

# Perfect

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Evon stepped back and examined the hat resting atop his dressing table. He picked it up and turned it over in his hands, then put it on and looked himself over in the mirror. He took it off and leaned close to the mirror to peer at himself. It was a perfectly normal hat, so why did it make his head look the wrong size for his body? It certainly hadn't done that in the shop. This was all Piercy's fault. Evon had been happy with the hat he already owned, but Piercy had glanced at it, shuddered, and said, "Dear fellow, that is not the hat of a man intent on proposing marriage to a lady. It is the hat of a man who wishes to remain single forever." Then he'd steered Evon to his favorite haberdasher and rejected fifteen other hats before declaring that *this* one was perfect. And now the hat was mocking him.

He sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the shiny tops of his boots. At least Piercy hadn't been able to criticize those. Evon might not care about fashion the way Piercy did, but he *did* care about comfort, and it was his good fortune that these very comfortable boots were made by one of Matra's best and most popular shoemakers. Good boots, a fine white shirt, a well-cut suit that looked good on him...he looked across the room at the mirror and sighed. He wanted this evening to be perfect, something Kerensa would always remember. Well, no doubt she'd remember it even if all he did was show up on her doorstep, ring in hand, and ask her to marry him, but that wasn't the kind of memory he had in mind.

He checked his watch, got up, and put the awful hat on. It was just his imagination; the hat looked fine, and he needed to stop worrying about it. He patted his coat pockets, feeling the rectangular bulge of his wallet on one side and the knobby lump of the ring box on the other. He resisted the urge to take the box out and check inside to see if the ring was still there. Would she like it? Suppose she didn't like colored stones? He took a deep breath. *Stop being stupid. She*

*loves you. She's going to say yes and everything will be perfect. And if he didn't hurry, he was going to be late.*

He went rapidly down the stairs, hoping not to see any of his family members – they'd want to wish him luck, and that would just make him more nervous. But as he passed the second-floor landing, a door banged open, and Jessalie said, "Look, everyone, Evon's going out with his sweetheart!"

"That's right, Jessalie," Evon said, trying not to grind his teeth.

"Evon's getting maaaaaarried," Jessalie sang. "What are you going to do if she says no?"

"Come home and make you drink toilet water, probably," Evon said. "So you'd better hope she says yes."

"Maaaaa-aah! Evon says he's going to make me drink toilet water!" Jessalie wailed, though her mocking eyes made it clear she didn't fear his threat.

"Evon!" his mother called out. "Don't make your cousin cry. She's younger than you and I expect you to set an example."

"As if that would make a difference to her," Evon shouted back. "Doesn't anyone care that she's the spawn of Cath's five hells?"

"Maaaaa-aah!"

"Oh, be quiet, Jessalie," Aunt Mayda said from farther down the hall. "And stop harassing Evon. This is an important night for him."

"I bet she's going to say no," Jessalie said under her breath. "I bet she sends you packing. I bet—"

"*Desini cucurri,*" Evon whispered, and Jessalie, her mouth open and her arms crossed over her spindly chest, froze mid-word and began to topple. Evon caught her and lowered her quietly to the hall floor, then ran the rest of the way down the stairs and out the front door

before his mother or his aunt wondered why it had suddenly gone quiet. The paralysis would wear off after a few minutes, leaving no permanent effect. Unfortunately. What he needed was a kind of *desini cucurri* triggered by a set of conditions, such as someone opening her mouth to whine. If he—he shook his head violently, then had to grab at his hat to keep it from flying off his head. For once he would *not* let his brain wander. This night was for Kerensa.

He hailed a cab and gave the driver the direction, then settled back for the short ride. The heat of the day had mostly subsided, though a breeze would have been welcome. Though it was still far from dark, the lamps lining both sides of the road were coming on; Evon thought they were a little dim, as if the spell powering them needed to be renewed. Or maybe the spell could be updated, since it must have been invented some fifteen years previously. He'd observed the lights on this road for nearly a decade and knew they always came on at the same time, regardless of how dark or light it was outside. *Suppose they turned on in response to the sun's setting*, he thought, *that would extend the life of the spell*—he took his hat off and smacked himself on the forehead. *No spells. Just her.*

The cab pulled up to the curb outside Kerensa's boarding house, and Evon asked the driver to wait while he strode up the walk and rapped on the door. It took a while for someone to answer, but Evon was accustomed to this. "Mrs. Warastis does it on purpose, when it's a gentleman caller," Kerensa had told him. "She thinks you all need to be taken down a peg, so you'll appreciate whichever of her ladies you're calling on."

"I think I appreciate you very well even when I'm admitted immediately," Evon had said.

"Well, *I* think it looks bad if I come running right away when you call," Kerensa had said, but she'd followed it up with a smile that made him forget his objections.

Finally, the door swung open, and a small woman who looked like a china doll regarded him with suspicion. "Yes?" she said.

"Good evening, Mrs. Warastis, you look lovely in that gown," Evon said, trying to sound polite rather than unctuous. "I'm here to see Miss Haylter."

