



To Touch the Stars

Sienna Black

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Chapter One

It was the third day out of five set aside for audience. A steady stream of supplicants waited outside the gate. Some of them had been there three days. Some would wait for the next set of five.

"No." Talkirk dismissed the boy with a wave of his hand before he had the chance to bare a single inch of flesh. He was too pale, too skinny. His cheekbones were too sharp, his eyes too dim. Whoever had him before, whatever charnel house turned him out, had used him too hard, run him ragged and dry. He had no place in the Cairn.

None of them had been worth looking at for a hand of days. His castellan insisted on continuing the search, too afraid or too stubborn to admit a lost cause. If he continued past the fast-approaching limit of Talkirk's patience, he'd have to be replaced.

It was an idle threat. Finding good men, reliable men, who would follow orders and not look for opportunities to knife him in the back and claim his seat, wasn't easy. It took time and dedication. It took careful bargaining and a negotiator's skill. It took time to build stores of valuable goods that could be traded for service. It was too much work.

One war followed another these days as settlements outgrew themselves and their leaders struggled for more habitable space. If the battles had been easy to fight, they would never end.

But they did, now and then. At the end of every fighting season, there was an unspoken peace. A pause in the back and forth of armies and territories to let families grieve for the sons and fathers lost; time to let boys grow into men, learn some skill at arms, and start again.

While the world waited for the next skirmish, men found ways to be entertained. They found comely women, married, and started families of their own. They scraped the remains of their meager belongings together and sent them to the chosen champions as tribute. It was either bargain or bribery, a plea to be chosen as a soldier in the next wave or to bypass a farm, fields and homestead and thereby leave the family in peace.

Some sent food or beasts of burden. Talkirk had a stable full of horses of the best breeding. They sent silver and jewel-studded weapons. They sent their virgin daughters. They sent their sons.

It was no secret that he favored men. One whole section of the arc, some levels above the ground, had been given to those he'd collected already. What went on there was left to speculation. No one passed through that guarded gate without Talkirk's permission.

Oh, a pretty woman could turn his head. Many did. Many had. There were more than a reasonable number of women in the cairn who claimed her child was born of Talkirk's seed. But presented with a sister and brother standing side by side, he was likely to use and return the daughter. He would keep the son.

When they suited him. Today had been a waste of time. The trinkets given were amusing. The flesh less so. He glanced around the hopeful again. They lingered even after he'd turned them away, hoping he might change his mind. And these were the best of those who came. He shuddered, thinking of the ones outside the gates, full of scars and worms and who knew what else. No, there'd be no new conquests today. He stood abruptly and stretched. Delano paused mid-speech.

“Master Castellan.” Talkirk waited for Delano's bow. “I'm bored,” he announced. “And going to sleep. Save the rest for tomorrow.” He looked past his right hand man. “They can spend the night learning tricks. Something that will impress me.”

As he turned to start his progress into the heart of the cairn, a lone voice called out behind him: “Just one more!”

It stopped him in his tracks. The usual rumble of voices hushed and stopped entirely as he turned back. His word was law. No one contradicted him. No one second-guessed. He was sure that when he faced the crowd the fool would be gone, mortified by his own boldness and headed for safer ground. He was wrong.

The gathered parted before the figure who came forward instead. They exchanged glances, they whispered in one another's ear, but no one said a word out loud. Some of them shied away from him, not wanting to be touched. Others brushed their fingers down his back. He didn't pause.

He stood of a height with Talkirk, though he was narrow-shouldered, slender-built. He was pale, as though he hadn't often seen the sun, and yet hard muscle sculpted his shoulders, his arms and the bit of his chest that could be seen through the neck of his shirt. He carried a gnarled length of wood, shoulder-height and sanded smooth. He didn't lean on it, hardly seemed to need it. The butt rested beside his booted foot when he stopped.

Talkirk looked him over slowly, head to toe and back. Now this one better suited his tastes. He bit back a smile as he inspected the new arrival. Dark-haired and pale-eyed and well-made. He'd do.

Talkirk stepped off the dais, spreading his arms as he moved closer. Muscle shifted, demonstrating the breadth of his own chest. “I'm bored and tired. I need my rest. Why shouldn't I kill you for interrupting me?”

The stranger smiled, a faint quirk of his lips. He spread his arms in mirror-like reflection. “Because I've traveled a very long way to talk to you.”

Talkirk snorted, exhaling. Amused. “Half these people walked for days. That doesn't make you more important. Try again.”

He didn't miss a beat. “None of them are pureblooded. None of them can save you.”

Now the murmuring started in earnest. The watchers backed further away, forming small groups. They bent their heads together, whispering “pureblood” until the word seemed to shimmer in the air.

That wasn't what made Talkirk move. It wasn't what drove him to close the gap between them, covering the distance with one long stride. Even in times of so-called peace, men could—had—tried to take the title he'd earned with blood. At the slightest sign of weakness, they would try again.

Not today.

“Save me.” He growled, the sound muted by lips and teeth. It made his throat tighten and his jaw ache. He pitched his words low, meant only for his challenger's ears. Talkirk stood inside the pureblood's circle of defense, so close they could and did trade breath. “There's nothing I fear that you could prevent. I don't need you.” Another half step and their chests met. “What's your name?”

To his credit, the narrower man didn't give ground. He didn't push back, but neither did he yield. Their eyes met, held, then he tilted his head. “Lucan.” He paused and his lips quirked again. “I have not come to test you. I come to offer myself.”

Many men had made that offer. Every one meant something different. With this one, he'd be sure from the start.

He fisted one hand at the back of Lucan's head, roughly gathering his hair into a club. He pulled and Lucan's neck arched. Vulnerable. Exposed. Talkirk saw his nostrils flare, watched him swallow, but he said nothing.

He shoved the other hand into Lucan's pants, thick fingers closing around his cock. Judging by touch, the rumors about purebloods were untrue. He was not shrunk and shriveled, not possessed of a useless stem. Talkirk pushed back the skin that still covered the head and swiped a rough thumb across it. Lucan sucked in a breath through his teeth.

"Do you offer everything?"

Lucan swallowed again. His cock hardened in Talkirk's hand. "Yes," he answered, tongue flickering out to wet his lips. "I offer myself. Whatever it takes."

Talkirk let him go as abruptly as he'd touched him. Released his hair and caught his wrist instead. "Audience is ended," he said loudly enough for everyone to hear. The protest began immediately. It didn't matter. He was watching the flush fade from Lucan's cheeks.

Delano cleared his throat discreetly, at Talkirk's shoulder now. "A reprieve," he suggested. "If you end it two days early..."

"What's done is done. They can wait," Talkirk said, not looking at his castellan. "I've made my choice. I have what I want." He turned on his heel and moved. Delano backed out of the way. Lucan followed without a stumble in his stride.

There were quicker ways to travel through the cairn. Lucan had no doubt of that. He was being paraded. He could feel people following them. They hung back a respectful—maybe frightened—distance, but they followed, the susurrations of their voices giving them away.

He heard doors open on either side, caught footfalls on metal plating that meant observers had stepped out of their apartments to watch. He heard the slight creak as decking shifted under the weight of those who leaned and looked down from their balconies. He was on display.

They warned him this would happen when he left the warren. He would be a curiosity, they said. Misunderstood, even feared, a legend come to life. Their food would poison him. Their water would choke him. He would end up in chains, in a cage, to be poked and gawked at, maybe killed. Only a fool would willingly go to them.

Lucan went alone. No one would notice for days.

The rhythm of the walking staff helped him count his steps. It was twelve from the gate to where he'd stopped, another three then up and over the dais. Seventeen more and a turn to the left, then ten stairs and forty paces before they came to another set and climbed.

Mapping the way felt safer than replaying the memory of Talkirk's touch. Bad enough that he was being shown off like a new possession. Worse to have his erection lead the way. No warning could have prepared him for the way he reacted. Hard hands and rough fingers should have made him flinch. A rough hold on his hair couldn't stay him, a hand in his pants was not threat enough to keep him still.

But pleasure could. Fierce pleasure, shocking and sharp like the air before a storm. He'd ground his teeth to bite back a gasp, tightened the muscles in his back so his hips wouldn't roll forward, thrusting him through Talkirk's fingers against all common sense.

It felt like everything he was had focused in his cock, on that one raw brush of weathered thumb against too-sensitive skin. He'd hardened like a boy with no control. He was doing it again. How many paces since they'd topped the last step?

