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Winning Hand
By Sean Michael

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Chapter One

"Full house." Erith spread the cards on the low table, grinning as Lord Renault groaned dramatically. The Gentlemen's Club was packed, card games, dice games and various other amusements being enjoyed by dozens of Lords and Ladies looking to avoid the spring rains.

"Na'eb and his Holy Sister's crusty left ball! If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were cheating. That makes what? One thousand taban I owe you?"

Erith smiled over at the handsome young man. Charming and wealthy, Renault was a perfect gambling partner, jolly and pleasant and always willing to pay up. "Two thousand, three hundred and eighty-six, so far."

"Two thous..." Dark brown eyes looked across the table and then Renault reached for the cards, shuffling them in his broad hands. "Well, I guess I'll just have to win some back, won't I?"

"Or lose some more. Addina had some lovely ponies of Jutanari stock that I'm of a mind to buy. I've almost enough to buy the ones I wanted." Erith grinned and took the cards he was dealt.

Three ladies on the first deal, it almost made him wonder if Renault was cheating to lose.

He hadn't been paying that much attention, but he supposed it was possible. But why on earth would the man want to lose that much?

"More ponies? You've got some of the finest stables in Saluee. Rumor is the stable boys fight for a position there. Of course," Renault winked suggestively, "it could just be those terribly interesting parties you've been known to throw. I imagine somehow sleeping in

the barn loft has quite a view of the salle."

Renault took three cards, wincing at the result. "Did you hear Elle's pony had to be put down? Broke a leg jumping a creek. Your bet."

Erith tossed two cards at the table, not letting his expression change as he pulled the six of axes and six of jewels. "She pushes them too hard. That's not the first pony she's put down and it won't be the last."

He looked over at Renault, eyebrow raised. "You start off the bets."

He tried to figure out what Renault wanted from him, the ladies might have been a coincidence, the sixes were not.

"Two hundred," Renault threw his chips onto the table with confident flair, but Erith had a hunch the man was going to lose.

It was time to have some fun, see just how far Renault was willing to go to get into his good graces.

Erith waited for the other two to make their wagers and then casually tossed in one thousand taban worth of chips. Lords Simpson and Tweland threw down their hands with unhappy groans and Erith turned to Renault, wide grin on his face.

"Well?"

"I don't have the markers with me to cover that." Renault looked at Erith, eyes wide and falsely innocent. "I don't suppose you would take my word on it as collateral?"

"Your word, Lord Renault? Now I could hardly show my face here if word got out I was taking soft bets." Interesting... Renault knew Erith didn't take soft bets, that fact was

common knowledge around the gambling circuits.

"I've enough markers for half the bet..." Renault frowned and began to go through the pockets of his surcoat. "I came straight from the sales and I've the papers for a new slave." Renault pulled out the sheaf of papers from his coat. "I paid eight hundred for him. If you'll accept that along with my remaining markers, it'll see your bet and raise you three hundred taban more."

"Those must be quite the cards," Erith drawled. Only he knew they weren't. Curioser and curioser... the man was scrambling to cover a bet he knew he'd lose. The amount was nothing that Renault would truly miss, but he was doing his best to make sure Erith took him for an awful lot of money.

He held out his hand. "May I?"

He perused the papers. One boy, approximate age of seventeen summers, clean of disease, though he was in fairly poor shape -- probably beaten by his handlers. He hardly needed another slave, but he did want to know what Renault wanted.

He threw the papers onto the pile of markers along with three hundred more of his own markers.

"Let's see your cards."

Renault threw down his three Lords, looking over at Erith with a grin. "Three of a kind."

"Full house." Which you well knew. "Sorry, my Lord. Na'eb and his Holy Sister isn't with you tonight it seems." Erith pulled the pile of markers and papers over to him. "I believe I've risked my luck enough for an evening."

"Already? But Lord Erith, the evening is young. The moon is hardly in the sky."

Erith smiled. "Exactly, my dear Renault. The evening is young, which leaves me time to pay a visit to a certain establishment and spend some of your hard-earned taban."

He grinned, standing and placing the markers in a bag. He was getting impatient. If the lordling wanted something, it was time to be out with it or the fool would have lost his money for nothing. "Have the boy delivered to me in the morning? I'll have Havilland keep an eye out for him."

"That sounds acceptable." Renault stood as well. "And as the best game in town is heading out the door and I'm out of markers, I guess I'm heading out myself."

Erith inclined his head and headed for the changing table, handing over the markers. "Add it to my account. After you've taken one hundred for yourself and another for the ladies who, as always, served us so prettily."

"Certainly, Lord Erith. You are generous as always."

Erith waved his hand impatiently and headed down the stairs to the street, Renault keeping pace.

"Well I was planning a visit to the Inn of the Blossom myself this evening." Renault's voice was low and he leaned slightly toward Erith, as if making a confidence. "But now I am without means this evening. A shame to end the evening so early by heading home alone, don't you think?"

Erith suppressed a groan. So that was it, the good Lord Renault wished to bed him. Erith gave him a critical once over from the corner of his eye. He was sure Renault was a fine enough bed partner, but Erith could find his like by snapping his fingers.

He'd had lordlings before and, to a man, they'd bored him within days, several hadn't

lasted the night.

"Ah, Renault. I'm sure a man of your stature could find a willing woman to fill your arms." Erith looked over with a wicked smile. "Your wife, for instance, comes to mind."

Renault laughed. "Lord Erith, if my wife came to mind neither of us would have reason to visit the Inn of the Blossom for no manhood can bear exposure to the light of her glare."

"She has a certain... intensity about her."

"I believe you mean sheer, unadulterated evil."

Erith shook his head. "I knew there was a reason I never married."

"No woman will have you?" Renault moved closer, a hand brushed against Erith's arm.

"I'm simply not willing to compromise for less than perfection." Erith stepped away.

"Speaking of perfection, there's a boy who's as close as Na'eb and his Holy Sister ever got to it just waiting for me. Good evening, my friend. Say hello to your wife for me."

Renault's disappointment was palpable, like a wave off the sea, complete with sea-salt spray of anger. "You'll throw me off so quickly, Lord Erith?"

He stopped and turned, putting on an apologetic, but firm air; it was best to nip these things in the bud. "Lord Renault you are an attractive enough man, a splendid addition to any social gathering, and an excellent partner at the tables. However, you are regrettably not my type when it comes to matters such as those we are currently discussing."

"And are you not willing to broaden your tastes, Lord Erith? Try a dish that's not the usual?"

Erith forced himself not to roll his eyes. Renault was the epitome of curious, bored, henpecked dandy who'd heard rumors of wild parties and wilder sex. Erith doubted if the idiot could imagine anything half as curious as the things that had happened at his last gathering a fortnight ago.

Setting his teeth together, Erith forced himself to smile warmly. He wasn't lying about the boy he had waiting and he paid for the evening no matter how many minutes he wasted playing out in the damp night air. "I'm afraid my tastes are well-set, my friend. However, I'm sure I can recommend a young man who would enjoy a taste-test. Come with me, I'll make some discreet introductions."

Renault seemed somewhat mollified, though he still wore his pout like an accessory.

"My treat, as most of your ready cash this evening has fallen into my pockets."

Renault's pout faded and he began to walk with Erith toward the Inn.

"I don't suppose you'd give me the papers back? I'll make good on the money of course in return." Renault rubbed his hands together. "The boy had a certain look to him, if you know what I mean."

"I'm sorry, I make it a habit to never give back what I have won fairly in a game of chance. It leads to the wrong sort of assumptions."

Renault sighed. "Like you need another houseboy. What? You're going to throw him in the stables, let him sleep through your hired help?"

"What does it matter to me if he does? He gets one of the chambermaids caught with a baby it's just another scullery boy built in." Erith grinned over at Renault, shaking his head at the man's outraged expression.

Erith couldn't help but notice the man looked vaguely like a puff adder when he was upset.

"What? I'm supposed to care what a bunch of servants do on their own time?" Erith shook his head. "You and your kind are too provincial, Renault. I don't have to control my household staff, they stay because they're fed and they don't have anywhere to go. Let them have their little intrigues and passions."

"You talk as if they can be trusted, left to their own devices."

They turned onto the Corridor of Dreams, heading towards the Inn. "Better left to their own than meddling in mine, Renault. If I had wanted children, I am well aware of the steps towards making them."

"Is that why you prefer the company of men?"

Erith took a deep breath, his patience and tolerance at their end. "You've made your pass, I've turned you down. Don't push your luck, Renault, you don't have a good enough hand."

"I lost a lot of money to you tonight." Renault was bristling, he made the words sound like an accusation, but Erith was through playing the man's games.

"You aren't suggesting that your losing has somehow bought and paid for my favors, are you Lord Renault? You lost, I won, it's as simple as that. Luck will be blowing another way on another night and you'll make your money back. Or not. One should never gamble what one cannot afford to lose."

Erith straightened his surcoat as they arrived at the Inn. "Now, I shall introduce you to Byron and pay for his services for the evening, as I am rather flush on your losings at the

moment. But that is as far as my generosity extends."

"Fine. I miscalculated your... generosity, Lord Erith. The least you could do is allow me to exchange those slave papers for funds."

"You have a problem understanding the word, no, Renault. You lost the boy; he belongs to me now. I expect him delivered to Havilland's care in the morning and I shall be quite put out if he's not." Erith reached for the door handle, the warm smell of incense reaching out to him, reminding him of why he was here, making his cock twitch in anticipation.

"Are you coming?"

"No. I suddenly find the idea unpalatable. I'll take my chances with my wife." Renault turned and headed down the stairs. "Are you sure you won't change your mind? Perhaps go double or nothing?"

Erith laughed, the sound harsh and chill, even to his own ear. "You have nothing left I want, Renault. What's so interesting about this boy-slave? No matter. I'll discover for myself tomorrow."

With that, Erith opened the door, in search of clinging, pale arms and a sweet, hot mouth.

"Lord Erith?"

Havilland's quiet, unassuming voice moved through the room and Erith cracked an eye. Grey, gloomy -- perfect weather to be abed, especially after a long evening of drink and dice and whoring.

"Go 'way." He pulled the covers over his head with a groan.

"Yes, sir. But I have a question, m'Lord, about the new slave delivered this morning, sir."

Slave? Erith blinked. He didn't buy any slaves. Daflin's Blessed Trumpet, he preferred the ease of hired servants -- less hassle, less responsibility. Less paperwork. Why in the world would he have a... Renault.

Right.

"What kind of shape's he in?" Erith sat up and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Skinny, tired. Mute, but it seems he can hear. Wears some stripes, but no recent broken bones."

Stretching, Erith threw the blankets off, slipping out of bed and grinning at Havilland.

"Can I see him from the window? He brought a good price at auction, I hear."

"He's in the courtyard -- wearing more dirt than clothes, I'd say."

Erith pulled on his robe, hunching into its warm softness and strolling toward the window. He didn't immediately see the boy. Havilland had a couple of ponies hooked up to the market wagon, and finally he saw the boy, standing between them, rubbing noses with each beast in turn.

From what he could see the boy was of a similar build to himself, although there the similarity stopped. The lad sported long black hair in an unkempt braid trailing down past his ass, whereas his own bright auburn curls ended stylishly about his shoulders. Havilland had been generous in calling the boy skinny, he looked to be nothing but skin and bones.

"Well he seems to have a touch with the ponies -- set him up a bed in the stables." He turned back, stretching and yawning. "Burn his clothes and hose him down first, I don't

want him bringing anything into the household. And as there's none here yet, I'll take my coffee downstairs in the sitting room along with my mail."

"Yes, sir." Havilland nodded quietly and left the room. Erith threw on a pair of warm, thick leggings and some soft-soled shoes. Before he headed downstairs, a commotion caught his attention and he looked out the window.

Three of the stable hands were yelling at the new boy, one yanking at his filthy rags, another pouring a bucket of water over him. The new lad fought like a devil to keep the clothes on his back, his silent protestations seeming oddly graceful.

Erith watched as the stable hands overpowered the slave and stripped him. Once his clothes were gone, it was as if the fight had seeped out, too.

The boy could have been beautiful, given the right upbringing and luck. No wonder Renault wanted him. He could make his fortune on the Street, Erith thought dispassionately. Nicely weighted cock, fine build, a bit on the skeletal side, but a few months of meals would ease that and some men enjoyed that waifish look.

Well, if that was the direction the boy decided to head after working off his buying price, Erith would be happy to point him to the more pleasant houses.

The slave stood, naked and silent as the boys threw a few more buckets of water at him and threw some rough homespun clothes down beside him in the mud. There was something touching about the way the boy bent and gathered the clothing up, washing the mud off in a little pool of clear water.

He pulled on the breeches and tunic, looking up as he fastened the neck. Eyes, blue as summer skies at noon, met his. Shame, exhaustion and more than a little stubborn pride were evident there and, although the boy's cheeks flushed, he did not look away.

Havilland came out, hands full of rough blankets, and spoke softly. The boy listened and nodded, reaching out to take Havilland's burdens before following him into the stables.

Erith looked down on the now empty courtyard for a moment or two longer and then shook his head, dismissing the incident from his mind as he made his way down to the sitting room.

Salea was just setting a pot of steaming coffee on the table as he arrived, the rest of the table was already set -- light crumpets spread thick with butter and his morning mail sat next to the day's papers.

"Morning, Lord Erith."

"Salea." He inclined his head. "Smells good."

"You're up early this morning, sir."

"Yes, it seems I had a delivery."

"A slave." She sniffed and gave him a hard look.

"I didn't buy him, I won him in a game of cards. The boy'll work off his price and then I'll just have another servant."

"He's thin as a rake, had bad treatment too. It isn't right." She gave him a pointed look.

"He's only just come under my ownership, Salea, you can't expect me to be responsible for his care until now. And I'm sure you'll have him with a paunch in less than a week." He glared at her. None of the other servants would have dared to speak to him that way, but Salea had been with him since she was a girl -- he couldn't have kept the house without her. She and Havilland were the closest thing to family he had outside of the

Jutan Clans, his extended family preferring to allow him to conduct their business among the city-dwellers.

"Is he allowed in the house then?"

"What?"

"You packed him off to the stables without so much as a hello -- is he allowed in the house or do you expect me to take his meals out to him."

Erith waved his hand in dismissal, bored and annoyed with the conversation. "Do with him what you will, Salea, just keep him out of my hair."

"Yes, sir." She dropped him an exaggerated curtsey and, turning sharply on her heel, left.

He could remember a time when she'd first come to work at Taran House that she'd been terrified of him. He missed those days.

He sipped his coffee, rifling through his mail. Invitations, thank you cards, a note from his mother...

Erith groaned, holding the card by an edge as if the parchment itself was tainted. Undoubtedly another summons, a guilt-filled request to come home, let another take his place and live with his kin and clan and quit gallivanting about the Saulee sowing his wild oats and giving good, steadfast Juta a bad name.

Scowling, he grabbed his knife and slit the seal, intending to scan for important information and impending visitations when a crash and a squeal came from the kitchen.

He was out the door in a shot, running into Havilland on the way. "What in Na'eb and his Holy Sister's name is going on in there?"

"I... don't know, Sir." They hit the door simultaneously, grunting at the impact. The new slave stood there, silent and still, covered in steaming gruel, clumps dripping down his front.

Salea was sobbing, hands full with a damp cloth, trying to scrape the hot mixture from the boy's face. "I'm so sorry, dearie. You startled me. I didn't hear you. You should've spoken up."

"Salea? What happened? This is not what I meant by keeping the boy out of my hair." Erith couldn't decide whether to be irritated or amused -- he settled on irritated. Bad enough he got saddled with a mute slave, it appeared the boy was slow too, standing, letting the hot mess burn him.

"I'm sorry, Lord Erith. I sent one of the boys to fetch him for breakfast and he walked in so quiet and..."

"He's a mute, Salea. Doesn't talk, although he does seem to make up for it in trouble, so far. What boy, you've been here two hours and fought with my stablehands and traumatized my housekeeper? Not a promising start for you."

The boy said nothing.

"Leave him be. I dare say he's a mite more traumatized than I am. Go on, the kitchen's no place for you, Lord Erith." She shooed him out of her bailiwick, waving the oatmeal-laden cloth at him.

Erith backed away, cursing beneath his breath about uppity-cooks and busy-body mothers and petty lords with overactive libidos. "I'm going to get dressed, Havilland. I don't want to be disturbed."

"Yes, sir. Are you going to be wanting to talk with the new boy?"

Erith closed his eyes and counted to ten. This was why he didn't own slaves. "Yes. Later. After supper. Put him to mucking out the stables once Salea's done mothering him into a stupor."

On his way out he wished the door didn't swing both ways because he would have liked to have slammed it to make his point. What point exactly it would have proven, he wasn't sure, but it would have made him feel a whole lot better and that, at least, was something.

Blessedly, Erith was left at peace for the rest of the day, the only interruption the serving maid silently delivering his luncheon. He spent the chill, rainy afternoon curled up by the fire, reading an old book and relaxing and sipping at a particularly fine vintage.

He was almost in a good mood when Havilland appeared at dusk. "I was wondering if my Lord was dining in this evening or if he would be needing help dressing?"

"It's cold and dreary and I'm happy by the fire, I think I'll stay where I am." He gave Havilland a slight grin. "I've been smelling Salea's cooking all afternoon -- you'll have to tell her if it tastes as good as it smells, she's forgiven."

"Yes, sir. Supper is roast and potatoes with carrots. I believe Salea was making chocolate tarts for dessert." Havilland bowed and backed out of the room.

"Havilland, send a nice brandy up with the meal. There's a bite in the air."

"Yes, sir."

Erith read a few more pages and then moved to light the lamp and stoke the fire. Passing by the window, he could see the lights in the stable, see the new boy doggedly shoveling shit as he'd been told. Erith's eyebrows arched. A hard-worker, then, and fairly fastidious

by the look of it. He saw Salea enter the stable, reach her hand out to the boy, offer him something, and then his dinner came knocking at the door.

He let the curtain fall shut.

Chapter Two

Havilland brought in his meal, and Erith let the man fuss over him, enjoying the quiet attention that needed no response, wanted nothing in return.

"I'll send the boy up to fetch your dishes in an hour, my lord?"

"That sounds about right, just make sure he's clean before you do."

Havilland nodded and made himself scarce, leaving Erith to enjoy his meal. The roast was perfection and the brandy even better. By the time the quiet knock came to the door, Erith was floating peacefully -- warm and pleasant.

"Come in." The door creaked open and a damp head peered in, blue eyes wide and nervous. The boy nodded to him, keeping his eyes carefully focused on the floor and made a questioning gesture towards the dishes.

"You can take them in a minute -- come and stand by the fire, lets get a decent look at you."

Long eyelashes fluttered, discomfort and fear showing in equal parts before the boy moved towards the firelight, long hair throwing his face into shadow.

He stood, unnaturally still and silent, not even his breath making a sound. Freshly bathed and hastily clothed, he looked surprisingly young, his hands resting lifeless at his sides, eyes fastened on the hearth, lips closed firmly.

"I don't have any other slaves in the house -- all my people work for me freely. But you're here now." He pursed his lips. "No stealing and no gossiping, especially with Lady Fortenoy's servants, she's the most awful woman -- I was being punished for something

the day she moved in next door."

He felt as though he was talking to himself and it was eerie, the way the boy stood there, silent and still.

"Havilland says you've a fine touch with the ponies, so you can stay working with them. I'll set your wages at five taban a week for now -- increase it to ten if you do your work well in the next few weeks. I know that sounds low, but you're having your room and board for free, and I'm not stingy on either account -- you'll eat until you're full, unlike some do."

He made a face, calculating in his head. "Renault said he paid nearly eight hundred for you which will put you paid up on your papers in eighty weeks if Havilland approves the increase to ten taban. That's about a year and half until you're a free man and then if it's working out you can stay on as a free man."

Erith decided it was sort of like speaking to a statue, talking to this boy. "Do you understand what I'm saying to you, boy?"

The dark head nodded once and then stilled again.

Reining in his irritation, Erith continued. "I meant what I said about stealing. I can't abide thievery in my house. If you're caught stealing, I'll have you at the whipping post, understand?"

Another silent nod, eyes closing for a mere second.

"Are you marked, then? Your papers don't say much besides an age -- no name, no place of birth, nothing."

One hand came up, turned palm up. Erith could see the pale scars of the slave brand on

the blue-veined inner arm. The mark was in the western style and looked to be more than a few months old.

There were two fresher marks which named his last two owners -- a Lord Dunney and a Myg the Fierce, from the looks of it. Erith sighed. He'd been hoping for a name, it wasn't like Havilland could call him 'slaveboy' for the next year and a half.

