

The Friendship

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Saliman was homesick. It was the kind of sickness that lay heavy in his belly, a slow, grinding ache. He had never been so far from home, and he felt the lack of his kind in the high northern citadel of Norloch. The days were warm – it was summer after all, and in Annar the summers were green and gentle – but his soul was chill. As he walked the First Circle, the high center of that garrisoned and walled city, it seemed to him, for all its grandeur, to be infused with a strange melancholy.

Far away in Turbansk, his southern home, it was the month of Hassian, the Lion's Breath, when the wind roared in from the deserts and laid siege to the city. At this time of year, everyone rose before dawn and hurried to the marketplace to do their business. For the rest of the day the people fought a losing battle against the heat. It was the wind, dry and harsh and merciless, that made it unbearable. No shade protected against the Lion's Breath, the wind laden with dust from the desert that found its way into the sweltering houses through every crack. Most people tried to sleep until the burning sun dipped over the horizon and delivered some release. Some splashed in the shallows of the Lamarsan Sea, under the shade of the city walls, and others embedded themselves in the dark-shuttered, high-ceilinged coffeehouses in the bazaars and spent all day complaining about the weather. How you yearned for the long shadows of evening then, on those endless tawny days.

But in Hassian, the nights made up for the days' tormenting tedium. At night the city woke up. The young women painted their lips and eyelids and put on their silks and bangles, and the young men bathed and perfumed themselves and braided their long hair, and all night long they walked along the wide, tree-lined boulevards by the Ernan Palace and flirted and gossiped under the bright lamps of Turbansk and the huge, serene moon. Musicians would crowd into the gardens of the great houses with flutes and dulcimers and harps and odhus until it seemed the very walls of the city pulsed with music. The coffeehouses burst with people of all ages, all vibrating with relief from the heat, all charged and excited with the cool of the night. The city quieted after midnight, when at last the heat abated (and most people then slept on the roofs of their houses), although some revelers would dance until dawn. And the fountains played all night in the gardens, bewitching the city with their gentle melodies.

Saliman, who had only recently been through the rituals of instatement that confirmed him as a Bard, found himself tormented by these memories, which rose inside his body with a vivid sensuality that made him ache with longing. He yearned with all his soul for the music-filled nights of Hassian.

He had traveled to Norloch from the Suderain because he wanted to continue his studies of the High Arts – the lore of Edil-Amarandh and the deeper mageries – with Nelac of Lirigon, one of the greatest Bards in all Annar. Saliman had read every scroll of Nelac’s that he could get his hands on, and the beauty of his writings set him afire: he wished to know everything that this deep and plangent mind could teach him, he longed to plumb the secrets of his magery. After much thought, he resolved to ask Nelac if he would take him as a student, and wrote him a long and shyly impassioned letter. The great Bard’s reply made tears start into his eyes, and he remembered its words all his life. Nelac had simply written: “My dear one, if you so desire, and if your heart and your mind draw you to this long and hard and beautiful path, come at once. There is always a place here for souls such as you.”

The hard thing then was to tell Oslar, his beloved mentor, of his decision. Oslar was beginning to feel the shadows of age close around him, and he had hoped that Saliman, the most innately gifted healer of his generation, would one day take his place as the chief healer of Turbansk. More, he loved this young man, whom he had watched grow from a stripling into the early blossoming of his power. It took Saliman a long time to screw up the courage to tell Oslar that he wanted to leave Turbansk. At last, stumblingly, he told Oslar of his desire, and although the old Bard’s face darkened with sadness, he did not seem surprised. He looked searchingly into Saliman’s face, and then he smiled.

“My dear one,” said the Bard, and Saliman started, as it was the same endearment Nelac had used in his letter. “I have taught you for many years, and in that time I could hardly have failed to see how the White Flame burns in you. I regret, you will never know how much I regret, that you are so unfairly gifted: seldom do Bards show aptitude for more than one of the Three Arts, and there is always need for Healers as great as you will be one day. Do not be troubled: it is a joy to me that Nelac of Lirigon offers to teach you. You deserve no less. And I know you will come home.”

