jasper swallowed hard and tried to control his brain. "Is any of our correspondence getting through? Any at all?"

"The Cell says yes. Go figure. So I've no idea at all. In the last three years six prisons have been created in the dump. Six! When I say prisons, it's any empty building that's lockable." Chu unrolled a map. "This one used to be a school, this one a hospital, this one ... "

"An arable farm." Jasper stared at the map and his memories almost swamped him. "Between States Three and Four. They pulled out the low paid workers as a false front of good will and anti-oppression views then left it to rot and crumble."

"Correct. I lost money from shares when the farm collapsed. I remember it." Chu nodded. Jasper had sold his shares. "You OK?"

"Tired." Jasper forced a smile. "Six new prisons suggests they're jailing anyone for anything."

"Isn't 'dissident' a wonderfully vague word?" Chu rolled his eyes. "All it takes is to voice an opinion that's not in line with the Cell. They're all insane. Beggars are illegal! Beggars! There are more beggars in Crull than anything else!"

"We'll have to think about contacting Demihold personally. We have to intervene for everyone's sakes, especially Crull. We can't get bugger all done for them!" Jasper sighed wearily. "Anyway I must call it a day. I'm expecting my parents this evening so I'll need to get out the pots and pans."

"Bah! You need to get yourself a wife or two, that's what you need." Chu informed him.

"So everyone keeps telling me." Jasper smiled and left the office.

Jasper's home was in a fairly quiet area of the city. It had three floors and was comfortably heated and furnished. Obviously it was nothing on the scale of Hellion Mansion but Jasper liked it. Lord Cassidy was hugely proud of both his sons and he greatly admired Jasper for all he'd achieved. He was quick to tell anyone who wanted to listen, and a few that didn't, how well Jasper had done for himself, and he'd done it on his own.

The rift that had caused Jasper's initial move was still present, although Taybor and Jasper tolerated each other. It was a huge relief for Jasper that this rift hadn't lessened his relationship with his parents. There was an ever present 'something' that ran beneath Taybor and Jasper like a bad smell that had never been aired or ventilated.

Jasper was an excellent cook and he had a very substantial meal prepared for his parents, which he served up himself. No servants for Jasper because he simply didn't need any. A middle aged lady called Mrs Tapps wandered around the house with a duster every other day and that was it.

It was pretty clear to Jasper that his father was in a rather strained mood, despite his efforts to conceal it.

"Business OK?" Jasper asked tactfully.

"As OK as it gets in these times." Lord Cassidy nodded. "Thank the Stars people will always find ways to get drunk, no matter how gloomy their lives." He smiled. "Ah I'm sorry for my mood, Jasper. Your mother threatened me horribly before we set out because I was being such a grump."

"Why what's wrong?" Jasper asked, pouring his mother more wine.

"Oh nothing." Cassidy sighed. "Or at least that's what it should be. I often think I have two extra toddlers rather than a wife and an adult son. Maya and Taybor." Jasper just looked at his father and didn't know if to laugh or not. "In all fairness, Maya is the most aggravating soul in that house and Taybor is the most foul tempered soul in any house." Cassidy grimaced. "Jasper I really do need your help. I know Maya is coming to see you next week. Could you please tell her to stop digging at Taybor." Only Cassidy's serious face stopped Jasper from sniggering out loud.

"Father, Maya is your wife. If you can't tell her to stop whatever she's doing then what makes you think I can?" Jasper asked in bewilderment. Cassidy took a deep breath and glanced at Gidra.

"She rescued a cat from a tree in the garden the other day. Taybor even climbed the wretched tree for her! Maya announced, very firmly, that she was naming the animal Drea." Cassidy winced and Jasper put down his fork. "It's a dig at Taybor, Jasper and Maya hasn't let it drop for seven years. Any man would be at his wit's end, let alone someone of Taybor's temperament."

"I see." Jasper nodded, looking at the table. "Maya was very close to her."

"Something she has in common with you, Jasper." Cassidy exhaled noisily. "Son, the girl's been married for seven years. It has to be left alone. Please ask Maya to let it go, I beg you."

"She was named after the midwife's cat." Jasper smiled sadly. "Seven years. Has it been that long?"

"Are you listening to me, son? Seven years, yes. That's a long time to tolerate jibes and digs." Cassidy said gently.

"She'll be twenty-three now. Twenty-three last Yule Time."

"I knew this was a crass idea." Lady Gidra set her jaw. "It's fine, Jasper. We'll handle Maya and Taybor, don't worry."

"Jasper please!" Cassidy said desperately at his son's dejected reaction. "You're over it! You moved on, I know you have."

"Well actually I moved out, remember?" Jasper corrected. "I can tell Maya that picking fights with Taybor is an utter waste of time. Fighting with Taybor always was. How can I tell her to forget? Perhaps I have moved on, I honestly don't know, but I'll never forget Drea. I'll never forget how she was treated and who was behind it. The only reason Maya's taunts rattle Taybor is because he knows he was wrong. He's stubbornly refusing to accept that and he'll never admit to being shocked at the

repercussions. Me moving out. If Taybor honestly believed himself blameless, the Maya's comments wouldn't bother him."

"So you think it's fair to have him pay for years like this?" Cassidy asked.

"Torture by aggravation is never right so I do think Maya should back off a bit." Jasper nodded. "It's childish and it's unfair on the rest of the household. Father, no one's making Taybor pay for anything. His own conscience is doing that." He cleared away the plates and took them into the kitchen.

"Damn. I didn't mean to cause such an upset." Cassidy rubbed his temples.

"He loved her Cassidy, he probably still does. I know you understand that, he's very much like you." Gidra smiled. "The childish fighting does need to stop and Jasper agreed with you but you can't force him, or Maya, or anyone else to stop remembering her."

"It would be pointless trying." Cassidy shook his head. "If I'd known the impact the girl was going to have on my family, I'd never have brought her from that orphanage."

"Maya would never have spoken to you again." Gidra smiled at her husband and he laughed.

# Chapter 8

---

Drea sat on a pile of damp logs next to the boundary fence of the prison. No one had even bothered to rename the hell-hole and it was still called The Farm. The prisoners at The Farm were all woman and all guilty of various crimes of shame and disgrace to varying degrees. Drea couldn't remember which atrocity they'd actually jailed her for. Begging? Shameful publicity? It didn't matter. The other women in The Farm had committed similar crimes, that was to say, none at all. The guards, for the most part, left the women alone. They were left to ponder their shame and to be thankful they'd been given such a punishment as a means to work towards atonement. The guards lazed about in huts around the outside fence and the women were left to the squalor of the inner farm buildings that were now dirty, cramped cells. Despite the guards' apathy towards them, Drea had still manage to draw their attention towards herself by not grovelling to their ideals, then refusing to cry at their beatings. In the two years she'd been there, Drea had become known as the prisoners' prisoner, as well as one in the crotch of the system as a whole. Drea Silver was a very proficient pest.

"So did he sell the shares?" Candice had been listening to one of Drea's many stories. Drea was way past bothering if she was actually believed or not regarding her tales of mansions and lords. It didn't matter. It was a light to listen to and a light to talk about.

"I don't know." Drea shrugged. "I was married off to a drunken old relic before the place went bust. I can remember these fields full of crops though, from when I was a little girl. You're from State Seven aren't you?"

"I am. My brother educated me in history and I began to teach to the local kids. I was sent here for my troubles and my brother was shot." Candice heaved a weary sigh.

"I'm sorry Candice, I didn't know." Drea apologised. "Do we have any volunteers for shovel duty tomorrow? It needs done before the warmer weather." Both women pulled a face. This rather foul job was undertaken by the women themselves. Behind the cells were trenches, covered with wooden boxes. Toilets. Every week the trenches had to be filled in and fresh ones dug. If the women themselves hadn't decided to do this, then the prison would have been even more rife with sickness that it was already. "I'll do the north one then start on the east." Drea offered.

"Ugh. OK I'll do the other two." Candice gagged. "How come you still wear an arm cuff? Most women these days would be glad to get shot of such a marker."

"I'll never part with it. It's the only thing in the world I've ever owned. More than that, it's all I have left of Lord Jasper. Even if it was made from rusty tin, I'd still never part with it."

"What do you think he's doing now?" Candice looked up at the night sky.

"Sleeping if he's any sense." Drea smiled. "He'll be running the business with his brother and father. He'll be twenty-eight now so he'll probably have a wife or two and half a dozen kids." Drea looked at Candice. "Petra once told me to leave it all to the fairytale books. If I did that, I'd die. It's the only spark I have. I was part of that fairytale, even if it was only for a heartbeat in time."

"But you were a slave." Candice said. "At least your marriage raised you from that." Drea started to laugh and waved her arm at their surroundings. "Oh yes, point taken. You know what I mean though. Under less tragic circumstances you'd have a family and a good man."

"I had a good man. I know it was only to look at and only to sort out his stocks and shares but he was there. That was all that mattered. He wanted me there. No one's ever wanted me either before or since. Now he's lost to me." Drea shrugged. "How shitty is that eh?"

"Drea! Your language is terrible!" Candice laughed.

"I picked it up from the men. What are they going to do? Jail me for it?" Drea smiled.

"Drea!" Lila came running towards them. "Drea, Beth's fever's worsened. She hasn't got long." Drea jumped to her feet and followed Lila into the stone hut that was home to twenty women. It was smelly and stale, despite every attempt at cleanliness. Beth was panting and sweating. Her skin was a ghastly yellow and her eyes were bright with sickness.

"Drea."

"I'm here Beth. Lie still." Drea held the dying woman's hand.

"Tell me about your Lord." Beth croaked.

"He's causing one hell of a scene in Brightplain, Beth, you'd better believe it." Drea felt tears pricking her eyes. "You think he's just going to sit there while these arseholes chuck his girl in jail? Pfft! He'll be down here like a whirlwind, Beth, and he'll kick a few arses while he's here."

"Then you can get married at last." Beth managed a smile.

"Absolutely." Drea smiled even though her lip was trembling. "He'll have carriages for miles, Beth. We can all go to Brightplain. My wedding will be party of the decade! Lord Cassidy will give us all enough wine to have a bloody bath in!"

"Oh your mouth." Beth tried to laugh at Drea's bad language.

"Oi you should hear Lady Maya! By my suppressor can that woman swear!" That was an out and out lie but Drea was sure that Lady Maya would understand. "It won't always be like this. One day we'll be able to do what we like. We'll be able to go to school and even university. We'll be able to go to work with our husbands and brothers. We'll fix Crull so it'll be every bit as good as the other two Zones, even Brightplain. It's going to be OK, Beth. You can sleep now and when you wake up again, everything will be perfect for you." Drea had tears streaming down her face as she watched Beth's eyes stay still and her jaw slacken. "Rest well, sister. You deserve it."

Drea went to inform the guards of the fatality, disturbing their drinking and their card game in the process. They grumbled then wandered down to the hut with Drea, then leant against the walls and door frame.

"Just shove her in the east trench. You'll be filling it tomorrow." One of the guards decided, with a yawn. Drea was absolutely horrified, as were the other women. "Come on then! Jump to it!" Three women darted towards Beth's body and Drea moved to stand in front of it. "Look, this isn't a cemetery! Why is it you that always has to spark off?" The guard glared at Drea.

"All we need are shovels. We'll need them tomorrow anyway. We'll dig her grave ourselves." Drea said.

"You can't dig holes all over the place. Out of the way, woman. East trench."

"No." Drea stood firm.

"I beg your pardon?" The guard sneered.

"No. That's a diabolical thing to suggest. How long do you think it will be before the next Cell kicks in and does its usual show of humanity? They'll dig this place over for crops to provide employment. Again. How long will it take them to track you down and make an example of you for burying a human being in a midden?" Drea anticipated the fist before it was even launched. It connected painfully with her breast bone but she stayed on her feet. "Guard Roland isn't it? I've heard you talking to your friends, there." Drea grimaced against the pain as Roland hammered her hard across the face. "Your family live in the flat above the bank. Mother, sister, grandmother."