"I'll see if she's at home to gentlemen callers," Mrs. Warastis said in a sweet, melodic voice that was at odds with her expression. She waved him through the door, and Evon went into the now-familiar sitting room and stood by the empty fireplace. They went through this ceremony every time, as if Evon were a complete stranger and not a familiar visitor to the boarding house. Mrs. Warastis guarded the...well, she probably thought of it as protecting the virtue of the women under her care, though some of them were older than she was. Evon had never dared ask after the fate of the absent Mr. Warastis.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Kerensa appeared in the doorway. Evon caught his breath. She was always the most beautiful woman he'd ever known, but tonight her hair was coiled high on her head in the latest fashion and she wore a full-skirted silk gown whose color brought out the green in her hazel eyes, and for a moment he forgot about everything except looking at her. She blushed a little. "Evon, you're staring," she said.

"I think I have good reason. You look extraordinary."

She blushed a little more. "Well, so do you. Much better than you did this afternoon."

"I did tell you I clean up nicely." He came forward and offered her his arm. "Shall we go?"

In the cab, seated side by side, Kerensa said, "You know I'd be just as happy to go to our usual restaurant."

"I know," Evon said. "But I thought a change would be nice. And you'd look out of place in that gown."

"True." She shook out the folds of her skirt. "Did you finish the shield spell?"

"I did, and it was delivered just this afternoon, so I feel entitled to an evening off."

"I'm looking forward to it. You've been so busy I feel I haven't seen you in a week."

"I promise to be less busy in future."

"Until the next project," Kerensa said, her eyes shining with laughter.

"I'm sorry –"

"Evon, I wouldn't love you nearly so much as I do if you weren't who you are, and that includes your occasional obsessiveness."

"So you *do* love me, then?"

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "More than anything."

He put his arm around her, and they rode in silence for a while, until Evon sat up and pulled out his wallet. "I think I – no, they're right here," he said, pulling out a pair of tickets. "They were sitting on my dressing table all week and for a moment I was afraid I'd forgotten them."

Kerensa took them from his hand and held them up to the light from the lamps they passed; the sun had nearly set and the interior of the cab was dim. "I can't believe you got these," she said.

"I did a favor for one of Mistress Gavranter's clients and she was grateful in the form of two tickets to that concert," Evon said. "So it was partly luck and partly skill." He dug in his wallet for cab fare; no point taking it out a second time, or fumbling around for the fare.

Kerensa looked at them a moment longer, then handed them back. "Those look like good seats, too," she said. "I do love pianoforte music." She smiled at him, then drew him close for a kiss. "I love it better when I'm with the right company," she whispered.

Evon moved a little closer. "I assume," he said, kissing her in return, "that I'm the right company."

"I was actually thinking of inviting the cab driver," she said. "He seems nice."

"You barely saw him."

"Well, he drives nicely. And the horses like him."

"Probably because he feeds them lumps of sugar."

She sighed. "I suppose you'll have to do," she said. "But you'll have to get rid of that hat."

Evon clapped a hand to his head. "It looks terrible, doesn't it?"

Kerensa laughed, and said, "I was *teasing*, Evon. It looks good. Though I liked the other one too. What made you change?"

The lump of the box felt like it was burning through his coat and shirt into his skin.

"Piercy said I needed something different."

"Piercy says that about anything that's more than a month old. But I do like it."

The cab came to a halt, and Evon helped Kerensa down, then paid the driver. "I hope this restaurant is as good as people say," he said, offering her his arm. "It's certainly popular." There was a line stretching out the door and halfway down the walk toward the street.

"It looks like we're in for a wait," Kerensa said.

"I made a reservation."

"I always knew you were smart."

They received all sorts of attention as they passed the line – annoyance, jealousy, and some very admiring stares for Kerensa, who acted as if she didn't notice. There was a good chance she *didn't* notice; it wasn't that she didn't realize she was beautiful, it just never occurred

to her that people might care about that. Evon tried not to feel smug. *That's right, she's with me, and I'm going to ask her to marry me. So look all you want.*

He gave his name at the desk, and they were ushered to a table about equally distant from the kitchen and the front door. Perfect. Kerensa looked around as the hostess seated them. "This looks really expensive," she said in a low voice. "I'm afraid I look like a gape-faced yokel from Elkenhound. Are you sure—"

"Before you finish that statement, I want to remind you that you are sitting with the man who has singlehandedly reinvented shield magic and been paid very well for it," Evon said in an equally low voice. "I thought it would be fun to spend some of it on something entirely frivolous. Though I admit I didn't realize it would be quite so upscale. Do you think anyone really needs this many forks?"

Kerensa giggled. "Oh! Excuse me," she said to the black-clad man who had appeared out of nowhere. "Can I help you?"

"I am, in fact, here to help *you*, miss," the man said in a patrician accent more perfect than Evon's own. Evon and Kerensa exchanged glances. Kerensa was clearly about to break into laughter again. "I will be your waiter this evening. What is your dining pleasure?"

"Ah," Evon said. He'd assumed there would be a menu, but this intimidating man seemed to expect Evon to know what was on offer already. "What would you recommend?"

"The chef is famous for his *carande d'lein*, of course, but tonight the *hoirois venatre* is very good, or perhaps miss would care for *ghereini la bourse* with a *breilard* reduction?"

Cervescran cuisine. Of course. Evon wanted to sink into the floor. He'd picked this place because it was popular and Piercy had recommended it, but he hadn't done any more research than that. He didn't speak a word of Cervescran; he had to take it on faith that what the waiter

had just spouted out was food and not directions to a water closet. "Ah...I think the second one," he said. "For both of us."

"An excellent choice, sir," the waiter said, bowed, and walked away. Kerensa had her hand over her mouth and looked as if she were using it to keep her jaw locked shut. "Don't laugh," Evon said. He could feel his perfect evening begin to disintegrate around him.