He was also going to need to do something about a mark of his own, something impermanent that could be removed once the boy had worked out his papers. So not anyone could take and claim him. A bracelet of copper with his sign on it would do the trick, it could be soldered on and then cut off again once he was freed.

The matter of a name though...

"Have you a name, boy?"

Something almost fierce entered the slave's eyes, but was gone just as quickly and could have been a trick of the firelight. The slave shook his head, a small, single movement.

"Well then, do you believe in fate?" Erith stood and wandered to the shelves of books, reaching for one without even looking. He opened the book at random and took the first name he came across.

"You'll answer to Tiamman."

An odd gasp, almost a sound, escaped the body standing by the fire. The boy was pale as death, turning almost gray in the firelight and his lips opened for a moment as if he would speak.

A single tear graced the hollowed cheek before it was pushed aside by a steady hand.

Erith blinked. How very odd, to get so emotional over a name. Well, if the boy didn't like it he could tell someone. The irony of that thought amused Erith suddenly and he chuckled softly at his own foolishness.

When he looked back over the b... at Tiamman, those sky blue eyes were dry and clear, seeming to burn in the thin face.

"You're an odd one, aren't you?"

There was no response to his comment, no acknowledgement that he'd even spoken and Erith found himself weary of the one-sided conversation. And... even if he would only reluctantly admit it to himself, there was something about the boy that disturbed him.

"Get on, then. I expect a full days work from you, starting tomorrow. Make yourself a bed in the stables. It's plenty warm there and you seem to suit the ponies."

Tiamman picked up Erith's tray and carried it out, shutting the door behind him silently.

Erith paced for a few moments, not able to get those blue eyes from his head. All of a sudden, the room seemed too quiet, too close and Erith rang for Havilland.

He was half dressed in decent breeches when Havilland appeared. "I'm of a mind to go out. Have the horses hitched and send a runner to the Inn. I'll want my usual table, usual company, usual room."

"Yes, sir."

"And before I forget, the slave's name is to be Tiamman and he'll need a copper slave band with a Juta flame on it. Something that'll come off easily enough once he's paid his way."

He waved his hand dismissing Havilland and let his thoughts turn to the evening's entertainments. A warm, willing body was exactly what he needed to chase away the sudden feeling of loneliness that filled him.

"Tiamman, boy? You in there? Tiamman! I'm here with those shoes you needed, son. You in the back there?"

Erith looked up from the stacks of papers on his desk with a frown. Someone was standing in his courtyard hollering. He attempted to ignore it, but the noise continued, beating into his head and infuriating him. "Havilland!"

The gray head appeared quickly. "Yes, sir?"

"Who, in Na'eb and his Holy Sister's names, is out there screaming?"

"Grady, sir. The blacksmith." This information was given out as if completely reasonable, which served to do nothing but irritate Erith more.

"The blacksmith. And why, pray tell, is he yelling in my yard?"

"He's talking to Tiamman, sir." Again, that patient tone answered him, as if he was confused and slow.

Erith blinked. "Who?"

"Tiamman, sir. Your slave, sir?"

It was almost more than Erith could do to not bang his head on the desk. Eventually he'd remember that boy's name. "Has anyone explained to Grady that he's mute, not deaf,

Havilland?"

"Yes, sir. Quite a few times, sir. He's just... well, he's loud, sir."

Erith dropped his face in his hands and spoke, grinding out each word. "Why is Grady here for Tiamman?"

"Tiamman ordered shoes for your pony, sir. He's been reshoeing all the mounts since he took over the position as lead hand."

Erith noted that Havilland looked almost pleased with himself. He also noted the man forgot to call him 'sir'.

Then he heard what Havilland had said. "Lead hand? The slave? What happened to Lars?"

"Salea caught him filching from the silver cabinet again. I had to let him go, sir."

"You should have sent him to the stocks. What about the other two boys? They've been here longer than the slave, haven't they?"

"Tiamman has a special touch with the ponies, the likes of which I've not seen before. Bran and Truc were happy to have him promoted over them, sir."

Erith nodded absently and then frowned as Grady shouted again. "Black Harod's guts I've had enough of this shouting."

He strode out to the stables, intent on putting a stop to the noise.

"Grady! What in Na'eb and his Holy Sister's names is the meaning of all this ruckus, man?" The stables went suddenly, utterly silent -- slave and servant and tradesman

looking at Erith as if he'd grown a second head.

Grady, with his black-smeared round face and stout build, recovered first, yanking off his cap and bowing clumsily. "Um... sorry, milord. Just...just getting some measurements from your hand here, milord. Didn't mean to disturb you milord. I...I'll be going now, lad. If that shoe doesn't sit better, just send one of the boys over to fetch me."

Erith blinked as a handsome dark-haired lad, face expressive and open, nodded pleasantly at the smith, drawing a few images in the dust and pointing.

Grady seemed to understand, patting the boy on the back and heading out, whistling a bawdy song.

Erith turned to Havilland with a frown. "So, this is my slave who looks to take positions from freed boys?"

"You wouldn't have recognized him, would you, sir?" Havilland sounded rather pleased at that.

"No, I don't suppose I would have." Erith walked around the boy, who had stiffened, standing straight, still and silent, a closed look having replaced the open look he'd offered Grady.

"He's filled out quite nicely." He'd been right about the boy's looks and felt a familiar tightening in his belly. It made him impatient -- he wasn't the type to go for boys who had no choice but to submit, it just wasn't his style; if someone was pliant beneath him it was because they were enjoying themselves, even the boys at the Inn had a choice -- he was as happy to be fucked as to fuck.

Havilland wasn't actually smiling, but had a knowing look in his eyes. It made Erith angry.

"See to it you remember Lars' mistake and keep your hands out of my silver." He growled the words at the boy and strode back into the house, stealing a chocolate tart on his way through the kitchen.

Salea smiled over at him. "You keep stealing those and there won't be any for after supper, milord."

Erith bit down on his tongue to keep from snapping at her. He'd learned long ago that making Salea cry resulted in soggy bread and burned coffee for weeks.

He slammed up the stairs and into his rooms, pacing and waiting for his temper to cool. The sound of neighing caught his attention and he went to the window, looking down at his slave, working the horses.

Erith had to admit, the boy was a master at staying out of sight and earshot, which was damned handy considering the few times he had noticed Tiamman, the result was negative.

Whenever he did notice the boy he felt his control slip; he wanted to know the boy's story, wanted to know why he didn't speak -- the healer's report that came with his papers gave no physical reason for the boy's muteness.

And there was something about those eyes...

As if hearing his thoughts, Tiamman looked up, summer sky eyes turned on him with unerring aim. He stared down at the boy for a long time before finally stepping back, deeply unnerved.

The boy was a slave -- not bad to look on, decent with the ponies, obviously intelligent -- but nothing special.

Shaking his head, Erith went and pulled out a book, plopping down into his chair, steadfastly ignoring the urge to go to the window.

The party was in full swing -- the band was playing downstairs, the younger set dancing and laughing and trying to duck their chaperones. The wine was plentiful, the food edible and the service smiling and friendly.

Erith smiled as he walked through the back rooms of his house, nodding as the press of people eased. Havilland stood at the double doors of the ballroom, dressed somberly. "Is the room full?"

"Yes, sir. Quite busy."

"There are boys from the Inn?"

"Yes, sir. Plus the girls you requested. Your guests were very appreciative."

"Aren't they always?" Erith grinned, excited and ready to quit hosting and begin enjoying his own party. "The front rooms should be emptying within the hour. Make sure things get cleared out. I'm going to go mingle."

Another of the cool, knowing looks. "Yes, sir. Enjoy your evening, sir."

He was in too good a mood to let Havilland's gentle disapproval bother him; Havilland had been frowning on his activities and proclivities for nearly forty years, he'd probably miss it if the old man were to change his tune.

He grabbed a glass of bubbly wine, downing half of it and then holding the stem between

his fingers as he wandered through the rooms of his home.

He stopped for some time at the door to the front parlor, enjoying being the voyeur for a few moments, letting the moans of passion and the sound of skin on skin fill his cock with anticipation.

He noticed two of the hired boys in the corner, petting each other, and caught their eyes meaningfully before turning and wandering back toward the kitchen.

He could hear them following and sped his steps, the sound of their booted heels on his floor speeding to match his pace. The hands of one whispered across his back and he broke into a run, laughter spilling from him.

The kitchen door was open, someone airing out the room from hours of cooking and Erith sped out and across the courtyard, the humidity of the late summer night air slowing him as he sprinted into the stables, happy, horny boys close on his heels.

The stables were dark, the earthy smell of horse and hay strong and sweet. Erith stumbled along until he reached one of the far stalls, swinging the gate open and laughing as hot hands reached for him.

Multiple hands slid over his skin, pulling at his clothing. Warm whispers of need and desire poured over him even as sweet lips fastened upon his throat.

A hard cock was pressed against his buttocks and he pushed back into it, letting the boy know without words what he wanted.

He was pushed forward into the privacy of the stall, pressed up tight against Beletta; his own personal mount, used to his smell as well as his shenanigans, only nickered gently before returning to her oats.

His breeches were pulled down, his body bared to the night air as fingers slid into him, preparing him quickly. The second boy's hands were busy working his erection, sliding teasingly over his flesh, pushing it up against the horse's belly before circling it and pumping.

He cried out as he was entered, pushing back eagerly on the hard cock as lips covered his own.

Hard flesh pressed against him on all sides, the horse in front of him, solid and hot, the boy behind him and the other against his side, and he let himself become lost in the sensations.

He wasn't sure what made him open his eyes, perhaps some noise, but he did, looking past the dark hair of the boy who's mouth plundered his own, straight into piercing blue eyes.

Erith gasped, a hot tongue sliding deeper into his mouth. Those eyes blazed at him, floating in a pale, quiet face. The thrusts from behind him came faster, harder. The hand on his cock demanded his attention.

Tiamman was trapped between Beletta and the back wall of the stall, silent and still, just watching. So blue. Na'eb and his Holy Sister, those eyes, there was something about those eyes...

Teeth nipped at his shoulder, biting down firmly and Erith was filled with warmth. Letting his eyes fall closed, he came, crying into a nameless mouth, sobbing out his passion, left sweaty and uncomfortable as the intensity faded.

When his eyes opened again, those blue eyes and their silent owner were gone.

The cock inside him slid away, slipping from his body, leaving him empty and dripping.

The boys dressed him again, hands smoothing over his skin, lips and tongues moving over his face and neck.

He stepped away from them, leaning against Beletta, feeling dissatisfaction and loneliness fill him. He waved the boys away as they moved to press against him once more.

"Make sure my guests are happy."

He watched them go, noise of laughter and music drifting out to the stables from the house. He laughed at himself, the sound bitter and old.

Beletta nickered, head bobbing, begging for attention. Erith patted the soft, brown rump, distracted. It was ridiculous, letting the fact that some slave watched him fucking a couple of whores make him unhappy, ruin the act for him.

A rustle came from the front of the stable and Erith turned his head. Tiamman was crawling up the ladder towards the loft, moving quickly and quietly.

His body tightened once again as he watched Tiamman climb, the boy's breeches tightening over his buttocks. He shook his head, angry. At the slave, at himself, at the boys who'd believed him when he'd waved them away.

He strode through the stables, boots ringing out on the wood. These were his horses, this was his home, he had riches and position, he wanted for nothing and by All the gods in the heavens he would fuck who he wanted and enjoy it.

Why then could he feel the blue eyes watching him, boring into his back until he slammed the door of the kitchen closed behind him?

Chapter Three

"Lord Erith! Lord Erith!"

Havilland's voice, strident and insistent, broke through Erith's drink-fogged sleep. Last night he'd attended quite a festivity at the Inn and the wine had flowed easy as water. Erith had crawled into bed, utterly exhausted, intending to sleep until the next party or spring, whichever came first.

"Lord Erith. The Watch has been, sir." There was a note of distress in Havilland's voice, unusual enough to drag Erith out of his stupor.

"The Watch? What's happened?" He sat up, swaying slightly, head held in his hands. He could remember last night, vaguely. There had been wine, beautiful boys, song -- but nothing dangerous, definitely nothing to have the Watch involved.

"It's Tiamman, sir. They... they caught him scaling the wall, sir. He... he's in the Stone Hall."

Erith's breath caught for a moment, an odd pang of disappointment and pain in his chest. "Tried to escape, did he? What did he steal?"

"Steal, sir?"

Snarling, Erith lifted his head. "Well, obviously if the little thief bolted, he stole something. What's gone from the house?"

Havilland shook his head. "Nothing, sir."

"The stables?"

"No, sir."

"Then why?" Erith shook his head, wincing as the movement started a throbbing headache. "No matter. Let the Watch have him, if they want him. The boy was nothing but trouble."

"But, sir..." Havilland's voice trailed off.

"What is it, Havilland?" Erith was exhausted, wanting nothing more than to curl back up into bed.

"The man from the guard, he said they're going to drag him after the whipping this morning, sir. He... he's still your property, sir."

Damn the boy to Daflin's Meadows, this was exactly why he didn't keep slaves. He rubbed his eyes blearily. The boy hadn't been so much trouble that he could in all good conscious let him be dragged through the streets.

"Get me some clothes."

"Yes, sir, right away, sir."

Havilland hadn't been this subservient in a long time and it made Erith pause. "You like him, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Why?"

Havilland stopped, looked over at Erith with worried eyes. "He wasn't born a slave, no

matter what anyone says. That boy had a life, a family. He knows horses, knows people. He was imprisoned, hurt and had his life stolen."

Erith blinked as the old man's cheeks flushed. "He has every reason in the world to hate everyone, sir. But I'll tell you, I never saw him mishandle those mounts, even when they bit. He helped Salea when she got down in her back, helped the girls with the linens. He's a good lad and he deserves better than he's been given by fate."

Sitting stunned on the bed, Erith's mind was whirling even as Havilland went to fetch his clothes. Those were more words in a row than he'd heard from Havilland in thirty years.

He let Havilland dress him, the man's words fighting with his hangover for dominance in his mind.

Havilland had him dressed in record time, handing him his cloak at the door. "Bring him home, sir."

"I'll head out on foot. Bring the carriage to the Stone Hall, Havilland." With that, Erith headed out.

He hurried through the filling streets, trying to understand what it was about this boy that affected his household so strongly. Salea, Havilland -- hell, if he'd admit it, even himself. "Damn Renault and his libido, anyway."

Erith stood at the door of the Stone Hall before he knew it. A rough, heavy-jawed man looked at him balefully. "Can I help you, milord?"

"Yes. You have recovered some of my property and I wish to see it." Erith let his natural arrogance run free, the feel of the place was oppressive, distressing.

"Ah, you own the mute then? Caught him heave-hoing over the wall. Banged him up

pretty bad bringing him in." The guard laughed, the sound deep and thick. "Funny thing with mutes, they don't scream, no matter how hard you hit 'em."

Blunt, stupid fingers fumbled along a rusty ring of keys and unlocked the door. "He's in the third cell on the left. You decide you want him back, it's a five taban fee. If not, he's slated for whipping in an hour. Lots his size don't survive it and saves you the killin'."

Erith made a face as he entered the filthy corridor, the smell of blood, waste and despair thick in the air. He counted the cells and stopped at the third, peering through the bars in the dim lighting, looking for the boy.

He pulled his cloak up over his nose. "Tiamman. Come here, boy."

A shadow slowly detached itself from the wall, Tiamman moving stiffly forward. Erith winced when he caught sight of the banged up face; both eyes were going black, one already swollen mostly shut, and there was blood crusted at a split lip and beneath the boy's nose.

From the way he was holding himself, the boy quite possibly had a rib broken, or at least bruised, as well.

Tiamman stopped at the bars, blue eyes blazing defiantly at him.

"Havilland tells me you decided to run. I was inclined to let you rot, but you seem to have charmed my staff and Havilland... suggested I come down here and fetch you back. Is that what you want?"

The boy didn't move, didn't flinch. Nothing.

"Look, boy. I don't have the time to sit in this flea-infested shit-hole and wait for you to make up your mind. Did anyone hurt you, abuse you while you worked for me? No. I

gave you food, a place to live and you repay me by running?"

Again, nothing but still silence. "Tiamman, listen to me. They are going to kill you. These men aren't playing around."

Erith looked into the cell, looked into those blue eyes hoping for fear, need, guilt, anything. What he found was worse. Defeat and resignation -- there was death hiding behind those eyes. All the boy had to do was nod and he would be free...

No, he wouldn't. The realization washed over him like a wave. Tiamman would walk out of here a slave.

One prison for another.

Erith shivered, eyes closing at the thought of a prison branded into your skin, soldered around your wrist, etched into your bones.

He opened his eyes again and looked, really looked at the scared, bruised boy trapped in the cell before him. Tiamman blinked, met his gaze, and those blue eyes filled with tears. "All right. Havilland and Salea will revolt if I don't bring you home, anyway."

He made his way back out to the guardhouse, picking his way gingerly.

The beefy man grinned at him. "So we whipping today?"

Erith shook his head and tossed the man ten taban. "There's five to get him out and five to make sure you don't bang him up anymore getting him out here." He turned as Havilland arrived with the cart. The man had perfect timing, as always. "There's my man with the cart -- I expect to be out of here in five minutes."

Walking out to the cart, Erith met Havilland's worried eyes. "He's not been whipped yet,

thanks to you."

"Thank you, sir."

Shaking his head, Erith snorted softly. "Oh, I don't know, Havilland. We've got a beaten, runaway, mute slave on our hands. I'm not convinced you should be thanking me."

Tiamman stumbled down the steps, tumbling down the last few thanks to a helpful shove from the guard. Erith winced at the heavy sound of the boy's body hitting the ground.

"He's all yours, milord. Some advice? Keep him chained. Next time we won't be as gentle."

The boy staggered onto his feet, coming to stand behind the cart, shivering and pale. Erith wasn't sure he could even see anymore, as swollen as his eyes were.

"Give me a hand," he told Havilland, going around to the back of the cart. Between them they managed to get Tiamman up into the cart. The boy was pliant in their arms, neither hindering nor helping, the only sign of distress a slight trembling that shook his limbs every few moments.

"Did you hear the guard?" Erith asked. "They catch you again and you'll be lucky to live to the whipping. They catch you again and I won't be coming to your rescue."

Havilland made a small sound and Erith rounded on him. "He received no ill treatment in my home, Havilland, nothing but kindness from you and Salea and he repaid us all by running. I'll not reward that behavior again -- the next time he runs he's on his own."

Havilland looked as if he wanted to argue, but in the end only nodded.

"Will you stay and hold his head, my lord? To keep him from getting anymore hurt?"

"Oh for the love of..." He glared at the old man.

"It wouldn't be right for you to be seen driving this old cart, sir, or I'd hold the lad myself."

Rolling his eyes and muttering about old fools and recalcitrant slaves, Erith settled himself in the cart, laying Tiamman's head in his lap. The boy was still trembling, and Erith took off his cloak and covered the shivering body.

The ride home seemed endless, Erith able to do nothing but look at the boy's beaten face. He wasn't conscious, head lolling on his neck like a rag doll. Blood seeped slowly from his nose and Erith was filled with a slow rage.

"Damnit, boy! Why did you run? Now I'm going to have to waste good brandy on you, bandages. Do without my lead hand. Maybe even have a healer in if that rib gets worse." Erith nattered on, a seemingly endless series of selfish complaints.

The boy, of course, didn't answer.

They pulled into the courtyard of the house and Erith sighed as Havilland climbed down. He looked down, scowling as he realized his hand was stroking the boy's hair. "Let's put him in his bed, shall we?"

Havilland blinked. "His bed, sir? In the loft? How... how do we get him up the stairs, sir?"

Erith sighed. "I don't suppose there's room for him in the servant's quarters?"

"No, sir. We're all full. That's why the boy was in the stables to begin with, sir."

Eyes flashing with temper, Erith snapped. "Fine. Put him in one of the little guestrooms

and keep him there. Send for a healer if you have to, let me know when he's back to work."

"I could use a hand moving him, sir."

Erith glared.

"The stairs, sir."

"Oh, all right." Erith took the boy's shoulders while Havilland took his feet and together they carried him to the kitchen door. It flew open, Salea coming out, crying and wringing her hands.

"Oh, the poor boy!"

"Clear the way to one of the guestrooms and stop your blubbing," snapped Erith. He began to mutter as they slowly climbed the stairs, surely it would have been no harder to get the boy up the ladder to the stable loft, certainly it would have been shorter. He grunted and cursed Renault a hundred times and Havilland several dozen as well, for good measure.