This eased Saliman’s heart, and he replied to Nelac’s letter, saying that he would travel as soon as he could, and began to make preparations for his departure. But as he did, he realized, with an intensity he hadn’t experienced before, how much he loved Turbansk. It was early spring, and in the golden light that fell over the pale red stone of its buildings and illuminated the myriad greens and bright flowers of its gardens, the city had never seemed to him more beautiful. As he became more excited about his departure, his regret at leaving swelled inside him. When he said farewell to his family and, last of all, to Oslar, he thought his heart would break. But he shouldered his pack and began the long journey northward out of the city gates.

In Norloch, he was lonelier than he had ever been on his solitary and peaceful journey. Nelac was everything he had expected, and more, but he could not study with him every hour of the day. Nelac’s Bardhouse, with its high, dark ceilings, tapestried walls, and marble-floored hallways, had a lofty grandeur strange to one

used to the sensual splendours of the architecture of Turbansk, and even Saliman's private chamber, for all its comfort, oppressed him. He missed the spare beauty of the whitewashed walls of his room in the School of Turbansk, with its grilled windows that threw shadows in the shape of flowers over the polished wooden floor, and its few bits of simple but well-made furniture.

Nelac taught a dozen students: young men and women who, like Saliman, had been drawn to him to continue their studies of the High Arts and who lived in the Bardhouse, as was the custom. None were children; he did not teach novices. They were friendly and pleasant, but Saliman felt shy in their company: they formed a close-knit group, with its own jokes and language, that he didn't know how to enter.

At the center of the group was a young Bard who, like Nelac, was from Lirigon. Saliman met Cadvan of Lirigon when he came to Nelac's private rooms on his first day in Norloch. Cadvan, who had clearly been deep in conversation with Nelac, frowned at Saliman's entrance, annoyed by the interruption, and left swiftly. Saliman was taken aback by Cadvan's brusqueness, a kind of rudeness he had not encountered before, and after that, he regarded him with mistrust. Over the following weeks, he saw that Cadvan was clearly a Bard of great native power and ambition, and it was said of him that he was sure to be First Bard of all Annar one day. But Saliman thought him arrogant and selfish, and wondered at the admiration he inspired in others. Saliman held himself apart from the other students, and although no one was hostile, he was left to his own devices. Cadvan himself treated the southern Bard with a distant courtesy, but Saliman, who quickly showed himself to be among the most talented of Nelac's students, felt the prickles of an unspoken rivalry.

Saliman kept his thoughts to himself and bent his mind to study. Nelac was a gifted teacher, both rigorous and generous, and Saliman's respect for the subtlety and profundity of Nelac's powers increased as his studies deepened. In his spare time, he most often found himself in the taverns in the lower Circles, where sometimes he met traders from the Suderain and was able to speak his own language and hear news from home. The other students would have been surprised to see him then: Saliman's natural gregariousness was seldom evident in the Upper Circles, and they thought him taciturn and dour. So it was for some weeks, and Saliman saw no reason for things to change. He planned to finish his studies with Nelac as soon as possible, perhaps within the next year, and return home.

His homesickness never lessened. For the first time in his life, Saliman was conscious of the blackness of his skin: in those days, few Bards traveled to Norloch from the south, and he was the only Bard of the Suderain in the entire First Circle. Saliman now thought he knew why. The stern Librarians looked at him askance when he entered the huge Library of Norloch, and at first he wandered through its labyrinths, staring at the confusion of scrolls on the endless shelves, too hesitant to ask for help. It was nothing anybody said, more what he felt was left unsaid: the way

eyes would follow him as he walked through the street, only to flicker away when he swung his gaze to meet them, or the cool courtesy of many of the Norloch Bards, who greeted him with fine words because of his Bard's robes but conveyed a sense, all the same, that they did so under sufferance.