Another fist. "The family of a man who wants to bury the dead in a hole full of human shit." Roland grabbed Drea by the throat. "I swear I'll tell the whole damned continent where they live, you bastard." Roland threw her to the floor where she gasped for air.

Drea ended up behind the midden trenches, alone with Beth's body. It took seven hours to dig a shallow grave with her bare hands in which to bury her fellow inmate.

\*\*\*

Jasper was extremely surprised to open his front door to his brother, Taybor. Taybor would rather have had his molars extracted than visit an ordinary house in an ordinary part of the city. Jasper prepared himself for drama.

"If it's about Maya being a pain in the buttocks then I agree with you, Taybor." Jasper moved a pile of papers so Taybor could sit down. "It's puerile and disruptive and I'll talk to her when I see her tomorrow. How's the kids?" Jasper was now twice an uncle, courtesy of Taybor and his two wives. Celia was six and Dorothea was one.

"Noisy." Taybor grumbled and sat down. Jasper smiled at his brother's gruffness. Despite his grumbling and complaining, Taybor was a very loving father. He'd tried to play the uninterested parent with Celia and could never manage it. He'd been positively woeful when he was presented with a second daughter, woeful with a grin that almost bisected his face.

"I heard that someone got told off for teaching Celia how to play cards. Shame on you Taybor." Jasper poured two glasses of wine.

"Hey! You're the one who's always hooting on about me being traditionalist and stuffy! Card playing girls should be right up your street." Taybor scowled.

"Maybe. I didn't think scolding wives were up yours. Nice girl is that. I like Maria." Maria was Taybor's second wife and a huge contrast to his first, Mezii. Maria was twenty-one and as modern as Taybor was 'sturdy'. How in the world they had ever got to the marriage stage was beyond Jasper. She reminded Jasper of Maya, in a way. Maya had been his father's most 'radical' wife.

"She's different. Yes." Taybor rolled his eyes. "And thank you for agreeing to talk to Lady Maya. I never denied that my decisions weren't perfect but the fights are disrupting everyone. Father doesn't need it, nor do the other Ladies. By the Stars I even had Maya and Maria at it the other day and yes I do know you're smirking behind that glass. It isn't funny."

"No. Absolutely not. I'll have a word." Jasper smirked.

"Jas, for what it's worth, I'm sorry." Taybor looked at his big hands. That had been the first apology in seven years. "It's astonishing how social moods and attitudes have changed in the last decade, isn't it? I played the Lord of the manor role for all it was worth, temper and all. It doesn't mean much these days, I know."

"Of course it does. Your position is still very much respected, Taybor, as is father's and as is mine. We're Hellions." Jasper shrugged. "And thank you."

"We're a successful business family. We aren't the deity type icons we once were and that's probably for the best. I know you think it is, you boffin." Taybor sniffed. "I overheard mother and father discussing their visit here. Father was beating himself up for upsetting you as he did. I knew it was time for me to face up to the gravity of the situation I'd caused. I have to realise how important it's been over the last seven years. Seven years, Jas. I honestly did expect you to forget about the girl. I vastly underestimated her importance to you. Actually it shouldn't have been my place to have an estimation. I expected you to be over it in a week and married within the year. It guts me to think what would have happened if father hadn't insisted on a compromise." Taybor grimaced painfully. "I was shocked to my bones when you up and left the Mansion. I could hardly believe it! Well it didn't take long for the regrets to begin seeding after that. You're my brother. Those seeds have seven years worth of growth on them now, Jas, and it's still growing. You still love her." Taybor looked up at Jasper and Jasper rubbed his eyes as he digested Taybor's apology and tried to formulate a reply to it.

"There aren't many days go by when I don't think about her, no. It's as you say though, times were different then. I realise now how much trouble I could have been in, me and Drea. I presume that was your motive." Jasper nodded.

"You presume wrong. I was being an arrogant arsehole." Taybor said bluntly. "And for no other reason than I could be an arrogant arsehole."

"Well it can't be undone, Tay. It means a lot to me that you came here with this. I really do appreciate it very much." Jasper smiled.

"Bah! Will you stop being so damned nice! Call me an arrogant arsehole! I'm the oldest brother so I insist." Taybor sniffed.

"You *were* an arrogant arsehole. Will that do?" Jasper laughed.

"Oh it'll have to." Taybor heaved. "Right! So that's that out of the way. Now then." He chewed his lip for a few seconds. "There is no compensation for arrogant arseholeness so I won't insult you by trying. I've come across a ... a curiosity. I don't know what to do with it, if anything, or even if it means anything."

"Get on with it Tay. You always waffle when you're nervous and it makes me edgy."

"Not nervous, just ... iffy. I was ploughing through the papers last night, intending to cut some of the smaller, more far flung customers due to rising transportation costs. Anyway I came across the Call contract, right at the bottom of the pile. It's a tiny, tiny trade Jas, yet it's just been stamped and approved and renewed without it even having been revised for years. Er ... well ... I know I could think of a reason for that. Could you?"

"For Drea?" Jasper blinked and felt the shock setting in.

"Good old Cassidy eh?" Taybor shook his head in amazement. "I don't think he's been keeping tabs on her as such, just purposely kept this alive and profitable. Anyway, there's more. Here look." He handed Jasper a copy of the contract. "The names are different. This one's from two years ago and it says Murdoch Call. The two after that say Heindell Call. It was Murdoch who married Drea, wasn't it?"

"Yes it was." Jasper felt his mouth drying out. "So ... so who's this? Brother? Son?"

"I've no idea. The thing is, Jas, it isn't Murdoch. It isn't Drea's husband that's running the business. I know there could be a few reasons for that, but what's the first one you think of?" Taybor watched his brother's face go through every expression known to man.

"Dead? He's dead?" Jasper reeled. "Tay he was fifty-eight when they were married! Two years ago he'd have been sixty-three! Dead, yes he has to be." He babbled. "Taybor my Drea isn't married any more! She's not married!"

"Hey come on." Taybor steered Jasper back into his chair. "Come on Jas, I mean it. Simmer down. Think about what you're saying Jas, Please. We're on about the possibility of Drea being widowed. We're on about her husband of five years being dead. Show a bit of respect, brother."

"Oh no! Oh my poor Drea! Taybor she'll be as miserable as sin. We have to find out if she's OK! Taybor we must!" Jasper said desperately.

"We have to find out the score very, very discretely, Jas." Taybor said firmly. "It's been a long time and we have no idea what turns her life made after leaving Brightplain. We have next to nothing to go on and anything we do could be disruptive to us, and to Drea."

"I ... I know." Jasper tried to calm himself. "She may well be still a part of a good family. I know. If I find out she's happy and safe then I'll leave it for good, I swear. Are business correspondences getting through the borders? I know political ones aren't."

"I think we're thinking the same way. I need to send some sort of nosey correspondence to Heindell Call and disguise it as a business interest." Taybor nodded.

"Clarification regarding the name change." Jasper said eagerly.

"For starters, yes. I have no clue as to a next step though."

"I'll think of something. I'm a government Minister, Tay. I can bullshit with honours."

"You aren't thinking about going to Crull are you? Government Minister? Yes? You'd be shot as soon as you set foot in the place." Taybor said in alarm.

"You get confirmation that Murdoch Call is deceased and I'm perfectly entitled to go and pay my respects to a business colleague of the family." Jasper insisted.

"Your position, both politically and snobbily, won't mean a thing there, Jas. The place is a madhouse. I'll go with you." Taybor nodded.

"Eh? Tay you have the tact of a dying bison!" Jasper laughed.

"So? Would you get in the path of a flailing bison? Thought not. Anyway we need to find out what's what first so help me write this letter.

\*\*\*

Drea was returning the shovels after the trench filling when she saw a battered, open truck approaching the prison. 'General' Roland came darting out of the hut and almost knocked her over.

"Just shove those round the back." Roland snapped without paying attention to who Drea was at all. Drea nodded and trudged round to the rear of the hut. The visitors in the truck were six soldiers and Roland was ordered to get all the guards together quickly. Drea pretended to be fixing a tumble-down stone wall while she earwigged through a broken window. Soon there were eighteen men crammed into the guards' hut. From what Drea could gather the current Cell was losing favour and influence. Many soldiers had already fled to the hills and left the Cell seriously weakened. It was like a cracked record and this was the track it always followed.

"They're finished, Roland. Done. Out. We either take to the hills between here and Brightplain or we're done for." One of the soldiers said.

"No doubt." Roland nodded. "So we lay low in the hills, then align ourselves with the Red Star as new men once they're established."

"So we just leave?" One of the other guards asked. "Like ... just walk out the front

gate? What about that lot in there?"

"There lies the problem." The soldier said seriously. "Prisoners or not, there are some big mouthed bitches in there." Drea flinched and chewed on her lip. She was the chief big mouthed bitch. "You also know that not all of them were from the dregs of society."

"So you're saying they could influence the Red Star? A gang of grimy women?"

"Like I said, they all weren't trashy gutter-sluts. Roland. You know how new Cells work! They'll make a show of heeding them to gain favour. We did it too, remember?" The soldier pointed out.

"Well we can't drag them all along with us." The other guard exclaimed.

"Of course we can't!" Roland snapped. "Trenches to the north and east, re-dig them."

"Eh?"

"The middens! The shit trenches! They've filled those two in today so they won't be as rancid. Open them back up." Roland ordered. "Pylo you really are stupid. I'll spell it out. Leave the boxes over the trenches before we leave here. Yes? If you were scouts from a new Cell, would you think of digging up a shit trench? Move it!" Drea felt her blood run cold. Mass graves! By the time any remains were unearthed via normal farming methods, the scum here would have either vanished into obscurity or be part of the next Cell. "Round them up into the center cell. Once we've finished, we'll dump them and torch the building. Do it!"

Drea leant against the wall and fought with the bile in her throat. She had to tell the others! They had to get out of here! Men were already making their way into the compound, barking orders as the did so. Drea stood in absolute terror while the women were dragged and pushed into the center building. She'd never felt so overwhelmingly useless in her entire life.

A scream was stifled into a sob when the gunshots started. They'd find her next. She'd told Beth it would be OK! Drea cried in complete fear as more gunshots exploded and she saw men headed towards the north trench. Think Drea! Her eyes fell onto a length of rubber hose that the guards sometimes used to wash down the cells and the women if the stench got too high in the warm weather. Drea grabbed it and dragged it over the edges of the glass of the broken window, chopping off about six inches. She tucked the tube into her suppressor. Roland was right. No one would search a midden, especially a full one. Drea scrambled her way to the south trench, the one they'd intended to fill in tomorrow. The stench was obviously vile and it was fifty times worse beneath the crates that bridged the trench. Drea wretched and gagged and covered her mouth and nose with her cloth cap, then waded in.

It seemed like hours before Drea eventually heard the sound of stomping boots. She bit a hole in her mask and fed her hose through it, into her mouth, then she ducked

her head under the reeking waste in the half full midden trench.

# Chapter 9

---

"Just you two?" A bored and tattered looking border guard yawned and showed Jasper and Taybor his black teeth. "No wives and such?"

"Just my brother and myself." Jasper nodded.

"What's your business in Crull?" The guard reeled off, parrot fashion.

"Personal. A family acquaintance has suffered a bereavement."

"Huh?" The guard looked at Jasper.

"We missed a funeral so we're here to offer condolences." Taybor translated.

"Hundred funerals a day here. Not many get the attention of Brightplain toffs." The guard made an attempt at reason.

"Look." Taybor said testily. "Call's wine vendors, State Three. The deceased was Murdoch Call, and we're visiting his son, Heindell. No he isn't expecting us as we only found out about the death recently. OK?"