Salea had the sheets pulled back as they reached the guestroom closest to his quarters. Erith began to count to ten and told himself that he should be thankful they didn't expect the boy to sleep with him. He placed Tiamman on the bed as gently as possible, standing back as Salea began her mothering.

"Oh, Lord Erith... he's so pale! And his poor wee face!" Salea was dabbing at the blood, attempting to clean him.

"His poor, wee face would be fine if he hadn't run like a scared bunny." Erith growled.

Salea turned on him. "He wouldn't have had to run if he weren't treated like garbage, made to sleep with the animals, branded like a dog. He's a man, same as you, my Lord, and deserves to have a life."

"I gave him a home, food, shelter and didn't beat or fuck him, which is more than he'd have gotten from Renault, which is more than he got from any of his other owners by the looks of him. I was giving him a fair wage, letting him earn his papers back. All he had to do was stick it out doing something he obviously enjoyed for less than two years and he'd have been free to walk out of Saluee and never look back."

Erith's voice had begun to rise and by the time he stopped for a breath he was shouting. "And he repays my kindness to him how? By running, by embarrassing me and setting my house into an uproar. I suggest the two of you be happy I went down to the Stone Hall at all, let alone had him brought back here, and keep your mouths shut over any accusations you might make to me in regards to my treatment of the boy."

He stalked to the door and turned back to glare at the tableau, three pairs of wide, startled eyes watching him. "Make no mistake, just because you've been with me as long as I've had the house doesn't mean I can't fire you or that I won't."

Erith saw Tiamman's hand move, stopping as the boy struggled upright, reaching for Salea's hand. Tears flowed down his cheeks as he shook his head, patting Salea's plump hand gently.

Stunned, Erith watched as Tiamman got to his feet, stumbling against the furniture. He fell to his knees before Erith, pointing to Havilland and Salea and shaking his head. He pointed to himself firmly, slitted blue eyes fierce.

Then he slowly pulled off his tunic and prostrated himself, presenting his scarred back for punishment.

Shame and anger warred inside Erith.

"I don't beat the servants and I won't beat you." Erith bit the words out tightly before turning on his heel and slamming the door behind him as he left.

He didn't recognize the soft, sorrowful cries for what they were, at first.

Erith was curled up on his bed, plucking at his guittara and scribbling down random notes. He'd had a terrible day, with the uncomfortable silences from the servants, the constant rehashing of the morning's events and the sight of that marked, abused back stretched out before him. Finally, he had retreated into his music, letting the familiar motions of playing and writing relax him.

When the first wails began, he thought it was the wind, finally blowing in autumn's bite. He went to close the shutters, to keep the chill out, but the night was still, the wind non-existent.

Then he heard it again -- a long, low sob, full of pain and fear and sheer agony, seeping through the walls between the rooms.

The boy.

It must be the boy.

Erith's hands tightened into fists against the urge to go and check on him; if Salea and Havilland were so concerned about the boy, let them take care of him.

Several more wails sounded from the boy and then... was that words? Yes, faint and tortured, almost moans, Erith could make out the word "help" repeated over and over.

What was taking Salea so long?

A scream split the air and Erith strode to the boy's room; it would take a harder heart than his own to ignore such sounds.

Opening the door, Erith could see that Tiamman had managed to tangle himself in the bed sheets, hands caught up in the linen as he writhed. Someone had changed his clothes, wrapped the broken ribs in a poultice, put a bandage over one arm.

Even in the darkness, the bruised, swollen features of that face looked painful.

"Please, help me."

Erith stopped next to the bed, blinking. He hadn't imagined it; the boy could speak.

Another soft wail broke him out of his thoughts.

"Wake up, bo- Tiamman. Wake up."

More sounds of pain and it was clear the boy wasn't waking up.

Sighing, Erith sat on the edge of the bed and shook Tiamman's arm. The boy's skin was warm and soft, the muscles beneath his hand wiry, but solid.

"Come on, Tiamman. You're only dreaming. Wake up."

Grabbing both arms, he shook Tiamman more firmly.

He could tell when Tiamman woke. The boy stiffened immediately and the soft, pained noises stopped as if a door had closed on them.

Tiamman sat up, working to untangle himself from the sheets. With his eyes still swollen shut, Erith wasn't sure if the boy knew where he was, what was happening.

"Look, lad, relax." Erith helped him free his hands easily, pushing the pale, beaten boy back onto the mattress. "You had a bad dream, that's all. No reason to get up. You just rest back down."

The long, thin hand pointed to the bandaged chest and then out the window towards the stables. Erith sighed and shook his head. "No, Tiamman. Stay where you are. You're in no shape to sleep with the ponies."

The boy moved restlessly, trying to get up again and Erith pushed him gently back down, hand on Tiamman's chest to keep him in place. The boy seemed to shrink back for a moment and then he went limp.

Erith shook his head. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The boy gave no indication he'd even heard him and with a sigh, Erith headed back to his own room.

Curled up in his own bed, Erith couldn't avoid the things Havilland and Salea had said that morning. The boy had been ill-used and Na'eb himself knew why he had run.

Tiamman was definitely a conundrum, with his odd stillness and perpetual silence. It was almost as if he was invisible, or trying to be. Except, of course, when he was defending Salea and Havilland from a well-deserved talking-to.

Erith still couldn't decide if the boy was one of the most noble creatures he'd ever seen or an idiot with a death wish.

He'd almost fallen asleep, ruminating over the dark-haired puzzle sleeping in his guestroom when the low, soft cries started again.

He rolled over onto his back, hoping the boy would shake it off on his own, but the sounds grew louder, more heart-rending and, with another sigh, Erith got up.

He grabbed a robe on his way to the guestroom, if this was going to be a habit, he might as well just stay with the boy as be up and down all night going back and forth between the two rooms.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he shook Tiamman again. "Come on, Tiamman, let's not do this all night, it's just a dream, wake up now."

Erith tried not to think about how whatever nightmares Tiamman was having were probably based on very real events from his past.

The gasp as the boy woke up was followed immediately by silent sobs, somehow more heartbreaking than the cries themselves as tears seeped from the swollen eyelids.

"Hush, lad. It's all right, now. You're home and you're safe and, besides Salea's boiled cabbage, there's nothing here to hurt you."

A soft, snuffled snort of laughter made Erith smile down at the boy. "You only laugh, Tiamman, because she hasn't decided it'll cure what ails you. I've spent weeks eating nothing but that damnable soup and valerian tea. A fate worse than death, I'd swear it."

A couple more sniffs and the tears stopped, Tiamman's hands coming up to scrub at his eyes. The boy gasped and Erith tutted. He used the corner of his robe to gently wipe the salty tears from Tiamman's eyes and cheek.

"The guards beat you pretty badly. They're a brutal lot and smart enough to know they

can pretty much have their way with a runaway slave. Most owners would be happy to have the lesson made for them."

He realized he was gently stroking his hand over the boy's face, fingertips dancing delicately over the abused flesh.

With yet another sigh he stood, moving to drag a large arm chair over to the side of the bed. "I keep telling you you're safe here, Tiamman. I don't beat my people -- it's counterproductive. Not to mention how much the household staff seems to like you. I'm expecting to find a potful of money on my desk one of these days with a note that they've bought out your papers for you. As it is you've barely a year left to pay them off yourself." He shook his head. "I can't figure out why you'd run. I'll grant you, you still wear my slave bracelet, but only for another year, surely that's better than the brutal death the Watch had planned for you."

A soft sigh and Tiamman pointed outside, towards the stables. Erith shook his head. "No, Tiamman. You're to stay here and heal. Try and get some sleep, will you? Morning will be here before you know it."

Another quiet noise and Tiamman turned over, resting on his side. The blankets left his shoulders exposed, with their fine webbing of scars.

Erith looked down at his own soft, smooth hands.

He'd had it pretty easy most of his life, even if he liked to grouse and complain. The truth was he was bored most of the time. It was why he'd left the Clan in the first place, looking for adventure and fun. He'd found some, but his lineage had come to light and in Saluee certain things were expected of nobles. So he'd lost himself in the parties and the games and the sex, moving from one pleasure to another, always searching out the latest excitement, never satisfied for very long.

He looked from his hands back to Tiamman's abused skin. Was it only an accident of birth that separated them? He'd certainly never done anything to earn his position in life, his riches and excesses, while Tiamman... well he'd certainly never done anything to deserve such punishment while under Erith's roof.

It made him wonder what the boy's story was. He could hardly ask the lad... or could he? The others all seemed to be able to communicate with Tiamman, went to the effort to be understand his responses.

Erith sighed, not even sure why he cared, but something about the boy called to him, had from the beginning and no matter how much he wanted to, he couldn't deny it.

Throughout the night, Tiamman dreamed, calling out in fear and pain. Erith quietly kept the poor lad company, finally moving his chair close enough that he could stroke the boy's spine steadily, calming and relaxing.

Chapter Four

When dawn crept in, it found them both sleeping, Erith's hand resting on the boy's lower back, Tiamman dreaming peacefully.

Salea bustled in, tray held in her plump hands. "Brought you some gruel, son, and some tea. Oh! Lord Erith!"

He blinked, snatching his hand from where it lay, warm and comfortable against Tiamman's back. Tiamman sat up, blue eyes swollen nearly shut, thin slits of blue watching him warily.

Salea put the tray on Tiamman's lap, patting the boy on the shoulder before turning to Erith, hands on her hips. "So, you do care after all."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He was going for his most haughty and superior tone, but his voice was sleep husked and it came out gentle, almost soft.

"Then what were you doing sleeping in here, if it wasn't to look out for him. I knew you were a good man, my lord."

"It was the only way I was going to get any sleep," Erith grouched. "The boy was yowling like a cat in heat at all hours of the night."

"The boy can't speak, my lord." Salea beamed at him, patting him gently on the shoulder. "Underneath all the bluster and fuss, there's not a better heart in the lands. I'll fetch your coffee."

The blue eyes looked over at him, hands trembling as they rested on the tray.

Erith scowled over at Tiamman. "Don't listen to her, boy. Philanthropy's not in my makeup. I'm just waiting for my coffee. Throat's dry as sand."

Tiamman lifted a hand to his heart and then squeezed Erith's fingers in an obvious gesture of thanks. Then those shaky fingers offered him a glass of juice.

Erith shook his head. "Nothing passes these lips in the morning before my coffee."

Tiamman was watching him and he had to fight the sudden urge to fidget.

"Mornings. Bah. Can't stand them. There should be a law that a man doesn't have to get out of bed before mid-day. You'd think a man of leisure like myself would manage it, wouldn't you? But no, Sir, we've had a delivery of this and Sir, where do you want us to put that and Sir, you have to come down to the Stone Hall right away before they..."
Erith's voice trailed away.

A glance at Tiamman confirmed the boy was sitting stiffly, staring down at his tray.

"I didn't mean anything by it."

"Didn't mean anything by what?" Erith rolled his eyes and sighed as Salea's voice came from the doorway.

She came in and plonked the coffee down hard on the small bedside table, sloshing some of the liquid over the sides, she didn't relinquish his mug.

One look at Tiamman and she was glaring at Erith. "What did you do to the boy?"

"I didn't do anything to him! He had this juice and he... Daflin's encrusted left nostril! You'd think he was master here, as much as you coddle him!"

He stood, slamming his fist on the arm of the chair. "I swear, I'm going to find a more respectful staff if I have to hire in Gereth to get them."

A gentle hand fell on his arm and the mug of coffee came into view. Erith snatched it from Tiamman's grasp, splashing coffee onto his own fingers.

He growled and stormed out of the room, muttering about ungrateful, busy-body servants and recalcitrant slaves.

Before the door slammed shut, he heard Salea murmur, "You're a good lad, Tiamman."

He nearly threw the mug against the wall, only the scent of the beans drifting up on the steam, reminding him that he needed the drink far more than he needed to spill it and his only source of more was in the guestroom, coddling his slave.

He stalked into his room and settled deep in his armchair. Someone had been in to stoke the fire and it was burning warmly. He took a large gulp of the coffee, enjoying the way its heat singed his mouth.

As he sat and drank, he could hear Havilland and Salea talking outside of Tiamman's door and then another voice was added to the group, doors opening and closing with bangs before it grew quiet once again.

They never coddled him like that.

He finished his cup of coffee and sat contemplating calling for Havilland to help him get dressed for the day when the voices started up again outside of the guestroom door. He frowned, surely that wasn't -- then it came again, the deep and unmistakable boom of Penelopa the healer's voice.

Erith was at his door in a flash. The huge, black-eyed woman filled the hallway,

Havilland and Salea flanking Tiamman's... the guest room door. "Who called the healer?"

"Your man did. Since when do you keep slaves, son? I thought better of you." Penelopa turned her back on Erith, speaking to Salea. "Is he eating?"

Salea shook her head. "Couldn't keep down gruel this morning, sir. Poor lad's hurting, though he can't say so."

"Now wait just a minute!" Erith blustered. "I didn't give Havilland permission to... Daflin's blessed balls!"

This was just ridiculous. He was honestly going to fire Havilland and Salea both, as soon as he got Penelopa and her loud, opinionated, disrespectful, ill-tasting concoction-ed self out of here.

Havilland took a step forward, wringing his hands. "Please, sir. The boy's not eating, sir. And Salea said he brought up blood this morning, sir and we were scared."

Damn them all to Hell. "You should have asked first," he ground the words out. "And don't think there isn't going to be repercussions for this, because this insubordination is going to stop one way or another."

They were both trying to look cowed and sorry, but Erith noticed neither was succeeding very well, both obviously quite happy they'd gotten their way. Erith flung open the door and settled himself just inside, arms crossed over his chest, leaning against the wall.

"You've two minutes, Penelopa, and mind you don't be hurting him none or the two of them will have your hide."

Penelopa hadn't taken more than a step inside and a quick glance at Tiamman when she rounded on Erith, face red and as angry looking as a disturbed nest of hornets.

"They told me he was sick, not that you'd beaten him. I knew you were a lazy layabout poor excuse for a man, I didn't think you were cruel. How would you like it if I took my hand to you, son?"

"Oh, by All the gods in the heavens' light! The boy bolted and the Watch caught him vaulting the damned city walls. I didn't touch the little fool." Erith slammed his hand into the wall. "Contrary to what my staff would have you think, I don't wish the boy harm."

Erith rounded on Penelopa. "*I* didn't buy him. *I* haven't hurt him. *I* gave him a place to live, a job and fair wages to buy his freedom! *I* am not here to abuse innocent boys!"

The room was silent as Erith screamed.

Penelopa's eyes softened slightly. "Well, then, why didn't you call me sooner? Look at him... where'd he go?"

Erith looked over at the bed and where Tiamman had been sitting was now only a mass of twisted sheets.

"Oh no!" Salea's panicked voice broke the silence and Erith rolled his eyes.

"He can't have gotten very far. Probably knows Penelopa was going to give him some foul potion and is trying to avoid it."

"Like you is he, chick?"

Erith glared at the healer and spread out with Havilland and Salea, looking for Tiamman. He flipped the edges of the blankets up over the bed and sure enough, two scared blue eyes blazed out at him from the darkness beneath the bed.

"What am I going to do with you?"

He held out his hand, reaching beneath the bed, waiting for Tiamman to take it so he could pull the boy out.

Broken, torn lips moved and Erith swore he could almost hear the boy's voice. "Please."

"I won't let her hurt you, Tiamman. You have my word." The fear was palpable, pouring from Tiamman. Erith was tempted to send Penelopa away, just let the boy sleep it off.

A twinge of pain crossed Tiamman's face and those blue eyes burned at him, through him. "Come now. Penelopa knows my house. She won't hurt you. You're in pain, lad. Let's get you healed up."

Tiamman's hand was cold in his, grip weak.

He held on tightly and pulled Tiamman from under the bed, Penelopa helping him to get the boy up and back onto the mattress.

He put his hand on Penelopa's arm. "You heard me just give the boy my word you wouldn't hurt him?"

"I'll do my best, sometimes-"

"No. I said you wouldn't hurt him and the moment you do, you can leave."

"But-"

"No. Accept it or leave."

Penelopa gave him a surprised look. "I didn't think you had it in you, chick. I'll not hurt him."

Erith nodded and then turned to Havilland and Salea. "Do I pay the two of you to stand around gawking?"

"N...no, sir. Thank you, sir." Havilland took Salea's arm and led her out, closing the door quietly behind him.

Tiamman was shaking, tremors moving through him as Penelopa sat on the edge of the bed. "I'll need you to sit up, lad, undo the bandages. Tell me if I hurt you."

Panicky blue eyes flashed over at Erith, begging and frightened. "He doesn't speak, Penelopa."

"I need to know where it's tender, wee boy."

"Squeeze my hand if you need it to stop, okay Tiamman?" Erith moved to stand by the bed, taking Tiamman's hand in his. Erith forced himself to smile, distracting Tiamman with random comments and jokes as the healer worked.

Tiamman's hand clung to his, it felt good, heavy and warm. He watched as Penelopa poked gently around Tiamman's ribs, frown growing deeper. "He's got a badly broken rib, Erith. If he's not careful, he'll pierce a lung and you'll lose him."

"Can you fix it?"

Penelopa shook her head, dark braids swinging. "I can do a small healing to help the bones bind together, but only time'll heal up ribs. He needs to stay in bed, as still as possible. A week at the very least, two would be better and three would make me happy."

Tiamman tugged urgently on his hand and Erith turned to the boy. Tiamman was shaking his head and pointing at the stable, then he let go of Erith's hand and touched the slave bracelet around his wrist, pointing urgently at the stables again.

Erith shook his head. "Maybe you are deaf as well as mute; the healer said you could die." Tears filled the blue eyes and Erith sighed, patting the boy awkwardly on the back, wishing now that he hadn't sent Salea away.

"I'm not going to punish you for being hurt. Once you're better you can go back to work at the stables."

"Lad, listen to Erith. We're not talking an easy going. Pierce that lung, you'll drown in your own blood." Penelopa closed her eyes, murmuring under her breath. Tiamman's hand tightened, slitted eyes flashing up to Erith.

Erith smiled. "She's just magicking. She's harmless."

Tiamman tried to smile back, face twitching painfully, tears still threatening. The boy's grip on his hand never faltered.

Penelopa stood and rummaged through her witch's bag. "All right. Here's some herbs for the pain and to help him relax. I mean what I say about still. No walking, no stretching, not even much sitting. I'll need to wrap the ribs again, Erith, and it'll hurt. I don't know any way around it."

"Tiamman?" He turned to the boy, knowing Tiamman would have heard every word, but that didn't mean the boy would be reasonable. Tiamman looked at him for a long moment and then slowly nodded, turning a decidedly belligerent look on Penelopa.

"Do it quick." Erith suggested to the healer.

"He is like you, chick." Penelopa moved to wrap the bandages around the boy's torso.

Tiamman's eyes never left Erith's, even when the tugging began and the slow tears began to fall, knocked loose by agony.

Erith just held Tiamman's hand, patting it gently. "It'll be over soon, lad. Then we'll get you some medicine."

Penelopa grunted and declared the job done, patting Tiamman's shoulder. "Well done, lad." Tiamman shrank from the touch, hissing as the movement jarred the rib.

Erith and Penelopa got him settled onto his back.

"Prop his head up and have someone feed him at meals," Penelopa suggested, poking through her bag again. She took out two pouches and handed them to Erith. "A spoonful of each of those steeped in hot water should relieve the pain and encourage the healing. No more than three times a day though -- if he needs more than that for the pain you'd best send for me right away."

"All right." Erith set the pouches on the table next to the bed and walked Penelopa toward the door, eager to be rid of the healer, the woman made his skin itch, healers always had. "Leave your bill with me and I'll make sure Salea and Havilland get it."

A snapping sound caught Erith's attention. Tiamman was gesticulating wildly and shaking his head, pointing at his chest. "What Tiamman? Are you hurting?"

Erith walked over to the bed. Tiamman pointed to Penelopa and then rubbed his fingertips together, before pointing to himself firmly.

"You didn't call for the healer, Tiamman. Hells, I'd have called, if only they'd asked. It's the principle of the thing."

The finger pointed to Tiamman's chest, then pointed out the window.

"Okay, okay. I'll take it out of your earnings. Maybe it'll teach you to avoid the Watch."

Erith shook his head and showed Penelopa out the door.

Penelopa was chuckling as soon as the door closed behind them. "I wouldn't have thought it possible, but that boy is more stubborn than you are. I'm surprised you took him on."