Talkirk stopped before him and opened another door. A wave of warm air washed out to greet them. This was his apartment, had to be. It smelled like him, like heat and dirt and an underlying lick of spice and flame. He would live on the topmost level of the ever-climbing cairn. From here, he would be able to see everything. Everyone. It would provide him advance warning of any approaching force. But did he have an exit other than this one, obvious door? If the attack came from inside, in close quarters, what good would being perched at the top of his little world be?

"Come in," he commanded.

Lucan tipped the staff so it would clear the doorway, lifted his foot to cross the threshold. Talkirk's hand curled on the wood, fingers grazing Lucan's as he twisted his wrist, a move meant to disarm. "You won't need this."

Well-honed instincts kicked in. Not expecting him to fight back, Talkirk's grip was weak. Lucan took advantage. He snapped the ground-end up sharply, catching Talkirk in the armpit. One quick rotation, and Talkirk's arm was twisted, forced straight out behind him by the staff braced once more against Lucan's foot. Lucan grasped his wrist and pulled toward the center of his back. If he struggled too much, it would dislocate his shoulder.

"Traitor," Talkirk panted. Lucan could feel tension sing through his body, muscles tensing, always testing his grip.

"No," he argued. "I gave myself to you. But you didn't warn me that you'd take my staff away."

"Do you think I'm fool enough to let you keep a weapon, here? I shouldn't have to warn you."

He had a point. It made sense for him to protect himself. But the staff served as more than a weapon. It was Lucan's connection to the world and his place within it. He would explain, when the time was right. Not now, not yet. He let go. "You could have asked."

"Asked!" Talkirk barked laughter, so full-voiced and loud that Lucan's ears rang. He almost missed the sound of the door closing and the snap of the locking mechanism sliding home. "I like you, Lucan. You have spirit." He curled his hand around the staff again. "Give it to me."

It was almost a request. It was a step the right way. Lucan swallowed his objection and let go. This battle would take more than one skirmish to win. Small victories would have to satisfy him for now.

The air around him cooled as Talkirk moved away. Lucan wondered whether the man really put out heat or if he imagined it, just a trick of the mind. That too would take some testing. Investigating.

His thoughts centered in his cock again. He thumped his head gently against the wall where he leaned. He had lived twenty Cycles. He'd proved himself adept, controlled. He could ignore any distraction and yet one touch from this coarse man and he could hardly think for wanting.

The staff clattered to the floor, somewhere across the room. Glass rasped against wood, then Talkirk poured something liquid. "Sit."

Lucan shook his head. "Do you always give orders?"

There was a pause. Utter silence from the big man. Lucan could hear the sounds of the cairn outside in the quiet. Then Talkirk moved, settling down in front of him. "I'm Talkirk," he answered. "I don't have to ask."

Lucan grinned. Another battle for another day. He straightened off the wall. "Then where would you like me to sit?"

"Here. With me."

Straight ahead. Lucan stepped forward. Two paces, three, then his toe caught a riser and he stumbled forward. He caught his weight on his hands and knees, sinking into a thick mattress.

Talkirk was half a breath away. Lucan heard him inhale. Felt the rumble before he heard it. His pulse kicked up, beating hard at the base of his throat. Talkirk exhaled, hot against his cheek and asked, "When were you going to tell me you were blind?"

Chapter Two

Unprepared and caught off guard, Lucan's heart felt like stone in his chest. He'd thought himself ready for anything. How quickly he was learning that he was wrong.

In the warren, where they told him that little light shone, it wasn't a tragedy to be born blind. He wouldn't have to learn to forget shapes and shadows, to rely on senses that were secondary to all the rest. He had an advantage over his friends and peers there. He trained hard, embraced the darkness as a gift, not a fault. He didn't miss what he'd never had. He was no less a man.

But here? In the daylight they praised the keen-sighted. They spoke of colors and pictures and what they saw. Here, his blindness would be seen as liability. They'd think he needed protecting. They would call him weak.

"It didn't bear mentioning." He remembered how to breathe now. "It doesn't change who I am and if I'd told you..." He paused, brow furrowing. Suddenly it all made sense. The parading, the stairs. He would not want an armed man in his private rooms, but there was more to taking the staff away than that. "You've known all along."

"You looked through me," Talkirk told him. "I looked you in the eye and you didn't flinch. You glanced away because you thought you should. I might as well not have been there." Lucan could hear the grin in his voice. "It was a brave act. You impressed me, but tell me the truth. What use do I have for you except to warm my bed?"

His hand stroked into Lucan's hair. He didn't repeat that near-painful grip from before. This touch was gentle, almost a caress. It was an unexpected kindness that sent a shiver racing down his spine. "You are pretty," Talkirk confessed. "And I will have you, but I have a wall of pretty men already. Even a pureblood must offer something more."

He had more to offer. Lucan took a breath to explain.

Talkirk stole it away again. He was already close but he leaned in farther, tip of his nose tracing the path of Lucan's pulse in his throat; a pulse that sped up predictably.

Lucan tipped his head, exposing more skin as his fingers curled against the mattress beneath them. He should be thinking, should be telling Talkirk of his plans. He would train them, all of them, for the attack that was coming. He would teach them how to survive when the rules of regular warfare were cast aside. He would have to do so when he could think again.

For now, all logic fled him. Talkirk's tongue touched his skin, warm and wet, then his teeth followed, scraping gently. Lucan's skin turned to gooseflesh, his trousers tenting. He groaned, a soft involuntary sound, and curled one hand as far as he could around Talkirk's arm.

Strong. He was thickly built, the slightest shift of a finger setting muscles rippling. And almost hot to the touch. There were no hairs against Lucan's palm, just a broad expanse of skin. The ridge of a scar that his thumb ghosted over as his hands wandered, but no hair.

Talkirk bit harder, winding his arm around Lucan's waist. Lucan was crushed against the bigger man, feeling the solid thump of Talkirk's heart against his own chest. He worked his hands to the back of Talkirk's neck, curling his fingers in the short hairs at the nape just in time to be pushed over and trapped beneath the other man's body.

For a moment. Then Lucan's arms were pushed over his head, out of the way. Talkirk shoved his tunic off roughly, heedless of the ties. His hands replaced fabric, broad palms rough. They mapped Lucan's body, fingers the scouts that explored his ribs and traced the muscles of his chest. They were followed by incredible heat as Talkirk bit and mouthed and tasted every inch, kisses punctuated by half-voiced murmurs that shuddered into Lucan's bones.

His pants went next, jerked impatiently down his legs. Lucan expected the same possessive grip, the claim that had been made on him earlier. He was aching hard, eager to feel it again. It was all he could do to bite back a plea when it didn't come. He made fists, stretching his knuckles. He curled his toes. He waited there, exposed, undeniably aroused.

A drop of cool liquid fell on him from above. It landed just above his navel, arced around it and raced toward his hip. A second followed, landing just below. It streaked down his body and into the tight curls at the base of his cock. A third came, and a fourth, then more, like a shower of rain. Each drop startled him, making him tense and flinch. Every trickle made him harder, more desperate.

He panted now. He needed touch and if Talkirk wouldn't indulge him, he would satisfy himself. He moved his arm, the first he'd tried since it had been pinned. He slicked his palm down his body, picking up moisture from trails the impromptu shower left behind. Not water, something slicker. It lingered on his fingers. He closed his eyes, tilting back his head.

Talkirk knocked his hand away with a growl and replaced it with his own. The slick stuff cooled the heat of his touch but his grip was firm. Lucan groaned aloud, hips bucking up to drive his length through Talkirk's fingers, instinctively seeking pleasure. He bit his bottom lip, struggling to keep control after too long waiting, anticipating.

Talkirk shifted over him, weight braced above and not on him but palpable all the same. His hand twisted, moved around Lucan's cock, but he didn't let go. He spoke in an ear-tingling rumble. "Stomach down."

There was hardly enough room between their bodies to breathe. The smell of him, that scent of spice and smoke, surrounded Lucan. Too deep a breath and their chests collided, but he knew better than to protest the command. He flattened a hand against the wall of muscle, using it to turn himself.

It was as much a tease to brush skin against skin as to wait that eternity to be touched. Everywhere their bodies skimmed together, Lucan's tingled from the heat, every nerve wound tight.

Talkirk didn't keep him waiting. Not this time. The moment Lucan's cheek brushed the mattress, his legs were pushed apart and Talkirk fit himself between them. The hard ridge of his erection nestled into the cleft of Lucan's ass, already slick. Lucan arched his hips back, hungry for that contact. Talkirk scraped his chin against Lucan's shoulder, his teeth against the nape of his neck.

Lucan whimpered. He swallowed another and whispered, "Please."