"Suppose so." He accepted a few gold coins from Jasper and nodded them both through.

"Why didn't I think of bribing him." Taybor muttered as they strode out of the patrol grounds.

"We only have a business address here, Taybor. 117 Galyan Street. Any ideas?" Jasper looked at the maze of dirty, littered streets that sprawled out in front of them. They were hopelessly lost within ten minutes and were forced to go into a jeweller's shop to ask directions. A square slab of a man looked evenly at Jasper and Taybor when they entered his shop.

"We're looking for Galyan Street, sir." Taybor told the owner.

"Not very successfully." The man shrugged and Taybor felt his irritation rising rapidly.

"Obviously. Could you give us directions, please?" Taybor forced a smile.

"It's the Street behind this one. The back yards join on to one another. Whereabouts?  
It's a long street."

"117."

"You're OK then!. It's directly opposite here, through the back way. I share a yard  
with 117." The man smiled.

"Excellent! May we cross through your back yard?" Taybor asked.

"This isn't a public thoroughfare. Walk round." The man sniffed and Taybor emitted a  
growl.

"Thank you." Jasper butted in loudly. "That's fine. Thank you very much Mr....?"

"Debyal. Reef Debyal." Jasper nodded and pushed Taybor out of the door.

"Arse." Taybor cursed as they set off down the street. "I've a mind to make his face  
into a thoroughfare."

"Oh stop moaning." Jasper laughed. "It's only round the corner!" As it happened, it  
took a whole ten minutes to walk down the street then double back along the next  
one. Number 117 was a sorry looking building with peeling paintwork and dirty  
windows. Taybor nodded in satisfaction when he saw six bottles of Hellion brew in  
the window. The man behind the counter was tidy and smartly dressed.

"I'm looking for Mr. Call." Jasper said.

"Oh you are, are you? Why?" The man looked up from his books.

"It's regarding the late Mr. Murdoch Call. I'm looking for his son, Mr. Heindell Call."

"Well you've found him. What ... " There was a rustling of a curtain from behind the  
counter and Heindell turned round

"Murdoch? Who wants Murdoch?"

"It's OK, mother. Come on, back through where it's warm. I'll talk to the gentlemen."  
Heindell steered Petra back through the curtain but she wriggled away from him.  
"Mother, please."

"Oh pish, Heindell! Pish I say!"

"Come on, mother. Please excuse my mother. She sometimes has rather alarming  
episodes." Heindell apologised and Jasper and Taybor nodded politely.

"You know Murdoch?" Petra dodged her son again.

"Not personally, Ma'am, although my father did." Jasper said respectfully. "Please accept my condolences on behalf of the Hellion family." Petra shrieked like a hundred banshees and terrified the living daylights out of Jasper and Taybor.

"It's ... OK! It's OK mother. Come on, through the back. Yes, I know it's the boss. I do apologise, gentlemen." Heindell manhandled his mother through the curtain.

"Taybor! That woman will know Drea! She's bound to!" Jasper hissed to his brother.

"Batty as a loon." Taybor hissed back. "Shh." Heindell was back.

"Lord Hellion, I'm sorry about that." Heindell apologised.

"No need for all that, Mr. Call. All that's long gone. I'm Jasper and this is my brother Taybor."

"Lord Jasper!" Petra was back, and crying. "You're real? You are!"

"For crying out loud." Heindell heaved.

"Mrs. Call, why would you think I wasn't real?" Jasper asked carefully.

"I never doubted! Umm ... I never wanted to doubt it. I wanted to believe in you so much at times." Petra was in floods of tears and Heindell looked very awkward indeed.

"It's fine, Mrs. Call. I am real, you can see I am. Who told you who I was?" Jasper's voice held a tremor.

"What in the blazes is going on?" Heindell shouted. "Mother! For goodness sakes!"

"She loved you, you know." Petra nodded and Jasper looked at Taybor in sheer agony. "You were the only thing that kept her going most of the time. You kept all of us going. We all saw her spark, Lord Jasper. It never went out." Jasper had to swallow very hard a few times to keep the tears in check and Taybor wasn't much better.

"What are you talking about?" Heindell glared at his mother. "Who loved him? If this is some sort of mental rambling I'll see you in an institution."

"Mr. Call, please forgive me. This is my fault." Jasper said shakily. "Mrs. Call is referring to your father's fourth wife, Drea."

"What?" Heindell erupted. "Contract or not, I demand an explanation!" He

demanded. "I will not tolerate any disrespect towards my late father."

"Of course not." Jasper said quietly. "I didn't expect this to happen like this so obviously you deserve an explanation." Jasper spent the best part of an hour explaining to Heindell Call how his father's last wife came to be in Brightplain. He even managed to avoid putting Taybor in a bad light by avoiding specific family, and therefore private, names. Heidell's colour drained and he had to sit down.

"G ... get out." He stammered. "Leave my shop. If it costs me the contract, then so be it."

"I'm sorry." Jasper muttered.

"I'm not." Taybor stated. "Listen to me, Heindell. We've come a long, long way to sort this out. Our condolences are sincere, have no doubt about that, and the contract is safe. It's a viable business deal, regardless of anything else. We certainly aren't here to disrespect your late father. Do you understand that?"

"I'll tell you what I do understand." Heindell got to his feet. "I now understand, too late, his furious ravings. I now understand he was justified in his resentment of having a cast off trollop forced onto him like that. I now understand that everything he used to shout about was true! He wasn't a well man *Lord* Jasper, and that girl's stubborn refusal to humble herself drove him into a frenzy of agitation for five damned years!"

"Are you finished?" Jasper roared and Taybor looked at his brother in surprise. "You'll be finished in more ways than one if you don't shut the hell up!"

"Oo! Nice one, Jas." Taybor whispered in admiration.

"She did nothing wrong, you sorry little runt! Absolutely nothing! Do you hear me? My affection for her was so transparent the whole damned household saw it with no input from her at all!" Jasper hung his head. "I was at fault, not her. She did nothing wrong, Mr. Call. She wasn't sent to your father in disgrace and she was no cast-off. She's the finest woman I've ever met and your father had no reason to feel shame, or resentment, and nor do you. Personal matters should never overlap into business so the contract is still viable, as my brother said."

"The contract stays. You don't. Leave me alone." Heindell said curtly. "Good day, gentlemen."

Jasper veered off into a side street where he broke down in tears of sheer, agonising grief. His Drea had been sent to household of abuse. She'd suffered five years of it and it was all his fault. He should have walked away when he knew damned fine he was falling in love with her. He should have kept his nose out of it and left her in the

kitchens. He should have looked for her. He should have come to Crull sooner.

"Come on Jas." Taybor put his hand on Jasper's shoulder. "Hell and damnation, I'll never forgive myself for as long as I live. We'll find out where she lives and bloody well kidnap her if we need to."

"Why? Taybor she'd have to be deranged not to hate me! Seven damned years it's taken me to come here. Seven years! What sort of a man am I?" Jasper cried.

"A very trusting one and that's not a crime. You trusted Call to look after her, we all did. I know it's wrong to speak ill of the dead but he was the arsehole of the piece, not you, and if that dungball in there lays one finger on her I'll tear his spleen out." Taybor was just as distressed as Jasper and the guilt was crippling him.

"Lord Jasper?" Petra's reedy voice came from behind a refuse bin. "Heindell thinks I'm asleep."

"Mrs. Call!" Jasper darted at the bin. "Mrs. Call go back inside. Heindell will ... "

"Oh he won't." Petra's head nodded randomly. "He's all noise. Murdoch now, well he was an utter bastard you know. Heindell just has the mouth."

"It's enough. Go inside before he sees you're missing." Jasper helped the old woman from behind the bin. "It's fine, Mrs. Call. I'll sort this out. Please don't worry, or risk, yourself."

"No, no. You don't understand. Drea isn't with us." Petra said quickly. "Heindell is my son, you see. Not Drea's. He wouldn't take her, Lord Jasper. I pleaded and I begged, I swear I did. I told her I wouldn't leave her. I didn't want to leave her. I shouldn't have left her." Petra cried and wrung her hands.

"Mrs. Call, where is she?" Jasper leant over so he could see Petra's face.

"She said she'd be OK and she smiled. She said she'd work something out and she smiled. If she'd had children, then Heindell would have to have taken her until they were grown. She never did." Petra shook her head.

"Thankful for small mercies." Jasper muttered. "Where did she go, Mrs. Call?"

"I don't know. I never saw her again. Women aren't allowed outside on their own so I never got chance to ask after her." Petra suddenly smiled at Jasper. "You once tried to set up a folding chair to sit on in the orchard and it collapsed four times on you. Drea laughed so much. You ended up throwing it aside and sitting on the wall with her."

"She told you that?" Jasper smiled too even though he couldn't recall the event.

"Oh yes. She told me how you tried to teach Lord Taybor how to juggle with three apples. Lord Taybor ate one because it was easier with two. I saw the flower you made her from a single sheet of paper. Murdoch burned that, by the way. He was a nasty man. I'm pleased he's gone and I lost my mind as a punishment for that, Drea won't. She's stronger than I was. She had hope." Petra nodded again.

"Well we're all guilty of losing that from time to time." Jasper sighed sadly. "Thank you for speaking to us. It means a great deal to me. You have to go back before Heindell sees you missing. Take care Mrs. Call." He watched as Petra disappeared into the shadows behind the wine shop.

"I made that flower." Taybor sniffed and Jasper laughed, just as Taybor had intended. "I did! I was teaching you. Poacher. So he burned my flower eh? Nasty old relic. So! Next? Don't you go all depressed on me Jas."

"I'm fine." Jasper smiled weakly. "She could be anywhere. Tay, you don't think she's ... "

"No." Taybor said flatly. "The Dreas of the world don't leave it so easily. Don't let me hear you say that again or I'll slap you better looking." He waved his hand at Jasper. "Actually Jas she couldn't be just anywhere. Women aren't allowed out on their own and single women would stick out like sore thumbs."

"Well for five minutes before they're arrested ... oh no! Arrested?" Jasper said desperately.

"What a rat hole this is." Taybor said in annoyance. "Jas we can't just wander about asking about a single woman. We've seen what happens and that was with someone who knew her. We need a female ear. Men won't talk to us because one woman isn't that important here. Nursing and whoring." He said decisively.

"So we have to go to the bathhouses and the barracks." Jasper took a deep breath.

"You are hard work. We'll try the hospital first. Even women have hospital records."

Jasper and Taybor trailed their way to five hospitals, only to be told that none of them treated women. Even if the staff were female, no women's records would be there. A soldier outside the fifth hospital told them that their best chance would be a hospital on the outskirts of town where women went 'to drop them'. Childbirth.

The maternity hospital was a converted warehouse and it was jammed to the rafters with ailing women and children. Some were obviously very pregnant, others very sick and Taybor was mortified and visibly shaken. Sickness always had made him squeamish but the squalor here positively revolted him. The men saw a feeble total of

five nurses among the crowds and it took Jasper over half an hour of polite charming to fend his way to one of them.

"Women's hospital." The old nurse snapped. "Don't you think you have enough resources?"

"We're looking for a missing person, ma'am. Obviously this is the natural place to start." Jasper raised his voice above the din.

"I don't have time for this muck." The old nurse turned her back on Taybor and Jasper.

"I have money to pay for medicines for the hospital." Taybor spoke up and the nurse turned back round. "Obviously I'll need to get to my bank but I will honour my word. Please accept this as an initial token." He handed her his money purse and she tested it's weight.

"Thank you, sir." The old nurse nodded. "This way, please." She hobbled off into a room that was no bigger than a cupboard, the two men following her.

"I'll be as quick as I can, ma'am, you're clearly very busy. We're looking for one of the widows of Murdoch Call. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the family." Jasper said.