It was not the same in the lower Circles. Norloch was, after all, a port town, a center of trade as well as the garrisoned center of the Light in Annar, where the greatest mages gathered and taught the Lore of the Bards. Into the city flowed silk and oil from Thorold, rye from Ileadh, wine and coffee from the Suderain, furs from the northern coast. Tongues from every part of Edil-Amarandh could be heard at the port, and nobody blinked at dark skin. Saliman felt that the nine walled Circles of Norloch became progressively colder as he wound his way in through the gates until, when he entered the First Circle, the highest and inmost core, where the famed crystal Tower of Machelinor rose three hundred spans over the broad Meads of the Carmallachen, all color and warmth had been leached away. Only the anarech trees, dark-leaved and graceful against the white stone, lent a vivid life to the grand streets: they were now in full flower, and their crimson blooms fell on the stone paving like huge drops of blood. Here was the heart of the White Flame, the central mystery of the Light in Annar, and Saliman thought it keen and pitiless, like the light that gleamed on the blade of a sword.

One day, as summer began to turn to autumn, Saliman was in the Library of Norloch searching for a particular poem from which Nelac had quoted earlier that day during a long discussion about the Balance. The poem was by a famous Turbanskian Bard, Lorica, and Saliman had the feeling that Nelac had spoken it especially for him. He couldn't get the lines out of his head:

*In my heart's burning quarter
There is a courtyard, silent, cool,
Where my soul waits for me.*

*Though I am lost, though I wander
The streets of a strange city,
There my soul waits for me.*

*I see my face in that still pool
Where the bright fish flicker
Through and through me,*

*And the leaves of spring quiver
As they yearn towards the sky
Through and through me.*

Saliman had finally, with some difficulty, tracked down a scroll of Lorica's poems and was rolling it out at the reading table when he became aware that someone was reading over his shoulder. Irritated, he turned around. It was Lamkil, a student whom he knew by sight. He had a thin, clever face and hair so blond it was almost white.

"Why are you looking at that rubbish?" said Lamkil. "It's a waste of time."

He was smiling, but his eyes, a very pale blue with white lashes, were cold and contemptuous.

"I read where my heart leads me," Saliman answered shortly.

"Not only by a woman," said Lamkil. "But a dark-skinned woman." He perched himself on the table, pushing the scroll carelessly aside, and stared down insolently at Saliman. "Dark-skinned," he repeated. "Have you never thought that the Dark especially favors those of its own color?" He smiled again, his face a mask of politeness. "The Nameless One himself was of your race. Surely the skin of the Dark is a mark of the Dark. I myself wonder why we have these writings in our Library. Such people can only poison the Light."

Saliman was stunned, as if he had been bludgeoned, and did not react at all. Lamkil nodded as if they had been exchanging pleasantries and casually sauntered away. As Saliman watched his retreating back, he was consumed by a choking, murderous rage. Blind to everything else, he sprang to his feet and lifted his hands, the power boiling through his veins, to hurl a death curse. But before he could utter the fatal words, somebody grasped his forearm.

"I wouldn't do that," said Cadvan. "At least, not here."

Saliman found himself looking into another pair of blue eyes, but these were steady and serious. Next to Cadvan stood another of Nelac's students, Ceredin, who was watching Lamkil's exit from the Library with open disgust.

"I'd give him boils. Or piles," she said, turning to Saliman. "It's all a lackspittle like Lamkil deserves."

Saliman stood very still, teetering on the edge of his fury. His heart was hammering in his chest, and he realized that he had broken out into a sweat. His anger slowly ebbed away, leaving a trail of bitterness. He shook Cadvan's hand off his arm and stared at the two Bards. Both were blue-eyed and pale-skinned, and he felt a sudden weariness and disgust with all these arrogant northern Bards.

"Did you not know that dark skin is a sign of evil?" he said grimly. "Be careful, lest you be sullied."

Cadvan opened his mouth to answer, but Ceredin cut sharply across him. "That's strange," she said. "I've been told that nothing corrupts the purity of the Light more deeply than the work of a woman."

“Such arguments are ignorant and misled,” said Cadvan confidently. “And best ignored.”

Involuntarily, Ceredin and Saliman exchanged a swift, skeptical glance. Then Saliman picked up the scroll of Lorica’s poems.

“I think I will read this in my own chamber,” he said, and left.