It was enough. Talkirk grasped his hips, fingers pressed into his flesh with such force that the memory of them would linger for days. He pulled them back, forcing a bend into Lucan's spine, and fit the head of his cock against the puckered opening.

Lucan was no virgin. He'd shared his bed with men and women alike. That didn't change this moment. This would be the last full breath he'd be able to take until they

spent themselves, especially with a man like Talkirk. One last breath and his fingers curled against the mattress. He was ready.

Talkirk claimed him with a powerful thrust, no hesitation and no holding back. They shouted together, Lucan twisting beneath, hips pushed deep into the mattress, body shuddering. They hovered like that for a moment, letting Lucan relax. Letting muscles slack and the first shock of penetration fade away.

He was big. Lucan wasn't surprised. He'd expected to burn with the heat his lover put out. He didn't, couldn't know that his heartbeat would shift and change to match the pulse he could feel inside him. He hadn't thought that he would breathe when and only when Talkirk did. There was no end to one body and beginning of the other, now. Lucan's mind whirled, struggling to understand. He sucked in air to ask if Talkirk felt the same and paused. No need to ask. He knew.

Talkirk curled a hand around his cock so that each thrust drove Lucan through his fingers, giving him pleasure both within and without. He bit and licked Lucan's shoulders, hard enough to sting but always shy of true pain. Their rhythm was broken by grunts and short, hard groans as pleasure built and ebbed, working toward an end.

And when he came, when Talkirk once more buried himself, wet heat pulsing from him with each beat of his heart, Lucan tensed and cried out too, spilling himself between Talkirk's fingers, the dark room seeming to spin about them dizzily.

"Sleep," Talkirk rumbled, crashing down on the mattress beside him. He made no effort to clean them, offered no more comfort. One heavy arm draped Lucan's back. "Sleep now," he said again. "Stay with me."

Lucan was boneless, spent. He wasn't sure he could have stood to leave, even without that prompt. In truth, he had nowhere else to go, but it was also true that there was nowhere he would rather be. He tucked himself closer to Talkirk's solid strength and let himself sleep without worry for the first time in days.

* * * *

They were not alone.

Talkirk had never been the type to wake up gradually. He didn't drift lazily toward consciousness. The moment something disturbed his rest, he was wide awake and alert. It had thwarted more than one attempt on his life.

Lucan lay stretched out beside him, still, dark hair tangled and shadowing his face. He closed his eyes when he slept. Talkirk made a mental note to ask him why. But he wasn't the threat. There was someone else.

He rolled to his feet near-silently. He crossed the room to the doorway of the second chamber, pausing to listen before he stepped inside. There were no voices, nothing clattered or scraped, but the presence was clear. Someone had let himself into Talkirk's rooms, was still there, waiting if not patiently. Only one man would dare.

Delano stood by the monitor, gaze intent on the display showing moving blocks of color. Now and then he tapped the surface and a projection would rise. Three-dimensional representations of the people he'd selected would hover before him for a moment, then disappear again. He didn't glance up from this seemingly random survey, but Talkirk had no doubt he knew he was being observed.

An assumption proven true when the other man spoke. "You're lucky I thought to check the grid. You forgot"

Talkirk stepped into the room, door closing behind him. "I didn't," he argued. "I was busy."

Delano's gaze lifted, then flickered over Talkirk's body. His lips pursed, dimple appearing at the corner of his mouth. He went back to the display. "You were distracted."

"For a moment."

"For three hours," Delano countered, not at all as unconcerned as he tried to seem. The tight set of his shoulders gave him away. "You slept."

"What of it," Talkirk snapped, unreasonably irritated. "Am I not allowed to rest? Does a man not sometimes need his sleep?" His ground his teeth, willing Delano to push the issue. His second did not rise to the bait. He ducked his head instead, tilting it slightly, but said nothing. He would keep his peace until Talkirk's temper cooled, as habit dictated.

It had already begun. Talkirk wasn't truly angry. Guilt made him snap. Once Delano had been the one to share his bed. They'd been soldiers together in the army of the last man to hold the Talkirk name. They were friends first and lovers after. He had a wife and children now, but the ties between them were still strong.

When new men came to Talkirk's bed, Delano had confessed once after too much stone-skin wine, he felt he slipped a little from Talkirk's favor. It had been hard to hear, harder to convince him that it wasn't true. To this day, Delano remained the only man who could make Talkirk regret. A hard look or cutting word could make him hesitate.

It was a weakness he struggled to overcome.

"They rely on you to protect them," Delano dared in the silence. "They've made you their leader. They believe that their trust is not misplaced in you. You can't let the appeal of a pretty newcomer break the pact you've made with them."

Talkirk sighed. "I've broken no promises, Delano. We are still safe."

Delano summoned a faint, wry smile. "Because some of us cling to old habits, my friend." He tapped a sequence onto the keypad below the display. A flash of blue light from the grid signaled that the force field protecting the cairn had been turned on.

Talkirk reached for the robe hung on the inside of the door and pulled it on, belting it about his waist. "Thank you," he said, words he'd offer no one else. "I am in your debt. Again."

Rather than brushing the apology aside as he had in the past, Delano's brow furrowed. "I'm worried about you."

Talkirk frowned. "Why?"

Delano turned his back on the display. "You're not thinking. At least not with your brain." He shook his head. "It's not like you to be so quickly caught up in someone new. You've no idea what leaving like that did. We nearly had a riot, and you left it to me."

This, at least, was a familiar conversation. Talkirk let himself smile. "Because I trust you. *Nearly* a riot. You stopped it, I see."

"This time," he agreed, "but do we want to dare a next? What if I hadn't been able? What if I hadn't been there?" He leaned forward, pressing the point. "I won't be there when you take him to Athel. I can only imagine what fun that will be."

Talkirk brushed that aside with an easy gesture. "There won't be trouble. Athel listens to me."

"You told him he was your favorite."

Talkirk shrugged. "He is."

“Is he?” Delano didn't react outwardly to the upward twitch of Talkirk's eyebrows. “You made him wait three days just to see you. It was raining. Now this one comes and in the space of three minutes you've decided to take him to your bed.”

He had an uncomfortable point. It had been fast, hardly rational. His shoulder's shifted again and his jaw set. “Are you arguing against him for Athel's sake or yours?” Delano flinched and Talkirk wished he could take the words back. It did no good to hurt his friend, but they were spoken now, out of his control and doing what harm they would. He chewed through a curse.

“I'm arguing because you've gotten careless, Cymren.” Delano spoke softer, using his old name. “We don't know who this boy is, or where he came from. Did you think to ask who sent him or what he wants?” He held up a hand, stopping the answer when Talkirk took a breath. “It's all well and good that he appeals and makes you feel something. It's not, though, if he makes you forget common sense.”

“It's handled.” Talkirk rubbed a hand over his face. The knowledge that Delano was right churned in his gut. He'd made a mistake, acted rashly. The point had been driven home. Twisting it now only made him angry. “I'll wake him,” he said. “You can stay and question him too. But you won't call him a threat, Del. What can he do? He's blind.”

“Blind, but not deaf,” Lucan said from behind him. Talkirk turned and saw him standing in the doorway, one hand braced against the wall. The other kept a sheet from the bed wrapped close around his hips. Tousled hair didn't hide the furrow in his brow. “I need my clothes.”

Chapter Three

Lucan dressed efficiently while Talkirk and his second went on. They didn't change topics, continuing to talk about him as if he couldn't hear. He'd expected to be underestimated. Hoped for it a little. It would help him prove his point. But to be so casually, coolly dismissed? It stung.

But then, how else would they react? They had no reason to think he was important or special at all. They didn't know how hard he'd struggled or the lengths he'd gone to trying to surpass his peers in the warrens. His lists of accomplishments weren't there for the people on the surface to see. The purebloods chose to live hidden lives, to stay isolated and unknown by all the rest. Their ancestors chose from the beginning not to take wives and husbands from among the natives they'd found upon landing. Those people were cruel, brutish in comparison. They had been shaped and hardened by the planet itself. Inhuman, Lucan remembered hearing them called.

Not so much, he would argue now. But they were different, that was true and impossible to deny. It made sense that just as they once had to prove themselves worthy of conversation and not simply combat, Lucan would have to prove himself among them again and again.

He *would* prove himself, whether he enjoyed it or not. He had a talent and a skill they would need. When Dark came and they were as blind as he'd been born, they would understand, no matter what they believed now. He wouldn't fail them. He hadn't come all this way to let a few blunt questions chase him home.