"I'm familiar with everyone, I'm a thousand years old. I delivered four of the six Call children. None here now though. I think their childbearing days are over." The old nurse shrugged.

"This one had no children. The fourth and youngest wife ma'am. It's so tragic when you actually hope she is sick, and not in jail." Jasper said miserably, comparing the options out loud.

"Hmm. I think she has been here, but it was with Petra Call. Poor Petra. That woman's had more broken bones than I've had indigestion attacks." The nurse shook her head. "So it'll be the little scrap with blonde hair?"

"Yes!" Jasper had to stop himself from hugging the old nurse. "Do you know where she is? We have no idea at all about the systems here."

"There are systems?" The nurse rolled her eyes. "I don't recall Petra mentioning her by name. I originally noticed her because I presumed she was a daughter that wasn't my handywork. Petra corrected me."

"Drea." Jasper nodded, nudging a huge box labelled 'C' with his elbow.

"Drea?" The nurse looked sharply at him. "Curious name."

"From a curious source." Jasper began peering into the box.

"Do you know her maiden name? We get kids here too." The old nurse asked warily.

"Well she spent five years in Brightplain so I wouldn't count on that. Drea Silver." Jasper said and the nurse made a gurgling sound and sat down heavily on a chair. Jasper and Taybor were panic-stricken, thinking she was having a seizure.

"I'm fine! Get out of my face. Bah!" The nurse wafted the men away from her. "How old?"

"I'm twenty-nine ma'am." Jasper said in panic.

"No! Not you! For crying out loud. Drea! How old is Drea Silver?"

"Oh! She'll be twenty-three." Jasper said and the nurse frowned and pursed her lips. "Can you remember her? It's very important."

"I can but I'd like a bit of verification. Did she ever tell you about that choice of name, sir?"

"Well yes." Jasper glanced at Taybor. "She was an orphan. The midwife named her after the cat." The old nurse just looked at him and nodded. "You! You are joking? You? You delivered Drea? You brought her into the world?" Jasper had to sit down too. "I don't believe this."

"The hospital cat was a silver tomcat called Drea." Lalin said in astonishment. "The dratted thing kept getting into the nursery and curling up under her crib. Her mother died of the fever after a week and I took the baby to the orphanage. The orphanage has long gone. Brightplain? She ended up in Brightplain?"

"She was on my father's staff until she married Mr. Call." Taybor said. He saw no need to rake over yet another explanation and he was fed up of repeating it as his guilt increased with every narration.

"My, my." Lalin shook her head in amazement. "So you see it as your duty to inquire into her welfare now that her husband's dead?"

"Basically, yes. We knew she had no family prior to her marriage but we only found out recently that she'd been widowed and was childless. Given the unrest here in Crull, my family saw it as the compassionate thing to do. She was in our household for five years after all." Taybor explained and Jasper was impressed as well as relieved. He'd have just babbled out everything and made a fool of himself.

"If only I'd heard her name I'd have known." Lalin was still astonished. "I can't believe that was her! Right on the doorstep as Murdoch Call's wife!"

"Neither Mrs. Petra Call or her son have any idea of her whereabouts, ma'am. What would her options be?" Jasper asked.

"Man-less, family-less, childless." Lalin pulled a face. "Nursing, which she isn't because I'd recognise that name on the register, whoring ... "

"Which she isn't because that's just ... ridiculous." Jasper helped.

"Of course." Lalin smiled in amusement. "And there's begging which is an arrestable offence." She stopped smiling and flinched.

"And sent where?" Jasper asked warily.

"By the Stars you don't want to know, sir." Lalin said sadly.

"Most probably not, but we must." Taybor said.

"The women's prison was converted from an old arable farm between States Three and Four." Lalin shook her head and sighed loudly. "The soldiers abandoned the place in panic with the prospect of another Cell takeover. I'm sorry, sir, but no women were found there."

"No." Jasper shook his head furiously. "The ... the women left too. They were unguarded, right?"

"Sir, a group of women would have got noticed, especially by these lunatics we have in now." Lalin said gently. "Sir, they wouldn't want a link of any sort from themselves to The Farm. I'm so sorry. Poor Drea Silver, after all that."

"No!" Taybor stated. "Just ... no! We'll go to the prison ourselves."

"You'd never get near it." Lalin said. "The rotten hell-hole wasn't guarded this much when it was occupied. You'll be shot, sir, just to stop you snooping. The new Cell aren't ready to go public just yet."

"I feel sick." Jasper was white with revolted shock. "I can't just not know, Taybor. I can't leave it like this."

"You poor lad. I can't stand this." Lalin rubbed her tired eyes. "There's enough crap here without those petty scum refusing people decent closure and respect. Come with me. Phyllis! Hold the fort, please. Emergency." She hobbled her way through the hospital and Taybor had to physically support Jasper as they followed.

Lalin parked the two men in a tatty little coffee shop and told them to get their acts together to minimise attention. Her advice made sense and Jasper and Taybor watched as she waddled out of the cafe and into a maze of side streets.

"I've come to you once before, Reef Debyal." Lalin stood and looked at the man behind the jeweller's shop counter.

"Who the hell are you?" Reef said in surprise. "Get out."

"I'm the midwife who delivered your children, even the illegitimate one." Lalin said calmly.

"By the Stars I'll have you damned well flogged! Are you mad?" Reef shouted.

"Mad? I'm bloody livid. You refused to help the girl you seduced twenty-three years ago, Reef Debyal, and she died because of it. Your daughter survived. Yes, your daughter. She was living on your damned doorstep as Murdoch Call's wife!" Lalin pointed her bony finger at Reef, who was dumbstruck and utterly astonished. "You know as well as well as I do that Murdoch Call was a very harsh man. He left his family with nothing but debts. The other wives were taken in by family. Thanks to you, wife number four had no family. She was arrested for begging and sent to The Farm. You work out the rest."

"H ... how do you know?" Reef's mouth was as dry as a bone. "Have you always known?"

"No. No I haven't. I have a man and his brother sitting in Wesker's Cafe and he's devastated. He's absolutely heartbroken. For reasons not known to me they were unable to be together and she was married off to Murdoch. It's taken him the two years since Call's death to get this far. Only you can give him closure so his mind can grieve."

"Me? What can I do?" Reef flung up his arms. "It really has nothing to do with me, old crone."

"You fathered her!" Lalin erupted. "Claim your paternity, for pity's sake! Lie through your teeth and say you were unaware of her until now, if you like, but acknowledge her as your daughter. By law you can ask for documentation from the prison and have her buried properly." Lalin said wearily. She could tell by Reef Debyal's face that she could have saved her breath.

"You are mad. I'll do no such thing, you lunatic!" Reef shouted. "How dare you bring that to my door after two decades? How dare you instruct me on what to do? I know the whereabouts of all my children, you old crow. They are all alive and healthy."

Whatever atrocities occurred in that place are of no concern to me!"

"You think not? Even if you ignore me, Reef Debyal, what I've just told you has registered in your head. That knowledge, and your own conjured up images of that hell-hole, will haunt you for the rest of your days. Good day." Lalin stamped out of the jewellers and slammed the door.

Taybor and Jasper were outside the cafe when Lanin strode into view, frustration to the fore. She shook her head and Jasper looked at her in desperation. They had no idea what the old nurse had been up to, but she knew she'd somehow tried to help.

"So there's nowhere else to look?" Jasper pleaded. "There has to be!"

"Work through your acceptance of it, lad." Lalin said quietly. "I'm sorry. No one survived The Farm."

# Chapter 10

---

Jasper flung himself full tilt into his work. Actions were carried out at a rapid rate based on Minister Jasper Hellion's reports on the instability of the current Cell in Crull. Manoeuvres were ordered and troops were sent from Brightplain, first, then from Demihold a month later. Foot by painful foot, Crull was being squeezed from both sides and factions split and scattered. Groups formed, resisted, collapsed and fled and were replaced by more groups. It was chaotic. Violence and running battles erupted onto the streets and the terrorist Cells were losing. This Brightplain - Demihold double bulldozer was a drastic and last step resort. There had been no other option.

It was eight months before Jasper received his first reports on The Farm, and when he did, he was physically sick. Decomposed remains had been found in two trenches within the grounds, all riddled with bullet holes. Rotting wooden crates were still perched on top of the converted graves.

Lord Cassidy Hellion arranged for a full memorial service to be held in his own grounds in respect of the women in The Farm and dozens of people turned out. Jasper and Taybor paid for a marble monument and it was set in the orchard, under the appletrees.

"Jasper?" Maya peered through the darkness from the orchard gate. "Jasper, come on."

"I want to stay, Maya. I'm fine." Jasper's voice came from the shadows under the trees.

"Do you know how long you've been here?" Maya sat next to him, by The Farm monument. Jasper didn't answer. "Four days." Jasper looked awful. He was pale with exhaustion and his eyes were red-rimmed with tears. His chin was dark and rough with growth and his long hair was loose and unkempt. Down one side of his hair, a prematurely grey streak ran its length.

"She would have been twenty-four this Yule Time."

"I know." Maya said gently.

"We sent her to that." Jasper's voice sounded empty and hollow. "I know we hounded Taybor, but we were all responsible. I should have kept my distance, father shouldn't

have put personal trust in a business colleague. All of us, Maya."

"Jasper you have to start working through it." Maya said. "You have to start accepting and grieving."

"I know. I will Maya, in my own time, when I feel I can."

Demihold had sent a great number of troops from its south border and had pumped a great deal of money into the Bulldozer. North Demihold was attempting to balance the economy by redirecting funds to the south. Brightplain was also trying to send financial subsidies but transactions were difficult cross-borders. Correspondences of every type were delayed and out of date by the time they reached their destinations.

Jasper spent his thirty-second birthday in a frenzy because one particularly elusive faction had managed to get into Brightplain. They'd managed to occupy a very small area of land in the north eastern corner that actually bordered one of the Hellion vineyards. Jasper frantically authorised permits, passes and troops and they were moved into that area. The area had been lightly guarded up to now due to it's geography. It was on a slope, for one thing, and it was also naturally protected by a nasty swamp at it's edge. Jasper cursed himself for a damned fool! He'd been with his father and Taybor when they'd grumbled about the scorching temperatures of late and the direct sunlight spoiling the crops. The blasted weather had dried up the swamp! How simple was that!

"Jasper." Chu came puffing into the office in a sweat. He was hot, flustered and irritable. "I know all of our correspondence has to be ploughed through and not all of it's relevant or useful. Most of it's old news or rubbish. Look at these, though." He handed Jasper some papers and Jasper looked at the dates first. "I know they're all late comers but read them." All the reports had arrived after the events, but they were all extremely accurate. They were all from the same sympathiser too, a man named Andrew Jasper, ironically enough. "It was the surname that first caught my eye."

'Demihold predicts a rise in wine prices. Wine comes from Brightplain. Brightplain will not tax Demihold at this time. Conclusion: Damaged crops. Theory: Hot sunlight on Brightplain's north slopes. ADVISORY: Monitor the foothill swamps for drying out. Andrew Jasper.'

This was followed by ;

'Faction activity headed towards north east Brightplain. ADVISORY: Check the swamps for dehydration. Andrew Jasper.'

"They're all like that. They're all very accurate predictions set out like that. This chap knows his stuff." Chu nodded.

"How is he getting this information to us?" Jasper asked.

"Underground movements for the best part. Once those networks get them to the border, our troops get them here to us."

"So does he claim to be part of any groups or factions? He's obviously on our side but they usually mention who they're working with."

"No. Nothing like that. It's just what you see there. Andrew Jasper. He must be working with others though, otherwise he'd not have knowledge of the Underground networks. It's a pretty shrewd move actually, Jasper. If there's no groups mentioned then there's no potential target." Chu nodded.