"He hasn't been that much trouble," Erith admitted reluctantly. In fact the biggest trouble Tiamman had caused hadn't really even been his fault. Erith shook his head, he was going to have to deal with Salea and Havilland and sooner rather than later. It was one thing for the two of them to run a little roughshod over him now and then, what they'd done in the last day and a half over Tiamman had to be punished or he'd totally lose control of his household. Things would have been a lot easier if he was willing to go the route most of the petty nobility in Saluee did, but the thought of beating men just to get them to do your will galled him.

He paid them a fair wage and treated them right and expected their respect and loyalty in return.

Perhaps it was time for another talk to the entire household, remind them of the rules of the house and who was actually in charge. He hated the very thought of it, but he hated the thought of the chaos that could result if he didn't nip Havilland and Salea's revolt in the bud.

Penelopa thumped him on the back, in what Erith supposed was meant to be a friendly manner. It made him cough.

"You're not a bad man, chick, far nicer than you like to let on, I'll wager."

"I'm not your chick and I don't see how my disposition affects you. Now, if you're done torturing my slave, I'll ask you to leave."

"Go give the boy the medicine, *Lord* Erith. He'll be in sheer hell, right about now."
Penelopa stomped down the hall, seeming to fill up the space as she moved.

Erith shook his head, contemplating calling for Salea to nurse Tiamman. Finally he decided to just take care of the boy himself. At least Tiamman wasn't plotting against him and wouldn't talk back.

Not to mention, he needed to make sure Tiamman stayed still and quiet. Erith shivered at the thought that he could have lost the boy in the night.

Erith opened the door, frowning at the tears continuing to grace Tiamman's cheeks.
"Na'eb and his Holy Sister! Let's get some medicine into you. Take the edge off a bit, shall we?"

He put two measures of the potions into Tiamman's empty tea mug and filled the rest with hot water from the kettle set over the fire. He swirled it around until he couldn't see any more powder at the bottom of the cup and decided that would have to do.

He just hoped it worked, the silent tears that continued to track down from Tiamman's eyes accused him, even though he'd done nothing to cause them. Damn the boy anyway. No, damn Renault, this was all his fault.

He held the cup out to Tiamman, cursing again as it became obvious the boy wouldn't be able to hold the cup himself. He held it up to Tiamman's lips, cajoling him into taking it.

"Come on, lad, if I know Penelopa it tastes like a horses ass, but it'll make you feel better."

A soft chuckle was followed immediately by a hiss. Erith frowned down at him, expression softening as Tiamman paled. "No laughing, Tiamman. No matter how funny I am. Drink up, boy."

Tiamman sipped at the concoction, grimacing horribly. Erith chuckled, pushing the glass back against Tiamman's lips. "That bad, is it? Come on, the faster down, the less tasted."

Between the two of them, Erith managed to get the full dosage into Tiamman. By the time the final sip was swallowed, Tiamman's head was lolling, eyes unfocused and vague.

He reached for Erith's hand, squeezing it, before letting it fall.

"You're welcome, Tiamman."

He laid the boy back down and covered him with a blanket, frowning as a soft knock came at the door. It opened as he turned and Salea stood there, looking quite surprised to see him.

He inclined his head and followed her out as she obeyed the implicit command.

He let the door close firmly, but quietly behind him.

"He's got a broken rib. Penelopa left a nasty draught for him to take three times a day. Seeing as I can't seem to count on you to do my bidding anymore, I shall administer it."

She nodded, eyes on the floor. "Yes, sir."

"And you should know that the only reason you and Havilland aren't sharing the healer's bill is because the boy insisted it come out of his own wages. Which is a real shame, because if you or Havilland had come to me and asked for the healer, I would have gladly

paid the woman myself."

"Yes, sir."

"Furthermore, I don't want to see you anywhere but the kitchens, the dining room or the servants' hall. You'll send a girl in with Tiamman's tray. You will be confined to your station until such a time as I feel that you are willing once again to obey, for by Na'eb and his Holy Sister, I am still master in this house.

"If you have a problem with that, I shall be happy to give you a week's wage and show you the door. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Send Havilland up and I swear, Salea, one burned meal comes up to me in the next two weeks and I will have you on the streets so fast your head will spin."

"Yes, sir."

Salea hurried down the stairs, sniffing quietly as Erith went to get himself dressed. Havilland's diffident knock came as he was brushing out his hair before the looking glass, checking to see if any silver strands had crept in over the night, thanks to his ungrateful staff.

"You called for me, sir?" At least the man had the good sense to look ashamed of himself.

"Yes. I want the books tallied and balanced, including all the staff's salaries and expenses. Go find a boy to muck out the stables until Tiamman's back on the job. I want a bath up here after supper tonight. Cancel my appointments for this evening -- run the messages yourself if you have to. Once those things are done, I want all the furniture downstairs cleaned and polished."

Erith was growling, staring at the old man through the mirror. "If, once you manage to get those chores done, you feel the need to stage a rebellion, let me know. I'll have you wax the ballroom floor before you're turned out. Clear?"

"Yes, my lord." Havilland looked as if he wanted to say something but was worried about how it would be received.

Erith contemplated dismissing the man, but relented and answered the unspoken question. "The boy's going to be fine, he just needs to stay put for a couple of weeks."

"Thank you, sir."

Erith waved him off and went back to brushing his hair. It was far more soothing when someone did it for him, and now that he was thinking of it, he realized it had been a long time since anyone had. It wasn't a job for servants, it was something he shared with family or lovers, and he'd had none close enough to share this with him in years.

A sharp wave of loneliness hit him, catching him unawares; he had no close friends, his family were all far away in Juta and his servants no longer respected or cared for him. He laughed rather sardonically at his double in the mirror. "Careful, old man, you're starting to feel sorry for yourself."

He fastened up his simple tunic, pulling his hair back into a short, neat tail and grabbed a good book. There was no way for anyone to know if the boy needed help, and now, since his not-so reliable staff was busy, he'd have to sit and keep watch.

Erith grumbled beneath his breath. It figured, his slave runs away, got hurt, *his* staff stages a rebellion and *he* was stuck playing nursemaid.

If this got out, he'd be a laughing stock at the club.

Well it would just give them something else about him to entertain them. Na'eb and his Holy Sister knew he was only as popular as his latest party and the longer time lingered between one soiree and the next, the more his star faded. It was all beginning to grow a little wearisome, but really, what else did he have to do?

Perhaps it was time to make that trip back home, though he'd left Juta in the first place for just the same reasons; boredom and discontentment. Maybe what it was time for was to pack up a bag, throw it over his shoulders and move on to somewhere new. If only he knew what it was he was looking for.

Chapter Five

He slipped into the guestroom. Tiamman was still asleep, the boy's face turned toward the light of the window, the bruises and swollen features highlighted by the sun's gentle kiss.

So young -- the boy looked vulnerable, body draped in bandages and sleeping. He'd lost that skeletal thinness, but Tiamman would never be a large man, never be as big as some of the Nord.

Erith blinked, shaking his head and pulling a chair over. He was just seeing things, thinking of home and inventing information to amuse himself over a long afternoon. He sat down, taking a careful look. He hadn't noticed before, but with the injuries altering the familiar face... Erith shook his head. The boy was Juta. The hair color was too dark to be of the Westan Clans, perhaps the Yut or the Paria, the ones from the far south. Still, the truth was inescapable in the slant of the blue eyes, the distinctive curve of jaw.

He had a Juta slave.

A Juta slave that had almost been beaten to death.

It was rather horrifying.

It wasn't that he thought the Juta were so much better than the Nord or their ilk, although he would admit that a little of that came in to play, but his people didn't believe in slavery. No Juta would sell anyone from their own clan into slavery, they wouldn't even sell their enemies; it was unheard of.

On top of that there was the age factor. Tiamman would likely live to be well into his fourth generation, if he wasn't killed first. Erith couldn't imagine damning anyone to the life of a slave for that length of time. Eighty years or so of it was bad enough, any more

didn't bear thinking of.

If it had been him... Well he had no pretensions regarding his own ability to suffer nobly, he probably would have killed himself.

Of course, that was, in effect, what Tiamman had attempted.

Erith reached out, traced the slave band on the boy's wrist, so dark against the thin, pale wrist. He shuddered, pulling his finger back and shaking his head. It seemed like an abomination.

At least he hadn't had his mark burned into the boy's arm.

He'd wanted Tiamman to earn his freedom through his own means, he'd told himself it would make it mean more to the boy. What a crock that had been. Freedom was freedom, whether earned or bought or given. He hadn't even wanted the boy, what part of him had insisted he keep him tied here?

His pride no doubt, or his vanity.

He went to the bell and pulled it. It wasn't Havilland who answered his summons; it made him smile. "I need something to remove a copper slave bracelet. Painlessly. Ask Havilland if you aren't sure."

The boy nodded and left.

Erith turned back to the bed, looking at the drawn face while he waited. So still, the only proof the boy was alive was the slight motion of his chest and even that seemed an illusion.

"I'm sorry. All the gods in the heavens know, if you'd just said something, let me know..."

His voice trailed off, sorrow hitting him. "You would have let me whip you, just to keep Havilland from having a harsh word."

He reached out, brushed the matted hair from Tiamman's face. "What clan do you belong to? Do you even know?"

A knock came to the door. The boy had a large pair of metal cutters, holding them out as if they were snakes. "Lord Erith, Havilland says these'll work well enough. Says they're sharp though."

"Come in then, don't stand there like a dolt." Erith waved him in impatiently, grabbing the cutters from him. "Hold the bracelet away from his arm."

The boy turned large brown eyes on him and Erith growled slightly, catapulting him into action. Erith slid the cutters carefully around the bracelet and closed them. It took some doing, all his strength and then another effort, nearly toppling him onto Tiamman as the bracelet was cut through.

He handed the cutters back to the boy and flung the copper bracelet into the fire. Nobody would ever wear it again.

Drugged blue eyes were staring at him when he turned.

"Tiamman!" Erith found himself almost embarrassed, reluctant to look into that bruised face, meet the accusation he knew he would see in those eyes. He fidgeted, suddenly nervous.

The boy shifted slightly, arm raising and stroking his throat.

"Thirsty? You're thirsty?"

A silent nod, eyelids drooping at the motion, was the reply.

Salea had brought the jug of juice with her when she'd brought Tiamman's breakfast tray and he filled a glass with the sweet liquid. Carefully tilting Tiamman's head, he helped the boy to drink.

He gulped greedily, desperately and Erith pulled the glass away. "No, Tiamman. We don't want you getting ill. Let that settle and you can have more."

A needy glance and those expressive eyebrows lifted, pleading for more. Erith grinned despite himself, shaking his head. "Don't even ask. You can have more in a few minutes."

The pout, complete with pursed lips and wrinkled nose, was drugged and vague, but surprisingly effective. Not to mention totally charming and Erith found himself captivated. This had been what he had been fighting all along, this connection he felt to the boy. It must be because Tiamman was Juta and it had been so long since he'd seen any of his countrymen. He wished suddenly that the boy could talk, that he could hear the fierce cadence and husky rumble of Jutanari speech.

To hear his name spoken by someone who could say it right...

He raised the glass to Tiamman's lips. "Slower this time."

He let the boy finish the glass but shook his head when Tiamman touched his throat again. "Let's make sure that stays down first and then you can have some more." He made a face and leaned forward as if to share a confidence. "It must be Penelopa' draught making you so thirsty, I think they're so nasty because they take on her personality."

Those eyes flashed, a mixture of shock and amusement filling them. Tiamman nodded again, smiling self-consciously.

Erith helped Tiamman get himself settled in the bed, careful not to jostle him.

"Comfortable?"

At the silent nod, Erith settled back into the chair. "I... it's so hard. I wish you could..."

He sighed, shaking his head. This was ridiculous, nothing had changed. There was no reason to get all nervous and flustered, even if those fascinating blue eyes kept staring at him warmly. Erith grinned. "I could read to you, if you'd like."

Tiamman's eyes seemed to light up at that, another smile tilting his lips. He even managed a slight nod.

Erith looked at the book he'd brought in for himself, it was an old Jutanari book of mythology. "How about this one," he asked in Jutanari, reading the title.

Tiamman gave him a puzzled look and Erith repeated his question and the book's title more slowly -- it had probably been awhile since the boy had heard his language spoken.

Tiamman frowned and tapped his ear, giving a slight shake of his head.

"Do you not understand Juta?"

Tiamman looked at him, obviously confused.

Erith frowned -- strange. Even if it had been years, Tiamman should recognize some of the language. Finally he sighed. "Where you born in Juterlunt, Tiamman?"

Another shake of his head.

Intrigued, Erith continued. "Westalunt?"

No.

"Paralunt?"

No.

"Yutan?"

No.

"Soralun?"

No.

"Fira?"

A nod of recognition and those eyes lit up.

That made sense then, there hadn't been any contact between the Jutanari and the Firtari since they'd moved beyond the green mountains. It would make sense that their language had developed in quite different directions. But from what he understood the Firtari were rabid isolationists, far more so than the Jutanari themselves, refusing to even do business with other Juta Clan. Could Tiamman be someone like himself, a wanderer, a seeker, looking for something beyond the borders of his safe world?

Again he wished for Tiamman to have a voice. There was a story here, one that he wanted to hear.

"Well, then. We have a place. If I found a map, could you point out where you're from?"

Tiamman shrugged and nodded.

Erith smiled. "Hold on. I'll find one."

He was halfway down the stairs, heading for the library before he realized what he was doing. He stopped, shaking his head. He never could resist a mystery and Tiamman was the most intriguing thing he'd seen in months. It only took a moment to find a book of maps and some parchment and ink. He'd have Tiamman's story if he had to drag it out hand sign by hand sign. He passed Havilland in the study, the man looking up from the books, eyes curious. Erith gave him an enigmatic smile and took the stairs two at a time on his way back to the guestroom.

When he slipped through the door, he found Tiamman lying in bed, arm stretched out toward the pitcher of juice, glass in his other hand, a slight grimace of pain on his face.

Erith laughed, the sound more than a little aggravated. "You are proving to be no more obedient than your cohorts, Tiamman. I told you to wait and Penelopa told you to stay still."

The boy had the good graces to look ashamed.

Thirsty, but ashamed.

"No moving, Tiamman. None. Not for drink, for food, nothing. If you need something, I'll get it for you." He walked up to the bed, looking sternly at Tiamman. "You'll die, if that rib breaks free. You have a life ahead of you, if you'll stick around to discover it."

Tiamman gave him a long look and then shook his head and raised the arm that had worn the bracelet. His eyes widened and he shook his arm at Erith, question plain.

"I removed it. If you'd told me you were Juta to start with... well there's the irony in you're not being able to speak..."

Tiamman frowned, eyes confused, and he shook his head, spreading his hands in confusion. He pointed to his inner arm, to his brand, then to his chest, face still and eyes sad.

"Not any more... I dislike the practice of slavery as it is, I cannot in good conscious allow any Juta to remain a slave, even for the time it would take to work off their papers. No Juta would ever sell another into bondage, you had to have been taken."

Tiamman still looked confused and Erith went through the papers he'd brought, finding a map of the northern territory.

He showed it to Tiamman, pointing to the Dark Pass. "You're Firtari, from here, above the Fir mountains, right?"

Tiamman frowned, looking closely at the map and then pointed to the woods of Deer's Hollow.

It was Erith's turn to frown, more puzzled than ever. "That can't be. Tiamman, you are Juta, I'm sure of it."

Tiamman pointed again to the map, nodding happily, fingers tracing along the lines, lips moving along with the words.

Erith blinked, watching the unconscious movement of lips. It wouldn't take much air over tongue for there to be words falling from that mouth and with those words, reasons, a background, a story. The boy could read, slow and clumsy, but he recognized the runes.

On a whim, Erith picked up a piece of parchment and a piece of soft charcoal. "Can you write, Tiamman? Your name, maybe?"

At the boy's nod, Erith held up the parchment, placing the charcoal in Tiamman's hand and supporting it. With careful, slow movements, Tiamman wrote his name.

"No, no, not the name I gave you, the name you were born with."

Blue eyes turned to him, blazing fiercely through what could only be tears. Tiamman hit the paper with his hand and then pointed to himself, repeating the motion again, more emphatically.

"Your name?"

Tiamman nodded, eyes bright and clear.

"I... All the gods in the heavens! Are you trying to tell me that out of hundreds of books, thousands of names, I picked yours? Tiamman, you can't expect me to believe that."

Those eyes darkened and he pointed to the scrawl of his name angrily, wincing as he jostled his ribs.

"Sh, sh, all right, all right, it's your name." He shook his head; it was unbelievable, to have pulled the boy's actual name out of thin air like that.

He touched Tiamman's hands gently. "I believe you."

Sitting slowly, he pondered the strange situation. Tiamman was Juta. Tiamman was the boy's actual name. He'd been given the boy on the whim of a spoiled lordling. What were the odds? It almost felt... as if the hand of a god was guiding them.

Tiamman settled back onto the pillows, eyes closing, sweat beading on his brow. Erith poured a glass of juice, holding it to Tiamman's lips. "Come on, Tiamman, take a drink. There's a good lad."

Breathing heavily as he settled back down, Erith frowned. "You need to rest and not get so riled up. So, you're from near Deer's Hollow -- up in the woods there. You must be used to snow."

Eyes twinkling, Tiamman touched the book again, tracing the drawn rivers and mountains. He pointed to the floor and then the map and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Erith leaned over, taking Tiamman's fingers and moving it down and across the sea. "This is Saluee... here, in The Riddway."

The boy's mouth fell open; Erith almost laughed at the stunned, awed look in his eyes. "You've come a long way."

A stilted nod, bright blue eyes staring at the map as if trying to make sense of the ridiculous.

"Where... were you taken in Deer's Hollow, by slavers?"

Tiamman shook his head slowly and pointed to a wooded area, a small keep for a petty lordling stuck within the trees.

"Inster," Erith shook his head as he read the map. "Never heard of him, but I'll know the name now."

"Do you have family there? Someone waiting for you?"

Tiamman shook his head, eyes sad.

Erith sighed, patted Tiamman's hand before he realized what he was doing. "You need

your rest. Tell you what, I'll read, you listen and it'll be time to try some broth before you know it."

Tiamman nodded, though the sadness remained in his eyes.

Erith realized the book he had wouldn't do, not if Tiamman couldn't understand Jutanari. "I'll just get another book. What would you like? Fiction? History?" Tiamman nodded at that. "Of the Juta?" Again Tiamman nodded. All right, a history of the Clans. I'll be right back." He pulled a couple of books off his shelves, both histories written more as stories, highlighting the more colorful characters of the Clans.

Tiamman's eyes were closed when Erith got back into the room, eyelashes leaving black shadows on the bruised cheeks. He crept over and settled into his chair, opening the book and beginning to read silently as the boy slept. After a few moments, a naked foot jostled his arm, ever so slightly. Erith looked up, bright blue eyes were shining over at him. Tiamman grinned, put a hand to his ear and rolled his eyes.

Erith couldn't help returning the grin. "I thought you were asleep."

He turned back to his book, eyes catching sight of most of one long, lean leg, smooth skin pale next to the blankets. He cleared his throat, and then cleared it again before beginning to read. He read until he was hoarse, voice growing rough with use as he shared the histories he grew up with as a boy. Tiamman's eyes never left him, at turns wide with excitement, dim with sorrow and sparkling with merriment. Erith had never had such an attentive audience, truly interested and somehow, although silent, able to express his feelings clearly.

Finally the thin foot nudged him again and Erith looked up. The boy was holding out his partially filled glass of juice in trembling fingers. He offered it up, free hand covering his throat as he nodded over to Erith.

Smiling, Erith took the glass, nearly dropping it as their fingers slid over each other. Tiamman's skin was warm, callused and sent an unexpected jolt through him.

He raised the glass quickly to his lips, nearly choking on the juice as he drank too quickly.

Tiamman nodded pleasantly to Erith as he lowered the glass. He could see the exhaustion painted plain upon the boy's face and he wondered if someone would bring some broth up. Maybe after Tiamman's stomach was full and warm, he could get some much needed rest. Tiamman pointed to the book and then held his fist to his chest in a gesture of thanks.

"You're welcome. It was... my pleasure." He realized the words were true, the morning had passed most pleasantly. More pleasantly perhaps than many a morning in recent memory. He shook himself. "Are you hungry?"

Tiamman shrugged and nodded a few times, then blinked and then shook his head. Erith chuckled and the boy grinned. Tiamman pointed to his mouth and nodded enthusiastically, then to his stomach and waved his hand back and forth in a see-sawing motion, sticking his tongue out dramatically.