"I'm not laughing at you," Kerensa said with some effort.

"I think laughing is against the rules in here, whatever you're laughing at."

"All right, I am laughing at you a bit. The look on your face...what language was that?"

"Cervescran."

"Really? Then my instructor has a really bad accent, because I couldn't understand a word. Oh, don't look like that, Evon, it was very funny."

"It's not supposed to be funny, it's supposed to be romantic."

"Funny can be romantic."

"I'm not sure that's true."

"Well, I—oh, I beg your pardon."

"A beautiful lady need never beg anyone's pardon," said the man who now approached them. "My name is Markrel, and may I say it will be a genuine pleasure to serve you tonight."

"We already have a waiter," Evon said, then felt a little stupid at how surly he sounded. The man also wore black, but he made it look stylish. He wore his dark hair swept back from his face and had the kind of sharp-boned face Piercy did. Evon disliked him immediately.

"Yes, but I am here to help you choose your wines," Markrel said.

*Wines, plural?* "Oh?" Evon said.

"That's very nice of you," Kerensa said. "What are our choices?"

“We have a very fine selection,” Markrel said, leaning closer to Kerensa than Evon was comfortable with. “Of course you’ll want to start with something light, and then based on how you will be dining, I will suggest a companion wine that will enhance your meal. What was your choice this evening?”

Evon’s mind went blank. What *had* he chosen? Something beginning with “h.” Probably.

“*Hoirois venatre*,” Kerensa said.

Markrel’s eyes widened a little. “A bold choice for a bold young lady,” he said. “The obvious pairing is our own Arkady merlot – I’m sure sir agrees with me.” He gave Evon a look that said *Yes, I am intentionally making you look the fool in front of your lady friend*, and Evon flexed his fingers and opened his mouth to cast a spell that would induce extreme flatulence in the man before remembering that they were in a very public place, and Kerensa wasn’t likely to be swayed by someone like him no matter how handsome he was. “I’ll rely on your good judgment,” he said instead, and smiled pleasantly. The evening could still be perfect.

Markrel bantered a little longer with Kerensa, shooting sly glances at Evon occasionally, and Evon just kept smiling until Markrel gave up and left. As soon as he was gone, Kerensa said, “I wish you’d done something to him.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The way he was so...so *smug* about it all! As if anyone cares about the musky tones of peat or whatever it was he kept going on about. He clearly doesn’t have a girlfriend. And I didn’t like how he kept looking at you, like *you* were trying to steal me away from *him*.”

Evon felt instantly better. “I don’t think I could do anything to him that wouldn’t get us evicted from this place.”

“I know. But it was a nice fantasy, you shrinking his shirt around his neck or something.”

"I'll remember that for later."

Markrel brought the wine, which was excellent, and Kerensa talked about the lecture she'd attended that day, and Evon began to relax. Their waiter returned with their food, which turned out to be ordinary veal cutlets with roasted asparagus, and that relaxed Evon further, because he'd had anxiety about being served something neither he nor Kerensa could recognize. At one point, he watched Kerensa gesture to illustrate a point, her eyes alight with excitement, and thought, *This is exactly what I wanted. We're both going to remember this night forever.*

"Isn't it getting a bit late?" Kerensa said finally. "When does the concert start?"

"At eight-thirty," Evon said. He reached into his coat for his watch and felt it come too easily to hand. Usually he had to fumble past —

He felt the blood drain from his face. No. He patted himself all up and down the front of his coat, felt his hand land on the lump of the box and on the smoother circle of his pocket watch. Nothing else. He closed his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Kerensa asked.

"I don't believe it," he moaned. He thought back. He'd had his wallet in the cab, because he'd paid the fare. He'd taken it out to ensure the tickets were there, handed the tickets to Kerensa to take out the money for the cab, then put the tickets back, and then...it was fuzzy after that. She'd kissed him, or he'd kissed her, and he must not have put his wallet back in his pocket. He'd left it in the cab. All his money, and the tickets, probably snatched up by someone else by now.

"Oh, no," Kerensa said. "Evon." She covered her mouth, her eyes wide.

"I don't believe it," he repeated. "Could you...I apologize for asking, but..." His face burned. That he could even think of asking her to pay —

"I left my purse at home," Kerensa said. "I almost brought it, but it doesn't match this dress."

"Kerensa, I'm sorry, I'm so stupid," he said.

She shook her head, and her eyes crinkled with laughter. "It's not funny," he said.

"Yes, it is," she said. She looked as if she were seconds away from erupting into peals of mirth.

"Kerensa, what do you think is going to happen if we can't pay?"

"You'll think of something. It's not as if they'll throw us in jail." She went suddenly sober. "They wouldn't throw us in jail, would they?"

"I don't know," Evon said. "This place is fairly expensive. They might see it as theft."

"Evon..."

"I know. I'm thinking." He looked around the room as if hoping inspiration would appear. Instead, he saw their waiter approaching. Kerensa still looked as if she were trying not to laugh. She would never let him forget this. It wasn't at all how the evening was supposed to go.

"Would you care for some dessert, sir, miss?" the man said.

"I—I'm sorry, I never caught your name," Evon said, desperately stalling.

"Nelsan," the waiter said.

"Nelsan, could I...I would like to speak to the manager. It's not about you," he quickly added, seeing Nelsan's expression change from genial helpfulness to something hard and cold.