"Where did you say you came from again?" Talkirk's second asked. Delano. The two of them were more than old friends. That was clear in the way they spoke to each other, in the fact that he challenged the Cairn leader with no fear in his voice. They would work well as a team, Talkirk gruff and intimidating while Delano showed cool restraint.

"I didn't," Lucan answered, tucking in his shirt. The trails left behind by the lubricant had dried enough to be tacky, fabric pulling against them. He wanted to wash. It could wait. "Not far from here. A day's walk or so."

"In what direction?" Talkirk asked. "I haven't seen anything but rock a day's walk from here."

Lucan purposely kept his grin small. "Direction as you measure it doesn't mean much to me. As for the rock..." He tilted his head, letting that serve as answer enough.

Talkirk snorted. "There's nowhere to live out there. We've explored those rocks, the caves. There's nothing."

"How many of you are there?" Delano countered. Whether he honestly believed or it was his job to make Lucan think he did was hard to say.

"More than enough to survive. We've been there all along."

"And you're all pureblooded? We thought the last of you had passed away."

Lucan ducked his head in acknowledgement. "We got tired of fighting wars and hid ourselves. It was better that you thought we'd all died. Safer."

"So why come here now? To save us?" Talkirk snorted again. "From what? What could a straggling group of cowards have to teach us?"

There was no question that he meant it as a challenge. No doubt that Talkirk wanted

him to rise to the bait, fight and lose. Lucan felt the urge to let his temper go and argue his insult. Take offense. But what would that accomplish? Nothing but to make him an enemy.

So instead he found the edge of Talkirk's bed and sat. "Do you still tell stories about the ship that brought us here?" The remains of which, he'd been told, made up the skeleton of the Cairn. Over time, the generations that followed had added to it, salvaging pieces of scrap they found scattered over the landscape and buried in the earth. They built layer upon layer until it stood tall against the sky, able to be seen for days in all directions.

It made him wish for eyes that could see.

"We tell them," Delano answered.

"We make our own stories," Talkirk added quickly. "No point in dwelling in the past."

Lucan listened incredulously. "Except to remember where we came from. To have the stars within reach again. To remember the world before we had to leave it." He shook his head. "This is why there are wars, Talkirk."

"There are wars because someone else wants what we've got," he answered matter-of-factly. "We have walls that keep the storms out. We have better weapons and all the food we need. That's why people attack us, not some ancient tale."

Lucan paused, considering. It was possible that he believed himself. That he really didn't understand. "Have you lived outside the Cairn, Talkirk? Do you know what it's like in the little cities where the computers only sometimes work? Where they actually have to hunt for food and a bad storm means that some of your neighbors might not survive? Or further out, where it's hard work and none of the comforts that surround you here?"

"I was born here." Lucan could hear him stand taller, hear his vertebra align and draw him up to full height. Pride echoed in his voice.

"Then you can't understand." It made him oddly sad to know that Talkirk lacked his love of history. "You don't know how it feels to live in the shadow of legend. To know that there's a place where your ancestors stood and life seems easy. People want that, Talkirk. They will kill for that. They fight wars in the hope that they might win it."

A long silence descended. Neither of the other men said a word. Lucan's heart pounded wildly in his chest. The hum of the current running through the walls sounded even louder. The current of air piped into the rooms reminded him to breathe. He'd clenched his hands while making his point. He forced himself to let them go now, flexing his fingers.

Delano cleared his throat. "You may be right. But all of that doesn't answer why the purebloods would send a blind man to us."

He had a point. It didn't explain it. Now was the time to get to the heart of things. It was Lucan's turn to sit up straight, spine stacking on itself, his shoulders pushed back. "The Dark season will be here soon. When it comes, we will too. I came to teach you and your army how to survive."

There was another silence, this one shorter, then Talkirk began to laugh. "You? Teach us? You're mad. You think because you know a few tricks with that stick that we need lessons from a boy like you? There are rules about war, Lucan."

"They're *your* rules. You didn't know we existed. We didn't agree to them." Lucan waited for another silence to go on. "You don't have to believe me. Humor me instead."

Let the mad, blind pureblood teach you how to fight without eyes. If he's wrong, it will entertain you. And if he's right..."

"If he's right we could use his training," Delano continued for him.

"You'd take his side?" Talkirk sounded honestly surprised.

Delano's voice warmed with wry humor. "I'm on the side that survives in the case of attack. Let him show us what he can do, Talkirk. If we learn something, so much the better; if not, what does it hurt?"

Lucan hadn't expected anyone to speak for him, much less the Cairn's second in command. When he ducked his head this time, he did it with sincere gratitude.

Talkirk still didn't sound convinced. He heaved a sigh and his voice grated when he spoke. "Who, exactly, do you propose to teach, Lucan?"

"Anyone," came the immediate answer. "Everyone who can fight."

"Mmn." It was a rumble, deep and thoughtful. "I think I know where you should start."

* * * *

"He's not much to look at, is he?"

Lucan was on display, again. At least it had been a shorter walk, this time. Two levels down and one hundred steps around the cairn wall to the section Talkirk and Delano called the Arc. This was where the men and boys who came to Talkirk stayed. His favorites had their own rooms, decorated as they pleased. The rest shared common quarters. What went on behind closed doors there was gossiped about even in the depths of the Warren.

They talked about Athel too. They called him Talkirk's golden boy. It wasn't meant to be flattering.

Fabric whispered against fabric and the joints of a piece of furniture sang out as he stood. Stretched, judging by the soft pops of bone and muscle realigning, and stepped forward with a heavy sigh. His footsteps shivered through the floor. Not as heavy as Talkirk's, not as light as Lucan's own. Lucan waited, not quite consciously taking shallow breaths.

If he'd held his breath, he thought he'd still be able to pick up Athel's scent. It—he—smelled clean in a way a body wasn't without effort. Soft, almost feminine, it overlaid a solid base most would take for granted. No matter the rumors about him and how he hung on Talkirk's arm, Lucan pitied the man who underestimated him.

"This is how you replace me?" Athel asked, slapping a hand against Lucan's chest. Warmth spread out from the point of contact. "He's skinny, Talkirk. Pretty eyes, yes, but have you noticed that they don't work? And thin," he repeated. "He won't keep you happy. He'll snap if you use him as you want to in bed."

Delano coughed and cleared his throat behind his hand. He'd argued against coming. Talkirk insisted, and didn't hide his amusement now. "I didn't bring him here to replace you. He's here for lessons."

"Lessons?" Athel hadn't pulled his hand away. It slid down Lucan's chest now, describing a diagonal as he wound around Lucan's side and stopped behind him. His hand stayed at Lucan's waist, fingers curled in fabric at his hip. "What am I meant to teach him?"

The other three laughed. Lucan cleared his throat. "With all due respect, Athel, they

meant lessons for you and the rest of the Arc.”

“From you?” He wound around Lucan's side again, hand moving with him. He caught Lucan's chin in his free hand and tilted it, tugged it down. “What do you think I should learn?”

It was a simple question, honestly asked. There was no reason for Lucan's breath to catch or for his awareness to slip beneath his belt again. This was Talkirk's favorite, the first of all his men. Showing interest or worse, arousal, would surely doom him. He willed his fledgling erection away and caught a deeper breath as he felt the tide of lust ease.

“You should learn to fight.”

“I know how to fight,” Athel countered easily.

“In the dark?”

“With my eyes closed,” he bragged.

Lucan let himself smile. “That's not the same. If you only close your eyes, you can open them again to see what you're doing.”

Athel drew his hand back. “You'd accuse me of cheating?”

Talkirk chuckled behind them. “To think I worried that you wouldn't get along. Enjoy your lesson, Athel.” He opened the door, letting in a cool breeze.

“You're leaving him with me?” Disbelief sharpened Athel's voice. “I didn't agree.”

“I didn't ask,” Talkirk answered evenly. “Entertain him if you don't want lessons. Delano and I have business. Be friendly.” The door closed.

Athel heaved another dramatic sigh. “With me, it's business,” he complained. “With you. Well.” He moved toward Lucan and touched the small of his back once he was close. “How was he?”

Lucan knew exactly the answer Athel wanted and yet he asked, “What do you mean?”

Athel snorted as delicately as the sound could be made. He nudged Lucan's hip. “Talkirk's not the type to let that chance pass him by. He had you, didn't he, pureblood? He fucked you.”

Lucan shifted his weight, uncomfortable. Caught between manners and privacy. “I don't think...”

“You're blushing. That's all the answer I need. So.” He nudged again. “Was he everything that you expected?”