Saliman hurried back to the Bardhouse, avoiding the eyes of passers-by. He thought he could now read the meaning of the cold courtesies he endured in Norloch, and he couldn’t bear it: it was wrong, wrong; it went against everything he had ever been taught. He felt as if a horrifying abyss had opened beneath his feet. In the entrance hall he met Nelac, who greeted him and then looked at him hard.

“Something is wrong,” said Nelac. “What is it?”

Saliman stood in the hallway, clutching the scroll to his breast, and couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Come into my rooms,” Nelac said gently. “It is not too early for a little wine.”

Numbly, Saliman followed Nelac into his sitting room. It was a sharp contrast to the gloom of the hallway: light poured through open doors that led out to a courtyard garden, now full of blossoming flowers, and one wall was colorfully painted with a mural of a woodland inhabited by marvelous beasts and birds. The room itself was comfortably littered with a mess of scrolls, musical instruments, and strange objects: curious shells and crystals, and tiny figurines carved of ivory or alabaster. Saliman sat on a couch and watched as the old Bard carefully poured a ruby wine into two delicately blown glasses and handed one to him.

“Now,” said Nelac, sitting down, “what happened?”

“I – I almost killed a Bard today.”

Nelac’s eyebrows rose, but he said nothing, waiting patiently for Saliman to continue. Saliman sipped his wine, wondering how to begin, and haltingly explained how he had gone to the Library to find Lorica’s poems. Soon the words began to pour out: what Lamkil had said and the despair that it woke in Saliman’s heart, his shame over his uncontrollable fury, his loneliness in Norloch, the coldness he felt here, his homesickness. Nelac listened without interrupting, frowning slightly with concentration.

“Maybe,” said Saliman, tasting the bitterness in his mouth, “I should just go home.”

“I think that would be a mistake,” Nelac replied. “Although I cannot blame you for wanting to.”

The two Bards sat in silence. Saliman listened to the birds chirping outside in the garden, feeling a peace grow inside him that he had not felt since he had arrived in Norloch.

“My dear one,” Nelac said at last, “I am sorry beyond words that you have encountered such malice. And I fear you are right that it signals more than petty divisiveness and jealousies. Did you know that I have been criticized by some, because I have eight apprentices who are women? And they also say that I should not accept Bards from poor families, that Norloch, being the high center of the Light in Annar, should only take students from the great Houses.”

“But in the *Paur Libridha*—”

“Aye, in the laws that Maninaë set down, it is said that since the Gift may appear in any person, whether they be rich or poor, whether they be man or woman, then the Light must be blind to difference, and teach every child granted the Gift, for to leave a spark of the Light untended in any diminishes us all.” His deep gaze rested on Saliman, with a gleam of ironic amusement. “These same critics who whisper about my teaching women – or Turbanskians – cannot explain why my students become the greatest Bards in Annar and the Seven Kingdoms. The answer is simple: I look for the Gift, and not for anything else. There are many different flowers in the gardens of the Light, and in my eyes they are all beautiful.”

Nelac poured them both another glass of wine. “Lately there are those who argue that in some people, the Light is purer than in others. I have thought long on the reasons for this, and I believe it stems from a flaw in the thinking of the Bards. Bards have ever defined themselves by what they are not, as much as by what they are. Even the Light defines itself against the Dark. But remember the First Song, the “Song of Making”?

“First was dark...

And the darkness thought, and it thought without mind

And the thought became mind and the thought quickened

And the thought became Light.

“So it is that the Light emerged from the Dark. The darkness is the very base of its existence: Light would not be without Dark. What we call the Dark – the forces of the Nameless One, him you call Sharma – differs greatly from the Dark of that primordial beginning. For that Dark does not contain human greed and vanity and the desire for power. It is neither good nor evil, as the night is neither of these things. And what we call the Light also differs from that first thought, that first Light, because it expresses itself through us. We change it, as light is changed when it enters water or a crystal and is bent one way or another or is split into its different colors. The Light and the Dark as we understand them are both ideas, thoughts, that

human beings have made. This does not mean that they are not real or true, of course.”