"I just...need to speak to him."

"Mrs. Grenatis is not usually available to guests," Nelsan said, not quite hostile but not nearly as friendly as he'd been.

"I won't take much of her time, I promise."

Nelsan regarded Evon and seemed to sense his growing despair. "Very well," he said, and gestured to Evon to follow him.

"Stay here," Evon told Kerensa in a low voice, "and I'll be back soon." He followed Nelsan through the dining room to a small door that swung when Nelsan pushed on it. Beyond was a narrow corridor through which the distant scents of cooking wafted. Three doors lined one side of the hall; Nelsan knocked on the second one. A woman said, "Enter," and Nelsan put his hand on the knob. "I hope for both our sakes this is truly important," he said, and Evon nodded.

The room beyond was cluttered even more than Evon's office, which was quite an achievement, since Evon kept his things in deliberate disarray to spark creativity. None of the furniture matched, and some of it looked as if it had started life in some overbuilt castle centuries ago. The walls were hung – crowded – with portraits, their frames overlapping one another as if they were pieces in a strange puzzle. A dead fern sat atop a walnut dresser; it smelled dusty, like something that might turn to ash if you touched it. Not that Evon had any intention of touching anything in this room.

The dark-haired woman sitting behind the desk looked up when they entered. "Who are you?" she demanded. Her voice was low and a little raspy, though Evon saw no evidence of tobacco-smoking apparatus anywhere.

"This gentleman insisted on speaking to you, Mrs. Grenatis," Nelsan said.

"I don't speak to guests," Mrs. Grenatis said.

"I just need a moment of your time, ma'am," Evon pleaded. "In private."

Mrs. Grenatis eyed Nelsan. He gave her a nod that communicated something Evon couldn't understand. "All right," she said. "Thanks, Nelsan." The waiter bowed a little and shut the door behind him.

Mrs. Grenatis leaned back in her seat. "So, speak," she said. Her accent was completely at odds with Nelsan's plummy one – at odds with her appearance, for that matter, because she was gowned expensively in rose taffeta and wore diamonds in her ears and on a pendant around her neck. "Um," he said.

"Your moment is about to run out, Mr...." she said.

"Lorantis. Evon Lorantis," Evon said quickly. "This is rather embarrassing...I left my, um, wallet in the cab when we arrived here. It had all my money in it. I can't –"

"I hope you don't think I believe that story," Mrs. Grenatis said, rising from her desk. "I'm going to send for the constabulary. You come in here, with your fancy clothes, and try to defraud –"

"Mrs. Grenatis, I swear I'm not lying," Evon said. "And I don't want to defraud you. I'm here to make you an offer. I want to work off the bill."

She eyed him skeptically. "You expect me to believe you know anything about work?"

"I'm a magician, Mrs. Grenatis. And I'm a good one," Evon said, not caring about modesty. "My skills come highly rated. Tell me what you need done, and I'll do it in exchange for whatever I owe you."

Her skeptical frown deepened. "Suppose it's not worth the bill?"

"I'll let you decide that. Anything you want."

"Anything?"

In despair, Evon said, "Mrs. Grenatis, can I show you something? Something that might clarify my position?"

Skepticism gave way to curiosity. "I'm only doing this because I have nothing better to do," she warned him, and followed him back out to the door to the dining room. The door had a small window in it, and Evon said, "Do you see the young woman sitting alone at that table

near the center of the room?" Kerensa was looking in another direction, apparently unconcerned about the events that had Evon's stomach feeling like it wanted to evict the *hoirois venatre*. She was so beautiful, with her golden hair turned tawny by the light, and he wanted to kick himself for having been so careless. So much for the concert.

"What about her?" Mrs. Grenatis said.

"Mrs. Grenatis," Evon said, "I intend to propose marriage to that young woman tonight. I had everything planned. Losing my wallet has ruined every one of my plans but this dinner — and that only if you'll accept my offer. *Please.*"

Mrs. Grenatis continued to look out the round window. Evon kept his eyes fixed on her, willing her to find some compassion in her for his tattered plan. "How good a magician?" she said, and Evon felt the *hoirois venatre* settle again.

"Very good," he said. "I make my living solving problems for people."

"You'd better be good to solve this one," she said, and led him back down the hall to the farthest door. The room beyond was dark and smelled damp, with more than a hint of mildew. Mrs. Grenatis stepped inside and began to fumble with an old-fashioned lamp attached to the wall.

"Allow me," Evon said, and summoned a small light that illuminated the entire room clearly. Mrs. Grenatis made a harrumphing sound, but Evon thought the look she turned on him was slightly more impressed. He sent the light bobbing along to hover near the ceiling at the center of the room. A few crates sat against one wall, their bottoms stained with dark water marks. Next to them was a stack of chairs that leaned a little to one side as if they wanted to fall over but couldn't quite manage it. There were a couple of wooden pallets, also water stained, and a long butcher's block table scarred and splotched from use. And against the far wall stood the largest water tank Evon had ever seen, bigger than he could put his arms around, not that

the idea appealed to him. Its sides were chipped and corroded green against pale blue enamel, water puddled around its base, and a slow drip came from the release valve near the bottom of the tank. The smell of stagnant water increased as he approached it.

“It’s the main processing tank for the water closets,” Mrs. Grenatis said. “It works, but it leaks a lot and the smell gets bad when we’re busy. And it’s too big for us to drain. We’ve got the individual water closets working separately on nights like this, but that’s not a long term solution.”