“More,” he blurted, too honestly. If he was blushing before, now his cheeks blazed. “But I didn't come here looking for a place in his bed.”

Athel made a sound that was half a purr and rich with amusement. “It's your naïveté that appeals to him,” he murmured as he moved to stand in front of Lucan. His hands moved, skimming up the front of his shirt again. They lingered at the laces, tugged and tightened, fingertips stroking skin through the gaps they made.

Lucan shivered despite himself. The reminder that they were crossing dangerous boundaries did nothing to curb his interest this time. He put his hands on Athel's hips to stay him, intent on keeping distance between their bodies. Bad enough to want, worse still to act. “I'm not that naïve.”

Athel laughed, a warm, rolling sound and reached further. His thumbs brushed the sides of Lucan's neck. “But you do have a place in Talkirk's bed. He's marked you, bound you to him, whether you wanted it or not.” He gripped Lucan's shoulders, pulling himself

closer. His cheek brushed Lucan's and his breath stirred tendrils of hair as he put his mouth close to Lucan's ear. "I am first. I'll kill to keep it that way."

Chapter Four

"He could be an assassin."

"One man against the Talkirk? That's suicide, not murder." A rumble of laughter went up from the men seated around the table. They nodded at one another, still grinning.

And Talkirk watched, leaning to one side in the broad-backed chair meant especially for him. These men were his generals, the leaders of his army. He'd followed Delano's prompt, told them of Lucan's report of a threat, and now they debated it.

"He could be a spy. Not from the so-called purebloods but from another city. Sent to learn how we work."

"Have you seen him, Izac? If he's not pureblooded, then I'm not breathing. He looks like he'd snap in a stiff wind."

"He practically glows in the dark."

"Maybe that comes in handy when you live in a cave."

"But if he's a spy..."

"He's blind." All eyes turned toward Talkirk. He met their gazes levelly. "He won't make a very good spy for anyone if he can't see the things he's meant to report on.

The silence lingered for a moment. "There are other ways to gather information. Recording devices..."

"I've had him bare," Talkirk said matter-of-factly. "I've been inside his skin. If there's still a recording device on him somewhere." He spread one hand like a shrug. "Let them watch."

"*He* will be watched," Delano offered, lips twisted into a wry smile. "Don't worry about that," he assured the assembled. "If he betrays us, he'll be dealt with."

The men seated around the table started nodding again.

Talkirk gestured, a motion of his hand that caught Delano's attention. His second nodded and stood, moving to the monitor set into one wall of the conference room. It flickered on when he was close enough to touch it. "Geologic map, ten mile radius."

In the pause, the generals turned in their chairs. When the map was displayed, a screen full of expanding rings laid over the land surrounding the Cairn, he tapped the largest structures. The rock formations that jutted up like fingers in the middle of the plain were highlighted, their silhouettes traced with glowing lines.

"Lucan, our pureblood, claims to have walked for a day. Assuming that he walks quickly, these are the cave systems large enough to hide a population that could pose a threat." Four clusters stood out on the screen. "I've read our old surveys and I don't believe that they're interconnected, unless there's a shielding grid under the surface that we can't pick up."

"And if there is?" Sante asked. He'd joined the army only a year or two after Talkirk himself. He was trustworthy, experienced, and understandably cautious about underestimating enemies. That mistake had cost him his right hand.

"If there is," Talkirk answered, stealing attention, "you'll deal with it when you find it. I trust you to lead my army. I'm sure a shield poses no threat." He smiled to soften the words. Sante sat up straighter and bowed his head in acknowledgement.

Delano cleared his throat. "And if the caves really are connected, we can rendezvous.

Even in a worst-case scenario, one of a dozen or so unexpected scouts ought to be able to get off a message for help.”

That prompted another wave of laughter. Good. If they were relaxed, they wouldn't panic. If they were confident, Talkirk got the answers he needed about this mysterious force of purebloods and held the advantage.

“We need to know numbers,” Delano went on. “Defenses and weapons, if we find anything. Anyone,” he amended. “It may be that it's all a bluff and there's nothing there at all. In which case, the Talkirk will deal with our new guest, and you all will have had a few days' easy reconnaissance.”

There was a commotion outside the door of the meeting room, voices in conversation that raised to an argument. Delano met Talkirk's gaze and moved, but Talkirk stayed him with a gesture and rose. “Continue the discussion. This won't take long.” Those who interrupted him at a meeting rarely made the mistake again.

He waited for Delano to speak again before he pushed open the meeting room door. To his second's credit, he merely raised his voice when the sound of struggle from the waiting room threatened to interrupt. Talkirk closed the door with a solid thump and arched an eyebrow at the scene before him.

His guards had a young man caught between them. He'd been forced to his knees and had his arms held out to either side. He wore neither shirt nor shoes and with his head bent, his features were hidden behind a wealth of flame-red hair. Talkirk knew that build, though, the pattern of moles that formed a triangle on the left side of his chest and certainly knew that exceptional color. He stepped forward, slid his hand deep into the locks and pulled Jerren's head back none-too-gently.

“This is important, I hope,” he said, his voice a deceptively calm purr. “Something that absolutely could not wait until I came back to the Arc.”

Jerren squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed hard. When he opened them, their vivid green reminded Talkirk of just why he'd kept this particular boy. He was stunning. Not just for his looks, but they made people take notice and appreciate the man who had collected and calmed him.

“It's important,” he promised, swallowing again. “It's Athel and that new one. Lucan. There'll be blood.”

Talkirk let go Jerren's hair and nodded that he should be released. He offered a hand and Jerren took it warily as he climbed to his feet. He shot a glare at one of the guardsmen and for good reason; dark red fingerprints marred his arm.

Talkirk caught his chin. “Tell me.”

“They're fighting,” Jerren answered, eyes wide. “Not just pretending. Really fighting.”

“Who?” Talkirk frowned but eased his grip.

“Athel. And Lucan.”

Talkirk snorted. “Of course they are. Athel fights with all the new ones. He fought with you,” he reminded the boy and let his hand drop.

Jerren caught it. “Not like this.” There was an urgency in his eyes. “Please, Talkirk. Come and see. If it's nothing, I'll take my punishment.”

He considered, weighing the choice. On one hand, planning in the face of an attack demanded attention and dedication. If these cave-dwellers were really a threat, it was a matter of protecting the people who trusted him, as Delano said. On the other, if the one

man who knew the enemy's tricks died before they came, no careful plan would matter.

Talkirk nodded. "Show me."

But he didn't need direction once they were outside the meeting hall. The sounds of raised voices and cheering drew him toward the impromptu arena. People jostled one another for the best view, hardly noticing his approach until he stood directly behind them. Then they scrambled out of the way to clear a path. Layer by layer the crowd parted before him until he stood on the edge of empty space, an agreed-upon distance between the combatants and their audience.

Jerren hovered behind him. He was right. This was a fight without restriction. Blood spattered the packed earth beneath their feet, both men dripping as they circled one another. Neither of them staggered. Neither of them limped. Both moved with grace and power, like men who knew they couldn't lose.

If he'd been another man, Talkirk might have guessed that the crowd drove them on. He knew Athel too well, though, and guessed that Lucan was the same. Neither of them could hear the mounting murmurs. They focused on each other and ignored everything else.

The moment the observers filled in behind him, accepting that he'd come to watch for the moment and not to interfere, tension built between the fighters again. An almost physical force drove them together, sweeping around and over them. Those who watched were caught in the moment as well. Talkirk saw Athel reaffirm his grip on one of the twin blades that were his trademark weapons. Soon, he knew. Soon they'd clash again.

As if he'd willed them into motion, Athel moved in a blur of pale hair that would distract another opponent. He relied on his beauty to keep his enemies off guard, underestimating him and unprepared. He closed the gap between himself and Lucan, one curved blade arcing up from beneath and meant to pierce the space between ribs.

Lucan flicked the end of his staff up and batted the blow away. Athel's arm swung wide and Lucan put the butt against Athel's chest. He hardly seemed to move at all and yet Athel stumbled backward, catching his balance gracelessly before he fell. Not only had the distraction failed, it gave Athel away. The crowd roared, fists thrust triumphantly into the air. Lucan put the staff down again and began circling. Athel backed around the space, gaze never leaving the other man.

Talkirk waited until Athel had nearly passed to rumble, "I told you to watch him, Athel. Is this how you obey?"

There was no pause in his movement, not a twitch of surprise. Athel simply turned to face Talkirk, knelt and laid his weapons down. He stayed down, head bowed and hands on his knees, though Talkirk could see his sides heave as he caught his breath. Across the living arena, Lucan turned to face him too, though he kept his distance, weight on his staff.