Saliman nodded, listening hard, the glass forgotten in his hand.

“So it is,” Nelac continued, “that Bards have ever looked at the world and made divisions between one thing and another. And this is not in itself bad, because if we did not distinguish between different things, we could not think about them. But if that is all we do, if we cannot perceive the connections and likenesses in the world, then our thinking becomes narrow.

“For example, we look at beasts, and we say: we have learning, and we can write our knowledge down, and we can make things with our hands. Every Bard can speak to animals, and for most of us, that reminds us how we too are animals, how we too are moved by the instinctive passions of beasts. We hunger and eat and kill, and fight over our territories, and are loyal and care for our own kind. But such passions also make us cruel, because we are not innocent as animals are innocent: all our actions are corrupted by thought. We understand time, and mortality: we do not simply live in the world, as animals do, and our sadness is not the sadness of beasts.

“There are always some who find that this likeness compromises their dignity. They wish to believe that they are not like beasts, and they claim that they are above earthly and humble things. It is fear, Saliman: fear of what they sense within themselves and do not wish to admit. It is not a long step from that to the thought that, if they are above beasts, they must therefore be above other human beings, that some must be higher because others are lower. And then to begin to name those who must be lower. And in Norloch there are a few who think this way, and who argue that the wrong kinds of Bards sully the White Flame. And they are beginning to say so openly.”

“I see,” said Saliman. “But is not the Balance a guard against such thinking?”

“It should be. But think, Saliman: what is the Balance but a thing we have made? And so it can be unmade.” Nelac sighed heavily. “I fear for the Light. Some people are forgetting that the Balance is not a belief but an ethic. It is hard to argue with belief.”

Saliman returned to his chamber and sat down heavily on his bed, suddenly limp with exhaustion. He stared unseeingly at the tapestries that lined his walls: they showed seascapes of clouds and waves, meant to induce tranquility. He didn't feel very tranquil. Speaking to Nelac had comforted him a little; he felt relieved, as if an abscess had been drained. At the same time, he was deeply disturbed by what Nelac had told him. If it was true, then Lamkil's taunts went far beyond personal dislike to a darkening of the Light itself.

His mind ranged restlessly: he thought of the White Flame - unconsuming and beautiful as starlight - that lived in the heart of the huge natural crystal in the Hall of Machelinor, and then of the Caves of Lamarsan, the heart of the Light in Turbansk, where a waterfall flowed endlessly over the mouth of the cave into a deep pool. In the Sacred Pool were fish and little crabs and crayfish, and soft mosses grew on the carved stone of its rim. When the moon was full, the waterfall seemed to be a curtain of pearls; at sunset it was a flashing stream of rubies and gold. In his own language, it was called the Flaming Waters. He remembered then a wildfire he had seen when he was a child, a terrifying wall of flame that consumed everything in its path, leaving behind it desolation and waste. What could live in the heart of flame?

Idly he whispered the word for the white fire, *noroch*, and a handful of silver fire danced on his palm. These flames, he thought, were nothing like the wildfire. It could be deadly to the creatures of the Dark, but it was the flame of healing. It granted relief from pain, mended torn skin and broken bone, drove out disease. Lamkil, on the other hand, seemed to him like the wildfire: his eyes burned with the desire to destroy. He wanted the White Flame to be pure, but nothing that grew, nothing that lived, thought Saliman, could survive purity. He remembered Lorica's poem, its image of fish swimming through the soul's reflected face. The power of the White Flame lay in its ability to connect, to illuminate how all things moved through one another. Lamkil wanted the flame to be something else, something single and deadly.

There was a knock on his door, and Saliman gently blew out the flames in his hand and rose to answer. It was Ceredin.

"Hello," said Saliman. Looking at Ceredin's straight, dark brows, full mouth, and miraculously translucent skin, Saliman wondered how long it was since he had desired a woman. Not since he had come to Norloch, surely; he couldn't remember.

"Hello," said Ceredin. "I just wanted to see how you were."

"I'm fine." Saliman met Ceredin's eyes. She regarded him steadily, almost neutrally. "Fine. Thank you."

