

NEVER TOO MANY

Chapter Three

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Celebrants filled the evening streets of Silveroak, and with them came music. Decorations were thinner and humbler than in other years, the foods less lavish, and visitors fewer. Ordinarily, the festival drew travelers into town from all over the region. Despite the humbler sights, the town of Silveroak celebrated with as much fervor as ever. Perhaps more. Children chased one another with streaming ribbons in their wake, neighbors danced and drank, and heartfelt relief abounded in every embrace between friends and neighbors.

Many hadn't expected a festival at all this year.

"This could easily have been a week of mourning without her here," said a voice unheard by the townsfolk. She strode in the air above the rooftops, clad in a transparent and colorful dress over the barest garments of modesty. Her blonde hair held some of the same ribbons trailed by the children below. She swayed with the music, but pointedly, she did not dance.

That distinction spoke volumes about her mood. Revel enjoyed every party with abandon. To even slow the goddess of joy at such a festival showed a grave impact.

"Yes. So I have gathered." Khíra walked beside and a step behind. Her lips twitched with hidden amusement while she let her friend process.

"They were stricken by plague," Revel continued. "None of the clergy nearby could help. They have a priest of Eradin here and one of Tenash's, and others nearby in Oribeln. None could channel our power while we were imprisoned. People were dying."

"It sounds like a nasty plague," Khíra conceded.

"It was! Is! Some are still ill, but they will get better. It was the weakest and the most vulnerable who were almost lost, including so many of the children. Clerics could do nothing," she reiterated. "No one could. No one but her."

"No one but a sorcerer with divine blood and a talent for medicine," said Khíra.

"Yes. Well. No one else nearby, anyway, or interested in helping out little Silveroak. No one but her. She came here four days ago and wore herself out tending to the sick, expending the last of her strength and the power of her staff every day until the sickest were cured and the rest at least on the mend.

“I made no claim on healing and medicine when we formed the pantheon, you know,” Revel went on. “You came later. You know. Not so strange when we left love up for grabs at the birth of this world, but... I didn’t seek this part of my mandate. Healing seemed necessary to joy. You see it here.”

“Hard to have a joyful festival amid so much sickness and death.”

“Yes!” Revel agreed, and then turned on Khíra with a predictable objection. “I wasn’t putting the festival first. I’m talking about the people and their lives. Sorrow isn’t a simple abstract.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” said Khíra. “They will be safer now. The clerics can provide blessings to this town again.”

Revel turned her attention back to the celebration below. “Look at them. They didn’t know we would return, and the worst would have been unavoidable by then, anyway. She saved them from all that. She saved dozens of lives.”

“Dozens? In a few days? She is more powerful than I realized,” said Khíra.

“Tricks of sorcery and a staff of healing, along with a clever mind and raw skill. And I did say she wore herself out in all this. Look at her down there. They celebrate her, but her true joy is in seeing their happiness.”

Revel stared down at her subject. She was tall and blonde, wearing a finely-cut white tunic dress belted with golden cords to match her hair. Long, athletic legs in golden sandals carried her in a circle dance with the townsfolk, drawing out laughter and a warm light in her eyes. To most, she looked entirely human, if statuesque and radiant and beautiful. The gods could see the faint light of wings at her back and power behind her eyes. “My Laska,” said Revel. “And you want to wrap her up in your scheme! I have plans for her!”

“Plans? You? Since when does the Lady of Delight make plans?”

Revel’s mouth opened and closed again. “I could make a plan at any time!”

“Revel. Darling. We have been friends forever. I’m not doing this to hurt you or ruin any of your plans. You know I want nothing but the best here. What bothers you about this?”

“You have an agenda,” said Revel. “All these matches for one of your faithful? Picking favorites from Fray and Larsen?” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Vesper and Aragha? You’re up to something. I know it.”

“This is a match of hearts and desires, not some political arrangement. Laska is attracted to both men and women. She will love them passionately. I want them all to be happy,” said Khíra.

“Pah! That’s my realm!”

“Then look on the matches I’ve made. Look at Callan, Naexi, Jaclyn, and Cora. How happy are they right now?”

Revel paused, glanced away to the horizon, and hesitated. Her glance lingered. “Oh.” Her face reddened. Her breath deepened. She tore her attention away with an act of will. “I suppose I might have expected *that*.”

“I want them to be my kind of happy. Together.” Khíra stepped closer and took Revel’s hands. “We are friends. You have a plan for her? What is it?”

“Everything she does now,” Revel admitted. “Healing. Relief to the suffering. Not with all the drama and pondering of other clerics, either,” she said, rolling her eyes. “She moves with light and warmth, enabling joy. She has power, Khíra. That power will grow. She heals, she protects, she lets people laugh again. She enables so much happiness wherever she goes. She can bring joy into darkness.”

“And what of her own happiness?”

“Of course, I want her to be happy. That’s why I don’t want her wrapped up in the plots of some other goddess.”

“Revel, I am as focused on my domain as you are on yours. This is love. They’re a perfect match. He’s warm and patient and kind and he fucks like an incubus. The women are every bit as enrapturing. He will cherish her, support her, and pleasure her out of her mind night and day. Do you think Laska won’t be happy?”

The description gave Revel pause. Her eyes turned back to the horizon with wary interest. “You’re not exaggerating.” She crossed her arms over her chest and glanced down to Laska. A handsome farmer presented her with a nice bouquet and even bowed in gratitude. “This is a commitment? No other lovers?”

“I didn’t say that. At least one candidate is already involved in something complicated, and that will likely continue even if she joins this circle. Callan isn’t the jealous type. This breaks all sorts of conventions; his partners may be open to breaking more. They’ve only just begun, and they know they have much to work out. But that will be up to them. Either way, this love will be at the center of her heart and her desires. She will never want to leave them.”

“You’re sure?”

“I do not control chance or fate. But this is my domain, and these matches are as careful as any I have ever made. I know what I’m doing.”

“You do, I suppose.” Revel’s eyebrow rose and one corner of her mouth turned up in a grin. “Like an incubus, you say?”

“One who cuddles after the deed is done and still respects everyone in the morning. I had to make sure he’ll keep everyone happy and wanting more. It’s not a matter for cutting corners.”

“Maybe I should borrow him for myself.”

“That’s what the mortal afterlife is for, darling,” Khíra laughed. “Are you satisfied?”

“These matters are where your domain overlaps with mine,” Revel mused. She looked down to Laska once more. “You’re talking about sending her a long way by mortal standards. Do you really need her there by morning?”

“Either of us can give her a gate easily enough.”