All eyes were on them. Talkirk didn't stoop. "Stand up," he ordered, "and tell me what this is about."

Athel straightened, shoulders back and chin lifted proudly. Blood trickled from his nose and a thin cut above his eye. The corner of his mouth was bruising and would no doubt match the angry red spot in the center of his chest. Still, he commanded attention. "He needed to learn his place."

Talkirk gestured at the people around them, still jostling for the best view of this conversation. "With an audience?"

Athel's gaze flickered away and back. "They know I'm First," he answered, chin lifting another measure.

"Are you still?" Talkirk lifted a hand and smeared away the blood trickling through Athel's eyebrow. It was bright against his thumb. He licked it off, gaze never wavering. "You're bleeding."

Athel's eyes darkened, pupils swallowing color. The set of his jaw softened. He stepped forward, sliding his hands up Talkirk's chest until they rested on either side of his neck. "I'm still standing."

Talkirk's gaze shifted now, past Athel's shoulder to where Lucan stood, still waiting. He bled, too, the stains from half a dozen shallow cuts standing out against the pallor of his skin. As Talkirk watched, a new runnel snaked its way down the pureblood's chest. A head-wound, no doubt, that would need tending, but Lucan didn't waver. Talkirk nodded. "So is he."

Athel turned and Talkirk wound an arm around his waist, pulling him back against his body, keeping him from launching yet another attack on the newcomer. He could feel muscles tense and shift against him. He felt it and his body responded. He rumbled lowly and knew that Athel felt it against his shoulders as surely as he felt the swelling proof of Talkirk's arousal against his ass.

As if he knew they were watching him, Lucan straightened where he stood, posture as proud as Athel's had been. "You had the advantage," he muttered behind Athel's ear. "And yet, there he stands. Perhaps there's something to be learned from this pureblood after all, mm?" Talkirk let his hips roll forward against Athel's pointedly.

The man in his embrace drew in a quiet breath, arched his back and tucked his hips against Talkirk's. "Perhaps we should discuss this somewhere quieter."

Talkirk laughed and lifted his head. "The demonstration is over," he announced for the gathered crowd. "Go back to your business," he commanded. "As for you." He nudged Athel again. He waited for the man to turn. "Take him back to the Arc. Jerren."

The young redhead appeared at his side, eyes hopeful.

Talkirk nodded his approval. "I needed to see this. You were right. The choice of beds is yours tonight." He fought down an answering grin at the boy's brilliant smile. "Tell me later. I have a meeting to attend."

Chapter Five

They weren't all against him. Lucan took a little comfort from that thought, but he should have known better. He should have guessed that Athel's invitation to spar hid an excuse to fight.

More to the point, he should have refused. At first bruise, at first blood, there should have been some blow beyond which he stopped and said 'no more'. And yet he hadn't. He'd let his temper reign and his control slip and he'd paid the price with spilled blood of his own.

It felt good.

There were rules in the Warren, times and places when and where fighting could happen. In such close quarters, it would have been easy to start riots or chaos and more without such boundaries. Here, they had room to move, to run and even to get away. Here, there was no need to keep emotion and impulse checked. There was only one law to remember: the Talkirk ruled all.

So Lucan let Athel's barbs work their way beneath his skin. He let them anger him, drive him, keep him moving, and when the first blow landed too solidly to be anything other than an attack, he'd responded in kind. There hadn't been a crowd then. There were voices, yes, but only two or three. The curious, come to gawk over the Pureblood and the Favorite. A few more joined and then there were a dozen. They didn't bother keeping their voices down as they shouted bets to one another, naming odds stacked so much against Lucan that a wiser man might have backed away.

Then he drew blood. He knew it after the blow landed, when the gathered gasped and Athel spat something wet onto the ground. The tang of it reached him a moment later, carried by a breeze, and he stood a little straighter. He didn't grin, wouldn't rub it in, but he'd proved himself now in a way they'd understand. He was not some pitiable inbred fool. He was a capable fighter. He deserved that much respect.

The betting changed. The odds evened out. Someone at the back of the crowd shouted out his name. A second voice joined, then a third. They weren't loud, but it didn't matter. They were loud enough. Someone was on his side and he let that knowledge mingle with the blood humming through his veins. He moved faster, hesitated less. If Athel wanted a fight, he had it.

Until Talkirk arrived. He'd heard the murmuring of the watchers change and known that something was happening. He could hear Athel moving, still circling. He heard him stop, too. Lucan knew Talkirk had arrived in the second before he spoke. It was a hum, a buzz that kicked up under his skin. The scent of heat, the warmth of the spice that surrounded him, traveled to him on a tendril of air. He felt a presence and weight in his mind and somehow against his skin though at least ten paces separated them. Athel said he had been marked. Was this how? Would he always know where the bigger man stood? Did it work in reverse, like some invisible tether? He would have to ask. He *would* ask. Later.

He hissed, now, as warm water trickled over a cut. The boy—not a boy, but younger—with the sponge flinched away and murmured a low apology. "Don't," Lucan told him. "It's all right. Pain lets you know you're alive." He summoned up a smile.

Silence stretched between them, thin and strained, and Lucan ducked his head. "Go ahead. Ask."

"Wh-what? I didn't..."

"I heard you take that breath. You were going to say something, and then you changed your mind. So ask. Or say whichever it is."

His caretaker paused another moment. He dipped and wrung the cloth in his hand and shifted his weight with the creak-and-stretch of tissue as his knees adjusted. Lucan waited patiently.

"If you're really a pureblood, how did you live underground? My father always said that the purebloods were too weak for anything and they all died out."

"Do I seem weak to you?" Lucan asked.

His companion hesitated, then confessed quietly. "I thought so when Athel showed you to us, but not now. Not after..." Another pause and the words tumbled faster from his lips. "Nobody's ever left a mark on Athel before."

Lucan didn't wince. So there'd been more to that match than a simple battle for a place in Talkirk's bed. Athel had a reputation riding on winning. If the fight hadn't been ended, if he hadn't won, he might very well have made good on his threat to kill in order to keep his place.

"Nobody will again, when I've taught you. If," Lucan amended, "Talkirk says I can. We live underground just the same way you live here. It's not harder, I think, though I'd just be guessing. I've never lived on the surface before. But we have places to grow food and sources of water. We sleep, we celebrate, just like you. Choosing to be where we are doesn't make us weak. And I promise," he added, smiling, "we haven't all died out."

There was another footfall at the washroom doorway. Silence fell again and Athel cleared his throat. "You're finished, Jerren. Leave us."

The man who'd tended to his wounds climbed to his feet, murmuring a quick and quiet goodbye. He traded another with Athel then was gone, the faint currents in the room readjusting to the absence of a third body. Lucan climbed to his feet.

"He does good work," Athel commented as if it were an every day thing to say. "Jerren. He has good hands. I'm sure that's why he caught Talkirk's eye. You should feel lucky. Most of them would stick their thumbs in a cut before they managed a bandage or any stitching." He paused and Lucan had the sense that he was being inspected. "Not that you needed any of that, of course."

"Neither did you, I'm guessing," Lucan offered, hands hanging easy at his sides. "And if you did, you have my apologies. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Athel snorted. "Then you're a fool." He settled on the bench beside Lucan, close enough that their shoulders brushed. There was no question of deliberate touch. Even without sight, Lucan knew that Athel did nothing by mistake. "I should think that a man who claims to have come to teach us to survive would know better than to let an opportunity to claim the advantage slip by. You had it over me, and you used it, as you should. You're not sorry for that. If you are, you shouldn't be."

Lucan frowned. "You said you wanted to spar."

"Does that make a difference? Is it different in your caves? Do you play with each other instead of training?" He made another quiet, dismissive sound. "Tell me how you feel." It was more command than request.

It deserved an honest answer. Lucan gave it thought. "My leg aches," he admitted,

splaying his fingers against the bandaged wound. "My ribs are sore. My jaw, too. I'll still be able to walk tomorrow, but sleep may be slow to come tonight."

"Now I feel better." Athel chuckled. "At least you'll remember who you fought. The Talkirk likes a fight," he added, a seemingly random shift of topic. "But you knew that before you came here. How much more did you know?" He paused and in the silence leaned closer. The smell of warm skin filled Lucan's nostrils. He didn't have a delicate scent. The Talkirk's favorite had no need of perfumes or oils to appeal.