Laughing outright, Erith leaned forward to pull the rope that would summon a servant. His chest collided with one of Tiamman's hands and he froze for just a moment, caught again by the warmth of Tiamman's skin touching his own. He rang the bell.

"I'm sure Salea's made a light broth for you -- something easy to eat and keep down. I think it would be best if you tried some."

Tiamman's eyebrows rose and his nose wrinkled, but he nodded amiably enough. Erith grinned at the stifled yawn, the drooping eyelids. A full stomach and his second draught of medicine and the lad would be asleep in seconds.

A girl came to the door, curtsying carefully, eyes focused onto the floor. "Yes, my Lord Erith, sir?"

Erith had to hide his grin, wondering what tales Havilland and Salea had been telling. It wasn't that his servants were all as ill-behaved as Havilland and Salea, but this was far more obeisance than was usually paid to him.

"Tell Salea to get some food up here. A bowl of something light and easy for Tiamman and I'll have a plate of whatever it is that smells so good. Oh, and another jug of juice. Thank you, that will be all."

"Yes, sir." The girl was gone as if the hounds of hell were after her.

Erith turned around to find Tiamman looking at the book he'd been reading, slowly tracing the illuminations with his finger, staring at the illustrations of animals, people, flowers. He removed his finger when he noticed Erith's attention and shrugged apologetically, pushing the book back across the bed.

"No, no, that's all right. Keep it. Read it. Enjoy the pictures." He leaned forward, showing Tiamman where he'd stopped reading. "You can keep going on your own if you'd prefer."

Tiamman shook his head, pointed at the words, and then held up his finger and thumb close together with a shrug.

Erith frowned. "You only read a little?"

Tiamman nodded. He pointed to the book, then his scarred inner arm before holding his hands out, palms up, as he tilted his head. The message was oddly clear -- not much need for a slave to read.

"Well you aren't a slave anymore. I can teach you, if you like."

He sighed at himself. What was he doing, what made him think the boy would want to learn or that he would still be interested in teaching Tiamman to read come tomorrow, or the day after that? He had a short attention span and it was hardly fair to the boy to build his hopes up and then grow bored with him.

Tiamman began to nod and then stopped suddenly, looking at Erith with a deep frown. He shook his head, held out his arm and pointed to the slave brand. Then he grabbed Erith's arm and turned it over, pointing to the smooth, unmarked flesh. He closed the book with a silent sigh, stroking the cover with careful fingers before pushing it away.

"I told you you weren't a slave anymore." Erith grabbed Tiamman's arm and stroked across the branded flesh. "I can't make this go away, but I can have your papers properly notarized so that you are legally free."

The need, unadulterated and intense, that flashed across Tiamman's face was agonizing. The way it was carefully denied, hope fading in the face of perpetual abuse, was worse.

"You don't believe me? You think I'm lying to you? Thanks a lot."

He was saved by a hesitant knock and he went to the door, throwing it open. The girl managed an awkward curtsy, the tray in her hands hampering her efforts. Erith took his own plate and steaming mug from it and nodded his head in Tiamman's direction. "Feed him and get me when you're done."

"Yes, sir." Erith could feel the weight of Tiamman's eyes on his back as he walked out the door. He could hear the girl's chattering as he moved towards his room. "Come on, Tiamman. You gotta eat. Master said so."

He didn't understand why this betrayal hurt more than Havilland's or Salea's. The boy had

no reason to trust him; the connection he felt between them was probably only a thread of lust that he had misinterpreted as something more, something deeper.

His meal tasted like ashes, dry and bland in his mouth as he chewed automatically. He was almost grateful with the girl tapped on the door.

"Sir. You said to get you when I was done, sir."

"Yes, thank you." He almost told her to give Tiamman his draught, but the medicines needed to be precisely measured and it made more sense for him to just do it himself. He crossed the hall again, steeling himself, he wouldn't react to the boy this time, just make him his potion, see that he drank it and then leave him be.

Erith noted the mostly-full bowl on the tray as the girl left. Tiamman must not have eaten more than three bites.

Tiamman's eyes flashed up at him as he entered the room, brow furrowed and unhappy. The silence seemed thicker now, dense as morning fog. The boy's fingers moved nervously against the sheets, folding and smoothing the cloth.

Erith moved stiffly around the room, gathering the two pouches and Tiamman's mug, mixing the drugs with hot water. He glared at the draught. "You'll recover quicker if you eat."

Tiamman held his hand over his stomach and shook his head slightly.

When Erith moved closer to the bed, Tiamman reached out, confusion clear on his face, and barely touched the back of Erith's hand, blue eyes fastened to his own deep green.

He barely resisted the urge to nuzzle into Tiamman's touch and the impulse made him angry. "I tell you you're free and you shake your head. It seems I have a habit of

surrounding myself with people who make it their life's work to disagree with me. Well you know what, Tiamman? If you insist that you are still my slave, then you should obey me -- eat when I say eat, learn to read when I wish it. Or accept that you are no longer my slave and make your own choices in those matters."

Those blue eyes were affecting him, making him soft, weak. He needed to go. He held the cup to Tiamman's lips. "Drink."

Tiamman pushed the cup away, lips firming, eyes flashing with a mixture of hurt and fury. He gesticulated wildly, incomprehensibly, tears leaking onto his cheeks as his frustration built. He forced himself to a sitting position, wincing as he pointed and grunted. Finally the boy slammed his fists into the mattress as he swung his legs over the side of the bed, dropping his face into his hands and sobbing as he fought to catch his breath.

"Daflin's Blessed Trumpet, are you trying to kill yourself?"

Erith had to work very hard not to shove Tiamman back down onto his back, instead taking the shaking shoulders in his hands and gently manipulating Tiamman back down.

He didn't understand why, but the thought of Tiamman dying terrified him.

Tiamman kept his face covered with his hands and hair. It was odd, his shoulders shook, his stomach muscles almost convulsed as he lay there, but there was no sound.

It was almost like watching a ghost haunt the bed.

Erith sighed, his anger disappearing beneath the weight of his worry. He reached out, hesitating and then touching the muscled abdomen, soothing his fingers along the quivering skin.

"Tiamman, please..."

Slowly the muscles beneath Erith's fingers relaxed, settled. Tiamman's breath evened out, slow and steady barring a few hiccupping snuffles. Finally, after an eternity of breaths, Tiamman's hands left his face, coming to rest on his stomach, curling close to where Erith's hand soothed.

His eyes still closed, bruised face wet and flushed, Erith comforted himself with the fact that the boy's mouth was relaxed, his head nestled into the pillow.

Erith reached for the glass containing the noxious potion, bringing it to Tiamman's lips. "Please, drink -- it'll make you feel better."

Tiamman opened his eyes and looked up at Erith, then nodded. He gulped the liquid quickly, making a terrible face and sticking out his tongue as he reached the dregs.

"I know... I know..." Erith sighed and sat down on the bed next to Tiamman, gently stroking through the boy's hair. He found the gesture oddly soothing, his ire and worry slowly leeching away with every glide through the ebony silk.

Deep breaths were the only sound for a long while. Then Tiamman's eyes began to droop, body relaxing as herbs and Erith's touch worked together to comfort. Within moments he was snoring softly, face turned toward Erith's hand.

Erith stayed far longer than he'd planned, stroking Tiamman's hair, his other hand resting on the warm, soft skin of Tiamman's belly.

There was far more to this boy than first met the eye and the slow pace of discovery necessitated by Tiamman's lack of speech grated. Patience was not Erith's forte and the knowledge that Tiamman could physically speak was itching at him.

Erith stood, pulling the covers over Tiamman, smiling as Tiamman murmured and shifted, sighing as the blankets settled around him.

Chapter Six

Erith was sitting cross-legged on his bed, wrapped up and comfortable in his robe, books piled up around him. He was reading a book about the northern lands, specifically Deer's Hollow. He shivered, Tiamman came from a cold place, forrested and full of game. The cities were small, few and far between.

The boy had slept most of the afternoon, waking only long enough for Erith to help him with the chamber pot, listen to a short story about The Queen of Heaven's Light's first summer among her people, and to sip listlessly at some broth.

It was the same routine they'd followed every day for almost a week.

Erith frowned. If Tiamman didn't like the soup, he'd have to make sure the boy got more juice, something to feed him. Tiamman wasn't the skeleton that he'd been when he arrived, but he was still thin.

He sighed, it was ridiculous, this concern about a total stranger. Tiamman was young, wounded, uneducated...

Lovely, mysterious, and somehow captivating.

Erith shook his head. He really needed to visit the Inn.

Soon.

Chuckling at himself, Erith put the book aside, digging through to search for another tome about the Firtari. He'd just laid his hand upon the leather binding when he heard a low moan from the next room.

More nightmares. He kept hoping that Penelopa's draughts would put Tiamman too far under to dream.

He waited, tensed and ready to move if Tiamman continued to make noises. Relaxing the longer quiet reigned, he nearly jumped out of his skin when another moan split the air, this one far louder than the first.

Erith got up, grabbing his book and the quilt from the end of the bed. If he wasn't careful, Tiamman would hurt himself thrashing about in panic. He hurried into the next room, already murmuring quietly in the hopes Tiamman would hear and relax. He threw his things on the chair and lit the lamp, keeping the flame low.

Tiamman was rocking, rolling back and forth, lips moving, low moans filling the air.

He sat next to Tiamman, taking the thin shoulders gently in his hands, caressing even as he held the boy immobile. "Sh... just a dream."

Tiamman seemed to quiet slightly and he slid one hand up across the damp brow, petting gently.

Whispers, vague and slurred fell from Tiamman, eyes rolling as he dreamed. "...don't wanna go back... please... don't make me..."

"Sh... you don't have to go anywhere, Tiamman." The boy responded, turning toward him and begging again.

"Go where, Tiamman? Where don't you want to go?"

"...so cold...waiting for the soldiers...the whip burns though... please..." A thin trembling hand reached out toward Erith, calling, beseeching.

Erith grasped Tiamman's hand, wanting to question Tiamman further while he was talking and at the same time loathing himself for doing it.

He squeezed the hand he held. "Wake up, Tiamman. It's just a dream, it isn't real, not anymore."

"Mmm..." The groan faded into silence as Tiamman's eyes fluttered open for a second before closing again.

The hand within Erith's didn't loosen its grip, even as Tiamman's body relaxed. He sighed softly, floating at the fine edge of sleep.

"Tiamman?" Erith slid his free hand along Tiamman's arm.

A rumbling, interrogative sound answered him, Tiamman moving toward the touch. The boy was so responsive. And sensual. Erith found his body tightening as Tiamman moved into the gentle caress. Tiamman sighed softly, the fingers holding Erith's hand were moving, stroking and squeezing randomly as he dozed.

The touch was so innocent, Tiamman was unaware of what he was doing, Erith doubted the boy would have any interest in arousing him were he awake, which only made it all the more arousing in the first place.

"What am I going to do with you?"

A chuckle, low and rich and soft floated up from the bed. Thin shoulders shrugged lazily and then relaxed, pushing back into the pillows.

He hadn't been seduced by innocence in a long, long time. Barely even aware he was doing it, he leaned forward, eyes intent on the softly red mouth. Tiamman's eyes fluttered open, blinking owlily in the dim light of the lamp. He yawned, hand brushing against

Erith's hair as he raised it to cover his mouth. Jerking back, Erith pulled his hand from Tiamman's, standing and moving toward the fire.

What had he been thinking?

Erith heard the sheets rustling and turned, frowning as Tiamman tried to struggle upright.

He strode back to the bed. "Have you always been this stubborn?"

Tiamman gave him a long, thoughtful look before nodding.

Chuckling, he gently pushed Tiamman back down, again sitting next to the boy on the bed. "You need to stay lying down."

Tiamman's eyebrows lowered in a mock pout as he settled back onto the pillows. He reached out, tapped Erith's arm, pointed to the floor and then spread his hands questioningly.

Erith's brows drew together. "You want me to sleep on the floor?"

Tiamman's eyes widened, comical surprise shining in his face. A silent chuckle and he shook his head. He pointed to Erith again, to the blanket and book on the chair and spread his hands.

"Why am I here?"

Tiamman nodded.

"You were having a nightmare. You had them last night as well. I'd wake you and you'd just slip into another, so I stayed." He nodded toward the quilt and book. "Thought I'd get comfortable tonight."

Tiamman's eyes softened, warmed with the smile that bloomed upon his face. He reached out and squeezed Erith's hand gently. He pointed to his own chest and then to the chair, raising one eyebrow.

"What is it about you have to stay lying down that you don't understand?"

Another grin and Tiamman's eyes were well and truly twinkling now. He pointed to himself and then the bed and shook his head comically, then mimicked shoveling out the stables. First patting the bed, Tiamman then pointed to his temple and nodded, finally to his heart and shook his head.

Erith thought he understood what Tiamman was saying and it made him sad that Tiamman would be more comfortable in the stables than in a nice warm bed with a proper roof over his head. How had the boy lived before he'd been captured and taken as a slave? Erith kept forgetting that not everyone was born to the luxuries he took for granted.

And yet for all his possessions, he was alone.

Tiamman tilted his head, staring at Erith solemnly. He frowned dramatically, mimicking the sad look on Erith's face and raising his eyebrows. Then he slowly reached up and ran a single finger down Erith's cheek, a curious look on his face. Erith let his eyes close and leaned into the soft touch, finding solace in it. In a strange way Tiamman soothed the lonely places in his heart.

When he opened his eyes, Tiamman's blue ones were staring up at him and Erith was caught, trapped within the summer sky of them.

His eyes caught the movement of the tip of Tiamman's tongue flicking across his lips and Erith suddenly had to know for himself how Tiamman's lips might taste. Leaning down,

he gently touched their lips to each other.

Tiamman's eyes never left Erith's, wide and bright. His lips were soft, the scab where the skin had been split, odd and unusual. Erith could smell him, feel his breath brushing close. Tiamman didn't pull away, they just rested there, lips pressed together for a long moment, sharing breath and discovering the details of each other's eyes.

When Erith sat back, he heard something that made his heart swell.

"Oh."

"I don't know what it is, but I'm drawn to you." The soft words left Erith of his own volition, though as soon as they were released he wanted them back. He'd learned to never give anyone ammunition against your heart. Tiamman's eyes invited confidences that he's sworn he'd never share with another.

"M...my wit." It came out as a whisper, almost below the range of hearing.

To Erith it was a beautiful sound. His kiss had brought the ability to speak back to Tiamman, as if he were the prince in one of the enchanted fairy tales he'd grown up with.

"That must be it." His own voice was hoarse, though hardly from disuse.

He slid gentle fingers up and down Tiamman's throat, leaning forward again, for another kiss. This time Tiamman kissed him back, closed lips pressing against his, soft as well-worn silk, trembling slightly as his neck stretched to move into the touch.

Erith scarcely dared breathe, the gentle, almost chaste kiss, affecting him more than he cared to admit, more than anything sexual had in years, more than perhaps anything had. He pressed his lips closer for a moment, before pulling back with a gasp.

Tiamman's head fell back against the pillows, cheeks flushed. He looked more than a little dazed, blinking slowly, one hand stroking his own lips. Erith felt more than a little dazed himself and he stood, putting some space between himself and the boy, working to catch his breath.

This was madness; he was well-experienced in the mores of sex, jaded even, how could he be breathless and hard after such a simple kiss?

Perhaps it was the very innocence of it that had shaken him so.

At least he wasn't alone. The blue eyes on the bed were fastened onto him as if he might disappear into a puff of smoke. Erith basked beneath the look -- Tiamman wasn't admiring him, judging him. Tiamman was seeing him.

The silent moment grew, stretched, and then a clap of thunder, close and loud, startled them both, making Tiamman gasp and Erith jump.

Glad of the distraction, Erith went to the window and drew it open. A rush of rain flavored air poured into the room, the noise and fury of a storm beat against the house and Erith wondered how he could have missed the storm's approach.

Tiamman sighed happily, turning towards the air. The wind fluttered over him, blowing strands of raven hair wildly. Tiamman's eyes were closed, a small smile on his face. His skin looked almost dusky contrasted with the pale bandages.

The sight did nothing to abate the desire that ran through Erith and it suddenly occurred to him that what he needed to do was to just take the boy, lose himself in the porcelain body and get it out of his system. Then he could go back to normal.

With that thought in mind and the storm raging behind him, Erith strode back to the bed and bent to take Tiamman's mouth in another kiss, opening his mouth and pushing his

tongue against Tiamman's lips insistently.

Tiamman's eyes flew open, body stiffening as he pushed himself back against the pillows. Head shaking, unhappy noises trapped behind closed lips, Tiamman's hands scrabbled against the sheets, seeking purchase.

Erith pulled back just a bit, enough to murmur quietly. "Oh come on, Tiamman. You were into it a minute ago."

Tiamman shook his head firmly, hands coming up to push at Erith's shoulders.

Erith backed away with a snarl, frustrated.

He prowled around the room, waiting for his need to lessen, another half snarl leaving him when it proved stubborn, his body thrumming with lust for the boy who lay half-naked on the bed.

Tiamman was still and silent as the wind poured through the room, blowing the flame from the lamp. Erith blinked, waiting for his eyes to adjust. The lightning lit the room, making everything bright for a fraction of a second, before the room went dark again.

The storm touched something primal in him, some place where the airs and trappings of the lordling he was were stripped away and he was more drawn than ever to Tiamman. He moved back to the bed and sat next to the boy, one hand moving gently through the black hair, pushing it off Tiamman's face with tenderness.

"I want to kiss you again." He was appalled by the neediness in his voice, but he could no more have stopped it than he could command the storm to cease.

He could feel Tiamman trembling, could almost feel the unhappy confusion and distress pouring from those hooded eyes. The boy's fingers moved constantly, nervously.

Another clap of thunder and Tiamman's mouth opened in a gasp, body jerking beneath Erith's touch. He closed his eyes, his own need warring with Tiamman's fear.

With a groan he stood, not even stopping to pick up his quilt or his book, leaving the room before he did something they both would regret.

The memory of Tiamman's eyes -- first warm and dazed, then heavy with confusion and distress -- followed him like a shadow. Emotions that were echoed in his own heart, especially the confusion. A part of him wanted to go back and just take what he wanted, but mostly he wanted Tiamman to offer it, to come to him and give himself over to Erith's need.

It wasn't the itch of a game or the spark of curiosity, it was need, deep and impossible.

Erith sat, nursing that need with a cynical hand, sprawled in the middle of his empty bed. He watched the storm as it raged, wind mourning the loss of summer and heralding a cold winter.

A single tear slid down his cheek as he came; his seed felt as if it were burning him from the inside out.

Slumping to his mattress, almost drowning in his own swirling emotions, Erith was buoyed by the memory of Tiamman's voice, drawn from a well of silence by a soft kiss. All the horrors that Tiamman had seen, pain and humiliation and fear, and he'd stayed silent, saving his voice for his dreams. Until tonight.

Until they kissed.

Somehow the thought eased him.

Sated in body, if not in heart or soul, he curled up into a ball in the middle of his bed and let himself be drawn into sleep.

Chapter Seven

The storm had blown itself out by the time Erith awoke, leaving a cool, dismal day behind it. Grey and cloudy, the weather matched his mood and he ensconced himself in an overstuffed chair, heavy book in his lap, fire blazing before him.

The events of the night before crouched at the back of his brain, toadlike and grim. He resolutely ignored them, making plans to get out of the house for the evening. Almost a week, cooped up in his own house, nothing but a silent invalid for company. No wonder his brain was addled.

A night at the Inn, and a young, supple body looking to his pleasure would be just the cure. He watched the flames leap, remembering the flash of warmth in blue eyes.

Maybe two men.

He didn't look at the serving girl when she brought up a tray, just made sure to turn a few, unread pages before she returned.

He'd just finished his stew when a quiet knock came to his door.

"Come." He growled the word. The door opened and he began, without even checking to see that it was her. "Since when do you come back in less than an hour, I'm supposed to eat to your schedule now, too? You can tell Salea I'm in no better mood today and she can just keep her little power plays to herself."

Silence met his tirade.

Turning to snap about ill-mannered people who didn't have the sense to respond, Erith's words dissolve as he saw Tiamman, pale and a bit shaky, but dressed and upright, hair fastened in a clumsy braid. He was holding the book and folded blanket from the night

before.

His eyes were nervous as he took a few steps into the room and offered Erith the bundle.

"Daflin's blessed balls! Were you born with no sense?" Instead of taking the bundle from Tiamman, Erith slipped his arm around the boy's waist and let him to the settee in front of the fire. "What were you thinking walking about like that?"

Tiamman offered the blanket to Erith with a shrug, eyes fastened onto Erith's face. He pointed to his chest with a finger and then made a muscle as his lips moved soundlessly. "B...better."