“And you want me to...repair it?” Evon said.

“Don’t like getting your hands dirty? Or isn’t this the sort of work you do?” She snorted. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you’d never seen one of these before.”

*I invented this*, Evon thought, but decided against sounding superior and smug. “Not at all,” he said, “though I have to warn you that even after I repair it, it will only run another five years before it needs to be replaced. Just include an installation fee and whoever brings the new one will drain the old for you.”

Mrs. Grenatis waved that away. “Let’s see you fix this one before you give me advice on how to run my business,” she said. “Clean it up, stop it leaking, and get rid of the smell.” She turned and left without another word, leaving Evon staring up at the tank. Mrs. Grenatis was getting the best of this deal. Evon didn’t do this kind of work anymore – his time was far more usefully spent in research and development – but if he did, his fee for the service would be at least five times the cost of their very expensive dinner. He removed his coat and laid it on the table. If he hurried, there might be time to walk to their favorite spot in Lucery Park and still make his proposal. He could salvage at least some of this evening.

A close examination told him the enormous tank almost wasn’t worth repairing. Could he offer to pay for a replacement instead? No, if that were possible, she would have extorted a

promise to pay for their supper later, maybe accepted some kind of collateral, though the only thing he had of that nature was the ring, and he wasn't letting go of that. He would just have to do his best, and modesty aside, his best was always excellent. And it helped that he had invented the thing, though this was not a model he was familiar with and it had been more than six years since he'd been called on to repair the prototype that resided in the Lorantis family home.

He dragged one of the crates to where he could stand on it and remove the tank's lid, which weighed as much as he did – well, that was probably an exaggeration, but not by much. He staggered off the crate, set the lid aside, and climbed back up to peer inside. The water was murky and impenetrable even when he brought the light over to hover directly above it. The filters probably hadn't worked for...he should have asked Mrs. Grenatis how long it had been in the condition, but it didn't really matter. What mattered was that the filters should have been near the top of the tank, and he didn't see them anywhere. He examined the thing more closely; not visible outside or in. He cursed a little, climbed down again, and rooted in the pockets of his coat until he came up with his coppery chalk, then drew a huge circle on the front of the tank. He chucked runes all around it, pressing maybe a little harder than necessary in his irritation, then said, "*Spexa*," and the side of the tank inside the circle went glass-clear. The water wasn't any less murky from that perspective, but he hadn't expected anything different.

So. He needed a spell that would act as a temporary filter. He stood, tapping the chalk against his lips, then spitting at the bitter taste. Something to draw all that muck together. He stepped away from *spexa* and began chalking more runes on the blue enamel, working around the rusted spots. It took a long time, and he had to force himself to work slowly even though it felt as though the seconds and minutes were running away from him. A sponge, that would be a useful material component, but he was nearly done and didn't feel like trying to find the

kitchen, not to mention Mrs. Grenatis might think he was running away. He wrote one final rune, came around to where he could see through *spexa*, and said, "*Ademi misca*," steeling himself against the horrible combination of citrus and loam that filled his mouth.

The water inside the tank began to roil as if a giant, invisible spoon were stirring it, and some of it slopped over the top to make dirty wet streaks down the side of the tank. The coppery chalk gleamed wherever the water touched it, but wasn't washed away. Evon took a few steps backward to avoid being splashed, and waited. The churning went on, and on. Evon checked his watch. 8:24. Definitely no time for the concert. What was Kerensa thinking, sitting out there alone? Regretting the concert? Wondering where he'd disappeared to? Thinking about just leaving him there—no, she wouldn't do that. Well, this shouldn't take much longer, and he'd walk her home by way of the park, and everything would turn out fine.

Streaks of clear water began spinning around the murk, like green-glass ribbons winding around the masses of turbulent silt. They grew longer, and wider, until his perspective changed and it was the dark silt that made ribbons around clearer water. Finally, there was nothing but a tank of mostly clear water in which swam an arm-thick snake of black muck, undulating like something alive. "*Desini*," Evon said, and the snake's movements slowed until it lay motionless in the water. Evon climbed back on the crate and reached into the water. His fingertips brushed the silty surface, breaking off a few particles, but he couldn't quite take hold of it. Groaning internally at yet another delay, he rolled his shirtsleeve up to his armpit and hoisted himself onto the lip of the tank, leaning far down until he could get a grip on the mass. It felt loose under his fingers, and he very carefully pulled it up, praying it wouldn't shatter into a dozen pieces.

"What are you doing?" Kerensa said.

Evon lost his balance briefly, flailed with his free hand, and successfully kept from falling into the tank. The sharp edge of the tank cut into his stomach. "Ouch," he said, then, "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"It's been almost half an hour, and they needed the table," Kerensa said. She was carrying his hat like a serving platter, two-handed. "Is there a reason you're trying not to go for a swim?"

"I'm paying for our supper," Evon said. The silt-snake was miraculously intact in his hand, and he pulled it up farther until he could lift it out of the tank with both hands. "You should find somewhere else to wait. This place is filthy."

"I want to be with you," Kerensa said. She came forward and put her fingers on *spexa*. "You were supposed to clean it? Does this mean you're done?"

"Unfortunately, no," Evon said. He stepped down from the crate and looked around for someplace to put the waste matter, gave up and put it in the far corner and pulled a crate around to partially conceal it. He looked at his filthy, wet hands, considered his trousers, and awkwardly wiped his palms off on a chair cushion. "I have to make it work properly. It might take a while."