Athel's breath tickled Lucan's cheek. "I still don't trust you," he murmured, lips grazing Lucan's jaw. He slid a hand along the inside of Lucan's thigh. His fingers were clever, teasing as he cradled Lucan's balls against his palm. "Not as far as I could toss you," he added, fingers curling just a little shy of too hard to be arousing.

Still, Lucan felt himself twitch and stir, cock hardening. Heat blazed suddenly in his cheeks. Naked, he couldn't hide his body's reaction. He cleared his throat and wet his lips. "I'd call that wise. You don't know me."

"I know enough." He let go, fingers trailing upward against Lucan's hip, grazing the base of his stomach. Athel traced the space around his cock and never let his hand stray close enough to touch. He tortured with intent and Lucan ground his teeth to muffle complaint. "And now I see why the Talkirk took you to his bed. Are all of you built so generously?" Though he didn't laugh, the promise of it warmed his voice.

Lucan's, in response, was tight. "I wouldn't know."

"Pity. I might want one of you for myself." He moved, standing as abruptly as he sat.

In his absence, Lucan struggled not to shiver. He didn't cover his lap now that he could. What would be the point? "What do you think you know about me?"

Athel sighed a long, bored breath. "That whether or not I like you, we're better off with you here. I have seen a great many men come and demonstrate their fighting skill at the Talkirk's side. None of them had your grace or such control of power. And they fought with eyes wide. At the very least, you'll be good for us in the Arc." He sighed again. "It can be tedious, waiting for a turn."

In the Talkirk's bed, he meant. Lucan didn't need to ask to understand. "I remember ten names."

"There are twelve," Athel corrected. "Not counting you. He never goes above that number and rarely goes below, so your addition makes the rest of us understandably nervous, I think."

"I didn't mean..."

"You ought to stop saying that," Athel interrupted. "It makes you sound weak. Like you speak without thinking. A man like that is easily influenced. Corrupted. He's not safe to have around, if you understand me."

"I do," Lucan admitted slowly. He had a point.

"You learn quickly, too," Athel said, amusement in the words again. Lucan heard liquid poured then footsteps coming close. Athel caught his hand and curled it around a cup. "Drink. It will help with the pain."

Lucan lifted the cup to his lips, then paused, curious. "Why do you want me healed?"

"Because you're no good to us if you're broken and limping," he answered without missing a beat. He moved and Lucan heard the subtle snap of flame being struck. "If you're too damaged to teach, then you're too injured to take to bed. And if the Talkirk's new toy is already broken, I can promise that the toy won't be the one held accountable."

Now that fit more with what Lucan had learned thus far about Athel. Oddly, it put him at ease. "You're protecting yourself by helping me."

"And so the teacher learns from the student." He stopped in front of Lucan again. "Come on. I'll dress you." He curled his fingers under Lucan's elbow. "And then we'll eat. Fainting with hunger won't please anyone either. Step up."

Lucan stepped over the lip of the tub and let Athel guide him. "One day you'll have to tell me exactly how you came to be here."

Athel laughed lowly again. "No, I won't, but I may."

* * * *

Talkirk chewed the last bit of meat from a narrow bone as his door swung open. He hardly looked up. He knew who'd come and had no reason to be alarmed. He had no doubt that, if he'd been duped, he could take care of himself.

His visitor wasn't so assured. "You should have locked it," Delano scolded as he pushed the door shut behind him again. "I could have been delayed."

Talkirk licked gravy off the pad of his thumb. "Would locking it have made you come any sooner?"

"That's not the point."

"It is to me." He tossed the bone down on his plate and leaned back in his chair. It protested under his weight. "Sit. Please."

"We have business to discuss." Delano held himself as though he'd rather be somewhere else.

Talkirk narrowed his eyes. "We do, but I'm asking for your company as much as your advice. We agreed that this wouldn't be an issue between us when I brought you up the ranks with me."

"We did," his second acknowledged. "And it's not." He relaxed his posture and came to sit across the table. After a brief hesitation, he reached for the bottle that stood between them and filled a cup.

Talkirk allowed himself a murmur of pleasure. "Good. Have you eaten?"

Delano nodded. "Halima cooked. Don't let me stop you."

"You didn't. I've finished." He picked up the discarded bone again and used the splintered end to clean under his fingernails. "What domestic bliss."

"Don't, Cymren. We agreed."

Talkirk's gaze flicked up to meet Delano's. It lingered there a long while before he sat back again, acquiescing. "So give me the report you're bursting with. I am, as the old saying goes, all ears."

Delano drank deep before he started to talk. "There are eight of us willing to travel. Capable men, well-trained. I trust them at my back and side."

"And," Talkirk prompted when Delano paused.

His second's eyebrows lifted in question. "And?"

"And." He pursed his lips. "What aren't you telling me that I need to know?"

Delano lifted his cup again. "We've agreed to go on the condition that you stay in the cairn."

Talkirk let him drink until he'd emptied the cup. He sat, unmoving, watching his old friend until their gazes met again, as eventually they must. Then, and only then, did he let one corner of his mouth quirk up. "Do they know you're here, giving away the secret plan

to keep me at home?"

"It isn't a secret plan. There's no reason not to tell you. It's not safe for you to go."

"So this is a danger that applies only to me? Am I somehow more delicate than the men you chose?"

"No. You know very well that that isn't what I mean."

"Do I?" Talkirk held Delano's gaze again. "Explain to me how I'm misunderstanding then."

Delano exhaled a sharp breath. "We've discussed this before. You can't put yourself at risk. Much as you don't like to admit it, you are fallible. You can be hurt. And this plan of yours could lead directly to an ambush. As your second, as your *friend*," he clarified, reaching across the table to grip Talkirk's wrist, "I would be remiss in my duties if I let you come along."

Talkirk studied Delano's fingers against his skin. A part of him understood the urge to protect. That small voice of reason agreed that he should stay, let other men risk their lives to find out whether Lucan was telling the truth.

It could not drown out the larger part. "I've heard your objections," he murmured, "and I take them seriously." He inhaled, filling his lungs and deepening his voice. "But I will be a member of your party in the morning. I will lead the way to the pureblood caves and back, and if there's any trouble, I will lead the fight." Delano gathered himself to argue and Talkirk clasped his friend's wrist in turn. "It's not open to negotiation, Delano. I'm going."

For a moment he thought he might have a fight on his hands. He had seen that flash of fire in Delano's eye before. He knew the stubborn set of his jaw all too well. But then his second relented, chin lifting just enough to be a surrender. A subtle show of throat.

"Of course you will. As you will, Talkirk." He drew his hand back. "I should go."

Talkirk watched him stand, shoulders stiff, and that same small voice spoke regret. Before he'd taken up the mantle of leadership, he might have let Delano sway him and make him cautious. Now, for all the reasons his friend felt the need to protect him, Talkirk couldn't afford to let it happen. He was the leader. If his strength and will looked weak, someone would challenge him. If he lost, he died.

He wasn't ready for that yet. He stood as well as Delano turned and stepped to the door. "I'll see you in the morning, old friend."

Delano hardly turned his head back, though he nodded. "Yes, in the morning. Sleep well, Talkirk." He let himself out without a glance back.

Talkirk snatched the bottle with what was left of the wine and stormed into his sleeping quarters. It would be a restless night.

Chapter Six

It was a long trek to the caves the next morning.

Talkirk moved like a man on an important mission. He took long strides, not looking behind to see if the rest of the party could keep up. Temper as much as determination drove him forward that way. How dare they? The words churned through his mind. How dare they conspire to make him look like a fool. Protect him, Delano insisted, but the results would be the same. Staying safe and hidden in the cairn's embrace would reassure no one if it was found out.

There were other reasons to move quickly. As the time for the next eclipse drew closer, the sun above Shadow burned more brightly. It had something to do with the movement of planets and position of the stars, Talkirk remembered vaguely from the lessons of his childhood.

The facts were unimportant. What mattered to him were the hotter and brighter days. Alone, a man might wander into the vast nothingness of the plains and die. Even in a party like this one, they could hallucinate or lose their way. Better to move quickly, find shelter and get back.

The caves ahead loomed over Talkirk and the rest as they trekked across the expanse of open land. If, as they suspected, this stand of rock somehow connected to the other formations, then even now they could be marching over countless enemies.

Perhaps the men who Lucan claimed lived underground were listening, counting footfalls and planning the ambush Delano feared. If that was the case, Talkirk thought eagerly, then let them come.

Someone fell into step beside him. He knew without looking that it was Delano. No one else would dare without announcing themselves. But his second assumed the place by his shoulder as if he'd been born to it. There had always been this silent agreement between them. No one else could claim the right to walk in that place.