"Lamkil's attacked me too, in that ugly, dishonest way. It leaves you feeling - sort of soiled - ashamed, even."

"Yes," said Saliman. There was a long pause, and Ceredin breathed in, about to take her leave, when he added, "I do feel shamed. It was as if he called out the darkness within me. I would have murdered him, you know. It was almost a kind of sorcery."

"Not sorcery," said Ceredin. "Something more homely, I think. If you want a person to be stupid, you tell them they are stupid. If you tell them often enough, they believe you. They become stupid. I've seen it happen." She spoke with a subdued passion that made Saliman look at her more closely.

"Why would anyone want me to kill them?"

"I expect that he would have been astonished if you had. In that brief moment before he died, I mean," said Ceredin sardonically. "People like Lamkil underestimate those whom they despise. Cadvan says you should just ignore them, but I think he's wrong."

"Nelac doesn't think they should be ignored," said Saliman.

"You've spoken to Nelac? Yes, Nelac sees the patterns in things, how the small things matter. I'll wager Cadvan will change his mind when it's his turn."

"Why would they attack Cadvan?"

"Lamkil and the rest of them think that only those of noble blood should be taught in Norloch. Cadvan's father is a cobbler, as he likes to remind us all. It makes his Gift shine all the more brightly." Ceredin smiled with sudden mischief, and Saliman found himself smiling back.

"My mother is a weaver," he said. "And I never knew my father. Perhaps I could beat Cadvan at his own game."

"Perhaps," said Ceredin. "It's a silly game, all the same."

A silence fell between them, and Saliman realized belatedly that he had kept Ceredin standing in the doorway, and asked her in.

She shook her head. "I've work to do." She hesitated. "Cadvan is a good man, even if he has his blindnesses. He is not one of those who will not see. He will see in time." Then she turned swiftly and left.

A fortnight later, Saliman was at the Black Swan, a tavern much frequented by the younger Bards, with Ceredin, Cadvan, and some others. It was a perfect autumn afternoon, the sun just beginning to sink in the unclouded sky, and all Norloch was gilded with a rich light. The Bards sat in the Black Swan's very pleasant courtyard, passing a clay carafe of Suderain wine around the table. It was a strong wine, meant to be mixed with water, but Cadvan was stubbornly refusing to dilute his.

"If a wine is meant to be drunk," he said amid laughter, "then it should be drunk properly! None of this watering down!"

"It's you who'll be properly drunk," said Ceredin.

"I pledge this cup to thee, then, Lady, since I count on you to carry me home." Cadvan stood up, raised his goblet to Ceredin, and drained it in one draft. Ceredin rolled her eyes at Saliman, who was – rather primly – mixing his wine in a proper Suderain drinking bowl.

A few Bards, including Saliman, had brought their lyres with them, and before long, one of them started plucking a lilting melody from the strings. Saliman picked up his own instrument and idly played the counter-melody, so the twined arpeggios

wound beneath the light conversation. Saliman realized that, for the first time since he had been in Norloch, he felt as free and at ease as he did at home. Things had changed after his conversations with Nelac and Ceredin. It was as if, without anything being said, an unseen barrier had been lifted; Saliman no longer shunned the company of the other students, and they welcomed him without reserve into their gatherings. If Saliman was still unsure of Cadvan, he let it pass: after all, Cadvan had saved him from lifelong disgrace and banishment.

Just as these reflections passed through his mind, Lamkil and some of his friends entered the courtyard. *As if to remind me*, thought Saliman, *that all is not sweetness here*. He coldly watched the small group of Bards, and Lamkil looked up and caught his eye. He returned Saliman's gaze as coldly, then turned to one of his friends, making some sally that made the other laugh. They sat at a table not far away.

"In this case," Ceredin whispered in Saliman's ear, "I agree with Cadvan. Best to ignore them here." Saliman jumped; he hadn't realized Ceredin was so close. She winked at him and smiled. He became conscious that he had stopped playing the lyre and began the gentle arpeggios again. But although he smiled at Ceredin, a shadow had blighted the afternoon.