Kerensa hopped up to sit on the table next to his coat and laid his hat atop it. "I don't mind."

"You'll be bored."

"I'm never bored when I watch you work."

Evon shrugged, though his heart warmed a little at her words. "All right." He stepped closer and peered through *spexa*. The water was still a little cloudy, but he could see the back wall of the tank, the pipes leading in and out of it, and the filters.... He groaned again, outwardly this time.

“What’s wrong?”

“The filters are in the absolute worst place they could possibly be put. No wonder no one’s done maintenance on this thing in years.”

“Does that mean you can’t fix it?”

“It means it really is going to take forever.” He came to stand next to her, leaning against the table. It would be at least an hour...and then there would be the walk to the park...and with no money they’d have to walk from the park to her boarding house, and Mrs. Waratis had a strict curfew. There just wasn’t enough time. Evon watched his perfect evening disappear into the distance. Well, he’d just have to put it off for another night, even though the idea made him want to keen out his frustration like a leashed dog. “Maybe...I think you should go home, Kerensa. We’ve missed the concert, and you shouldn’t have to wait around here for me.”

Kerensa folded her arms across her chest. “We don’t have any money for a cab. Were you thinking I’d walk? Alone?”

“I could call Piercy.”

“He’s out with Meerla Cladanter. He won’t answer even if you do call him.”

“I could call...” *My parents* hung, humiliatingly, in the air between them. “There must be *someone*.”

“No one I can think of. I’m sorry, Mr. Lorantis, but you’re stuck with me.” She kissed his cheek, then gasped and said, “Oh, your shirt!”

Evon looked down and saw a thin line of orange rust across his midsection. Of course. The Gods had misinterpreted his prayers for a perfect evening and had sent him a perfect disaster instead. He brushed at it and succeeded only in turning it into a smear. “At least that wine waiter isn’t around to see this.”

“As if he mattered at all. Go on, Evon, make your repairs and let’s go home.”

Evon shook his head ruefully and went back to the crate to drag it around to a new position. "The filters," he said as he rolled up his other sleeve, "are supposed to be at the top. When I designed this –"

"*You* designed this? Evon Lorantis, is there anything you haven't invented?"

"Something to keep Jessalie from being odious?" He smiled at her and climbed onto the crate. "I didn't design this one, thank the Gods, because I'd be too embarrassed to admit to it. I invented the original, and gave the patent to my parents. It's my share of the household upkeep."

"I'm incredibly impressed. Go on."

"Well, once the limitations on development ran out, everyone rushed to create their own models. And most of them are the way I designed them. But a few people thought they could improve on it – well, some of them actually *did*, which is really the way it ought to work –"

"You're not jealous?"

"Not really. It's satisfying, having created something people admire enough to want to improve on. Anyway, some of those 'improvements' really weren't. It looks like this is one of them. Though I honestly can't see what they were trying to achieve." He hitched himself onto the lip again and reached far down to where the filters were attached to the back of the tank. Despite being rolled well up, his shirt sleeve was starting to be soaked. He reached a little farther, caught hold of the release catch, and pulled the first filter free. It came up with a rush of water and more sediment, and Evon tapped it against the inside of the tank to clear it. The matted fibers that made up its front were gray and chalky-looking. "I think these should be replaced, but honestly, this place is already getting more than its money's worth out of me, so I'll just clean them."

"Here, hand it to me," Kerensa said.

"You'll ruin your gown."

"I'll be careful. And it will go faster."

Evon shrugged and passed the filter to her. "Put it in the corner," he said, then repeated the process for the second filter. "Now you should stand well back." He began rubbing his palms together, as if he were trying to start a fire by friction, and said, "*Ademi misca – recivia!*"

Silt flew, rebounding off an invisible barrier between Evon and the filters, outlining an invisible wind beating at the filters. Some of the dirt did get past, and Evon had to take a few steps backward to avoid being showered with filth. The floor around the filters became spattered with wet, dark flecks. Evon watched, and resisted the urge to repeatedly check the time. Finally, when the filters had gone from dark gray to something much paler, Evon said, "*Desini,*" and the little whirlwind ceased.

"Is that all? I mean, once the filters are replaced?" Kerensa said.

"I renew the spell that makes them work, and then I have to repair the seal to the release valve so it stops leaking," Evon said, climbing wearily onto the crate. He wasn't drawing heavily on his reserves, but he felt as if he were being jabbed repeatedly by his Uncle Findlay's knitting needles. "Would you hand those up to me now?"

Replacing the filters was awkward work, but went quickly, and sooner than he'd expected Evon levered the heavy lid back into place. *It's not that late. Maybe....* Evon looked at his rust-stained shirt, his wet sleeves and the grime ingrained in his hands, and let go of that dream. There would be another night. It wasn't as if either of them were going anywhere.

"So, the release valve is that tap at the bottom?" Kerensa said. She was sitting on the table again, kicking her legs so her skirt flew out around her feet.

"Yes, and it looks as if they tried to fix it before and had a little flood," Evon said, pointing at the stained crates. He crouched and drew a circle around the corroded brass fitting

where the valve attached to the tank. "*Resarva*," he said, shutting off the flow of water to the spigot. "I wish I had some tools. *Solto cucurri*." The valve handle began unscrewing itself; Evon caught it before it could hit the ground, then dug around in the top of the exposed valve until he found a kinked piece of metal. Evon was too tired even to be bothered by its condition. "*Vertiri*," he said, holding it flat on his palm, and Kerensa drew in an astonished breath as it straightened out.