“Yes, but I can’t just throw one in front of her. She’s too smart for that. She has to have some sense of where she’s going and why, or this will all go wrong.”

“So tell her,” said Khíra.

“I’ve never appeared to her before. Never communicated directly. What do you want to do? Walk up together and tell her the love of her life will be in Sunderford tomorrow?”

“Why not?” Khíra shrugged. “I’m laying it on thick with love at first sight as it is. I don’t have any patience for will-they-won’t-they with this circle. The direct approach can be fun sometimes.” Then her eyes lit up. “Oooh, but we could play coy with the details. Curiosity and anticipation will make it more fun.”

* * *

Shadows closed in on five sides—shadows with no physical origin, walking on their own and reaching out with fingers extended in long, sharp talons. Callan stood in the center of an ancient stone-tiled floor, with crumbled walls scattered around the ruins. Equally scattered torches held back the night, but not the approaching enemy.

Though fear ran among his emotions, he had no trouble controlling it. A healthy respect for the danger didn’t become panic or paralysis. He could handle this. He had options. He had tools. He had abilities and skills.

Tactics rushed through his head: Fight or flee? Pick a direction and charge, leading the others to chase once he dispatched the first? Try to climb the walls? He knew this enemy. Shadows were much

weaker in sunlight, but he had none of that here. Ordinary weapons would be less harmful to shadows than any normal foe, yet with focus, he could channel Khíra's might through his blade.

...his blade? Right. He had a proper sword now, and a good one at that. He had never worn a good chain shirt like this, but the weight felt fine and he could still move. He had a good shield, too.

Options. Tools. Abilities.

The first decisions came easily. Callan turned to his left and closed the distance to one oncoming shadow. Better to start early with only one than wait for them all to hit together. The spot put one of those crumbling walls on his right, too. Most importantly of all, he called on his goddess to protect him from evil: "Defy the foul and shine in light," he prayed.

Dark talons slashed high. Callan ducked. Already coming in low, Callan stabbed forward past his shield and felt resistance—unnatural, not entirely solid, but real. Callan silently called upon Khíra again, willing her power into his blade. He would only be able to do this once more. Better to take out one opponent early than save his strength for a long grind against all of them.

Divine radiance and reliable steel banished the first shadow in a single lunge. Callan turned as the rest closed in, disrupting one with his shield and narrowly evading the talons of another. He didn't normally move this fast. Maybe he'd gotten better at this, or maybe it was Khíra's protection? He felt even more confident of that when another clawing hand seemed to jerk back at the last second.

None of Khíra's other favors would do him as much good as the protection he already invoked. Callan focused on offense to reduce their numbers quickly. Another stroke of his blade caught nothing. Shadowy hands grasped and clawed, but so far he stayed fortunate. His next opportunity cut down another enemy, again thanks to divine power. The rest would all have to come from his own sword-arm.

He had no doubts until one touch pierced his defenses. Instantly, Callan felt weaker. Along with ordinary pain, his weapons and armor grew heavier. Callan fought on, trusting his skill and his decisions. The protection of Khíra already carried him this far against five opponents, now reduced to three. His next hit didn't dispatch a shadow outright, but he hurt the thing. He could win this.

The wall still protected one side. Callan realized it also offered a respite. He hooked his shield arm over the side and heaved, catching one crumbling brick with his foot and pushing himself over in a desperate but effective move. Running the instant his feet hit the ground, Callan rushed for the next set of crumbling walls.

A glorious beauty awaited him with a smile of approval. He knew better than to pause. His run opened only a little space and a moment to face one pursuer instead of three, but it mattered. Even she thought so. “Good choice,” said Khíra at his back. “You’re doing great.”

Callan met the next shadow blade-first, running it through before it could harm him. The other two closed and attacked. One fell short, but the second struck with the blood-chilling touch of the grave. His muscles shuddered, instantly weaker than they should be.

He fought on. He had to. That was the point of this. He understood that now.

“This is a bit unfair, really,” Khíra admitted. “Your advantages only go so far while theirs persist. Lost strength doesn’t come back easily. And six against one is a lot to ask.”

“Six? Shit!” Callan spun and darted away from the shadow that passed straight through Khíra to attack him.

“Like I said, you’re doing great. Keeping a wall to your side was a good choice. It limited the number that could come at you at once. Moving was good, calling on my protection was very good—probably your best choice so far. You’ve missed a couple swings, but I would say you haven’t made any mistakes.”

“You mean other than not running away?” Callan asked, and then choked and shivered when one more shadowy hand reached through his chain shirt to grasp at his heart. Though he stepped back from the worst of it, his blade and shield felt almost too heavy to wield now.

“No, they cover ground faster than you. They’d have caught you before you got away, and you had no good escape route. It’s night. But you knew that when you started, didn’t you?”

Callan cursed in silence. He couldn’t get the word out amid his wheezing. Though his next swing connected, he barely did any harm. The shadows were hard enough to fight when he had his full strength, and now he was truly weak.

Lost blood and withered flesh would kill him faster than his trembling muscles. Callan gave ground and trusted his armor and Khíra’s grace to protect him. He had to. With one hand on his chest, Callan called upon the goddess to heal him with only a handful of words—despite her standing right there. He didn’t ask for her to take over. He didn’t hide behind her, either.

This clearly wasn’t that sort of fight.

Bleeding wounds mended. Necrosis faded. His strength did not return, but his weakened body was at least whole.

“Practical,” she conceded.

The shadows closed in.

Callan withstood another assault from all three shadows. He even landed another hit. Nothing else nearby would help—no corner to limit their numbers, no bright lights for deterrence, no allies but for the one giving commentary. Callan wondered what Naexi would do in this situation, or how Cora would handle it, or if Jaclyn's abilities were more suited to this fight than his own.

Despite the odds and his wounds, despite his depleted powers and his situation, Callan held off despair and fear. Another blow finally cut down the wounded shadow. He fought on.

"Okay. That's enough." Khíra clapped her hands twice. The shadows vanished.

So, too, did the weakness afflicting Callan's limbs. That didn't stop him from letting his shoulders sag. The blade in his hand tilted downward to clang against the stone tiles. Khíra raised an eyebrow at that, but she didn't rebuke. "Why did you keep fighting?"

"What do you mean why?"

"This is only a dream, and only for practice. It was just real enough to make you treat it like the real thing. You didn't expect me to intervene. Why didn't you give up?"

"Are you saying I should've?"

"No. I want to know what you were thinking. I want you to think about it."

Callan blinked, stopping to do just as she asked. "Because I had nowhere to run. I wasn't likely to win, but I had a chance as long as I didn't give up or die—and if I was bound to die, there's no reason to give up. The outcome is the same."