"Well there is. Andrew Jasper. Yes I get what you mean. One man would be harder to find if it got uncovered. That's probably an alias anyway, if he has any sense, which he obviously has." Jasper agreed and complimented.

\*\*\*

All it took was a muffled footstep for a lightweight repeater firearm to be hoisted off the floor and trained on the door. Sleep to offensive in a split second.

"You're needed in here, Andrew." A voice came from the other side of the door.

"Guy! For shit's sake, you ape. OK, OK. I'll need ten minutes." Andrew grumbled. Guy's big booted footsteps retreated down the wooden corridor of the makeshift hut that was half-way inside a cave. The extreme western hills of Crull were riddled with such caves. This particular one was very isolated and the only building in sight was a tumbledown shell in the distance that used to be an orphanage at one time.

"I'm not a spy! I want to join you!" A tatty looking mad protested loudly to Guy. "I've looked for three weeks on my own in these damned mountains."

"We'll see." Guy lounged on a chair, his gun still in his hand. "Here's the boss."

"Good." The tatty one said and nodded acknowledgement at a boy who walked into the room. "Well go and get him then!" Guy let out a childish laugh.

"This is him." He informed the visitor.

"What? He's a kid!"

"Yeah he is a bit of a runt eh." Guy yawned. "Andrew, I found him about six miles from here. He was on one of the outcrops behind the old gold mines."

"Why would you doubt me? I'm alone! No one would find this place in a million years so I'd have no chance of contacting anyone if I was a spy, would I?"

"You just looked a bit iffy." Guy shrugged. "Anyway, why are you talking to me? I told you, he's the boss. We woke him up. He's pissed off."

"Guy, take him outside, shoot him, then throw him in the midden trough."

"Huh?" Guy looked round in complete surprise.

"H ... huh?" The man looked terrified.

"I said ... "

"Yes, yes I heard you. Andrew?" Guy was taken aback and more than a little nervous himself at Andrew's instructions.

"Take a good look at me." Andrew ignored Guy and spoke to the other man.

"Y ... yes. Look I'm sorry about the kid thing. I just thought you'd be older, that's all." He prattled.

"So you never got the chance to join the Red Star?"

"The Red Star? How do you know I ... I never intended joining the Red Star. You've been misinformed, Andrew."

"I was told by a very reliable source. An eye witness, actually." Andrew shrugged off his heavy army jacket, revealing his baggy vest, and his arm cuff. "Oh I can't think of her name now. What was it?" He loosened the knot at the back of his bandana and a cascade of blonde hair tumbled past his shoulders. "I remember! Drea Silver." Drea glared at 'General' Roland in sheer hatred and Roland stumbled back against the wall in shock.

All she'd had to do was hide her hair and wear boy's clothes. Her small size and suppressor did the rest. By now, Guy was over by the door and seriously disturbed by all this. Even among their own men, only a handful knew that Andrew Jasper was a twenty-six year old woman. Everyone took her for a runt-like boffin type male of around eighteen with a lot of knowledge on everything and strongarm backup such as Guy. The weedy boffin didn't take long to earn respect, and no one had any cause at all to doubt him in any respect. What was disturbing Guy was the actual unmasking. There was no way that this Roland person was going to be allowed to run off and make this public knowledge. Roland knew this too.

"Drea, Andrew, whatever, that doesn't matter to me. I can honour that." Roland grovelled. "I swear it's all safe with me. I always did admire you, Drea, always. About

that midden stuff, well you didn't actually think I meant that do you? As for the others, well I had no choice! Those bastards would have killed ..." A crack like an explosion cut off his sentence. Even Guy recoiled at the suddenness of it, and at the cold look in Andrew's eyes. Roland stood for a few seconds with his mouth open and his eyes crossed, as though he was trying to look at the bullet that had just exploded in his brain. Then he thudded to the floor and stayed there.

"Shit." Guy said at last. "Shit!"

"Yes he was." Andrew nodded wrapping up the long blonde hair into the bandana once more.

"Prison guard?" Guy began hoisting Roland's body over his shoulder. Andrew nodded and redressed. "Er ... you don't really want him dumped in the midden do you?"

"He probably deserves it, but no. Dump him in the nearest mineshaft, Guy. These hills are riddled with shafts full of dead arseholes like him." Roland nodded and went to dispose of Roland. He was replaced by another close colleague, Henry.

"He failed the entrance exam then?" Henry said, going for the buckets and water.

"Loyalty of a dung grub. I knew him from the past." Andrew said moodily.

"Ah I see. Did he know who you were?"

"After I stripped off, yes. Poor Guy will never be the same again." Andrew smiled and Henry rolled his eyes.

"I've often wondered this, just out of curiosity, you know? How do you get Andrew Jasper from Drea Silver? Drea and Andrew I suppose, yes, but where does Jasper come from?" Henry asked, mopping up the blood and brains.

"From days that seem like a hundred years ago." Drea sighed sadly. "Easy really, I loved him. I still do."

"Oh! Oh I'm sorry, Andrew. I never thought of anything like that. You're Andrew Jasper to me, you see? The boss." Henry apologised.

"No need to be sorry." Andrew smiled. "He was a wonderful man. He probably still is."

"Ah so he's alive at least." Henry nodded.

"Most probably. He's in Brightplain. You know I wear a slave cuff, you've seen it plenty of times. Well mine isn't for decoration." Andrew smiled at Henry's astonished

face.

"You're joking? You were a genuine slave girl? Get out of it! I know your sense of humour." Henry laughed.

"Genuine slave girl." Andrew laughed too. "I certainly was. Slave girl it was so I never got the chance to be with the man I loved, or him with me. I was exchanged for a business contract to a bully and a brute of a man. I watched him die with as much compassion as I showed that bastard." He nodded to the crimson stain on the wall.

"Ah that's really tragic." Henry sympathised. "That's all gone now though, especially if the brute's dead. Can't you go to him? With all the contacts we have, I'm sure we could get you to Brightplain."

"Don't think I've never thought about it." Andrew shrugged. "I don't know what I'd find, Henry. My Jasper is here in my head and my heart. In reality he'll likely have three or four wives and a dozen children by now. Ten years is a long time. Besides all that, I couldn't do what I'm doing now as a wife, could I? I can't even do it as a woman! We couldn't expect any husband to tolerate his wife crashing about the hills with a machine gun for the good of Crull." He laughed with Henry. "Ah he'll be just fine, Henry. Men like him deserve the best and he'll have it. I miss him every single day, but knowing he's fine and safe somewhere comforts me."

"Andrew!" Guy was back and out of breath. "Brightplain troops have retaken the north east corner and they've moved into Crull. They've pulled troops from the western border and sent them to the east lands."

"Yes!" Andrew grinned. "Just where they're needed! The western border should be fine now because States Three and Four are protected by Brightplain. We still need to stop crap up north though. Demihold is still struggling financially. We need to take the pressure off them from this side until their cash and troops stabilise. We send correspondence through the Network via the north west. Those hills would kill a bloody mountain goat, let alone a pissy terrorist. Send a squad of Rats up there to relay hut five. Now then!" Andrew found a sheet of paper and a pen. "I bet they have a laugh at this. I can speak Northhold but writing it's something else. They probably think it's been written by a retarded alcoholic."

"I'm sure they decipher them." Guy nodded. "Even more good news, Andrew. We got quite a stash of ammunition from one of the collapsed factions. A neighbouring faction attacked them and wiped them out but they didn't find the ammo."

"You know, I don't understand it. Really I don't." Andrew sighed. "They aren't going to get anywhere! Can't they see that? The days of a few hundred strong Cell running the place has gone. They can't even get enough together to make a full bloody Cell so what chance does a piddling faction have? Shit heads."

"They're doing Brightplain and Demihold's work for them, thankfully." Henry put away his buckets. "It's not just the Cell days that are over, Andrew. The whole military rule days are over. The gangs and groups are just not getting any support. Every civilian out there wants a normal, non-military government like the other two Zones."

"Well it'll be a Brightplain and Demihold coalition government to begin with, until Crull gets its act together. That's a good thing though. The entire Zone will be protected and helped by the other two until it's strong enough to do it on its own. It should have been done decades ago. I don't suppose we'll ever know what spurred Brightplain on to take the initiative so suddenly, but I'm pleased it did." Andrew began his letter, painfully, in Northhold.

# Chapter 11

---

Jasper was in one of his 'phases'. This meant swings from agitation and restlessness to lethargy and depression. He'd gone to work and got in everyone's way without actually doing anything useful at all. When he found himself yelling at his staff for no reason, he knew it was time to clear off and get his head together. He ensured that nothing urgent needed his attention then went home. Jasper didn't know if to laugh or cry when he found his parents had come to visit. Of course he was always pleased to see his family but he knew he wasn't at his best just now and really just wanted to be left alone.

"You're exhausted. You look terrible." Cassidy commented.

"Yes well things are looking hopeful in Crull so maybe I won't be as stressed out in the future." Jasper exhaled loudly and sat on the couch.

"You have more grey hair than I have!" Cassidy laughed.

"It's silver." Jasper smiled. "And it's only this bit at the front."

"I think it looks distinguished." Gidra complimented, then went to make some tea.

"Actually I didn't want to bring your mother." Cassidy said quietly and Jasper felt his agitation rising again. "I'm also not sure if I'm doing right here."

"Mother!" Jasper stood up and took the cups from Gidra. "I really do need your help. I have to attend a stuffy meeting with stuffy politicians and the last one I went to, one of the clerks said I looked like an unmade bed. I'm hopeless at clothes shopping."

"Yes, you're a man." Gidra began tugging at Jasper's collar, then his trousers, looking for the size. "You've lost weight. These are a size less than the last ones I bought you. Goodness knows where you got these from. I'll go to Stock's tailors." She said firmly and Cassidy forked out some cash.

"Good job you're here. I've no money on me at all." Jasper said as his mother left.

"What's going on?"

"Maybe nothing. Well probably nothing. Just ... things." Cassidy was clearly very uncomfortable.

"You're like Taybor when you do this. Just spit it out." Jasper rolled his eyes.

"Do you remember a serving girl called Mayte? I have to admit, I can't."

"Yes I remember her quite well. She gave me language lessons. She went back to Demihold didn't she?"

"She did, yes. She married a soldier from our own army here in Brightplain and he accepted a post in Demihold. I can only think that her husband doesn't speak Northhold so he gave his wife a letter to translate. Well ... well ... it's not a normal letter, Jasper. It's formal. Mayte, the wife, contacted me." Cassidy chewed on his lip. "I have the letter and you're welcome to it, given it's nature as a military correspondence. The contents of the letter aren't why the girl contacted me, Jasper. Mayte claims to recognise the writing style of it's sender, for a whole array of reasons. It's from a man called Andrew Jasper. Mean anything to you?"

"Possibly. I do think I'd better have the letter, father." Jasper said seriously. He was astonished and very impressed at the area of contact and influence of this man. He was everywhere! This was most definitely a war hero of some standing.

"Of course. Let me finish though, please. Like I say, I don't think the contents are important as far as myself and Mayte go. It's two weeks out of date and it's typed. Apparently there's no letter y in the Northhold language. They use a rather elaborate looking character in its stead. Yes?" Cassidy looked at Jasper.

"That's right. It can't be typed effectively because most typewriters don't have the key and those that do have a poor reproduction of it because it is very elaborate." Jasper agreed.

"Quite. So that character was written. Mayte noticed an error in the way it was written and that error was made in exactly the same way throughout the note. She'd only ever seen that error once before. A high number of the words were written as they'd be spoken and the whole letter was in the grammatical style of this language, not Northhold." Cassidy said.

"So it's badly written Northhold. It's not the easiest language for non-natives." Jasper replied.

"Mayte took that into consideration. It's consistent, right though the note and even the word 'the' is spelled wrong. There's also a pattern of back to front letters. A whole host of constant errors that when combined, were familiar to the girl. This is absurd, I know it is." Cassidy sighed. "If she hadn't been so insistent and convincing I'd have dropped it in the fire."