Erith raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "You look like a gust of wind will blow you away, though I suppose that is an improvement."

He took the blanket from Tiamman and spread it over the boy, tucking it around the slender body. "I hope you let someone help you get dressed at least."

Tiamman frowned and shook his head, patting his chest in an unmistakable "I can do it" gesture. At Erith's lowering eyebrows, Tiamman quickly pointed to the half-full lunch tray and then at Erith, making eating motions.

"I was done, but if you're hungry..." Erith put the tray in Tiamman's lap without waiting for a reply. "Glad to see your appetite's returned."

Tiamman looked at him, shaking his head and chuckling. He looked like he was going to say something, but his lips stayed shut. Finally, he sighed, picked up a slice of bread, buttered it and held it to Erith's lips.

Erith frowned and moved away. "I said I was done."

He regretted snapping the moment the words were out, hurt inching into the blue eyes.

He sat down next to the boy with a sigh, rubbing at his eyes. "Surely you didn't come in here just to return my quilt?"

Tiamman placed the bread back on the tray carefully, his eyes fastened on the action. He nodded silently, giving an apologetic shrug. He whispered softly, the words broken and pained and almost lost in his chest. "Sorry to bother. Just... thank you."

With that Tiamman smiled sadly and scooted to the edge of the settee so he could stand, holding Erith's lunch tray in his hands.

Erith took the tray from him and put it back onto the small table. "You're here now, you might as well stay. I..." like your company, but it would hardly do to say that. Not when he didn't understand it and just the thought of it, let alone of Tiamman finding out, made him want to run from the room.

"I don't want you getting sicker again. I have servants who could have brought that over, or I could have done it myself when I missed them. Oh, would you like me to keep reading to you?" He almost blushed as he realized perhaps that was why Tiamman had brought the items himself.

Tiamman sighed and shook his head, face almost painful as he fought to communicate. "Worried. Missed you at lunch." By the time he'd pushed the words out, Tiamman was pale and shaking with nervous effort.

"Oh..." Erith sat slowly down on the settee, pleasure flooding through him at the words. His hands fluttered in his lap and finally he let them move to touch Tiamman as they so wanted, smoothing the blanket down over the boy's arms and pushing a lock of hair back off Tiamman's face.

Tiamman smiled, relaxing at the gentle touches. He leaned his cheek against the back of the settee, eyes soft and content. Slowly, Tiamman reached out and plucked a loose string from Erith's tunic, finger not even really touching, but a warmth blooming regardless.

It itched at Erith, the peace and comfort that Tiamman brought to him, took from him.

He really needed to let this go, Tiamman would be well enough to leave in a few weeks and now that the boy had his freedom, Erith had no doubt he would be leaving.

If he wasn't very careful Tiamman's departure could be devastating.

He went over to one of his bookshelves, putting distance between himself and the temptation that was Tiamman. "I could read to you now... I've another text here, similar to the one on the Juta but concentrating on the history of The Riddway."

Tiamman's eyes followed him as he moved, slowly taking in the details of the room. They widened as they landed on his guittara, with fine wood glowing in the light. He pointed to the harp and then to Erith, raising his eyebrows in a question.

"Do I play? Yes, I dabble a little. Would you like..."

Tiamman nodded enthusiastically, eyes sparkling.

Erith abandoned the bookcase for his guittara, sitting at the other end of the settee as he tuned the instrument. It had been a long time since he had played and he felt a little rusty, so he played a few simple tunes to begin with and then sang a tavern song. He only looked up from his harp once he'd finished the ditty, checking to see Tiamman's reaction.

Tiamman was sitting, eyes bright, completely enrapt. A pure, simple, hungry joy filled the air around him and he smiled at Erith as if a gift of immeasurable worth had been handed to him.

Erith found himself responding to that smile, returning it with a soft one of his own before going back to the guittara. He closed his eyes and let the music fill him, let it carry him away on wings of sound. He sang a few more complicated songs that spoke of heroes and fair maids, histories of the Clans folded into music and passed down from generation to generation.

He barely noted the passage of time as he began to sing songs of his own composition, songs he'd not shared with anyone before, but, with Tiamman's pleasure practically another note in the air between them, he wanted to open himself up to the boy. Finally, he ran out of tunes and he just played, picking bits of this tune or that out on the strings, occasionally accompanying the guittara with soft humming.

Tiamman was resting quietly, a happy, drowsy smile on his face and pleasure shining from his eyes. The bruises were finally fading, the swelling less and less noticeable and with a tunic on, he looked like he was where he belonged.

When Erith stopped, fingers aching, Tiamman reached out and grasped his hand. Tiamman tried to speak, lips opening, but nothing came out. Finally, he just smiled and pulled Erith's hand against his own chest, hugging it close in thanks.

"You're welcome." Erith flexed his fingers awkwardly, grimacing at the pain in them. "It's been awhile since I played."

Tiamman frowned, taking the hand he held and focusing on it. He began to rub, massaging out the kinks with a gentle touch, thumbs stroking the palm as he worked. "Beautiful."

Erith shrugged and then sighed happily as the ache in his fingers began to disappear beneath Tiamman's ministrations. "I guess it's not something you forget. Once I started the more complicated rhythms it all came back to me."

Tiamman frowned and looked up at him, a confused look on his face. Then he blinked and blushed wildly, nodding and reaching for Erith's other hand and beginning to rub.

Erith trailed the fingers of his free hand over the red cheeks, fingertips sliding along the hot flesh. "Beautiful." As he repeated Tiamman's word, it dawned on him the boy hadn't meant his playing but his hand. His heart began to beat faster.

Tiamman's face flushed even further, blue eyes flashing up at Erith. He smiled, stroking the hand he held in his own. Then Tiamman's cheek nuzzled against Erith's fingers, soft lips turning and giving them a gentle kiss.

Arousal hit Erith, his cock beginning to swell, and something else as well, something deep inside responded, making his blood sing and he felt faint from the intensity of it. "Tiamman..."

Another kiss, feather-light and warm, was Tiamman's response, this one brushing against the thin, blue-veined skin of Erith's inner wrist. He closed his eyes, breath huffing from him as if he'd been running, fingers curling around Tiamman's head, arm sliding against the sweet lips, begging another of the gentle kisses.

They continued, soft, dry caresses slowly working up his arm toward the crook of his elbow. Tiamman's breath brushed against his sensitive skin, making him shiver and sigh. He grasped Tiamman's hand, the one holding his so gently, and brought it to his mouth. He kissed Tiamman's palm, his mouth resting there as another shiver trembled through him when Tiamman's lips slid across the skin his breath had warmed.

Erith learned how sensitive his inner elbow was to the sweet, careful strokes of Tiamman's lips. They sent shivers through him, made him warm and hungry for more of the same. It was as if Tiamman was learning him, not attempting to arouse, just to communicate, to know.

Those simple touches were addictive.

Hardly even aware he was doing it, his mind completely absorbed in feeling every sensation Tiamman was bestowing, Erith took the pad of Tiamman's hand, just below the thumb, into his mouth, sucking rhythmically. A sigh, which could have been a needy moan, fell from Tiamman's lips and swirled over the pale skin of Erith's arm. Those sweet kisses traveled back down to Erith's fingers, each pad kissed softly, each knuckle caressed.

Finally, a kiss pressed to the center of Erith's palm, followed by the briefest flash of heat from a liquid-fire tongue. That made him moan, eyes flashing open to deep blue staring at him.

Tiamman smiled and nodded softly. "Beautiful."

Erith felt heat flood his cheeks and he realized suddenly that he still had Tiamman's hand pressed to his mouth. He pressed a last kiss to it and let it go, eyes dropping. Tiamman's sweet touches made him feel like a virgin, untried and chaste. He chuckled, wondering if the boy was perhaps a sorcerer or wizard, putting him in a spell. After all, he was hardly a virgin.

They sat -- Tiamman slowly tracing signs and patterns upon Erith's palm; Erith following the odd strands of hair that worked their way from Tiamman's braid, noting that they ranged in color from deepest blue-black to an almost warm shade.

They both jumped when the door from the guest room slammed shut and a young girl's voice shrieked down the hall, "We've lost the stableboy again! Master's gonna yell!"

Tiamman's eyes met Erith's, wide and surprised, mouth drawn into an "O". Then Tiamman began to laugh. The uproar building in the hall was put from his mind as he

was transfixed by the sound of Tiamman's laughter. Rich and deep, it made his belly feel strange, warm and tingly.

Tiamman squeezed Erith's hand, sharing the sweet amusement, drawing him into the bubbles of laughter and fascinating him, surrounding him. It was a balm, making him smile back, join in with his own chuckles.

He traced Tiamman's lips with his fingertips, circling the wide smile. Tiamman was quite lovely, but when he smiled... Erith's breath was stolen.

He found himself leaning forward, eyes beginning to drift shut as his lips neared Tiamman's. Tiamman moved toward Erith, eyes sparkling, smile still firm upon his face.

The knock came as the door was flying open, Salea standing there, eyes wide. "M'lord. Tiamman's disappeared and Havilland's gone to market and I can't find him and...Oh!"

Erith gave Tiamman a wry grin and then turned to Salea. "He's been here all afternoon and you pick this moment to come bursting in to tell me what I already know?"

"I... Well, we thought that... I didn't think he'd bother... I don't..." Salea stopped. "He was gone, sir. The bed all made and the room cleaned. I thought maybe bandits had come."

Tiamman's chuckle was offered up to Erith with a wink and a roll of the eyes, a secret shared. Silently he mouthed, "Bandits?"

Erith schooled his grin. "Bandits, Salea? That make beds and clean? Perhaps I should hire them to break in on a regular basis."

Tiamman's eyes were alight, practically glowing with amusement.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir." Cheeks flushing, she fastened a look onto Tiamman's back that

bordered on accusatory. "Shall I have the girl bring him a meal to the guestroom then or is he back down in the stables, since he's up and about and well enough to visit you in your chambers?"

The light in Tiamman's eyes dimmed and the happy smile faded as the embarrassed irritation and innuendo in the cook's tone hit home.

Anger filled him, taking up all the places the happy glow in Tiamman's eyes had touched. "I don't think you need to worry about that, Salea. I'll make sure your replacement knows where to have his tray brought."

Tiamman's eyes caught his, a curious blend of question, guilt and something close to grateful thanks lurking within them, even as Salea's angry wailing began across the room. "I've been here for years! There's no need! I just asked a question, my Lord! Don't turn me out!"

He was perfectly prepared to fire the woman, but Tiamman had shown her mercy in the past and he quirked his eyebrow at the boy, a question in his eyes.

That warmth bloomed again, Tiamman pinking under his regard. His eyes fastened onto Erith's face, Tiamman sighed softly and mouthed. "She makes good biscuits."

"Apologize to Tiamman and I'll give you one last chance."

"Ap...apologize to..." She blinked and firmed her lips. "I'm sorry, boy. You startled me, being out of bed and all."

Tiamman nodded to her, pleasant and polite, before turning back to look at Erith with stunned eyes.

Erith smiled at the boy and then turned his attention back to Salea. "You can have his

supper tray brought up here with mine. And Salea, if I hear a single titter or giggle, or any insinuation at all about Tiamman's presence in my room today I'll replace my entire staff, beginning with you."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry to disturb you." Salea backed out the door, scowl settling in before the door swung shut.

Tiamman was still looking at him as if he were either crazy or amazing or perhaps both, a smile lurking at the corners of that full, sweet mouth.

"What?" Erith asked a tad defensively. "She's been sassing me for long enough."

He raised his hand, touching the corner of Tiamman's lips, wanting the moment Salea had interrupted back. Tiamman smiled, ducking his head, hair falling forward onto his face. He reached up and pushed it back, wincing as his fingers caught a tangle. Tiamman rolled his eyes at Erith and untangled his fingers, grumbling beneath his breath.

"I could brush that out for you if you like. Doesn't look like it's been washed either, I'd be happy to have a bowl of hot water and some soap sent up..."

Tiamman shrugged and made cutting motions with his fingers and wrinkled his nose dramatically.

"Oh, no, you don't want to cut it. All it needs is a little taking care of and it'll be the envy of lords and paupers alike." He ran his hand over the messy braid, noting again how long the hair was, down past Tiamman's buttocks in the braid, it had to be closer to the lad's knees when undone.

"Please... I'd like to see what it looks like clean and brushed, not tied up in this ragged braid."

Tiamman blushed and nodded, eyes warm and pleased as he ducked his head.

"It's a nest." The words were still whispered, but there was a wee bit of strength behind them.

"Well I'd hate to put anyone out of a home."

That laugh came again, bright and happy, warmer than summer winds.

"Well, squirrels make racket at night." Blue eyes twinkled at him, full of mischief.

Erith chuckled, Tiamman's happiness spurring his own. "Well then I'll go ahead and ask them to bring up a couple of bowls of water and some -- unless you'd prefer a full bath?"

Tiamman looked at the window, pointing to the gloomy, cloudy sky and wrinkled his nose, rubbing his arms as if he were cold.

Erith was puzzled. "But there's a nice warm fire up here -- or in the guestroom if you'd prefer it. Nothing's nicer on a gloomy day than a good long soak in a nice warm tub."

Tiamman didn't look convinced, arching one eyebrow. Erith reminded himself that Tiamman's baths since he'd been here had consisted of stableboys throwing water at him and dunking his head in the rain barrel. Na'eb and his Holy Sister, the boy was wearing the clothes he'd been given when he arrived... months ago.

"Trust me." A very tentative knock sounded at the door and Erith strode over, opening it to reveal one of Salea's girls looking like she'd rather flee than be at the door.

"I want a tub delivered, the water should be quite hot and the special soap for my hair." He looked back at Tiamman, quickly making the assessment that one of his own outfits would do for the boy. "And if Salea's managed to make something sweet, I'd like a plate

of it sent up along with some milk."

He let the door close after the girl's deep curtsy and went over to his wardrobe, going through the clothes for something dark and rich to bring out Tiamman's coloring.

Tiamman sat, watching Erith with the expression he'd come to interpret as meaning 'I don't know what you're doing, but you're a noble and they're odd'. In the last week that look had accompanied eating raw oysters, having a manicure as he read to Tiamman, explaining the importance of rank with the Juta and insisting a stained shirt be thrown away or burned.

Erith was very used to it.

He pulled out several outfits, tossing them onto the bed, along with a number of plain white blouses. There was a velvet burgundy breeches and vest combination, several pairs of soft leather breeches the color of butter, a forest green formal combination and two pairs of black leggings that he couldn't wait to see hugging Tiamman's... assets.

While he was foraging for clothes, the tub arrived along with several servants carrying pails of hot water. They set the tub up by the fire, leaving the soaps and a pile of towels next to it along with a tray of sweet pies and a pitcher of milk.

Tiamman sat and blinked, watching the parade of servants and pails and things with a vaguely confused, mostly awed expression. When the door shut behind the last person, Tiamman looked at Erith and shook his head with a warm, affectionate grin.

Erith shrugged self-consciously. "I know I complain about them, but on the whole they're a good lot. The problem with Salea and Havilland is that they've been with me far too long. Familiarity breeds contempt. You aren't getting undressed. I can turn away if you're shy."

Erith turned and began fidgeting with the clothes on the bed. "You can just throw what

you're wearing in the fire."

Tiamman made an odd noise, struggling as he stood. When Erith turned Tiamman had made it to his feet and was frowning. He pointed to his shirt and then to the fire and shook his head.

"I've got a half dozen shirts here for you, you won't miss that rag, I assure you."

He moved over to Tiamman's side and began to help him with the rough homespun tunic as he realized Tiamman might have been able to make it across the hall under his own steam, but lifting his arms to take off the shirt was going to hurt.

Tiamman smiled gratefully, wincing as he tried to lift his arms. Together they got the tunic off, Erith wrinkling his nose at the feel of the old, scratchy fabric.

Then Tiamman pointed to the bandages at his ribs, cocked an eyebrow and turned to let Erith unfasten the knots.

Flinging the offending shirt into the fire, he quickly worked the knots out and carefully unbound Tiamman's ribs. The bruising was almost gone and it didn't look bad at all.

"How's it feeling?"

Tiamman stretched gingerly, stomach muscles rippling, nipples dusky and just begging to be tasted. Settling back, he nodded. "Better."

Tiamman's hands dropped to his waist, unfastening his breeches unselfconsciously. He slithered out of them, folding them neatly and setting them on an armchair. Then he pointed to the tub with a questioning look.

Erith tried not to stare at the long limbs and the flaccid cock in its nest of raven curls; Tiamman was beautiful and Erith felt himself reacting predictably. He cleared his throat.

"Go ahead and climb in."

While Tiamman was doing that he retrieved the neatly folded pants and tossed them into the fire. A disgruntled noise caught his attention. Tiamman was looking at him, pouting, one muscled leg bent and raised to step into the tub. "My pants!" The exclamation might have been impressive if Erith could have heard it.

Whether or not Tiamman had actually spoken aloud, Erith wouldn't have been able to say, his attention was riveted to the flow of muscles in Tiamman's body. His own breeches had become uncomfortably tight.

Tiamman shook his head, climbing into the tub. He settled into the tub with a low moan, eyes closing as the hot water surrounded his sore ribs. Erith watched the expression of bliss dance across Tiamman's features, shivering at the sounds of pleasure the boy made as he relaxed. He could readily imagine those sounds coming from Tiamman as Erith moved over him, buried inside the lithe body.

He dug his fingernails into his thighs, forcing himself back into the present. "Still not sure about bathing?"

Tiamman's eyes popped open and he flushed, hands coming up to scrub at his hot cheeks. Giving Erith a shy grin, Tiamman sank below the water for a second, wetting his head. He gathered his braid around so he could pull out the strands of hair that tied off his braid.

The boy was pure seduction, even if he didn't know it, and if Erith didn't get himself under control he was going to attack the boy where he sat "Need my help yet?"

Tiamman nodded absently, tongue caught between his teeth as he concentrated on picking out a thick knot. Crystalline drops of water gathered on his eyelashes and he kept blinking, trying to dislodge them.

Erith groaned, turning his back on Tiamman as he tried to adjust himself inside his pants. It was no use; he was just going to have to live with uncomfortable.

He picked up the soap as he moved toward Tiamman, resisting the urge to lick the drops from Tiamman's eyelashes. "Let me wash it -- the soap is soft and should help with the knots."

Tiamman smiled at Erith as he walked over, dropping the end of the braid into the water with a plop, chuckling as Erith jumped back.

Pointing over at Erith's tunic, Tiamman raised his eyebrows and winked. "Gonna ruin your blouse."

Erith felt his eyebrows climb into his hair. "You want me to take off my shirt?" The words all but squeaked from him.

Tiamman blushed, ducking his head and hiding his face. "No. Just need to be careful." Erith noted that Tiamman's blushes covered his shoulders, the flush reaching towards his back.

"Of course." He took the shirt off, trying not to move too quickly, to look too eager. He knew he was playing with fire, knew he might not be able to control himself. He didn't care. "There, now I won't get my shirt wet."

Tiamman's eyes burned from behind the veil of hair trailing over his skin. Erith noted the blush deepening, Tiamman's breath speeding and the boy shifting in the tub, ducking his head under again to rewet it. "I'm ready."

So am I Erith thought, the words on the tip of his tongue, but he kept them back along with the moan that was threatening.

Kneeling next to the tub, he trailed his hands in the water and then opened the vial of special soap and poured a good amount over Tiamman's head. He began to work it in, rubbing his fingertips against Tiamman's scalp. "Feels good, doesn't it? Having someone wash your hair..."

"Mmm..." Tiamman's eyes were closed, lips parted as he relaxed beneath Erith's touch.

Erith bit his lip to avoid whimpering.

Once he'd worked the soap into Tiamman's hair he let his hands move over the back of Tiamman's neck, massaging lightly before moving on to give the boy's shoulders the same treatment. Tiamman's skin was slick from the soap and warm, soft, sliding sensually beneath his fingers. Tiamman shifted, swallowing a groan. Erith caught a glimpse of a growing erection, flesh swelling and full.

The boy dropped his hands into the water, attempting to cover his groin without being too obvious. "Time to rinse?"

"Yes." The word whispered from him and he helped push Tiamman's head beneath the water, using his hands to help work the soap out.

Tiamman came back up spluttering, drawing Erith's attention to his lips and he leaned forward, no longer able to control himself. His lips pressed against Tiamman's, slow and sweet, tongue lapping at the water on Tiamman's lips.