"Many would say that's reason to stop fighting."

"Sure."

"So why didn't you?"

Callan shrugged in the direction of the banished shadows. "Fuck 'em."

The goddess smiled. "I like that attitude."

"This is an unusually, um... wakeful dream. Coherent," said Callan.

"Lucid, you mean? Yes, it's a dream, but I am also really here. You aren't imagining me. And yes, this is far more direct than I normally am with my faithful. Even my highest clerics rarely get this sort of straightforward conversation."

"I am grateful," he said with reverence.

She waved off all the gravity and formality. "You broke me out of a prison with other gods and then I took over the direction of your life. This won't happen often, but I don't mind. At any rate, you want to ask why we're here?"

"I'm not complaining."

“Not even after getting torn up by shadows? I know, you don’t want to complain to your goddess, and I am pretty wonderful,” Khíra joked. “No. The pain and danger had to be real. You understand that much, even if you don’t understand why. Understanding is the real reason for all this. I made you a paladin in a single night, without the years of training and devotion others put into the role. I gave little explanation of what that means and what you can do. You adapted quickly and fought well on the road, but much of your ability came as a surprise. I wanted you to understand what you can do. This dream is meant to catch you up, so to speak.

“More of your ability comes from you than from me, but you need to know both. Now you will have that knowledge. You will have that confidence. Again, you are not under the expectations of my other paladins. I give you no quest or burden beyond what you have already accepted. I only want you able to handle whatever comes as a result.”

“I’m grateful. I’m also still waiting for the other shoe to drop,” said Callan. “All of this is really only to protect me?”

“Callan, what do you want out of life? Right now, as your life stands, leaving aside obligations and charity and all the rest: what do you want?”

The question sank deep within him. He felt Khíra’s words in his soul, cutting through mundane matters and petty distractions. He answered with a clarity he rarely felt: “Them. Cora, Jaclyn, Naexi. I want to make them happy. I want to stay with them, wherever and whatever that means.”

Again, Khíra smiled on him with radiant affection. “You will feel that way about the others to come, too. I knew your heart was suited to this. You are inclined to do right and help those in need, to protect innocents and all those other paladin things, but at your core, this is what you want. It is why I granted you the power of my paladins.

“Callan, you are wildly in love with a rogue scholar and treasure-hunter, a dark elf paladin of Tenash, and a warrior-monk on a mission of vengeance. More such lovers loom in your future. You will have more than enough to handle without some divine quest from me.”

He accepted that with a nod. “I suppose I see your point. I really would rather focus on them.”

“Yes. You would. And in a more conventional romance, this would be too fast and that would create trouble before long. None of this is conventional. You *could* go through all the normal drama of you overthinking all this. Cora could keep secrets out of habit, Naexi might give everyone too much space until she hurt herself with the distance, and Jaclyn most surely would push you all away because she has never known unconditional love and joy and doesn’t think herself worthy. I’m helping you all

along with a few whispers and guidance, but these choices are still yours and theirs. This love is still real. Yes, it's unnaturally fast. Gifts directly from the gods are like that. This is no less real.

"And I want you to know one more thing." Her voice sank into his soul, compelling the deepest truth from him: "That deep, yearning lust within you is a good thing, Callan. I've stoked those flames, for your sake and theirs. If you have any quest, it is this romance and all its delights, from the pure to the carnal. It's your favorite part of this love, and theirs, and mine. Embrace it. Savor it. And you aren't being selfish if you let them make you the center of attention sometimes... or even often. They're having a very good time with you... like now."

Callan blinked, unsure of what she meant until he felt the seductive slide of bare skin against his own. With a smile, Khíra vanished. So did the stones, and the entire dreamscape... and his armor and clothes.

* * *

She rolled against his body, hip to hip, leg along leg, bare and full breasts on his chest. Every inch of her drew him from sleep to soothing exhilaration, and that was before her body slid downward along him. Callan's eyes fluttered open and his head tilted to the sight of grey elven beauty in soft, dim light, pulling away from him with a smile—but not going far at all.

"Sshh," Naexi urged before her lips turned to his chest. Her kisses trailed downward to his flat and newly-toned abs, and his hip, and glided across his fiercely erect cock. A shuddering breath escaped his throat with the first touch of her lips, deepening when her hand curled around his thick shaft. She lifted her head to catch his eyes again. Her white hair dangled to his hips and his groin. "Sshh," Naexi repeated.

Her face tilted away. Her next kiss opened all around his head and shaft, making his body shake. Lips slid halfway down his length. Naexi's tongue lavished him with more sensation within her mouth. Stroking fingers slid to the base. Her body rested on his legs to create even more luscious sensation, but her kiss consumed nearly all of his mind.

Naexi slowly stroked back and forth with her hand and her mouth.

Though overwhelmed, Callan could at least take in his surroundings. Night remained, still and peaceful, with dawn some time away. Cora and Jaclyn slept in one another's arms on a bedroll within arm's reach, nude beneath the blanket they shared. The horses and oxen slept right where they had been left with the wagons not far away.

Naexi continued her favors. Every slow plunge and withdrawal shook him with ecstasy. He caught the softest low moan from her throat as she sucked again. She, too, shuddered against her lover.

When his eyes fluttered open again, he noticed more about the night. Everything immediately around the four lovers enjoyed a dim illumination like the brightest moonlight, but the moon was in only a thin crescent. The night sky was clear overhead and their campfire had gone out some time ago. The light only extended a few yards in a circle around Callan and his lovers—and played no havoc with his night vision for the woods beyond. The animals and wagons and the trees around them lay in ordinary nighttime darkness.

Though the weather was good, the night should have been darker. Colder. A little damp, too. *Lover's Shelter*, Callan understood. Like the 'tiny hut' spells of wizards, but... The lover's mouth around his cock held far more of his attention than their magical shelter. He held back a groan. He didn't want to wake the others. He also didn't want to be unappreciative. "Naexi," he whispered quietly.

"Sshh," she repeated, and made him shudder again.

"I... Naexi."

Smiling patiently, Naexi lifted herself on her knees to slide up along his body again. Her pale eyebrow rose to prompt him to speak. "I want to give back," he whispered. "I don't want to be selfish."

"I do." She smothered his mouth with a kiss. Hair dangled around his face in the darkness. Even her whispers were quieter than his. Maybe it was a talent of the elves. Maybe it was just her talent. "I will let you give when I am ready. You taste and smell good. You *feel* good. I want to do a lot of this. Tonight, and most nights. Relax. Try not to wake the others." Another kiss sealed her argument, and then once again her lips withdrew from his to trail down his body and return to her desire.