"She ... she ... she thinks Andrew Jasper is Drea?" Jasper felt very light headed

indeed. "But that's ridiculous! Isn't it?"

"Most probably." Cassidy said awkwardly. "I can't think why she'd just pull out Drea's name though. Especially to connect it to something like this. I don't know son. Your mother would give me the silent treatment for a month if she knew I was spouting all this. I've learned not to live by passive assumptions though, Jasper. I couldn't *not* tell you. I know it still upsets you so I hope I'm not being irrational here."

"No. No, father, I'm very pleased you told me." Jasper said in a daze. "I've also seen Drea's written Northhold. Her written anything was a bit sketchy ten years ago. What made Drea's Northhold so peculiar was that she'd translate a word that she'd misspelled in the first place, but she'd translate it letter for letter, that symbol character included. As you can imagine, the results were rather chaotic." Jasper smiled as he remembered this.

"So this Andrew Jasper is well know to you, I presume?" Cassidy asked.

"He's all but solely responsible for preventing both borders from collapsing, the bit by our own land being a small part of it. He's diverted raids and bombings on our troops by interception techniques, and he's thwarted arms trades galore between factions. He prevented a full frontal assault on Demihold's border while they were disorganised. He did this by orchestrating lightning strikes on factions all along the border's length. Andrew Jasper is the most vital and instrumental man that Brightplain and Demihold have in Crull." Jasper explained.

"By the Stars!" Cassidy exclaimed. "So Mayte's assumptions must be wrong. I think I've opened my mouth to you needlessly. I'm sorry."

"Mayte is very, very insistent here." Jasper re-read the letter.

"If I'd known anything about this man, I'd never have troubled you. Jasper, he's a strategic genius, obviously. How could a woman be free to organise and carry out all that?" Cassidy said.

"I'm going to Crull."

"Yes I ag ... What? Jasper no! Damn me for a fool. It can't be as Mayte thought, Jasper, think about it." Cassidy said in alarm.

"If I don't go, it'll plague me to an early grave. It's making me ill, father! The military grip has all but gone in Crull. I'll be free to ask a few discrete questions. All I need do is announce who I am, really. The Underground Network is huge and Andrew is in touch with all of it. If he's Drea, then he'll know I'm there." Jasper rubbed his eyes.

"Jasper it's probably Matye's fanciful imagination." Cassidy tried.

"Mayte is very intelligent, and always was. There's more to it, father. Drea used to score direct hits with stocks and shares predictions, you know she did. I have an office full of reports using that exact same method. They have Drea's hallmark stamped all over them but I'd never have connected it in a thousand years. I have to go. If Andrew Jasper doesn't respond to my presence, then it isn't Drea. She loved me for seven years that I know of and the last three are a void. I have to go."

\*\*\*

Andrew lay flat on his stomach on the library roof, with a pair of binoculars. His own men had evacuated the market square and were now waiting for backup from the Bulldozer units. On one of the market stalls was a box and it had been sheer luck that one of them had recognised it, and the way it was made. Had it been opened, it would have detonated and maiming nails, scrap metal, and spikes would have shot out at a very high velocity at anyone in range. Andrew could see the box through his binoculars, and he could also see the reinforcement troops as they began to filter into the Square to search it inch by inch. If any more boxes were found then they'd be moved into the open if it was possible, then detonated by marksmen from a safe distance. The ones that seemed too dangerous to move were left until last, when it was safer to go into the area. Andrew usually took that job, he didn't miss.

"Desperation moves." He muttered to Guy, who was alongside him. "Bombs! I detest bombs! They're so cruelly indiscriminate. I want as much of the scrap recovered as we can, Guy. I want to know where it come from. I also want to know who ordered those boxes in bulk."

"We're already onto the crates." Guy replied. "Obviously shop owners can order boxes without it looking unusual. We started there." Andrew nodded.

"Damn. The stupidity of people is incredible at times. Guy, get down to the west path gate. The men look like they're struggling with curious bystanders. For shit's sake! Do they really want to go in and have a look?" Andrew said in irritation. A group of people were wanting to know why they couldn't carry on trading and some were insisting on 'helping'. "Oh great! They're getting themselves arrested!"

"I'll go and disperse them." Guy crawled from the roof.

A squad from Demihold was acting in the capacity of a general civic police force and Captain Snow sat in an interview room and glared at one of the troublemakers he'd lifted. Captain Snow was a new import but he was a good policeman and a good soldier. He'd cleared most of the bystanders before Guy had got there. As usual, there was always one crackpot who thought he could do better than the appointed forces.

"I should jail you for being a damned nuisance. You were not helping! That was a dangerous situation, you have to understand this." Snow explained loudly. He was actually of the opinion that the man was a bit feeble minded.

"I was helping! I stood right next to you and told them to clear off."

"Yes you did and that was quite ... astonishing ... but I'm trained to handle crowds. You could have been hurt." Snow said patiently. He had neither the time, nor the resources to detain eccentrics.

"So you arrested me."

"Of course I did! You started hurling insults at me! Look, I had no choice. You were going to cause a fight. I'm not going to press charges, I just needed you out of the way of it." Snow sighed wearily.

"But you're putting me on your systems, yes?"

"No. No that won't be necessary. You're free to go." Snow nodded.

"No, no. You have to put me on record. Section seventeen, subsection seven, paragraph twelve. Causing a public affray."

"Good grief. If I put you on the system, will you go away?" Snow heaved.

"Yep! Go on then, I'll watch. Jasper Hellion."

Two hours later, Captain Sitch came barging into Snow's office. Sitch had the unenviable job of weeding out the 'minor stuff' that would clog up the already clogged systems. Sitch wasn't from Demihold, as Snow was, he was from Brightplain.

"This one! Is he still here?" Sitch wafted a paper at Snow.

"Eh? Well of course he isn't. We have terrorist bombers at large, Sitch. Do you think I'm going to waste space on harmless weirdos? I don't think he was wired up right anyway." Snow handed Sitch his paper back.

"Snow he's the son of one of the most influential families in Brightplain and he's also the bloody Minister of Inter Zone affairs!" Sitch shrieked.

"What?" Snow said in bewilderment. "Don't talk bilge, Sitch. Anyway if he is all that, don't you think it's as well I did let him go?"

"No! Do you really want an important official wandering about out there among the factions? Eh? If they get wind of who he is, they'll have him!"

"Well balls!" Snow shouted. "No one tells me anything! Why didn't he damned well say? What in black buggery is he playing at? Don't just stand there Sitch! Contact the Underground lot. We need him off the streets as fast as possible. Bloody imbecile!"

\*\*\*

Andrew crouched behind a wall of metal bins, rifle levelled at a crate that was only just visible, poking out from behind rolls of cloths on a stall.

"I see you." He hummed. The last bomb boomed and exploded and Andrew pulled one of the bins on top of himself for cover.

"All clear!" Henry's voice sounded. "Good shot, Andrew."

"Has the Square been rechecked? Double checked?" Andrew removed his cover.

"Triple checked. We did brilliantly." Henry nodded.

"We certainly did. Well done everyone." Andrew smiled. "Any news on those crates?"

"Two shops in the area use those type boxes. If they check out clean, then we'll look further afield." Henry told him.

"Andrew!" Guy came running across the square.

"Oh hark at him!" Andrew grimaced. "Broadcast it a bit louder, Guy. Mouthpiece."

"Sorry! Andrew we found the crates. Not only that, we found a full bloody factory in the cellar!" Guy said in astonishment.

"Whoa! I hadn't really expected any of this to be local!" Andrew said in surprise. "What about the shop owner?"

"Well I dare say he'll be arrested eventually." Guy said vaguely. "At the moment he's locked in his shop with Davies and MuTang."

"Splendid!" Andrew grinned. "Shall we?"

Guy and Henry stood in the shop snarling, Andrew standing behind them.

"Untie him please, MuTang." Andrew said quietly. "I presume he's unarmed so it's not

necessary. We aren't the terrorists." MuTang nodded and untied the ropes. "Now then, Mr. Debyal, why have you got a bomb factory under your shop?"

"Who the hell are you?" Reef bellowed. "I'm not answerable to a damned kid!"

"Oh don't be so bloody difficult!" Andrew shouted. "You're making bombs to blow up kids! You arse! Kids and women! Who the hell do you think uses that market? Bulldozer troops? No! Women and kids from right here in Crull, you shit!"

"There are no real women and children left here." Reef growled. "Rebellious, out of control upstarts and you display that perfectly boy! You and your kind have ruined Crull."

"It's far from perfect just now." Andrew mused.

"It will never recover! See what you've done? You've ripped families apart with your blasted freedom shit and I damn every last one of you!" Reef spat on the floor in front of Andrew and Guy and Henry moved forward. Andrew held up his hand.

"Ripped families apart? You just blow them apart." He shrugged. "You have a very long stretch in jail in front of you, Mr. Debyal. Your own faction will be after you because you've been discovered. You've been here for years, I know you have. Surely you know how factions and Cells work by now?"

"At least with a Cell we had family loyalties. I had a family. I had wives and children. No more. They disrespected and disobeyed me, every last one of them. I damn them too. Yes, I've been here for years and only now my wives leave. They simply left! I could do nothing! You tell me how that is for the good." Reef glared insane hatred at Andrew.

"You're a very selfish man, Mr. Debyal. What about for the good of your wives and daughters? I'm also a believer of family loyalties. I also believe in respect and discipline. That isn't the same as suffocation and obsessive control." Andrew sighed. "Ah now look what you've done. You made me use a buzzword. You can't demand respect, nor can you force it. If you'd treated your wives and daughters as a bit more than burdens and inferiors, you'd have enough respect to last you a lifetime."

"How dare you preach to me about my household!" Reef roared. "You're a shit-arsed kid! How can you know how a functional household works."

"Oh I can, trust me. I've been part of two. The first one was as a slave, the second one as a family member. I'd give anything to return to the first one. Functional? Your lot doesn't look too functional to me, Mr. Debyal. Claw back a bit of that respect and tell me where the other factories are. This one's dead on its feet and you know it. Tell me and you'll earn the respect of the people in Crull, and the security that goes with it."

Andrew stood close to Reef.

"Go and die." Reef snarled.

"Tell me what I ask and you will have segregation in prison. If you don't, you'll be housed with other terrorists. We will find these factories anyway and they'll assume you helped us." There was a tap on the door and Andrew nodded to Guy to go and investigate. "Do you understand that, Debyal?"

"You are nothing, boy." Reef sneered and Andrew sighed heavily.

"The guard needs our help, Andrew. Some idiot bigwig's turned up and he's wandering the streets like a bloody tourist. Fool. They need him found and kept safe until they can chuck him back to Brightplain where he belongs. You want a few men pulled together while you finish up here?" Guy asked.

"If you would, yes please. I'll get another squad together when I turn this shit over to the guard. Who are we looking for?"

"Minister of Zone Affairs! I know! Bloody idiot." Guy rolled his eyes. "Minister Jasper Hellion. Shit!" He caught Andrew as he fainted and dropped on the spot.

Andrew pulled round in a back room of the shop. The guard had been and formerly arrested Reef Debyal and men were taking apart the factory in the cellar.

"Andrew!" Henry came darting over. "Good grief man! Are you OK?"

"Exhausted." Guy replied, handing over the bandana. "I had to hold that onto your head while I got you in here."

"Thankyou." Andrew replaces his headware. "Guy. The name of the man we're looking for, please."

"Sod that. The men are on to it. We can stay here until you rest up." Henry said.

"His name!" Andrew shouted. "The Minister of Zone Affairs! What's his name?"

"OK! Calm down!" Guy said. "Jasper Hellion. Shit! Not again! Andrew what the hell's wrong with you?"