Tiamman opened to him, the contact soft and so gentle. Responsive and sensual, Tiamman's tongue slid alongside his, tasting him with lazy hunger. A quiet moan crept between them, needy and low. Suddenly Erith was breathing Tiamman, tasting him, hands caught up in the damp hair at Tiamman's temples. Tiamman tasted like sunshine and light and nothing Erith had ever known before. It was like kissing was new,

reinvented between their lips and he didn't want to stop, didn't ever want to stop feeling like this.

Tiamman's hands slid around Erith's waist, warm and wet, and settled at the small of his back. A purr sounded as those fingers stroked and caressed, the noise rumbling deep within Tiamman's throat. Erith whimpered into Tiamman's mouth, his hips pressing against the edge of the tub, rubbing himself against the steel, wanting it to be hot and pliant, wanting it to be Tiamman.

Tiamman deepened the kiss, moaning. His hands traveled up Erith's back, pulling him close, their naked torsos meeting in a heated touch. Tiamman gasped as their skin brushed together, the sound almost a cry, eyes flashing open. He pulled away, breathing hard, sinking into the water.

Chapter Eight

"Oh..."

Erith moaned, the sound part frustration, part arousal, all need. He closed his eyes against the temptation of Tiamman; the boy's mouth, his shoulders, the nipples and chest and groin and erection all hidden beneath the water, soap obscuring and then revealing as it drifted in the water.

Soft, wet fingers traced his cheeks, his jaw, his eyebrows. "Beautiful." A kiss, light as air, feathered against Erith's lips and then Tiamman leaned over for a towel.

Erith moaned again as Tiamman's body brushed briefly against him, eyes flying open to watch as Tiamman stood. His breath caught as he got a fleeting glimpse of wet flesh, the gleaming erection, muscles shining in the firelight. Still on his knees, he reached up toward Tiamman, feeling like a suppliant, begging for a single touch. Tiamman reached out in answer, sliding his hand into Erith's, encouraging him to stand. His eyes were blazing, afire with a shy hunger.

Erith took the towel from his other hand and began to pat at his hair, eyes never leaving Tiamman's, knowing his own hunger showed in his eyes as much as, or even more, than Tiamman's did. Still dabbing at Tiamman's hair with the towel, he bent forward, licking a drop of water from Tiamman's collarbone. A whimper fell from Tiamman's lips; Erith could see those nipples tighten, could smell Tiamman's arousal. Tiamman's hands came up, clutching Erith's shoulders as he leaned closer.

He let the towel drop, his hands sliding down Tiamman's back to wrap around his hips. Lowering his head, Erith took one of those pink points of flesh into his mouth, tugging gently on Tiamman's nipple, holding it between his lips.

Tiamman arched into the touch, moaning. "Oh... E...Erith."

The sound of his name, his name, whispered for the first time into the warm room on the tail end of a hungry cry, was delicious, arousing. His cock ached, confined within his breeches. He wanted to do nothing so much as pick Tiamman up and throw him on the bed, make hot passionate love to him.

But there was Tiamman's ribs, and Tiamman's background and ... he looked up into eyes like the sky. "Make love with me?"

Another of those unbelievable smiles and Tiamman stepped out of the tub and moved into Erith's arms. "Yes. Please."

Erith blinked, somewhat surprised at Tiamman's agreement. He waited for the disappointment to come, for the arousal to leech away now that it was no longer a challenge.

It didn't.

If anything, his arousal became stronger, his body demanding Tiamman. He brought their lips together, closing his eyes as Tiamman's tongue slid between his open lips. Tiamman kissed him thoroughly, with a slowly building hunger, tasting him, feeding him with joy-filled passion. So intent, so focused -- Tiamman's attention was fascinating, made him feel beautiful, almost liquid with desire.

He tugged gently, pulling Tiamman along as he began to walk slowly backward, moving them toward the bed. One of Tiamman's hands traced along Erith's belly as they moved. Clever fingers caressed, circling the indentation of his navel, dipping into the waistband of his breeches. The touch sent lightning sparks through him, bright and fierce. He gasped and then moaned, hips pushing into Tiamman, frustrated by the material that separated him from the hot, hard length he could feel pushed up against him.

The bottom of the bed hit the back of his knees, startling him, and he sat down heavily.

Tiamman followed him down, as if being separated from Erith's lips was too much to bear. The kisses slowly became deeper, longer, hungrier. Tiamman's tongue traced Erith's lips before slipping inside as Tiamman settled beside him, naked torso pressing hot and still damp against his side.

Erith slid his hands around to Tiamman's back, running his fingertips along the vertebrae of the boy's spine. His other hand slid to Tiamman's hip and curled around it, holding on as his wits were swept away beneath Tiamman's hunger. One of Tiamman's hands began to stroke over Erith's stomach, tracing the muscles, stroking Erith's skin with gentle fingertips. Every inch of skin was caressed, petted, loved as the drugging kisses continued to steal Erith's sense.

Tiamman's fingers stopped at the laces of his breeches and the kisses gentled, then stopped. They slid along the swell of his erection once and then Tiamman brushed soft kisses along Erith's jaw before whispering, "Can I?"

Erith managed to find enough language to answer in the affirmative. "Please. Yes."

He carded his hands through Tiamman's hair, the outer strands were already dry and felt like silk between his fingers. He continued to brush through the damp strands, fingers twisting and slowing, losing their purpose as Tiamman worked at his breeches.

The first brush of fingertips against his cock made him gasp and Tiamman smiled softly against his cheek, hips nestling into Erith in response. Carefully, Tiamman pushed Erith's breeches down, over the swell of his hips.

Then Tiamman gentled him back onto the mattress, moving to pull the breeches off, baring Erith to Tiamman's hungry eyes. A happy murmur sounded and a soft kiss was

pressed against the hollow of his hip. Then Tiamman gingerly stretched out beside him, fingers returned to their exploration of his body.

He was used to being admired, lords and ladies alike wanting him, but they all wanted something from him. With Tiamman it felt like he was being explored for his own sake, not because he was good in bed or kinky.

Usually, he never quite lost focus of what his job was in bed, his need to give pleasure even as he took it, but now, while he tried to reciprocate, Tiamman was slowly driving him into an incoherent and mindless mass of nerves. His hands moved over Tiamman's skin without skill, without thought, as Tiamman explored every part of him.

Those kisses began again, a counterpoint to the flow of fingers dancing over his body, driving him to distraction. Tiamman's lips moved over his face, tracing his cheekbones, his eyebrows, his temples. The hollow beneath his ear had a soft kiss pressed to it as Tiamman explored the skin of his inner thighs. A sensitive spot underneath his chin was nuzzled and laved as a warm hand cupped his sacs, stroking the skin. The pulsing vein in his neck was discovered as long, steady strokes on his erection made him squirm.

He'd felt pleasure before, he loved sex, but this... Tiamman's focus was complete and it left him breathless and aching, his body writhing beneath each touch, reaching for more. There was no play for dominance, no game, Tiamman was just... loving him.

It scared him almost as much as it pleased him..

Tiamman's pleasure was palpable, adding to his own joy. Erith was turned, brought to face Tiamman, their lips joining again and again as Tiamman snuggled in closer, brought their bodies together fully. It felt so right, so close to perfection -- Tiamman's arm about his waist, Tiamman's tongue tasting him, Tiamman's hot cock sliding alongside his own.

He gave himself over to it, moving against Tiamman, thrusting his hips, pulling Tiamman

closer as the friction between them increased. He could hear soft whimpering sounds of joy, was only half aware they came from his own throat.

Tiamman's kisses became sloppy, blue eyes watching Erith in passion-drugged fascination. Erith could see -- feel -- Tiamman's climax as it rushed forward, lighting his face with pleasure and ecstasy. Warmth bloomed over Erith's stomach and cock, proof of Tiamman's pleasure, though he needed none, the joy on Tiamman's face proof enough.

He bit his lip, refusing to miss a moment of Tiamman's climax.

"Mm..." A soft, satisfied noise fell from Tiamman's lips and he smiled at Erith, a warm, knowing, sated grin that seemed to pull Erith in, hold him as close as the arm draped around him.

"Beautiful." Then Tiamman leaned forward to take Erith's mouth again.

Erith groaned, body arching up to meet Tiamman's, his own climax barreling down on him once more. A hot hand swept over Erith's buttock, then settled there, encouraging his thrusts, his pleasure.

His body tingled wherever Tiamman touched him, his mouth was on fire, his groin ready to explode and then he did explode, everything disappearing but the ecstasy of his orgasm. It rushed through him, gathering in his cock and spilling from him. He cried out into Tiamman's mouth, reduced to pure sensation.

Tiamman's fingers were soft in his hair when he floated down from the heights of pleasure, drowsy blue eyes watching him, smiling at him. The air smelled of soap and sex, Tiamman's body was warm and pliant beside him. Tiamman leaned forward and pressed a gentle, soft kiss to his forehead.

Erith murmured happily and stretched, all the frustration and annoyance of the last few

weeks having been leeches from his body, leaving him feeling good all over. He turned his head, sucking gently at the closest patch of warm skin he could find, which turned out to be Tiamman's shoulder. Another of those rumbling purrs sounded in Tiamman's chest and Erith smiled as those long fingers stuttered briefly as they moved through his hair.

He stopped sucking long enough to murmur quietly, "You feel good."

Tiamman's hand stroked down Erith's spine and over his hip, petting him. "So good. Thank you."

A kiss dropped on his cheekbone and Erith could hear Tiamman's inhalation, feel Tiamman breathing him in. He felt again that scared pleasure of being the center of Tiamman's focus. This time his wits were about him and he began to worry at it, at what had happened, how he'd lost control, lost himself inside Tiamman.

Tiamman sighed softly, the sound oddly evocative, fingers moving in random patterns over Erith's hip. Another soft kiss brushed against Erith's cheek.

The soft knock on the door made them both jump.

"Na'eb and his Holy Sister, their timing just keeps getting better and better."

Erith got up and flipped the covers over Tiamman, pulling his robe on as he went to the door. He flung it open.

"What?"

One of Salea's girls curtsied awkwardly, weighed down by a large tray with plates and cutlery and glasses. Behind her was another girl, this one laden with bowls of steaming food. "Your supper, my lord."

"Just set it on the table and go. I'll leave the trays in the hall when I'm finished." His voice sounded as upset as he felt and the serving girls sped through their tasks, tight-lipped and quiet. The door shut behind the girls with a bang, leaving them alone again.

Tiamman stood from the bed, hair falling around his naked body in a gleaming mass, eyes looking over at Erith intently, posture unsure and nervous. Lust surged through Erith again, and with it came need. He didn't just want Tiamman's body, it felt as if he needed it, needed to be buried inside the boy, to be taken by him. Even the few affairs he'd had for love had never had this tinge of desperation to them.

"If you're hungry you'd better get dressed, or I'm going to have you for dinner." He barely recognized his own voice, husky and edged with the same desperation he felt.

Those blue eyes widened, warmed and Tiamman graced him with another sweet, burning smile. Tiamman moved across the room, naked and graceful, imperfection of skin hidden by the sway of hair. He shrugged once and pointed to the fire. "No clothes."

Erith nodded back at the bed, eyes never leaving the temptation of Tiamman's body.

"They'll be a bit wrinkled, we were lying on them."

As soon as Tiamman was close enough, Erith grabbed his hand and pulled him closer, aligning their bodies as he began to nibble on Tiamman's lips. He firmly ignored the small voice panicking at the back of his head, concentrating instead on his own body, on how good it felt to be holding Tiamman, kissing him, touching him.

"Mm...then they'll smell like you." Tiamman pressed himself close, frowning when the fabric of Erith's robe interfered with their embrace. His hands fell to the belt, untying it quickly.

Their skin met again, heat against heat, and they moaned simultaneously, a sweet harmony built of need. Erith slid his hands down Tiamman's back, grabbing his buttocks

and pulling their groins tightly together.

"Want you so much it scares me." It was a moment before he realized what he'd said but when his own words penetrated his passion-fogged brain, he froze.

Tiamman raised his hand, brushed the hair from Erith's face, a look of concern in his eyes. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." He pushed forward, taking Tiamman's mouth, burying himself inside it like he wanted to bury his cock in Tiamman's body, letting the tide of need carry away his fears.

Tiamman took a step backwards, putting a bit of space between their bodies. His hand still rested against Erith's neck, quiet and warm. He frowned, looking at Erith in confusion. Erith noted the Tiamman seemed almost like a stag, having caught the scent of bowmen in the autumn wind.

He laughed, though there was little humor in the sound; Tiamman wouldn't let him run away from himself. The boy hardly knew him and yet... it was as if all his secrets were exposed.

"I need you." He held out his hand, fine tremors going through it. "I need you so badly I'm shaking from it." He crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes dropping closed as he shook his head, trying to deny it. He didn't need anyone.

Tiamman's arms were strong as they wrapped around his shoulders, drew him close to Tiamman's naked body. Tiamman stood there and held him, not asking or taking anything, simply feeding Erith's need for contact.

Then Tiamman leaned in and kissed him again, letting the passion build, meeting Erith's need with his own quiet desire. The rightness of Tiamman's touch almost sent him scrambling away, out into the streets and the Inn and some anonymous lover's warmth,

but Tiamman's touches, Tiamman's arms around him, Tiamman's mouth against him, Tiamman's tongue inside him, they calmed him, soothed him, made him pliant and eager.

He told himself that as long as he didn't forget that it wouldn't last, he'd be fine when Tiamman left or the passion wore off, leaving the feeling of belonging and rightness crushed into dust. It was silly to be so taken in the first place.

Tiamman leaned back, fingers stroking against the nape of Erith's neck. Bright blue eyes gleamed in the firelight, Erith could smell the soap mixed with Tiamman's musk. Tiamman's hand trailed down Erith's arm to his hand and entwined their fingers.

The whisper was soft against Erith's cheek, almost a kiss. "Food or bed?"

"What's food?" Erith asked, only half teasing. He was still trembling at odd moments, feeling utterly overwhelmed by Tiamman's slow, easy seduction, by the way the boy seemed to fit so easily into him.

Tiamman chuckled, leaning in to nibble at Erith's neck. The laugh turned into a soft moan as Tiamman's tongue met Erith's skin. Tiamman trembled, shivered in his arms and then stepped back, putting some room between them. Hungry, dazed eyes stared at Erith, the mixture of gentle confusion and burning desire intoxicating.

Erith reached out and gently slid his hand along Tiamman's ribs, palm gliding over the boy's skin. "How are you feeling?" He hoped the words didn't come out sounding more like "Are you up to fucking me," even if that was how he meant them.

Tiamman hissed at the touch, pushing into Erith's hand. "Mmm. Good."

Still stiff and bruised, Tiamman's body responded beautifully to his touch, drawn towards his hands, full of hunger. Erith continued to stroke the soft, warm skin, bringing their mouths back together again for another sip of Tiamman's flavor. "Penelopa will tan my

hide if you're re-injured."

"Then we'll have to be very careful." Tiamman stole another kiss, his voice raspy and weak, but still more than a whisper, more than just one word. "Your hide is too precious to risk."

"Oh..." How could such simple, plain words leave him more undone than the poetry and purple prose written for him by far more sophisticated suitors?

Tiamman's lips trailed over his face, learning the textures of his skin, smiling and soft on his cheeks and chin. One hand tangled in his hair, Tiamman rubbed the ruddy strands in his fingers. "Soft."

Erith chuckled lightly. "I wash it more than once a year."

Leaning back, Tiamman stuck out his tongue and wrinkled his nose at Erith, eyes twinkling.

"Don't stick that out unless you intend to use it," warned Erith just before leaning forward and sucking on Tiamman's tongue.

Tiamman gasped, moving in close, fingers hard and hot against Erith's scalp. The heat between them suddenly doubled, tripled as their skin touched. Erith slid his hands down along Tiamman's back, stopping when he reached the boy's buttocks, pulling Tiamman tightly to him, even as he continued to make every effort to swallow Tiamman's mouth whole.

Tiamman opened to him, lips and teeth and tongue welcoming him, needing him, meeting his hunger with a fierce, unafraid passion. Strong, callused hands slid to his shoulders, gripping fiercely as their hips began to rock together, setting a strong rhythm.

Erith was hard and aching, body craving the body in his arms. The more he tasted, the more he wanted. He pressed them closer together. A needy sob fell into Erith's mouth, Tiamman shivered in his arms, buttocks clenching and releasing beneath his hands as Tiamman moved.

Erith walked Tiamman back to the bed without releasing him, only stopping when they were beside the mattress with its pile of clothes and mussed blankets.

He circled Tiamman's erection, feeling the hot hardness of it. "I want you inside me."

Tiamman pushed into the touch automatically, groaning low and raw. Obviously gathering his control, he looked at Erith, eyes concerned and questioning. "You're sure?"

He stroked Tiamman several times, long slow pulls of the cock in his hand. Tiamman responded beautifully, body moving with natural grace and sensuality. "I'm sure."

"Oh..." Tiamman closed his eyes and arched, hands reaching for Erith as if steel drawn by a magnet. He wrapped Erith in his arms and drew him down onto the bed.

The covers were cool against his skin, colder still in contrast to Tiamman's skin and Erith found himself pressing closer to Tiamman's heat. Tiamman's hands roamed over his body, pulling him in tight, sliding over his ass. Sharp, nipping kisses burned along all the skin Tiamman's mouth could reach.

Finally, Tiamman's lips settled at Erith's nipples, teasing and tasting for a long moment before blue eyes blazed at him and Tiamman mouthed, "Oil?"

Erith's brows drew together. "The closest is in the large guestroom next to yours..." At Tiamman's surprise, Erith shrugged. "This is my sanctuary, I don't keep lovers here." His own eyes widened as he realized what he'd just said and how he'd violated his own policy with Tiamman, but he couldn't imagine not wanting the boy in here with him.

Tiamman pushed away from Erith, dragging his lips along Erith's skin as he moved off the bed. Standing, erect and lovely, Tiamman reached for a pair of leggings at the top of the pile of clothing. "Two rooms down?"

He nodded. "In the top drawer of the dresser by the bed." Suddenly remembering what else could be found in those drawers, he cleared his throat and pushed himself up. "I can get it."

Erith shifted up as Tiamman leaned down, knocking Tiamman off balance. Tiamman landed against the mattress, head near Erith's hip, bouncing slightly. They both stilled, Tiamman's hair falling around him, over him.

Erith heard Tiamman take a deep breath, saw the muscled buttocks clench and then Tiamman moved, snake-quick, and dropped his lips over the tip of Erith's erection, sucking strongly. He moaned, hands fisting full of the sheets in order not to thrust up into Tiamman's hot mouth. Long strands of hair tickled against his skin like a thousand tiny fingertips stroking him.

He wanted to slide his fingers through Tiamman's hair, hold the boy's head down and thrust up into velvet heat until he came, instead he dug his heels into the bed and forced himself to lie still, hips twitching beneath Tiamman's mouth. Strong hands circled him, pulling him close as those sweet-hot lips consumed his cock. Tiamman hummed, the sound vibrating through Erith's body, settling in his stomach like a flame.

There was a keening noise circling the room, filling his ears, and he realized it was coming from himself. The sound got higher as the pressure of Tiamman's mouth built his pleasure and then he was screaming as he came, body jerking and trembling as his seed spilled into Tiamman's mouth.

The soft heat of Tiamman's mouth continued to suck at him, a gentle humming

accompanying the careful touches of tongue as he floated back from bliss. Strong arms circled his hip as Tiamman cleaned him, warm face nuzzling into his skin and sighing happily.

Erith carefully opened his fists, letting go of the covers. He reached for Tiamman, running his fingers through the long hair with a sated murmur.

Tiamman pushed into the touches, looking up at Erith with a smile, eyes warm and happy. "Taste good."

"I didn't realize you were so hungry -- we could have had supper you know." Erith smiled down at Tiamman, body feeling boneless, at ease. "Come up here, I'm hungry, too."

Tiamman chuckled, slithering up Erith's side until they were face to face. Erith could feel Tiamman's erection, hard and hot as he snuggled close. "Like your smile."

"Oh yeah?" he asked, unable to keep from smiling again. He brought his lips to Tiamman's, pushing his tongue into the hot mouth, eager to find out how their tastes mingled.

Oh, sweet Na'eb and his Holy Sister, he could taste his own seed, salt and bittersweet mingling with the dark, honeyed mead taste of Tiamman's mouth. Addictive, that taste, with Tiamman moaning softly and sliding that talented tongue up to meet Erith.

"Want you, Tiamman."

"Yes." Tiamman was trembling beside him, eyes dark with need. Erith found a desire that answered his in Tiamman's face, wild and desperate and hungry. "Please."