Naexi lavished him with hungry affection. With her desires so clearly stated, Callan could do nothing but let it happen. Khíra's words echoed in his mind: *Embrace it. Savor it. You aren't being selfish.*

He followed her advice and Naexi's wants. Callan laid back and enjoyed it. His hands drifted to her head, running his fingers through her white hair. Naexi purred and kept going.

Her slow, steady pace eventually brought rippling urgency to his groin. Whether she sensed it through touch or caught a change in his breath, Naexi slowed and squeezed and calmed him from the approaching climax to hold him near the edge... and then, when the danger passed, she continued on.

Callan drifted in helpless bliss under her control until it happened again, and then again. Three times she brought him to the edge and denied him until he was ready to beg. He endured in silence

lest they wake the others. In truth, his yearning for satisfaction conflicted with how ready he was for this to go on and on.

When she finally allowed release, Callan barely held back his moans and kept himself to silent breath. She swallowed as hungrily as she sucked. Little escaped her lips. Naexi slowed to welcome his climax and softly moaned with delight as the flood tapered off... and he remained hard.

By now, he knew this sort of stamina wasn't entirely natural. Naexi knew it, too. She looked at him with a devilish grin, rose up on her knees, and turned in place. One leg swept over his head to come to rest at his side, putting him between her knees before she bent again and pushed her toned and shapely ass back at his face. Spread thighs finally offered him a chance to reciprocate for all the favors he gave her.

The thrill of her mouth returned. This time, Callan could return the kiss with equal intimacy. The scent of her sex and his own urges cut short any teasing approach. Callan kissed her inner thigh only to warn her body before his tongue softly lashed her wet and welcoming cunt. Naexi jolted with pleasure but surrendered just as quickly as licks became kisses and those kisses became a probe.

His hand returned to her head. Callan ran his fingers through her hair while his tongue found a rhythm and her sex grew wetter. Naexi took even more of his length this way and purred when her breath allowed it. That became less and less frequent as Callan's attention continued and the heat between her legs built.

She had been wildly aroused all through her service. She didn't need much pushing, and Callan already knew how to please her. Her muscles tensed and the mouth around his flesh whined as her first climax approached. Unlike Naexi, Callan did nothing to stave off her release. Instead, he kept kissing and licking, penetrating her lips with each brush until the dam broke.

Naexi released him from her mouth but clung to his body as she shook and spasmed. With her head laid across his hip, she barely held back the moans of orgasm. Callan prolonged it with the same steady, just-right service that brought her here and savored every twitch and every wet taste of her relief.

Dawn took hold gently. The same magic that held back the night kept the morning from becoming too bright. Naexi and Callan played in silent intimacy until their partners stirred all on their own.

"Huh. Is this what standing a watch looks like?" asked Jaclyn's scratchy voice. With grey thighs wrapped around his head, Callan couldn't see her until Naexi pulled away and rolled off of him. He found Jaclyn smirking at him with squinting eyes, fumbling for something out of reach until she pulled

it close. The first thing she wanted on waking up was a gulp from her waterskin. Wrapped beside her, Cora rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“I realized late into my shift that our safety was already assured,” Naexi answered. “We are in a dome of peace and comfort, centered on Callan.”

“Really?” Cora propped herself up on her elbows to look around. The blanket slid from her bare chest, drawing Callan’s eyes as if Jaclyn’s nude form wasn’t distraction enough as if Naexi’s long indulgence hadn’t sated his lusts. The depths of his desires felt good in and of themselves. Very good. His heart thudded again with admiration for Cora as she took in the scenery and made all the right connections. “Oh. Huh. I’ve seen this before. It’s like a tiny hut spell.”

“A what?” asked Jaclyn.

“I played escort for a wizard on a tour of some ruins. He could cast this kind of spell to keep warm and dry through the night,” Cora explained. “But if you realized, then you didn’t cast it yourself?”

“Not I,” said Naexi.

“It’s me,” said Callan. The explanation came to him readily, like he had always known it. Unlike the rest of his “training” in his dreams, Khíra had left this as a surprise gift. “This should be outside my ability. I’m not strong enough to cast magic with this power yet, but Khíra granted it early. It’s a little more subtle than the common spell, too. This one will go unnoticed altogether on the outside, and it keeps sound and scent within. She, um, wants us comfortable together. And wants to give us privacy.”

“You would’ve told us we didn’t need anyone on watch. You didn’t know?” asked Cora.

“No. It started when things got passionate,” he admitted, nearly blushing. “I think that’s how it gets activated. It won’t happen anywhere, but when it helps...?”

“Uh-huh.” Jaclyn flicked her tongue inside her grin. “So it’s a tiny slut hut.”

“I would never call any of you sluts.”

“You can when it’s praise. I want to be slutty with all of you. Anyway, I was talking about you. You’re the slut,” said Jaclyn.

“Oh. Well, yeah,” Callan conceded.

“Speaking of.” Jaclyn was already close. They even had a blanket on the ground between his bedroll and theirs. She moved closer, sliding one naked, tattooed leg over his while a perfectly accommodating Naexi gave way. “You look like you’ve got more in you. Kind of always dreamed of getting laid when I woke up.”

“Then we’ll have to keep that in mind going forward.” Naexi leaned in to kiss Jaclyn as a lover, but then stood to let Jaclyn claim Callan for herself. The paladin shamelessly stepped over the pair to greet Cora with the same sort of good morning kiss.

Jaclyn ran her hands up Callan’s torso and his arms, kissing him while her hips rolled against him. The tool between his legs enjoyed lots of contact from her naked skin, but she didn’t claim him just yet. A thought stopped her and turned her head to her other lovers. “I’m not being too selfish, am I?”

“Not at all. I want a couple minutes in the stream before my turn with him.” Cora slid out from the blanket and stretched.

“Turns?” Naexi grinned.

“Something like that. Anyway, you’re coming with me.” Cora took Naexi’s hand. The drow let out a note of amusement, but also consent.

“I hope they’re ready to take their time,” Jaclyn told Callan with another kiss. Her hips rolled and rose, moving to claim him. She moaned with first penetration. “Oooh, fuck, this is good. You weren’t... going anywhere... were you?”

Jaclyn rose on her knees to sink down harder on him. The tight, wet welcome of her body left them both breathing hard. Callan pulled her hips down and pushed upward with his, succumbing to the same need for more. All of Naexi’s favors hadn’t slaked his thirst for his other lovers. His first slow thrusts into Jaclyn felt like they had been needed for far too long.

“The wagons have plenty of supplies.” Despite the visceral thrill of fucking the tattooed beauty, Callan’s answer came out low and cool. “I thought I’d make everyone breakfast.”