The two groups of Bards ignored each other until Saliman and his friends were leaving the tavern. As they passed Lamkil's table, Ceredin tripped and fell, and Lamkil and his friends began to laugh.

"Who lets women into these places?" said one of the Bards at the table. "They can't even hold their drink."

Saliman and Cadvan helped Ceredin to her feet. Her face was scarlet with what Saliman thought was embarrassment but was actually rage.

"Someone set a gallcharm on my feet," she muttered. Cadvan stopped dead in his tracks. Saliman remembered suddenly how much wine Cadvan had consumed, although he didn't look in the least drunk, and took his arm.

"Ignore them," Saliman said. "They're not worth the trouble."

Ceredin pulled on Cadvan's other arm, trying to make him leave, but he shook both of them off and walked over to Lamkil's table.

"I suppose it was you who used a gallcharm," he said to Lamkil. "Or one of your crew. A good laugh, was it?"

"Don't blame us for that slut's drunkenness," said Lamkil. Perhaps he too had been drinking for most of the afternoon, thought Saliman: his cheeks were flushed, and he made no attempt to disguise his offensiveness. "Village scum, the lot of you, tottering along behind Cobbler Cadvan in his borrowed feathers. Well, you can't fool *me*." Lamkil's face was ugly with hatred, and his pale blue eyes stared straight into Cadvan's. "I know the ditchborn when I see them."

"Ditchborn?" said Cadvan. His voice was low, but his tone made the hair on Saliman's neck stand up. He could see the magery beginning to glow in Cadvan's body, a faint shimmer like starlight, which now flickered with anger.

Lamkil stood up, staggering slightly, his voice high with rage and sudden fear. "You dare to use magery against me? Ditchborn, like I said!" He spat at Cadvan's feet.

Saliman sensed the anger flooding through Cadvan. He knew that anger: it was the same uncontrollable fury that he had felt in the Library. He didn't even think; there was no time to think. He pushed Cadvan, sending him staggering aside, and then he stepped forward and punched Lamkil brutally on the nose. He felt something break under his fist and saw him crumple and fall, blood streaming down his face. Then, while everyone was too stunned to do anything sensible, he roughly grabbed Cadvan and, with the help of the other Bards, bundled him out of the courtyard. Cadvan was objecting wildly, and when they were outside in the street, Saliman – now as angry with Cadvan as with Lamkil – slammed him against a wall and held him there, his fists biting Cadvan's shoulders, their faces so close their noses almost touched.

"Don't you dare," Saliman said, breathing heavily. "Don't you even dare *think* about going back there."

Cadvan met his eyes, and for a long moment, the wills of the two Bards strove together. Then, quite suddenly, Cadvan relaxed.

"It's all right," he said.

Slowly Saliman unclenched his fists and let him go. Cadvan shook himself and fastidiously brushed some dirt off his cloak.

"Idiot," said Ceredin. Cadvan glanced up at her and scanned the faces of his friends, which were tight with concern and fright. A sudden brilliant smile, reckless and self-mocking, illuminated his face.

"Quite true," he said. "Alas." He met Saliman's eyes again and became grave. "I thank you, my friend."

"One good turn deserves another," said Saliman.

"I am only sorry that I didn't think to punch him myself. I was ready to kill him."

"He wants to wound and anger, to drive us to stupid acts," said Saliman. "He's very good at it. I think he doesn't know how dangerous it is." He paused, thinking about what had just happened, and examined his skinned knuckles. "It felt," he said judiciously, "*very* good to break his nose."

"Not that one should take pleasure in such things."

"Not that one should."

Saliman caught Cadvan's eye, and, quite suddenly, both of them began to laugh. Once they started, they couldn't stop. They clutched each other to prevent themselves from falling over, weak with hilarity.

Ceredin shrugged impatiently. When it was clear that they weren't going to stop, she and the other Bards left them there. At last, staggering like drunkards and wiping their streaming eyes, Saliman and Cadvan managed to regain some sobriety. Then they wandered home, chatting idly of this and that, in the last golden light of the day.

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