

The Smuggler and the Warlord

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A Charm of Magpies 0.5

Merrick came softly along the corridor. He had left the woman sleeping, black hair spread on the wooden block that these people used for bolsters. She had smiled at him before she slept; he doubted she'd be smiling come the morning.

The passage took him through to Boghda's rooms. The warlord was less fearful than many in his position; the door to his room was merely locked, and took Merrick only a few moments' quiet work to open. It was bolted as well, of course, but on the passage side. To stop people getting out, not in.

He pushed the door open and slid inside.

The warlord snored like a bear, a huge heap of tattooed flesh sprawled on a huge bed. It might have been easy enough to deal with him then, while he slept, but maybe he'd wake if he sensed an approach. For definite, he had loyal men who would come running at a cry. Best not to get close. Merrick stepped past, feet silent on the mounds of fur on the floor, and saw the man he'd come to get, standing at the barred window, looking out.

He was barefoot, stripped to the waist, the tattoos like shadowy stains on his back and shoulder. There were dark lines along his arms and the skin of his neck, under the shaggily cut blond hair. The fresh cuts glistened with salve in the moonlight. Merrick had heard that Boghda liked knives.

Maybe he would cut the fucker's throat after all.

He moved closer. Vaudrey didn't turn.

He'd done this half the journey to China. Standing by the side of the boat, staring out at nothing, lost in thoughts Merrick wouldn't have wanted to share. Then, he'd been a whippet-thin stick of an arrogant boy who'd needed, and got, a few good thrashings. Eight years on, he'd filled out to match his height, enough that he might even do Merrick credit one day. The skinny, snotty youth had grown muscles, and manners, and a bit of respect for his betters, and a knack for handling himself in a fight. He still had no bloody sense when it came to picking bed partners, mind. Merrick thought he might have to give up on that one.

'Oi,' he said softly, at his master's shoulder.

Lucien Vaudrey looked round then, and the expression in his eyes was pure, ragged relief. He swallowed, just once, and said, in a breath of a whisper that was very nearly perfectly casual, 'Oh, it's you. About time.'

Give the bugger his due, he didn't make a fuss. 'Oh, well, beg pardon, sir. Don't let's leave if it ain't convenient.'

'It's highly convenient.'

'Put on something you can ride in,' Merrick told him. 'Nothing else.'

Vaudrey moved very quietly for such a tall man as he gathered the minimum of clothing he'd need. Good thing. If Boghda caught them trying to escape, Merrick would be nailed alive to a gatepost, and he'd still count himself lucky compared to what Vaudrey would get. He looked back at the snoring brute on the bed, fingered his blade.

Vaudrey's hand touched his shoulder lightly. He looked round and saw the swift head-shake.

Well, if you say so. Merrick led the way past the bed, skirting the sleeping brute, and back along the passage, bolting it behind them. He'd planned this for weeks now, since Boghda had locked his master away at the first hint that he intended to leave. Since he'd seen the punishment chambers, and heard about what Boghda did to any lover that he considered less than faithful. Since he'd calculated just how long it would take Vaudrey to lose his rag with the bastard.

He checked up and down another corridor, led the way. Only be a few more moments to the private passageway out. There should be two horses waiting, and a fast ride would bring them to where Ling Lei's silk caravan would be stopped. He'd spent everything they had in bribes to sort this, *and* agreed they'd run the guns when Ling Lei's rebellion came together, which was going to piss Vaudrey off no end because he'd point blank refused to get involved in that before. The way Merrick saw it, they could always make more money. And since it was Vaudrey's idea to jump into some barbarian's bed, and Merrick's job to haul him out again, the overbred tit could bloody well take the consequences.

The overbred tit grabbed his shoulder then, and Merrick heard it too.

Guards.

He had his knife out and moving even as they turned the corner, bringing his other hand up to stifle the guard's death-cry. He eased the body down, feeling blood pump against his fingers, and saw Vaudrey, unarmed but with far longer reach, slam his fist into the second guard's throat, breaking something.

Merrick mostly forgot his master was a Vaudrey, bad in the bone, his family the worst sack of bastards in England. It didn't show – except now and then it did, like when he fought, and that vicious streak flashed out like a blade. He could see it now. Vaudrey took just a few seconds to bring the guard down, with barely more than a few grunts, and then he held out a hand, demanding the knife.

Merrick shook his head. Vaudrey shot him a glare, nodding angrily back in the direction of Boghda's rooms. The guard who'd failed to stop him escaping would be better off dead in the morning, he was saying. Well, Merrick knew that too, after five months in this hellhole, and he reached over and put the knife into the man's heart himself.

Manservant, right? You do the master's dirty work.

The rest of the moonlit journey was easy enough. Out through the long rocky passage, through the door that would be bolted behind them and any footprints swept away if the serving girls he'd bribed and bedded had any sense. Down the cold, sandy slopes, a fast, frantic gallop across rough terrain, out of the fortress in the mountainside where they'd been stuck five long months, while the big warlord's lust for the lanky English smuggler had turned to ownership and obsession. They didn't speak or pause till they came to Ling Lei's caravan, and were bundled in to one of the wagons that accompanied the many camels. Merrick hurried to get Vaudrey hidden in the under-floor compartment concealed by bolts of raw silk. It stank of opium, and gunpowder.

'You all right?' Merrick asked, watching his master curling to fit in the too-small space that would conceal him even if Boghda's riders caught them up. A couple of days hiding in there was going to be agony for a Long Meg like him. He wouldn't complain till after.

'Fine.'

'He cut you. Boghda.'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because he's a sodding animal.'

'Which is what I said when we got here,' Merrick pointed out. 'And you said, *he's really rather charming* and I was to shut up and let you alone.'

'He *was* rather charming at that point.' Vaudrey's voice was light again, after that brief, betraying snarl. 'If we'd left after three months, I'd have called that a delightful interlude.'

'You won't be told, will you? Gawd, you need a keeper.'

'I have a keeper.' Vaudrey reached up and touched the back of his hand lightly, all the thanks that would ever be exchanged. 'You're really quite adequate.'

Merrick sniffed. 'And what about next time?'

'What next time?'

'Next time I tell you not to get us tangled up with some dangerous maniac who's going to kill us both just because you want to get your end away. You going to listen to me then?'

Vaudrey's smile was just visible in the filtered moonlight. 'Of course I'm not.'

Merrick shook his head despairingly, fighting back a grin, and closed the hatch as the caravan jolted along its long journey towards Shanghai.