“You—?” Jaclyn’s eyes opened with interest only to roll back with pleasure as he pushed into her again. Her voice became a long moan. “Oh, fuck, he *cooks*.”

Cora glanced back over her bare shoulder before she and Naexi reached the stream. The “tiny hut” didn’t block sight or sound for those welcome within it. The erotic sight stirred her desires ever more, for both lovers, but Jaclyn’s declaration made her glance at one more. “He does?”

Naexi nodded. “He cooked for my company a few times while we quested. He’s good.”

“Alright. Now I really believe this is all some divine arrangement.”

* * *

They would have been late in getting on the road if their lusty play waited until the break of dawn. True to his offer, Callan worked up a breakfast of eggs and herb potatoes with quick and confident

hands before they set out. He would have been the one to clean up, too, if Naexi hadn't snatched the cookware away to the stream before he finished eating.

The four chatted and ate, yet even their chaste behavior held a constant flirty tension. All four of them felt entirely aware of their new dynamic... and felt excited by it.

This time, Callan and Cora took the lead in their ox-drawn wagon with Callan once again holding the reins. Their tethered horses followed behind, followed by Naexi and Jaclyn in the other wagon. Splitting up had been easier than Callan expected, given the pairings on the road the day before, and given the new spark Naexi and Jaclyn shared whenever their eyes met.

It wasn't the only new spark Callan noticed.

"I only made breakfast," he said. "It's really that big of a deal?"

"Some men can swing a sword and others can flash a nice smile," said Cora. "Too many of either type leave the work of daily life to someone else. You do all three. It's nice to find a man who actually learned from his mother instead of taking her work for granted."

"I always had the impression that talking about my mother would be the wrong way to go when trying to charm a woman," Callan grinned.

Cora laughed. "We're all far beyond charmed. Far beyond 'trying,' too."

"Why should the trying ever stop?" Callan grinned back at her. "It's fun."

She stared at his eyes, biting her lip before she leaned in to kiss his. Her kiss didn't linger while he had a road to watch, but her stare did. "Cooking is one more way of flirting, isn't it? That was deliberate."

"I may have heard women like a man who has some skills." Callan's grin turned inward as he shook his head. "I'm not normally all cool and confident. At some point, you'll see me stumble and fall on my ass, or spill something on myself, or make me blush and I won't know what to say. That's the real me."

"Good, then I can moan your name and beg for more without making you arrogant," said Cora.

He let out a laugh. It was the humble kind, of course. "Thank you."

"You said we aren't your first, right? You've been with women before all this godly stuff."

"Only a couple times," he said. "It didn't mean as much. Not even close. I haven't broken any hearts. You've had more experience?"

"A few experiences, yes. I'm only a few years older than you, though. People assume I'm older than I am. Rugged living, I suppose."

"It's not the sort of rugged to wear on your looks. You're beautiful," said Callan.

“Aw. You make me feel like it.” She leaned in as if joking, but only half so: “Tell me more. Don’t be shy.”

“I could lose myself in your eyes. It’s hard not to stare at the rest of you, too. And I lose a little of my breath every time I see that ass.” Callan didn’t quite blush with his playful smile. “You said not to be shy.”

“I like that more than I should. From you, anyway,” she admitted. “And them.”

“She, um...” Callan gestured to the sky. “Encouraged me to embrace the lewder aspects of all this. All of us.”

“Give her my thanks for that next time you speak with her. It’s fun.”

“If people think you’re older, I don’t think it’s because of your looks. I don’t know how you aren’t constantly chased by men,” said Callan.

“Oh, I am, but they’re usually waving swords.” Cora leaned in playfully. “So if it’s not my looks, what is it? Tell me more about me.”

He laughed. She was good at making him laugh. “You’re smart. Really smart. You’re educated, independent, capable. It gives you a confidence most women our age lack. Some men don’t earn that at any age.”

“Oh, that’s a good line. Your best yet, I think. Did it come to you just now, or have you been saving it for someone special?”

“Somewhere between both,” said Callan.

“Might not be so independent now. Kind of attached to you and them and this whole divine arrangement thing.”

“Is that what we call this?” Callan smiled. “I might be wrapped up in a goddess’s plans, but that doesn’t put me in charge. You’re the one who knows the most about the world. I would follow you anywhere.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. I don’t want you for your body alone. But thank you for saying that,” said Cora. “As for following or leading, I have ideas. I’m also excited to see who Khíra brings to us next.”

“Us?” Callan grinned.

“Us. We’ve established that. You might be the magnet, but this isn’t about only you. It’s one more reason I’m jumping on board. You’d have to drag me away now.”

He remembered to watch the road. “Good.”

Cora's voice softened with confession. "Other than that, I want to hole up somewhere and fuck day and night until we can all calm down. Then we can make longer-term decisions."

"What if it never calms down?"

"Oh gods, I hope," she sighed. Then she paused, biting her lip. "I've... never wanted it this much. Never wanted so much. I feel completely free with the three of you. No jealousy, no modesty. Just sexy and horny. It feels amazing." She watched him closely, eventually whispering in his ear. "What about you? Don't be shy."

"We've barely been on the road two hours and I already want to pull off the road and fuck all three of you out of your minds all over again," Callan confessed.

"Wow."

"I know. I shouldn't think like that. You're not toys, you're—"

"Shouldn't we do that right now, then? Before we get close to town?"

Callan blinked, looking at her in surprise.

"We're talking about being uninhibited, right? Listen, all that other respect and romance stuff means the world to me, but the magical sex part of this is unbelievable. It's... empowering."

"Hadn't thought of that word," Callan mused, but it felt right. It also excited him. His heart beat heavily. He felt an even heavier anticipation growing at his groin. Taking Cora at her word, Callan looked up to the road ahead... and then sighed. "Too late."

A mule pulled the first cart to appear up ahead, with its presumptive owner walking beside it. A second became visible as they broke from the shadows of trees along the road. One escort carried a spear. The others would probably be armed, too. This road was generally safe, but it stayed that way thanks to merchants and travelers being careful.

Callan stood up from his seat to wave, and received a wave from the escort in answer. "They're only the first to set out today," Callan explained as he sat back down. "We'll run into more before long. There'll be a steady trickle of traders between here and the outskirts. If we pull off the road, anyone who passes will see our wagons and stop to check if we're alright. I think we've missed our chance for now."

"Aw, boo," said Cora. "Even with your tiny slut hut magic?"

That made him blush and grin with equal intensity. "It wouldn't cover the animals and the wagons. We'd still draw attention. I'm not sure how often I can do that, either."