"Can you do that with anything?" she said.

"Only very simple things – non-living things – are affected by *vertiri*," Evon said. "You already know it has almost limitless capacities with regard to living creatures."

"I remember," Kerensa said, making a face. "But that means you're done!"

"Almost," Evon said, dropping the metal piece back into the valve and screwing the top back by hand, tightening it down hard. "*Solto*," he said with a gesture, restoring the water flow.

"Are you sure it works?" Kerensa said.

"It's not leaking...but then, if it were a slow leak, we wouldn't know about it, would we?" Evon stood and stretched out his back. "But then, neither will they."

"That seems a little dishonest."

"I know. I wasn't serious. Much." Evon crouched again and put his hand to the valve. Gingerly, he began turning it, and said, "I'll just open it a –"

Something cracked, and the entire valve broke free of the tank and flew away, propelled by a jet of water that rushed out and caught Evon full in the face. He staggered backward, landed hard on his rump, and began flailing as if he might stop the water's flow with his hands alone. "*Resarva!*" he finally sputtered, and the water shut off, leaving him sitting in an inch of cloudy water, his pants and shirt soaked, his boots soggy, and his hair a dripping mess. He wiped water from his eyes and looked at the tank. It was about two-thirds full now, and at the

bottom where the valve had been was a shimmering square holding back what to Evon's eyes was a mass of water viciously straining to get at him. He pushed himself to his feet, staggered a little, and looked around for the valve. It sat innocently a few feet away, perfectly intact except for bits of rusted tank that adhered to its edges. Evon picked it up, slapped it over the hole, and growled, "*Vertiri misca.*" The edges rippled, flowed like liquid, and settled into the gaps between tank and valve. "*Solto,*" Evon said, and stepped back. It was a sloppy fix. He didn't care.

He turned to face Kerensa, who had her hands over her mouth. Her eyes were wide. "Evon," she said, her voice a little muffled, "are you all right?" Her shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

Frustration, and embarrassment, and exhaustion all caught up with him at once. "Do I look all right?" he demanded.

"You look very wet," Kerensa said, and now her hands were definitely holding back laughter.

"It's not funny."

"Actually, it is, a little —"

"*It's not funny!*" Evon shouted, and instantly regretted it. Kerensa lowered her hands. "I'm sorry," she said.

"No, Kerensa, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, I was just...." He couldn't think of anything else to say. Kerensa had that blank, horrible look she only ever wore when she was miserable, and it was his fault.

"Let's just go," she said.

"I can't leave the water all over the floor."

"Then do whatever it is that gets rid of the water. I just want to go home."

It took Evon a moment to come up with the right spell. If only there were a spell to let him take back those harsh words. He climbed onto the crate once more and shoved the tank lid a little bit so there was a gap, then said, "*Trattuci recivia.*" The water flowed together from all the corners of the room, then rolled up the side of the tank and poured back into it. Evon put the lid back, then stood still, looking down at Kerensa. "It doesn't retrieve the water perfectly, but it's good enough."

"My shoes are ruined, though," she said, lifting her skirt a little to look at them.

"I'm sorry."

"It's my fault for jumping down into the water. Are you done now?"

"Yes." He got down off the box and went to pick up his hat and coat, settling the former firmly on his head and picking up the other – upside down, as it turned out, and he turned it over, wondering if there were any point to putting it on and at least appearing to be partly dry.

Something small fell out of its folds and bounced across the floor to end up near Kerensa's feet. "You dropped this," she said in the colorless, empty voice he hated, and he reached out his hand for it before he remembered what it was. The ring box. His heart started pounding. Not now, of all times.

Kerensa turned it over in her hand. "Evon," she said, "Evon. What is this?" She sounded curious, and a little apprehensive.

"Ah," Evon said, flailing about for an answer and coming up with nothing.

She looked up at him, a peculiar expression on her face. "Evon?" she said.

He felt as if he were drowning in silty water again. This was all so wrong. "I don't suppose I could persuade you to forget you saw that?" he said, trying to make a joke.

"Why? Evon, what...." Her eyes were very wide again, and very green, and he couldn't look away from them. "Evon, were you...did you mean...?"

He had the briefest vision of standing with Kerensa on the bridge over the stream in the park, their favorite place, himself perfectly groomed and Kerensa beautiful as always, him taking her hand, her turning her face to his with that light in her eyes, and watched that vision shatter and vanish in all directions because he was apparently still the Gods' favorite plaything. Water dripped from his hair onto his face, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"This was supposed to be perfect," he said. "I had it all planned. Perfect meal, perfect concert, perfect walk in the park, and then..." He gestured at the box in her hand. "I'm sorry for everything. I'm sorry I lost my wallet and I'm sorry we missed the concert and I'm sorry about the mess and I'm so, so sorry I shouted at you. I don't think things could have gone more wrong if that had been my plan in the first place." He took a deep breath. He'd planned what he was going to say, too, but he'd forgotten most of it and none of what he remembered seemed to fit this moment.

"I have a memory," he said, "of waking up with you in that freezing barn, how you looked at me when you woke, and I think I knew then—I mean, we had to learn to know each other, to understand what we were like when we weren't riding into disaster and possible death, and I didn't want either of us to feel rushed—but I think I knew from that moment that all I wanted was to spend the rest of my life with you. Kerensa, will you—can you please forget how awful this evening has been, and just remember that I love you, and I want to marry you?"