He wrapped his hand around Tiamman's shaft, pulling twice before letting go.

"Oil..." the word was rather distracted.

Tiamman blinked slowly and then laughed, the sound bouncing off the walls, filling the room with joy. He nuzzled Erith's jaw with hot lips, still chuckling against Erith's skin.

"Haven't we had this talk already?"

"You... distracted me."

"You are pure temptation."

"Me?" He batted his eyes. "All I'm doing is lying here..."

Tiamman's mouth dropped open and then he caught his own bottom lip between his teeth and narrowed his eyes. That was all the warning Erith got before he found himself flat against the mattress -- hard, eager Tiamman straddling his hips, fingers tickling his ribs.

He laughed, trying to buck Tiamman off, but the clever fingers kept tickling at him, distracting him, keeping him from trying very hard. Then their mouths met again in a hard, deep kiss, tongues dueling as they tried to swallow each other down and Erith was hard again, body straining eagerly toward Tiamman.

"Please," he begged, "in me."

Blue met green and Tiamman nodded, sliding down Erith's body again. Tiamman's tongue moved over his stomach and then played against his cock for a moment. At Erith's moan of complaint, Tiamman shushed him, pushing his legs up and open with stroking hands.

A soft kiss brushed across the skin of his balls and then that wicked tongue slid into his cleft, wet and hot. He whimpered, his hands diving into Tiamman's hair, tangling in the long strands. It felt so good, felt like nothing had in so, so long. Wet heat laved his

entrance, softer than silk, setting him aflame. With each swipe of tongue, the pressure became more firm, more insistent before backing off again.

When Erith no longer thought he could bear the waiting, Tiamman's tongue finally pressed inside him -- inside him -- and began fucking him slowly and gently. Pleasure shot through him, building pressure inside him, bubbling beneath his skin. He tossed his head from side to side, pushing his hips up into Tiamman, wanting, needing more.

Suddenly the heat was gone, replaced by a thick, blunt pressure against him, the involuntary movements of Tiamman's hips causing a series of shudders. Erith looked up into Tiamman's face, watched as he struggled for control.

"You're sure?"

"Na'eb and his Holy Sister, yes." He moved his hips again, trying to push himself onto Tiamman's cock.

Tiamman ran a hot hand down Erith's stomach and then grasped his hips as they moved together, Tiamman sliding inside him, stretching him, filling him. "Oh...Erith."

He moaned and then panted, trying to catch his breath, but he was lost in the sensation of Tiamman filling him, hot and hard, solid. He felt like he didn't need anything but this, his lungs could stop bringing in breath, his heart could stop beating, it would matter not as long as Tiamman was inside him.

Tiamman moaned once, low and long and almost pained. Then he began to move in slow, steady thrusts, pulling out until only the tip of his cock was held inside Erith's body, then pushing back in until they were fully joined.

Sweat made Tiamman glisten in the firelight, muscles working beneath golden skin as he made love to Erith. The long hair fell on Erith's chest, shoulders, a cool, silken weight,

moving in counterpoint to Tiamman's hips. It slid across his nipples, making him jerk, shifting him just enough that Tiamman's next thrust sparked brightly. He wailed, hands flailing in the air as he tumbled through the pleasure, lost in it.

Again and again, Tiamman's cock slid within him, sending showers of sparks, building the tension until they were moving together blindly, hips slapping together. Tiamman cried out, sobbing his name as warmth filled him, hips still moving, seeking to prolong the pleasure. It triggered his own climax and he came, his hands finding Tiamman's arms and gripping them tightly as the pleasure slammed from his body with almost painful intensity.

When the world righted itself, Erith found Tiamman still perched above on trembling arms, fighting to catch his breath, gasping as his body protested its sudden return to physical activity. Sliding his arms up along Tiamman's body, Erith helped the slender body back down next to him on the bed, stroking soothing fingers over the abused ribs.

"Are you all right?" he asked, cursing himself for all kinds of a fool.

Tiamman nodded and smiled. "Just a little boneless."

"Just a little boneless?" Erith grinned happily. "I, on the other hand, may never walk again."

"Guess we'll have to stay abed." Tiamman winked over at him. Erith was beginning to hear the promise of a real voice in Tiamman's words, something deeper and richer than the raspy whispers.

"I can think of worse fates."

Erith's stomach rumbled loudly as he finished speaking and Tiamman chuckled. "Mm... like starving the lord of the house. Want some food?"

"Not badly enough to go get it." He leaned over and kissed Tiamman softly. "I just want to hold you," he admitted, a little shocked at his own words, at how true they were.

At that, Tiamman moved even closer, laying his head on Erith's shoulder with a contented sigh, eyelashes brushing Erith's skin. "I was hoping you would."

Erith reached for the blankets that they'd managed to somehow bunch in a group at the bottom of the bed, pulling them up over their bodies. He could feel sleep pulling at him, demanding he slip into its embrace.

Tiamman's leg moved to rest atop his thighs, one of Tiamman's hands curled upon his stomach, Tiamman's breath, sleep-slow and steady, moved across his throat. Erith could hear Tiamman's heart, beating in an odd syncopation with his own.

Comfortable, warm and sated, they dreamed.

Chapter Nine

It was hunger that woke him, stomach protesting loudly in the early morning sunlight. Well, that and a warm, happy chuckle filtering in from across the room.

Erith cracked his eyes, Tiamman had his back turned, hair pulled back in another messy braid, one of the pairs of black breeches thrown on. Erith bit back a moan as Tiamman bent to retrieve something from the floor, placing it in a neat pile.

Erith shook his head -- Tiamman was cleaning up, gathering towels and trays, pottering about with a peaceful look on his face, moving naturally about the room and setting it to rights.

His stomach rumbled again and Tiamman looked over at him with a fond, open smile. Erith wasn't even sure if Tiamman knew he was awake or not.

It was as if Tiamman belonged here, not just in this house, but in this room, in Erith's room, as a part of his life. His body responded automatically to the sight of Tiamman half dressed, he would swear he could smell him from here, he certainly still had Tiamman's taste in his mouth.

He'd broken his own rules, had let Tiamman invade his rooms. It felt good.

Perhaps too good; he knew instinctively that Tiamman could hurt him deeply and he shrank away from that possibility. Maybe it was time for Tiamman to return to his stables.

Tiamman moved over to the bed, standing silent for a long moment. Then he reached out and stroked a russet, tangled piece of Erith's hair lying on the pillow. Erith could definitely smell Tiamman's musk now and he felt his body tighten in response. The

stables could wait.

He let his eyes drift open the rest of the way and reached out to touch. Tiamman jumped slightly as Erith moved and then his smile widened, body moving immediately into range of the outstretched hand. Tiamman's skin was cool, muscles jumping beneath Erith's touch. "Morning."

"Morning." Erith stretched and then let his hand wander along Tiamman's stomach. "You're cold, you should come back under the blankets where it's warm."

Tiamman chuckled and nodded, sliding gracefully in next to Erith and curling up beside him. "Mm... warm."

A callused hand slipped over Erith's waist as Tiamman burrowed closer, holding and caressing his sleep-warm skin. Erith shivered as cold skin slid against him, but it was cozy in the nest of covers and Tiamman was soon warm.

"How're your ribs?"

"Tender." The whispered word tickled against his neck.

Arousal warred with his sympathies and when he finally spoke, the words were huskier than his sleep-soaked "morning" had been. "I'm sorry, we probably shouldn't have... yesterday, I mean."

"Was so good. Worth it." Tiamman's lips began searching out bundles of nerves hidden along Erith's neck, kissing and sucking gently as he found places that made Erith moan and shift.

He thought he should probably protest, insist that Tiamman take it easy and give his ribs a break, but Tiamman's tongue was like magic and he found himself tilting his head,

giving Tiamman better access instead.

Tiamman's touches were soft and gentle, kisses falling upon him like spring rain upon a meadow. Tiamman was focused, learning Erith's skin, tasting him quietly. "So sweet."

He could get used to this, to being touched with a kind of almost reverence. He gasped as Tiamman's tongue searched out a particularly sensitive area of skin at the bottom of his neck. He didn't want Tiamman to ever stop touching him.

Wrapped in a cocoon of blankets and Tiamman's sweet caresses, Erith floated on passion, warm and comfortable, arousal ever-present, but not insistent. When Tiamman's lips covered his, it was simply an extension of the web of desire they had woven together. He opened his mouth almost lazily, Tiamman's tongue slipping in and exploring gently. His own tongue followed the other out and back into Tiamman's mouth, letting him make a careful exploration of his own.

So good, Tiamman tasted sweet upon his tongue, opening to him so willingly, moaning softly as Erith learned him. His own answering moan was a prayer to all the gods in the heavens, a wish, a plea that he could wake up this way every morning. If he had this gentle, softly arousing exploration to look forward to every morning, he would gladly meet each one.

The kisses melted, one into the other, Tiamman's hands in his hair, legs entwined, bodies snuggled close. Tiamman's eyes were open as they drank from each other, looking at Erith closely.

When their lips parted, Tiamman whispered, "You have storms brewing in the seas of your eyes."

Erith did something he couldn't remember ever doing before. He blushed. Tiamman smiled and took his lips again, knocking away the self-consciousness and replacing it

with desire. Arousal surged through him, need hardening his cock and then climbing up his body like a wild animal, growling into Tiamman's mouth.

The leg draped over Erith curled, pulling him in until their hips met, cocks sliding together. Tiamman gasped, shuddering. "Want you. So much..." It felt comforting, the edge of desperation in Tiamman's voice, letting Erith know he was not alone in his need.

His hands moved to grasp Tiamman's buttocks, pulling him closer still. "How do you want me?"

"How will you have me?" Tiamman's eyes were hot, hungry. "I ache for you."

He knew exactly what he wanted, felt the need for it burning through him, but with Tiamman injured... It would be so easy to forget himself, to forget everything but the feeling of their bodies moving together. "I want to take you, but I don't want to hurt you."

Tiamman reached up and stroked Erith's face, the touch shatteringly tender. "Won't hurt me. I need you. Please."

Erith closed his eyes, tried to fight the feelings that surged through him with that touch, feelings that surged through him and sank their hooks into him, but he was lost inside that gentle touch and two eyes blue as a summer sky. "Ride me."

"Yes." Tiamman bent in for a hard, quick kiss before whispering. "At some point, we should really go fetch that oil."

"Now's a good time -- I won't risk hurting you."

"Two doors down, top drawer, right?"

Erith nodded, lying back in an elegant sprawl, arms stretched out over his head. The day

before he'd been hesitant to send Tiamman to find the oil, worried about what the boy might think of the other things in the drawers of that room, but now he was more curious than worried about what Tiamman's reactions might be.

Tiamman got up, smoothed his hair, and pulled on a tunic before hurrying to the door, closing it behind him quietly. In a few moments, the door opened and closed again, Tiamman's cheeks flushed dark as he entered the room. His eyes were twinkling and he held the pot of oil in his hands. He handed the oil to Erith with a grin, hands going to remove his clothes. "Interesting drawer."

"See anything you liked?" Erith asked casually, wrapping his palms around the pot, warming it.

The blush deepened. "I saw things I couldn't even figure out how to use."

Bright eyes flashed at him as he slipped back into the bed. "You'll have to explain. Later. Want you now. Just you."

"Later," he agreed, bringing their mouths back together. The touch of Tiamman's lips set him ablaze once more and he opened the pot of oil, dipping his fingers into it, coating them with the thick liquid before trailing them down along the center of Tiamman's breastbone, dipping into his navel as he passed it, heading straight for Tiamman's erection. Tiamman sobbed into Erith's mouth as the touch reached his cock, the sound wild and needy. Tiamman arched, moving beneath Erith's fingers as if dancing, alight with desire.

Erith coated the fingers of his other hand as well and had them join the first ones playing against Tiamman's body. He circled the hot length of Tiamman's cock with one hand, the oil making his lazy strokes slick and easy. His other hand wandered behind Tiamman's sacs, tickling along the tender flesh to the puckered skin around Tiamman's opening. All of Tiamman's skin was so hot, but here it was burning and the flesh was so soft.

Tiamman's legs spread wider, body moving into Erith's fingers with a sigh. So responsive, so sensual, so unafraid and hungry -- Tiamman's body begged for sensation and pleasure. He slid two fingers into Tiamman with a single deep stroke into the most wonderfully hot and tight softness. Tiamman's body seemed to swallow him, greedy and demanding.

"Oh..." Tiamman's hands grasped at Erith's shoulders, head rolling upon the pillow, dark hair coming free of its braid. "Please."

Sliding his fingers in and out of Tiamman's body, Erith curled them just slightly as he pushed them in. He was rewarded when Tiamman jerked and called out, the hands on Erith's shoulders squeezing tightly. He continued to fuck Tiamman with his fingers, eyes glued to Tiamman's face, watching as the pleasure chased across his features.

Wanting to see its effects, he pushed a third finger in with the other two without warning. Tiamman arched, knees bending and lifting to open himself further to Erith's touch. Those blue eyes devoured him, wide and glazed with passion as his body moved, rocking, pleasuring himself on Erith's fingers.

"So good."

"By Na'eb, you're beautiful."

"Oh..." Tiamman flushed and jerked, body tightening around Erith's fingers. Tiamman's hand shot down and gripped the base of his own erection, squeezing firmly. "Going to make me... too soon..."

Erith let his fingers slide from Tiamman's body. It let him go reluctantly.

"No coming until I'm in you," he whispered into Tiamman's ear before lying back and

encouraging the boy to straddle him.

Tiamman climbed atop Erith, biting his lip as Erith's erection slid against his cleft. He whimpered, moving his hips restlessly until the tip brushed against his entrance. "In me. Now, please."

Erith slid his hands around Tiamman's hips, taking them in a firm grip and then pushed up, moaning as he pressed against the tight muscles. Tiamman's eyes fluttered shut, back arching as he sank down, slowly surrounding Erith's flesh with the tight grip of his body. They panted together, waiting for the fierce pressure of Tiamman's muscles to ease.

Then Tiamman pressed down again. Erith moaned as Tiamman took him in balls-deep. He watched as Tiamman's face reacted to what they were doing, the blue eyes glazing over, white teeth sinking into the ruby red lower lip.

"Good." Tiamman's voice was soft, husky, body clutching at Erith's cock as he gasped for air. Tiamman reached up, running his hands over his own body, nipples tight, erection red and weeping. "So good."

Erith's hips jerked and his hands slid up Tiamman's sides, moving over the sweat slick skin, sliding Tiamman's nipples between his fingers. "You're so hot, so tight."

"Erith." Tiamman sobbed as Erith touched his nipples, throwing his head back.

Erith smiled at the sound, fascinated by Tiamman's sensitivity, the way Tiamman moved on his cock, as if directed by the fingers teasing and pinching the sweet flesh. Continuing to work the hard nipples with one hand, Erith let the other slide down over Tiamman's chest, tickling along the tight stomach muscles until he reached the heat and hardness of Tiamman's erection

At the touch, Tiamman jerked, beginning to ride him hard, slamming down into Erith's

thrusts. His braid fell behind him, the end tickling against Erith's thighs. Digging his heels, Erith increased the force of his thrusts, hand wrapping around Tiamman's cock, letting Tiamman push up into it as he raised himself up.

Tiamman moved like a flame, dancing and undulating upon him, soft cries of pleasure slipping from his lips like prayers. Erith watched the flush of orgasm move through Tiamman, heard the desperation build in the boy's sighs. He wanted to watch without the distraction of his own orgasm, but it was too good, Tiamman tight around him and so hot in his hands, he could feel himself being pulled along into bliss.

"Yes, please..." Blue eyes blazed at Erith as Tiamman whispered out words of need. Seed splashed against his chest and stomach as Tiamman's body tightened, muscles rippling.

It pulled his own orgasm from him, hips pushing up, pushing him deeper into Tiamman as he came, seed pouring from him while pleasure shot from nerve to nerve.

Tiamman slumped against Erith, breathing hard, soft noises periodically sounding. His skin was hot and damp where it touched Erith, the smell of sex filling the air. "So good."

Erith pulled Tiamman's hair out of its tail and began to spread it out like a cover over the boy's back.

"Better than good," he murmured, moving his hands over skin and hair.

Tiamman snuggled in close and nodded with a satisfied sigh. Erith continued to pet him, stroke the long mane of hair, working out tangles and smoothing snarls. Tiamman purred softly, the sound rumbling in his chest.

"You make me feel..." Tiamman looked up at Erith, eyes dazed and sated, and shrugged. "I don't have words."

"I know," Erith admitted. *Liar*, a little voice whispered in his head. "And the ones I do have scare me."

Tiamman leaned up and kissed Erith softly before settling back down. "I'm harmless. Promise."

"Until you go..." He was barely even aware of saying the words aloud.

"Go?" Tiamman looked up at him in surprise and then thick eyelashes hid suddenly sad blue eyes. "Oh."

"After all, you're a free man now, Tiamman. And once you believe that... Well you're hardly going to want to stay with a jaded old man like me, now are you?" Bitterness and loneliness crept into Erith's voice and he turned his head, eyes closing against pain.

"I'd stay, if you'd let me." Tiamman's whisper was earnest, low and more than a bit scared. "I know I'm a nothing, branded, scarred. I'll stay in the stables, not muck up your life. I just...I've never met anyone who feels like you."

"You want to stay?" He looked down at Tiamman and then waved around with his hand in a vague gesture. "Here? With me?"

A mute nod answered him, eyes focused down and away, a dark flush on Tiamman's cheeks.

"You understand that you're free to go? Anywhere you want?"

Another nod.

"Then why would you want to stay with me?"

"I..." Tiamman swallowed hard, tremors moving through him. "Being with you makes me happy and I thought that maybe you were happy, too."

"You make me feel... I don't think happy is a good enough word for how you make me feel. And I don't... I don't trust it. I know I'm rich and I have lots of servants and the world seems to be at my beck and call, but..." Erith stopped and bit his lip, wondering when he'd learn to keep his mouth shut.

Tiamman sighed and moved up and off the bed. "Don't blame you, I wouldn't trust anything about me either. After all, what does a runaway slave have to offer a noble?" He smiled at Erith, the look sad and serene at once. "You're so beautiful, you felt so good. I forgot what I am, who I am." He reached for the breeches lying on the ground. "I guess should go back to work before someone thinks I've corrupted you."

Erith snorted, though the sound was more like a sob as he felt the happiness inside him shatter. "More likely they'll think I've corrupted you."

He blinked, but the wetness in his eyes wouldn't go away and he turned, curling up into a ball, unable to bear watching Tiamman leave. "Funny, I thought the gods would let me hold onto happiness a little longer than this."

A long silence and then the bed dipped. Warm arms surrounded him even as warm, naked skin curled against his back. A husky whisper sounded in his ear, "Damn the gods, Lord Erith."

"Don't be so quick to blacken yourself in their eyes, Tiamman." Despite his words he couldn't help pushing back into the warm body behind him.

Tiamman laughed, the sound hard. "I was a slave, a whore, a soldier's toy and sometime stable hand. Making love to you, knowing you, caring for you, they won't blacken me, won't damn me." A kiss brushed against Erith's shoulder blade. "And if they do, so be it."

It's a price I'm glad to pay."

Erith closed his eyes and grasped the arms that circled him tightly. "You would spend your freedom tied to me? Nobody's ever... I should shut up and enjoy you while you're in my bed, shouldn't I?"

Tiamman slowly turned Erith over and looked at him solemnly. "I can feel you inside me. You -- I've never felt this before. It's so..." Bright blue eyes tinged with tears looked deep into him. Tiamman struggled, looking for words, and finally just shrugged and placed a kiss on Erith's lips, soft and careful and tender.

Something quiet and good spread from where Tiamman's lips touched his own, moving through him, warming him inside. His hands slid up over Tiamman's shoulders, holding Tiamman to him. Erith hadn't realized how stiff and nervous Tiamman had been until the tension released at his touch. Tiamman flowed into his arms, gifting him with another gentle kiss.

"You're wonderful." He said, letting Tiamman kiss him again.

"Beautiful."

Another kiss.

"Warm"

Kiss.

"Mine."

Another soft, sweet kiss and then Tiamman pulled back slightly and looked at him. "Does that mean you're mine, too?"

"I don't know -- am I?"

Tiamman considered, tilting his head slightly, eyes roaming over Erith's face. He reached out, drew one hand through Erith's hair and then smiled, the expression lighting his face.

"Yes. You are."

The words were definite, firm -- not so much as an ounce of doubt held within them.

They made him believe and he pulled Tiamman's face back down, sealing their mouths together, making their words vows.

End