"We'll have to make up for it somehow." Her eyes roamed his face and neck. "Why so red?"

"It, ah... it's wonderful that you want so much. It's about the best thing I could hope to hear."

“Hope? After last night and this morning, I’d think it’s expected.”

“We’re lovers. You’re not a harem,” said Callan.

“I don’t see why we can’t be both.” Cora’s sly grin confirmed she was only half-joking. “As long as the same expectations apply to you, I say we run with whatever wild fantasy gets us off.”

“We should probably talk about expectations together. We haven’t yet.”

“Yes. What we all tell our families and friends, what’s shared and what’s private possession, whether we forsake other lovers or not. All that business,” said Cora.

He slowly nodded. “I don’t want to take any of that for granted. And I want whatever you and they are all comfortable with.”

“I figured. Hence my plan for a good long orgy to clear our heads first. Best to put that kind of conversation off while everyone’s horny, or your urges get you to agree too easily.”

“And like I asked... if it never calms down?”

“Then maybe we’ll get used to being very agreeable.”

“Callan, is that you? Well met, boy!” said the man with the first cart. Burtred was slightly heavysset and bearded, wearing a light tunic for the road and a belt with simple tools. Vegetables filled his mule-drawn cart. His cousin followed with the next, along with his husband. Sunderford had nearly grown past the point of everyone knowing one another by name and face, but not yet. “I heard you went out with that adventuring company. Is this them?”

“Only one in the wagon behind us. The rest moved on. Any news from town?”

“Troubles aplenty, like it’s been, but the gods have returned!” Burtred declared.

“Yes, we noticed the same thing,” said Cora. “Deep blessings indeed.”

“Ah. Yes.” Burtred and his companions missed the joke meant only for Callan. “Hopefully this will start putting things to right. Only a few priests in Sunderford wield any magic. They’ve got their work cut out for them.”

* * *

The accident at the River Gate could easily have been fatal for many.

Block and tackle gave way amid repairs to the tower and gate, leaving nine workers injured and bleeding. People rushed to help. Cries for aid carried across town. Yet despite the return of the gods, and despite the presence of four temples and clerics to minister them, everyone knew such help was still in short supply.

The priestess of Erudh had left with the dawn to address a blight in the northwest fields. Domis and Revel were worshipped in Sunderford, but their clerics wielded little magic and were already tending to the sick elsewhere in town. Even the elder of Fray had ridden out with a patrol before the accident.

Fortunate workers and the onlookers outside the collapse all rushed in to help. They dragged away those who could be freed and pried masonry blocks from those who could not. Some were bound to bleed out before the dust cleared. Others could hardly breathe under the debris.

And then, in a rush, the danger passed.

Light and wind swept overhead with the arrival of a blonde woman in white. The faint shine of wings at her back explained her brief flight, more dramatic than she'd have preferred but it got her through the crowd and the rubble quickly. Laska settled amid the damage with her staff in hand and a mass healing word on her lips, along with reassurance: "I've got you!"

Instantly, half the injured breathed easier and recovered from the worst. Bones straightened and flesh mended. Though still hurt, many could now hang on. Laska reached out with her staff to touch another victim, his breath wheezing and blood flowing from his chest. The glow of magic calmed and soothed his body. His spirit quickly followed.

"What... what the...?" he wondered.

"This is not your time." Laska gave the man a wink before she turned and repeated her healing word, again relieving the worst for masons all around. Mortal wounds became bruises and abrasions. Tragedy turned into a painful fright, but one everyone would survive.

Shaken workers and witnesses all looked upon her in stunned, brief silence.

Laska brushed a blonde lock from her face and turned her blue eyes upward with a self-deprecating grin. "Is that wall safe? Or am I just in time to catch a falling block of my own?"

"Up top!" shouted a burly, balding man with a dark beard close by. He bled from his arm, but escaped the uglier hits. "Top crew, are we secure?"

"The rest is holding!" shouted someone from the top of the tower twenty feet above. "They've got the last of it steadied now. I don't know what happened! You saw it yourself. Everything should have held."

"We'll work on that later. Just make sure it's safe now. Doubly sure," said the bald man.

"We're on it, but we may have a problem getting down," called the worker.

"I can help with that. I take it you're the foreman?" asked Laska.

"I am. Gods alive, you saved us. Where did—are you a deva? An angel?"

“Hah! No. I may have a deva somewhere back in my family, but no. I am mortal.”

“You were a blessing to all of us today.” Another man stepped through the parting crowd of workers and rescuers to join them. His look and his clothes struck a middle ground between the workers and something wealthier and gentler. Broad shoulders and a confident voice only enhanced the charm of his handsome face. “Derwith Hemshire. I’m the head of the Stonemason’s Guild. Who are you?”

“Laska. Is the guild in charge here?”

“We look out for our people, yes. Jon, what happened?” Derwith asked the foreman.

“Nothing that should have.” The foreman shook his head. “We were only changing out a few failing blocks near the top, and we checked every line and pulley three times. Something broke, one block hit another, and they all came tumbling down.”

“And now the top of the Port Gate is half crumbled and half unstable.” Derwith put his hands on his hips and looked over the damage. “At least we didn’t lose anyone. Laska, did I hear you say you could get our people down safely?”

“Yes. I can’t bring anyone up, but I can get up there and bring the rest down light as feathers. I am happy to help,” she said.

“Then we’re happy to take you up on that, and grateful,” said Derwith.

“Whenever they are ready.”

“I’ll let them know. We’ve got more to sort out first. Thank you,” said Jon. The foreman stepped away to spare her from his shouting.

“I know most every face in town. When did you arrive?” Derwith asked her.

“Early this morning. I’ve been traveling since the gods went silent, helping where I can,” said Laska. She didn’t need to elaborate on where she’d come from, or why. Despite her displays of magic, she did not need to go talking about *that*. “I suppose the needs left by their absence are still great.”

“Yes. I suppose so. Things have taken a better turn, though. Better still, with you here.” He bowed and offered his hand. When she accepted, he kissed her hand with smooth grace. “Before this accident, I was arranging a feast in celebration of these better developments. Much of Sunderford’s leadership will be there. Thanks to you, we don’t have a tragedy to turn my plans into poor taste. Would you be willing to attend? I would very much like to show my gratitude for your service today.”

“Oh. I’ve been traveling. I’m not exactly prepared for anything formal.”

“Not at all. This is a town of workers. Everyone pulls their weight. There’s no room for snobby standards here. What matters is what you have done for us. Sunderford’s leaders understand that. Heroes are always welcome.”