"I'm ... I'm fine!" Andrew fought with the blackness. "Find him. I want him found within the hour and yes I'm serious. Haul in anyone free and search every rat-hole and outhouse. I want him found, I want him safe, I want him in the old cinema house."

"At the base?" Henry asked. The old cinema was a safe building they used.

"Yes! Another thing, you're to treat him politely and respectfully. I don't know what he's up to but he's no fool. Treat him as a guest. Understood?" Andrew said and both men nodded. "Give him this and he'll go with you without a fuss." He pulled off the gold arm cuff for the first time in ten years. "I want it back. Lose it and I'll castrate you, Guy." Guy guffawed a laugh and zipped the object safely inside his jacket. "Henry, you look like a carp. Close your mouth."

"The Minister of Zone Affairs is your ... your ... whatever he is? Was? Jasper?" Henry blurted and Andrew nodded and rubbed the bare skin where the cuff had been.

"Lord Jasper Hellion. Second son of Lord Cassidy Hellion. The titles have worn off these days but they hadn't back then. You know the rest."

"By the Stars! How long is it since you've seen him?"

"Ten years, I told you. I know why he's here, Henry. He's no fool, like I said. He drew attention to himself to draw the attention of the co-ordinator of the Underground. He could have contacted the Underground from his office. He wants Drea Silver."

# Chapter 12

---

Jasper sat in the only public building he knew. Wesker's Cafe. He sincerely hoped he didn't look as bowel-wrenchingly nervous as he actually felt. He was terrified. He'd gambled on the police force's interaction with Underground being swifter than the 'bad lot'. All he could do was wait and hope his gamble would pay off.

"Jasper Hellion?" Jasper almost collapsed at the sound of the rough voice next to him and had to grip the edge of the table for support. "Don't panic, we're the good guys. In fact I'm *the* good Guy. Guy Frejak." Jasper just nodded, not trusting his own voice just yet. "I have something for you. I swear I'm not here to hurt you. I wouldn't bloody dare." Guy took the gold cuff from his pocket and put it on the table. Jasper felt light headed and close to passing out. "Steady on! Shit what is it with everyone today?" Guy supported Jasper so he wouldn't sway off the chair. "I hope you trust me now. I was told you would after seeing that cuff."

"Wh ... where did you get it?" Jasper felt himself shaking.

"The owner of it gave it to me, forty minutes ago." Guy said and Jasper couldn't contain the tears any longer. He closed his eyes and every single memory and every single detail flooded through his mind. "I'm just the messenger so I'm not sure what the deal is here. Take your time boss." Guy nodded.

"Tell me, does this cuff belong to Andrew Jasper?" Jasper wiped his streaming eyes.

"You know him don't you? I mean you know *him*." Guy nodded and Jasper sobbed and laughed at the same time. "Well bugger me silly. I take it Andrew's probably changed quite a bit since you saw him last?"

"Without a doubt." Jasper swallowed back another wave of tears. "It's miraculous. It's absolutely incredible. I can't explain how overawed I am here." He turned the cuff over in his hands.

"He was Andrew through and through for three months before he confided in me. Shit I have never been so astonished in my whole life. I don't know a lot about his past, just that he was in service in Brightplain and loved it there. You I presume?" Guy nodded.

"My family, yes. I'm sure the pieces are falling into place for you." Jasper smiled. "I thought he'd died at The Farm. This is a huge system shock for me."

"I'd say so. Nah! Andrew dying in some shitty prison? Pfft! I'm sure he'll tell you about it himself though. You ready?" Guy asked.

"Probably not." Jasper took a deep breath. "Guy? I'm sure you've gathered that I love ... er ... Andrew very much and you look like my brother Taybor when you smirk. Not funny. I was told, three years ago that she ... he'd never stopped loving me. I'm babbling. Sorry."

"Well he's a pretty private person, he has to be, so he doesn't often open up much about his personal feelings. There's been no one else, if that's what you mean. How could there be eh?" Guy chattered as they left the cafe. "For one thing he's the boss and for another thing he's a he. I'm not bigoted or anything but I think we'd all have noticed if Andrew had a man! Hell's delight!" That made Jasper laugh. Guy would get on very well with Taybor. "Just wait until I see him. How about not telling his right-hand man he had a fancyman in Brightplain!"

"Gah! I can't keep using 'he'!" Jasper cringed as Guy opened the doors to the cinema. "Shit I'm as nervous as hell, Guy. Ten years is a long time and I thought she was dead for three of them."

"You've gone grey Lord Jasper." Andrew said from an office door.

"D ... Drea?" Jasper blinked. "Oh my Drea." The tears flowed from both sides. "What have you done to yourself? You look like a teenage boy!" Jasper felt like he was dreaming. His Drea! After ten years!

"Yep! I'm supposed to." Drea laughed. "Guy! Stop smirking like a big sap and make sure no one whatsoever comes into my back rooms. Got that?"

"I bet he didn't bark orders out like that when you knew him." Guy rolled his eyes. "Go on, bugger off the pair of you. Umm no, not bugger off. Clear off."

"Guy!" Jasper squeaked in horror and Drea sniggered. "O ... OK so I've a lot to catch up on. No need for vulgarities." He sniffed and Drea laughed. He was still her Lord Jasper, even after all this time.

Hours passed by. Stories were told. Tears were shed and laughter was shared.

"I can't believe I've found you." Jasper shook his head in amazement. "Especially by such flimsy threads."

"I can't believe I've been in your memories like that for all those years." Drea sighed. "I'd resigned myself to your marriage and family."

"I couldn't resign myself to your marriage and family even though I knew nothing of it at the time. I hoped and prayed you were happy and safe. You weren't. Resigning myself to your death just wasn't going to happen. It was killing me." Jasper smiled at Drea. Khaki pants, baggy grey vest, oversized soldiers jacket, big black boots and a bandana. The last time he'd seen her she was wearing red satin pants, a gold threaded tunic and a jewelled cap. "I can't get over what you look like. It's brilliant!" He started to laugh. "I can't believe what I'm seeing! My Drea is Andrew Jasper. He's the most well known man in Brightplain and Demihold and he's my Drea."

"Ah just until Crull's sorted." Drea smiled. "Then he'll vanish into retired obscurity. Jasper you know I can't leave with you, don't you?" Jasper looked at Drea and saw the exact same eyes had he'd seen all those years ago. Innocent and pleading.

"You're needed here. I know." Jasper smiled.

"I'm needed here as Andrew, not Drea." Drea hung her head.

"I know. If you try and correspond with me, it would be a very big and dangerous risk." Jasper understood although he knew Drea was as upset at the prospect of being apart after only just finding each other, as he was. "Drea, it'll be OK now. I'll never, ever let you go again even though we will have to be apart. I know you're here and I know you're alive."

"And I know you're there and that you haven't got wives and a houseful of kids." Drea looked a bit happier.

"No I'll leave that to Taybor. I can't believe you hung onto this." Jasper handed Drea her arm cuff and she replaced it.

"It was all I had of you. Lord Cassidy all but ordered Murdoch to keep off it and not to force me to remove it. He hated it, like I told you. One good thing though, it kept him away from me. Bringing Murdoch's children into the world is a horrible enough thought, let alone in times like this." Drea shrugged and smiled and it took Jasper a few minutes for to catch on to the implications of that.

"So he didn't ... er ... I don't know what to say." He went red instead.

"Damn, blast and bugger it, is what I said. I found out in prison that I could have divorced the arsehole after two years due to non-consummation." Drea rolled her eyes and Jasper laughed. "Ah I don't want you to go. I know you have to, but I don't want you to."

"It'll be OK. I promise." Jasper put his arms round Drea and she started to cry. "What an incentive to fix the Zone eh? We'll do it between us."

"Secure the west border with Brightplain and the west border with Demihold and we have it. I sent you a letter but you'll probably get to your office before it does. The main, and most active factions are based down that west strip." Drea snivelled.

"So the double Bulldozer becomes a Triple Bulldozer, with you lot here to snare any stragglers." Jasper nodded. "It shall be done!"

"Andrew!" Henry barged in. "Gack! Er ... no not gack. Hell I keep forgetting he's a she. Sorry."

"You'll be sorrier if this isn't important." Drea squirmed round in Jasper's arms to look at Henry.

"Weird." Henry shook his head. "The police have that jeweller in the cells but he's gone a bit psycho on them."

"What?" Jasper laughed. "So sort him out! You have a brigade of big, hairy men and you come for a tiny five foot woman?"

"Um ... doesn't know you very well does he?" Henry said. "Davies was there when he started ranting. He thinks you should get down there, Andrew."

"I'm coming." Jasper said firmly. "Oh don't you give me that girl-power glare Andrew Jasper, it doesn't work. OK find me a bandana like her's ... his ... and an army jacket."

"Jasper ..."

"Hush!" Jasper raised his eyebrows at Andrew. "I'm not having my fiancee tackling psychos on his own."

"Find him some dark glasses too." Andrew laughed and Henry was bewildered with the gender confusion.

By the time Guy and Henry had finished with Jasper, Lady Gidra wouldn't have recognised him, let alone Snow and Sitch. He'd been bandana'd, jacketed, bespectacled and bearded and the latter made him itch like merry hell.

The ranting and raving from one of the cells could be heard all over the police station.

"Good grief will you shut up!" Snow roared, then saw his visitors. "I don't like this, Jasper."

"Me either." Jasper agreed and Snow looked at him. "Oh! Yes, he's talking to you."

He nudged Andrew.

"He's new." Andrew gave the officer a wide smile. "So! Has he said anything useful in his rantings?"

"No. That's why I saw no need to drag you out of the woodwork, Andrew." Snow stated. "Dealing with you covertly is one thing, you having to openly turn up here is another."

"I agree. That's why I don't do it often." Andrew nodded. "However, my men tell me it needs my attention and I do trust them."

"Fair enough. He's completely lost it though. He's just roaring and bellowing and making very little sense." Snow lead them down a corridor.

"She hexed me! She did! Why won't you listen to me?" A voice screamed from behind a locked door and Andrew winced. "She told me the images would torture me and they do! I swear I'll be a new man if you make them stop. Make them go away!" Snow opened the the cell door and they went in. "You again! Leave me alone!" Reef shrieked.

"The images that torture you, Mr. Debyal, it's called your conscience. It's your own guilt." Andrew said. "The factories?"

"Too late. She's dead." Reef sobbed. "I never wanted her and she made me pay, even after her death." He rocked back and forth.

"Who?"

"I could have claimed her bones and I didn't. She was nothing to me! Why can't you understand?" Reef raved.

"Mr. Debyal, you must calm down." Andrew said evenly. "You aren't making sense."

"I am! Calm? Calm? One bastard girl born to a slut and she's reduced me to this. She should have died in the crib but did she? No she did not!"

"OK, we didn't come here to hear this." Snow said. "Told you he'd lost it."

"So it would seem." Andrew agreed. "Mr. Debyal, you aren't the only man to father an illegitimate child. I hope she was spared the pain of knowing a loveless father."

"No she's dead. She was slaughtered on The Farm." Reef nodded and Andrew looked sharply at him. "Dead. Dead."

"There were no children at The Farm." Andrew said darkly. "Your daughter reached adulthood without you and every woman in that place was ten times the person you'll ever be."

"She was nothing." Reef laughed insanely. "Nothing at all. She has no right to intrude on my head like this! No rights at all! She was so useless she wasn't even noticed here and she was on my doorstep! As though I'd lay claim to such a waste of space! Murdoch ..."

"Stop!" Jasper shouted loudly. He's pieced together Reef's rantings long before the others. The realisation of who Reef Debyal was had crept over him like a chilling fog. "Andrew, come on."

"I don't bloody think so." Andrew growled dangerously. "Wife four, yes? Answer me, you pox riddled son of a whore! Wife four!" He bellowed.