Kerensa's mouth had fallen open a little as he spoke, her eyes were still wide, and she cradled the little box in her hands as if it were fragile, something to be protected. "I," she said, looked at the box, then back at him. "Evon," she said, then she flung herself at him, heedless of how his wet clothes stained her dress, and he couldn't tell if she were laughing or crying. He put his arms around her and drew her close. "I don't mean to be stuffy about this," he said, "but I was really hoping for a verbalized response."

She lifted her head to look at him, and there were tears in her eyes and a smile on her lips. "You don't understand," she said. "I was so tired of waiting for you to ask me to marry you that I'd decided to ask *you* to marry *me* tonight. On the bridge where we always go. I had it all planned out. Dinner, then the concert, then...and you—" She started laughing. "All the time I was sitting there, I was thinking about how late it was getting, and trying to work out how I could convince you to walk through the park with me anyway, and I'd almost come to the conclusion that it was too late and I'd have to find a better day when...." She laid her cheek against his sodden shirtfront. "I really didn't mean to laugh at you, but your expression...you just looked so *indignant*, not surprised or angry or anything like that, just outraged that the tank dared treat you like that. I'm sorry."

"I overreacted," Evon said, "and I hope you can forgive me. I think I was a little carried away in my desire to make this a night you would never forget."

Kerensa started laughing again. "I think I can guarantee I will never forget this night," she said. "And it will be a story to tell our children. You'll tell your version, and I'll tell mine, and we'll argue lovingly about which of us is right...."

"Does that mean you accept my proposal, then?"

"I think I have to, if we're to have children together. Think how shocking the alternative would be." Kerensa smiled at him. "I love you, Evon, and I want nothing more in the world than to marry you. Even if you did take far too long about asking me."

Evon raised his eyebrows. "Really? When should I have asked?"

She put her arms around his neck. "About ten seconds after the first time you kissed me."

"I think that would have been a little awkward, what with the freezing barn and all."

"Then kiss me now, and we'll pretend it's the first time."

Her lips were soft on his, like a promise of more to come, and Evon lost track of time entirely, conscious only of her lithe body in his arms and how wonderful it was to kiss her, knowing she was not only his dearest love, but his future wife. "Don't you want to see it?" he said between kisses.

"See what? Oh, I forgot!" She broke away from him, making him wish he hadn't said anything, and opened the tiny box. "Oh," she said again, more quietly. "Evon, it's beautiful. I love it."

"The emerald belonged to my grandmother, something she picked up in her adventuring days," Evon said. "She said it would bring you luck." The deep green of the oval central stone was the exact color of Kerensa's gown – the parts of it that weren't wet from embracing him. Six smaller round diamonds were grouped in triangles, three to a side, flanking the emerald. Evon took Kerensa's hand and slid the ring onto her finger. "It's too large," she said.

"I know. Just hold still." He rotated the ring so the band faced up, ran his finger along its curve, and murmured, "*Adenuo*." Smoothly, the band contracted, thickening a little, until it was a perfect fit.

"I'm glad I'm marrying you. You have such useful skills," Kerensa said, admiring the ring.

"I wish I could dry us off a bit. We're going to look ridiculous, walking out of here past all those people."

Kerensa hooked her arm through Evon's. "I don't care," she said. "Not one of them is as happy as we are right now."

Even so, Evon was grateful that Mrs. Grenatis, having checked his work and pronounced it sound, showed them a back way out. The night was still warm enough that Evon

felt only a little chilly in his wet clothes. Kerensa didn't seem bothered by the breeze. "I'm sorry your dress is ruined," he said.

"You can buy me another one."

"I thought it was improper for me to buy your clothes."

"That was before you were my affianced husband. Now it's your duty."

"I see. Do I have any other duties?"

She squeezed his arm. "Love me. Support me. Take care of me when I'm sick. Laugh at my jokes even when they're not funny."

"Strangely, that last is not part of the marriage rites of Belia."

"An oversight, I'm sure. Where are we going to live?"

"Kerensa, I know you just said 'where are we going to live?' but what I heard was 'are you going to make me live with your parents and your odious cousin Jessalie?'"

"And here I thought it took years for married couples to be able to read one another's minds. Well?"

"I thought we should have a house of our own, actually. If you don't mind."

"That sounds wonderful."

They turned up the path toward Kerensa's boarding house. The night was perfectly still, the only noise the sound of their shoes on the pavement. "Would you like to set a date?" Evon said.

"I already have," Kerensa said. "Midwinter Day."

"That's a long way off. I was hoping for something a little sooner."

"There's a lot to do, Evon, a lot of planning, and my aunt will kill me if I don't let her do it, which means more time so she can come to Matra. But that's not why. Midwinter Day is the day we met."

He remembered how she'd looked that day, her haunted eyes, that toneless voice. "I didn't think that was a day you'd want to remember."

"It was awful," she admitted, "but it was also the day I began to think I might have a life outside that nightmare. And you did that for me. So I think it's the perfect day for another new beginning."

She'd smiled at him that day, too, the briefest curve of her lips that transformed her face, just for a moment. She was smiling now, her eyes shining in the dim light, and he forgot he was filthy and wet and leaned down to kiss her.

"Perfect," he said.