Laska considered his offer. She had no clothes for fancy events and still carried dust and a little sweat from the road, but she could remedy all that. She also came here following the instructions of her goddess. Revel’s words rang in her head all the way here: *In Sunderford, you will find love and joy all your own. You will find it quickly, too.* Here was a handsome man, charming, warm, and extending his hand. “Thank you,” said Laska. “I’m grateful for the invitation. I accept.”

* * *

“You’ve gotten tense,” said Cora.

“Hm?” Callan blinked away from the road and the reins of the ox. He found her grinning beside him. *Gods, you’re beautiful*, he thought for the thousandth time. She still had him swept away. That was new love, to some extent—compounded by two other lovers who gave him the same thrill with flavor all their own, but still with the same novelty.

He wanted to stay in that headspace and savor those thrills. Instead, his mind had finally turned to other matters. The road curved left up ahead, lined by sparse trees on either side and tended rows of crops behind them. “Sorry. Thinking about how to explain all this.” He grimaced. “And running straight home to mother might not be the best way to impress a woman.”

Cora laughed. “Is that what you’re doing? Running home to mother?”

“No. Not by intention. It’s still the result.”

“Most people have family, Callan. You care about one another. You were off on a dangerous job and now you’re back with loot that will help her. This is considerate, not needy.” Cora’s eyes turned to the road and she shook her head. “You’ve no idea how reassuring this is, actually.”

“How so?”

“How is it not?” she scoffed. “Blessed by a goddess, women wrapped around your finger, and you still think of family and neighbors? I like people who can dazzle me, but I should’ve been looking for humility and sanity to go with it all along. And loyalty.”

“That sounds like a story,” said Callan. “You mentioned a lover who turned out badly?”

“Broxton. His name was Broxton, and he was a clever adventurer type like me. He also had a few years on me and some tales and feats worth bragging about. Strong, confident, good in a tight spot.

Treated me more like an equal than an apprentice, which is how I wound up sleeping with him amid all the capers and jobs.

“One night, a year ago, we raided a vile nobleman’s manor in the city of Tellesh. The buildings are all crowded there, like a maze. We came in on a ladder laid across an alley into a window forty feet from the ground. It was Broxton, a sorcerer named Thad, Jaclyn and an orc bruiser named Kron for muscle, and me. No one got hurt until we found the loot. Then it turned out the nobleman was a wizard and his statues came to life. Thad and Kron died. We ran. Broxton got out first, and he had the loot. He took the ladder with him and left us to the statues and guards.”

“He left you? Damn. What happened?” asked Callan.

“That’s when I learned Jaclyn can punch and kick her way through a brick wall if she’s got a moment and she’s mad enough. One moment I thought we were cornered, and then we weren’t. We got away. Broxton had booked us all passage on a ship leaving that night, but naturally that turned out to be a crock. He disappeared with all the loot and we had to flee the city.”

“Have you looked for him since?”

“No. If we run across him again, we might do something about it, but I’m over it. I learned a few lessons that night. Relevant to us, I learned that selfish arrogance isn’t just a minor flaw or part of someone’s rakish charm. He gave me the signs. He scoffed at things like family.” Cora shook her head again. “I should’ve known better. Now I do.

“I left home on good terms with my family. Naexi obviously can’t say the same, and Jaclyn lost all of hers. We’re glad you care about yours.”

The wagon rolled on. Callan considered it. She wasn’t wrong. “Guess I can forget that little worry... although the other one is still there.”

“What’s that?”

“How the hell do I explain all this, and how will she react?”

“You were straightforward with all of us and that worked out fine. Why not just come right out and tell her?” Cora’s grin said she understood exactly why not. A short, rueful laugh escaped his throat. “It sounds like you get along? What’s her name?”

“Amanda, and yes, we do. She was young when she had me, and hasn’t really ‘mothered’ in a long time. We’re more like friends and housemates than parent and child these days, but the mother-and-son part will always be there.” A grudging smirk crept into his lips. “She called both of my previous flings just as they played out.”

“So, she’s wise and you don’t keep secrets,” said Cora. “And she knows you’re a good man. I’m only half joking about telling her outright. Do you want to hide something as important as romance and lifelong partners from your family?”

“No. Not at all,” he said. “It’s not just the multiple lovers, though. It’s leaving town and chasing off after others, and... everything.”

“You’re worried about her?” she guessed.

“That, too,” he said. “She’s able-bodied, and our work is lighter than the farmers’ around here. We get along with them fine. We don’t have much, but it’s more than some. She always knew I wanted to get out on my own, too, and she approved. But the last few years have been tough.”

The words drifted away as they came around the last curve. Every tree had been familiar for the last two miles and more. Now he knew them all by heart, along with the bigger rocks, and the rows of crops, and the pair of chickens wandering farther out from home than he and his mother normally preferred. They chirped and warbled at the approaching carts, turning and running for the house with the same racket.

His home of timbers against a brick chimney stood amid trees and a few rows of carefully-tended herbs, with a similarly humble barn beside it to shelter their handful of animals. The barn and the cart beside it had both seen better days, but the tenants kept everything clean and safe.

“More than I expected, from what you said earlier,” said Cora. “Four rooms?”

“Three, with a little space in the main,” said Callan. “We added the third a few years ago with a lot of hard work. Gathered all our own materials with some neighbors’ help. Then the tax collector told us it added to our dues and the reeve wanted more for rent on the land and we regretted building it in the first place.”

“Then all of this should set her up nicely.” Cora tilted her head back to the wagon, and the one following. “Keep what you can use and sell the rest?”

“Oh, this will make a real difference. I’m probably fretting too much about how she’ll get on without me, but the rest is...”

The shutters on the lone front-room window opened, confirming the wagons had been heard as Callan expected. His mother looked out from one side of the window, eyes narrow against the light, her dark hair short and loose. Something seemed off, like he’d caught her in a bad moment somehow, but it didn’t catch until she jerked the shutters closed again. Her eyes had gone wide in the instant before—and her shoulder and arm were bare.

“Um.” Callan frowned. Had she been bathing? No, her hair looked dry. Mostly.

“Ah. Her hair is like mine,” Cora observed. “And her jaw, and—”

“You do not look alike.”

“No?” Cora grinned widely. “We were matched by a goddess and met on the road, Callan. You didn’t go out looking for a lover who looks like—”

“I didn’t,” he said, though his face reddened.

“I’m not bothered either way.” Cora sat with her smug grin as Callan pulled the ox to a stop short of the house. She put a hand on his wrist and leaned in, lowering her voice with reassuring intimacy. “Tell her the truth, love. We’re not worried.” She tugged him a little closer and whispered, “Although maybe leave out the erotic parts.”