"You know nothing of it! Leave me alone!" Reef howled.

"Wife four! Drea Silver was wife four, you shit. Drea Silver was your daughter!" Andrew was shaking with rage. "Say it. Say it! Say Drea Silver was your daughter otherwise I'll blow your brains out where you cower!"

"No! She was never my daughter!" Reef cried.

"You left her to die with her mother but she didn't. You turned your spineless back on her when she was sent to an orphanage. You buried her in your head and denied her even after her death. Say it, you bastard! Drea Silver was your daughter." Andrew snarled.

"She was my daughter!" Reef screamed. "Drea Silver was my daughter! I denied her miserable existence and she came back after death to make me pay!"

"You bet your balls she did." Andrew hissed. "Northhold maximum security prisons are full of shit like you. Shit doesn't smell the same to that scum in there, Debyal, and they will get you. You'll be in fear for the rest of your poxy life and when they do catch up with you, you'll plead for death as a release. Snow, he's as sane as you are and he has a cellar full of intelligent and lucid blueprints to prove it. I'll see you get them." He stormed out of the cell, leaving Snow looking after him in astonishment.

"Henry! Henry leave him." Jasper caught up with Henry as he tried to follow Andrew into a side office. "He needs time to think. Leave him."

"Hell he doesn't like him much, does he?" Snow was still reeling from Andrew's tirade. "I don't think I've ever known him go berserk like that."

"He feels very strongly about the atrocity of The Farm." Jasper said, and looked meaningfully at Henry. "Debyal speaking so disrespectfully will have upset him quite forcefully."

"He deserves the tirade, Snow. Callous arsehole." Henry shrugged. "I'll get back to the others. Check on him, yes?" He nodded towards the door and Jasper tapped on it.

Drea was sitting on a table in the office and the shock had set in hard and deep.

"He once appraised my arm cuff. I didn't like him then either. He told Murdoch to hack my arm off if I refused to part with it."

"I'm so sorry you found out like that." Jasper sat on the table with her. "I can't imagine how I would have felt."

"I wonder how he knew I was at The Farm." Drea frowned.

"I think I know. I told you I'd found the midwife when I was here with Taybor. She really did want to help, she was very sincere. She vanished for a while and it's my guess she went to try and get him to do the decent thing. Probably frightening him half retarded in the process." Jasper said. "Drea I'm not leaving until you're recovered from this."

"Nothing to recover from, Jasper. He was an arse twenty-six years ago and he's been an arse since. Actually it's easier for me knowing how bitter and full of hate he is. I can justify to myself, despising him completely. I'm fine, don't look so worried." Drea smiled at Jasper.

"I can hardly believe how strong you are. What happened to the Drea who used to apologise and cry at everything?" He smiled back.

"Oh she's still there. Swearing my head off like that isn't something I'm proud of, Jasper. I'm sorry. I'll apologise to Snow too." Drea sighed.

"Hardly your fault." Jasper lifted Drea off the table. "Come on, I'll get you back to the base."

"How long can you stay for?" Drea warbled pathetically.

"Not long enough." Jasper sighed. "The last thing any Zone needs is me being reported missing."

"I know. The minute I'm no longer needed, I'll come to you. All we need is Crull

stable enough for a joint government to step in. Even with all the changes we've seen, female leaders won't be possible just yet and nor would I want it." Drea shrugged. "I don't want to stay Andrew Jasper. I don't want to be a man."

"I'm pleased to hear it. I don't want you to be a man either." Jasper said and made Drea laugh.

"Ah it'll sort, Jasper, you'll see. Then they can get on with it. All I want is to be Lady Drea Hellion. Oh don't you pull a face! I don't care if you don't use your Lord. It's still there and I'm marrying it. I'll use and abuse it as I please."

# Chapter 13

---

The general opinion of Brightplain's Ministerial Offices was that Jasper Hellion had gone prematurely senile. He grinned, beamed, whooped and laughed his way through his working days in a manner that none of his colleagues had seen before. Only four other people shared Jasper's knowledge of Drea; his parents, Taybor and Maya. Maya had to be physically restrained by Cassidy from dashing off to the Crull border. In the end, she was distracted into staying put by being given the job of secretly arranging Jasper's wedding, along with Gidra.

"The western strip has closed in another sixty miles Jasper!" Chu waved a handful of papers at Jasper and laughed in delight. "The civilians are starting to settle in the other States and are already establishing businesses. The only hotspot is that pit in the middle."

"Which is now more tepid than hot." Jasper nodded as he read Andrew Jasper's report.

"He's all over it." Chu said in admiration. "He's really pulling out all the stops for this final pushover. He'll be hailed as a hero in thee Zones, Jasper."

"Ah well I wouldn't count on it. He's done more than his bit for Crull. It's my guess he'll blend into his surroundings and enjoy what he's achieved." Jasper said.

"You think? Shame really. I, for one, would love to meet the man." Chu replied.

"Actually, preserving his anonymity will make more of a hero of him than going public ever could." Jasper reasoned. "Everyone is individual, you see, so everyone has individual perceptions, and ideal heroes. Andrew represents so many ideals that everyone can identify with at least one of them. You'll remember his strategic genius. Seddit, out there, admires his bravery. Carlos admires his intelligence. My mother admires his tenacity. Taybor's wife admires his everything and threatens to leave Taybor and elope with him." Jasper laughed as he recalled Maria's words. Poor Taybor had almost choked. "We'll remember all these things in the way they were generated. Without a physical presence to influence us."

"I suppose so, yes." Chu nodded. "What about you? What do you admire in Andrew Jasper?"

"His surname and his appreciation of Brightplain gold." Jasper smiled and left his

office for home.

\*\*\*

Eight months had passed since Jasper's visit to Crull. Andrew's correspondences grew less and less as less and less needed corresponded. Business and trade links were establishing and growing between Crull and its two neighbours and buildings were being restored to their proper functions as schools, hospitals, and aid centers.

Jasper sat in his old rooms in Hellion Mansion and looked out over the frost covered gardens. He'd heard nothing from Andrew in two months.

"Uncle Jasper?" Taybor's nine year old daughter, Celia, was in there with him.

"I'm sorry, Precious, what did you say? I'm so rude, I wasn't paying attention." Jasper let Celia scramble up onto his lap.

"If Andrew Jasper tells the banks in Crull to keep the cost of lending out money low, then people will be able to start spending it. Sort of pushing the economy along a bit." Celia said.

"Well listen to you! You after a Minister job?" Jasper laughed.

"When I'm older, yes." Celia said seriously. "My dad says it's important to learn about these things, Uncle Jasper."

"And he's right." Jasper agreed.

"I don't know how he expects us to learn though. He made a squeaky noise when my mum said she wanted to go to school as a teacher."

"I bet he did." Jasper laughed. He thought Mezii would make a very good teacher.

"Maria likes to help ma'am Maya at the hospital so I could do that too. I'm not sure yet."

"Well we'll always need nurses, won't we? Goodness me, where would we be without them?" Jasper smiled at his niece.

"Why have you no wives, Uncle Jasper? I think you're very nice."

"Agh! Brat!" Taybor came striding into the room. "Nosey woman. Out." He grinned at his daughter and she launched herself at him in fits of giggles. "Come on, out of it. Your mother's looking for you with a hairbrush in her hand."

"No! She pulls it out!" Celia wailed.

"Well you'd better go find Maria first then." Taybor nodded and Celia darted out of the room. "Don't let her pester you, Jas. Kids ask awkward questions, I know."

"Oh she's fine." Jasper turned to look out of the window again. "She reckons Crull should lower its lending rate to kickstart the economy. Not so long ago she wouldn't be allowed to say that."

"Still no word?" Taybor asked and Jasper shook his head. "That's good though, Jas. No correspondence means no trouble, right?"

"Right." Jasper sighed heavily. "She's twenty-seven today."

"Ah I see." Taybor nodded. "Jas, Andrew Jasper has to have a phase-out period before Drea Silver can appear. He can't just stride out of his hut dressed as a woman now can he?"

"I know. I'm just thinking, that's all. You know me, I'll sit here forever pining." Jasper smiled sadly. "She'll contact me when the time's right, Taybor. Come on, we'll go to dinner."

Cassidy was in a very good mood indeed. Contracts had been surprisingly plentiful, not just for wine but for the raw fruits too. Now he was planing on buying land and developing orchards for oranges, apples and pears. This, in turn, would be an employment booster for Crull, as the land bordered that Zone.

"Wine? Come on Jasper, drink up!" Cassidy waved his hand at his son.

"He's going to be drunk!" Taybor laughed. This was the fourth glass forced upon Jasper in thirty minutes. "There again, who cares? More wine for me too."

"I'll start on authorisations regarding The Farm for arable crops again. Obviously it needs checked over professionally and tactfully. Respects need to be paid there. Thank you." Jasper accepted his wine.

"I think that's the best decision, Jas." Taybor agreed. "It needs formal attention and renovation. Keeping it as an abandoned graveyard is ghoulish and bleak. Crull doesn't need that. Is this a new brew?" He asked as his father indicated for them to drink up again.

"Seems to be going down well, Taybor. I think you have hollow legs." Jasper observed.

"Me? You've put away three bottles yourself." Taybor argued.

"I'm entitled to. I have a stressful job." Jasper said and moved over so his glass could be refilled. "Thank you Drea. So the area between The Farm and State Four will be ... Drea!" He jumped to his feet, sending glasses and cutlery in every direction. Taybor was absolutely dumbstruck and Cassidy was grinning widely. Drea was dressed in her red serving clothes and she was beautiful. "D ... Drea?" Jasper half sobbed and Drea nodded and smiled at Cassidy. "Drea!" He almost crushed her ribs with his arms and Taybor had to grab the wine jug. "Really? You're really here to stay?"

"Lord Cassidy, people will gossip." Drea laughed and flung her arms round Jasper.

"Well I'm pleased you got changed otherwise they'd certainly have gossiped. Happy birthday." Jasper hugged Drea as tightly as he could and never wanted to let go.

\*\*\*

Jasper and Drea were married within the week.

Drea was kept informed about Crull's rapidly recovering situation, but from her new home of Hellion Mansion. Guy and Henry knew of her whereabouts and were working on ensuring that Andrew Jasper retired as enigmatically as he'd functioned. He would recede into the new Crull and remain in the memories and the admiration of the Zone he'd fought so hard for.

Drea contacted Mayte in Demihold, and also Lalin in Crull. The old midwife replied to Drea's letter, but sadly died shortly afterwards. Guy had written Drea the news. As far as Drea knew, Reef Debyal was imprisoned in Northhold and would probably end his days there.

Petra Call had also passed away a year before Drea had returned to Brightplain. By a miraculous stroke of incredible fortune, Drea found Madame Jilly! She'd fled to Brightplain at around the same time as Drea had been sent to Crull to marry Murdoch. Drea and Jasper had been walking by the library and the head librarian, Madame Jilly, had simply walked out of it. She'd walked straight past the couple at first.

Jasper's thirty-fifth birthday would never be forgotten. He came striding out of his own private rooms and into the study with a smile that threatened to split his face in two. Taybor and his father had paced a threadbare trench in the carpet and kept colliding with each other as their paths crossed.

"Lord Cassidy, you have a grandson!" Jasper whooped and Taybor and Cassidy were delighted. "He's as bald as a marble! I think he looks like me though. Taybor I got to cut the cord and everything."

"Ack! Was it necessary to tell me that?" Taybor gagged. "Why the hell did you want

to be among all that anyway? You're abnormal! Ugh! We did hear the lovely Lady Drea threatening to castrate you."

"She did. She also told me I had to pass the next one." Jasper laughed.

"Ew! See? You're at it again! So what's his name?"

"I'm surprised to had to ask." Jasper smiled. "Andrew Jasper Hellion."

-----End.