Callan’s eyes narrowed at her, though the urge to kiss her was much stronger than any frustration. He’d always wanted a lover who could banter and tease. She smiled like she knew it. If they weren’t right in front of his family home, he’d have gone for that kiss, too. Instead, Callan climbed off the wagon and looked to the other before rounding it toward the door. “Mother?”

“Coming!” she called from inside the house—not joyful, not sad or angry, but... rushed? “Hold on! I’ll be right out!”

Naexi and Jaclyn pulled their wagon to a stop. At a glance the oxen and horses seemed fine. His eyes took in the rest of their small yard and noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Most days, Amanda would be outside taking advantage of the light and warmth for one chore or another. The chickens seemed calm and hadn’t intruded on the herbs in their freedom. The rows of herbs looked healthy... although the soil would still be damp after a mid-morning water.

“Something wrong?” Jaclyn asked, walking up with Naexi to join him and Cora.

“No, I don’t think so...?” He heard the question in his own voice. This was his home. He could walk right in. Their house was small and humble, but the extra room allowed for privacy if that was at issue.

“Wait! Wash your face!” his mother hissed. It was faint, coming from yards away and behind closed shutters, but Callan heard that. At a sideways glance, he realized they all did.

The door flew open as Amanda strode out in a belted green dress and vest. Her short black hair looked a bit less kept than usual, as if she’d just woken from a nap. Only a few steps brought her close enough to see she did not, in fact, resemble Cora all that much beyond a couple of common traits... although her face was normally paler instead of red.

Like she’d been caught in some vigorous labor. Or embarrassed.

The thought passed as she came straight in to throw her arms around her son for a tight hug. “You’re safe and sound! Oh, I’m glad you’re home.” She pulled back, put her hands at the sides of his head, and looked him over closely. “You are fine, right? No harm, no trouble?”

“I’m fine. I’m glad you are, too. Were you worried?” Callan asked.

“I’m your mother. Of course, I worry,” she huffed. Her eyes flicked to his companions and the wagons with obvious questions, but reunion brought a rush of topics. “You were off with adventurers. I wasn’t too worried about those ruins, but one never knows—and then the gods returned, Callan! Did you hear? Did you know?”

“Um. Yes. We knew,” Callan laughed. “That’s part of the story, actually. Mother, this is Cora, Jaclyn, and Naexi. Everyone, this is Amanda.”

“It’s good to meet you.” Cora stepped into a natural handshake.

“Likewise,” said Naexi, waiting her turn. She, too, shook hands, but also touched Amanda’s wrist with the fingertips of her other hand and bowed her head slightly.

“Um. Thank you. Hello,” said Amanda.

“Same. Hi.” Jaclyn smiled and shook hands, briefly at both, and then stepped back slightly behind Naexi.

“Are you the group that hired Callan?” Amanda asked, somewhat awkwardly. “I’d heard there was a dark elf among you, but also others. I’m sorry. I didn’t expect company.”

“It’s fine,” said Callan. “Naexi was with the group, but the rest parted ways. We—”

A thud and a clatter of pots interrupted from inside the house. “Shit,” a man grunted.

Amanda winced at first, but released the expression with a sigh and a roll of her eyes.

“Mother? Is someone else here?” asked Callan.

“Yes. Not the way I wanted to tell you,” she grumbled. “Tegreth, come on out. It’s fine.”

The big man who emerged from the door was a familiar sight to Callan. He wore a simple grey tunic over dark pants, belted but without any accessories. His brown hair and beard had only a few flecks of grey—and, Callan noticed, a few drops of water and the same post-nap state as Amanda’s hair. Tegreth lived nearby, working more with the masons than on his own small plot of land. He had a wife and two children not quite in adulthood yet.

“Callan. Glad you’re back safe,” Tegreth began. “Think I heard the introductions. I was over helping with, um...” He stopped when he caught Amanda’s shrug and her shaking head. Then he smiled and scratched the back of his neck. “Not how we wanted to tell you,” he echoed Amanda.

Naexi and Cora had the wits to say nothing, but Jaclyn's reaction fell quietly from her mouth. "Oh. Wow."

"It's a little more than a wow," Callan muttered.

"No, it's fine," Amanda grumbled. "Awkward, but fine. Tegreth, do you...? It's out of the bag now. Sorry about the strangers." She looked back and saw him hold up both hands, then turned to Callan again. "The other night, Tegreth's wife admitted to an affair with Tarrance—minor cleric, keeps the local shrine of Ondor. Their marriage was rocky for a while, and Tegreth and I have been turning our eyes away from each other for years already... his children are old enough to understand."

Callan could only blink. Amanda and Tegreth had always been friendly, and in fact they struck up mutual help on one another's homes more than once, but...

"I'm sorry, it's not my business." Cora mostly controlled her intrigued grin, but glanced to Callan as she asked, "You said it was the other night? The night before last, specifically?"

"Yes," Tegreth answered. He frowned a bit, but answered without shame. "Right as the gods made their return known. Tarrance shot his mouth off a bit too much in his declarations and praise, and then one thing clicked with another."

"Curious," said Naexi.

"Convenient and fitting," said Cora.

"I was being polite," Naexi murmured.

"Did you beat the guy's ass?" Jaclyn wondered. "Sounds like he has it coming, cleric or not."

"Oh, he's not a true cleric." Tegreth shook his head. "But no. I could be angry. I am angry, I suppose, but... it was also, ah, liberating."

"We're adults, and we're in the right." Amanda folded her arms, watching Callan. "This has been a long time coming. We just didn't know. Does this mean something more to you than the obvious? And what's all this?" She gestured to the wagons. "You didn't leave with all that."

"This is the loot from our adventure," Callan answered. "The horses belong to the ladies, but the rest is for us. You. There's a little gold, too. I thought it would help." That made it Amanda's turn to blink in surprise. "As for the rest, we knew about the return of the gods. More than most, probably."

"That would be more than anything I've heard," said Tegreth. "So far, all the clerics know is they were trapped by one of their feuds."

"They were. Callan freed them," said Naexi.

"We," he began.

"You," she asserted firmly—and smiled.

Tegreth's mouth fell open. Amanda had nearly the same reaction. "Is that what your adventure was for?" she asked, looking from one face to the other.

"Jaclyn and I met them after, actually," said Cora. "On the road. That's where the wagons and the animals come in, too."

Amanda's questions continued to mount. "I feel like I missed something in the introductions."

"Ah. Yeah." Then it was Callan's turn to rub the back of his neck and blush. "You remember how you once told me romance can take a few tries before you find The One?"