When they stepped into the shadow of the formation, the group broke in half. Now Talkirk traded a look with his companion. They nodded to one another. This was familiar. They'd lead teams together when they were simply soldiers in the last Talkirk's army. They didn't need to discuss their tactics. They knew each other well enough to assume and act.

They waited though. They watched the mouth of the cave before them, open and midnight black inside. Talkirk's heart sped, missing a beat or two. It felt almost like facing down a beast, waiting for it give some sign that it would attack. Watching for the tell-tale twitch of muscle that signaled a fight. He curled his toes, flexed his fingers. He tensed his muscles group by group, and relaxed them, bleeding off the urge to charge.

The attack didn't come. No wave of pale-skinned bodies came rushing into the open to defend their homes. They heard nothing but the sound of the wind that poured out of the tunnel ahead, cool and stale. Talkirk breathed it deep, scenting it for any hint of danger. He tasted earth and rock, but not a trace of skin. Nothing living. He glanced over his shoulder at Delano and shook his head.

So they moved. Delano and his four took up the lead. They threaded through the yawning mouth of the cave and disappeared into darkness. Talkirk shifted his weight,

leaning forward to catch the first sounds of struggle or voices raised in alarm. When neither came, he beckoned his group forward, pausing at the opening for only a moment before stepping into shadows himself.

The scent grew stronger here, almost cloying. Talkirk lifted a hand to cover his mouth and nose, a makeshift filter to breathe through. The air felt heavy and damp. It swirled in circles against his skin. He peered into nothing, eyes moving as he sought something to focus on, some deeper shadow in the darkness to use as a point of reference.

And with time he picked it out. He saw the shoulder of the man beside him first, a subtle shift of shadow from the corner of his eye. He could see another, further away, and realized over the next few moments that there were shafts of dim light filtering into the cave. Motes of dust and disturbed earth swirled in the narrow columns. Holes in the roof of the cave, Talkirk noticed, as he padded toward a pool of light. They were far overhead and too small to let in enough daylight to make the deepest shadows clear, but more than enough to see by once his eyes adjusted.

The cave they stood in was both tall and wide, and bigger by far than he expected when sizing up the rocks from outside. The temperature dropped by several degrees. A smaller man, Talkirk reasoned, might consider it cold. There were a few smaller spears of rock jutting up from the floor, taller than he stood. They had been smoothed, he found, as he laid his hand against the nearest. There were no rough edges, the pocks and nooks in the stone worn down perhaps by time and wind, perhaps by living hands.

But no weapons fired, no alarms sounded. There'd still been no ambush and no sudden appearance of any living man. If this was an occupied cave, those who lived here had done a good job of hiding themselves. Just as Lucan said they would. *Just as he said.*

"Talkirk." Delano stopped at his shoulder. "There are tunnels," he pointed out, gesturing toward one end of the cave. He spoke in a murmur, words pitched low so they wouldn't echo. "The floor slopes down. If there are men living here, beneath the surface, then surely that is where we'll find them."

Talkirk squinted as if he could somehow make the shadows part and reveal their secrets. "Then that is the way we go. Shoulder to shoulder," he told his commander. The men would move in pairs. They could sweep both sides of the tunnel that way, finding hidden openings and guarding one another from behind.

"Of course," Delano said. "On your command."

Talkirk took one last deep lungful of damp air, and exhaled loudly. "Let's find Lucan's friends."

* * * *

Someone in his childhood told Lucan once that blind men didn't dream. When he argued, they ignored him. How could eyes that didn't see create pictures in a sleeping mind? Impossible, they said. Dreams weren't felt or heard or tasted. Without pictures, it was a child's foolishness. He'd simply made it up.

He learned to keep his dreams to himself. It didn't stop them from coming.

Talkirk was a presence in this one, impossible to ignore. He became billowing waves of heat and the sound of breath drawn deep. When he moved, the earth trembled beneath him and the air responded, surging around him like the ripples in a pool of water.

He was the sweet tang of wine against Lucan's tongue and the dry grit of sand against his skin. He felt the calluses on Talkirk's palm as the broad hand wrapped his

cock and thick, demanding fingers began to stroke. He strained off the mattress, arching up into his touch. He closed his hand against a solid shoulder, digging his fingers into muscle that hardly yielded to his touch.

"Mine," the rough voice rumbled in Lucan's ear as the strokes went on. "Mine to do with as I please. Always mine." The flat of his thumb curved over the head of Lucan's cock and Lucan jerked, a whimper jarred out of him.

"Yours," he panted in response. "Yours, only yours, please don't stop."

Laughter surrounded Lucan, low and thick and pleased as Talkirk moved, shifted behind him and pushed Lucan up. He rested now against the broad chest, strong arms around him as he worked him toward climax.

But the bones beneath his fingers when he curled his hand around his master's were narrow, almost delicate. The lips against the shell of his ear were soft and curved. The laughter held a soft edge, mocking rather than amused.

Lucan stilled despite his body's demands. "Athel." When had he crossed the threshold from sleep to waking? He couldn't be sure. He only knew without a doubt that he no longer dreamed.

"Oh good," the man still behind him murmured, letting go his grip slowly. "I wondered when you'd notice, or if you would at all." He bit Lucan's ear, hard enough that Lucan expected to bleed.

"I noticed," he answered, muscle tensing. "Why are you in my bed?"

Athel exhaled, warm breath against Lucan's shoulder. "You cried out so sweetly. I thought you might enjoy the touch of someone else's hand."

And he had. Lucan couldn't deny it. He'd sought pleasure, thrust through Athel's fingers but it was all in the dream. If he'd known...

If he'd known, then what, he would have stopped himself? He knew better. He'd been claimed by the Talkirk and the Talkirk alone. In every sense that mattered, he was owned, and a possession could not give itself away. It didn't matter how good Athel's hands felt on him, he wasn't free to enjoy them. He wouldn't let himself. Everything was a test in the Cairn. He wouldn't pass the rest just to fail when it came to this.

"I'm not yours to touch."

Lucan caught himself on his elbows when Athel stood abruptly. "It's long past time you were up," his rival said, voice gone tight and crisp. "Your students are waiting."

Lucan swung his feet over the side of his bed. "Students?" He reached for bedclothes, pulling them over his lap. Again, it was too little too late, a token effort for no reason. Athel knew how to play him.

And missed nothing. He laughed and tugged the blanket away, then pulled Lucan to his feet. "Students," he echoed. "You claim to have come to teach. So. Teach." He thrust clothing into Lucan's hands. "I trust that you can dress yourself, though if you need me..."

Lucan pursed his lips. "I can dress myself. Where will this class take place?"

"In the courtyard, of course." Athel stood across the room now. No doubt he watched as Lucan dressed. There were times when Lucan felt grateful that he couldn't tell for sure. "You're our hero, our savior come to teach us to survive. And after our little match yesterday, there's no reason to hide you. Let anyone who wants to, watch. Unless you object." His voice rose at the end, as if he might really be asking.

Lucan wouldn't walk into that trap. He tucked his shirt and fastened his pants. "I

don't," he promised and reached for his staff.

His fingers closed on empty air. He straightened, feeling sick as he heard the click of metal—a ring or one of Athel's many bangles—against wood and felt the breeze as the other man spun the weapon in his hands.

"I wondered why you favored this thing," he said, nonchalantly casual, as if unaware that he had the upper hand. "I think I understand now. It feels good in my hands. Like a part of me," he mused before the end snapped out, whistling toward Lucan's ears.

He lifted a hand and blocked the blow, palm stinging where it hit. He curled his fingers and twisted the wood under his arm, off-balancing Athel. He heard the startled gasp and pulled. He felt the other man stumble to recover. But now Lucan had the staff in his control.

He let it slide through his fingers to rest beside his foot. "It may be, with practice," he agreed, biting back the urge to smile. No need to add insult to wounded pride. "We should go," he said instead, stepping toward the door where Athel stood.

They walked one hundred and seventeen steps in silence.

Then Athel announced him to—how many? A dozen, at least. The air churned around him, pushed and turned into dizzying eddies by the movement of so many bodies in one place. There were observers too, murmuring lowly to one another at the edges of his hearing. Had a crowd gathered again as it had for the fight?

"Well?" Talkirk's favorite prompted when silence stretched a little too thin. "We're waiting, teacher."

Lucan pursed his lips and moved forward, finding the edge of the platform they stood on with his toes before he stepped down. As he suspected. Athel wouldn't make this easy and if he could make the newcomer look a fool, so much the better.

He stopped when he felt the heat and solid presence of another body. Lucan squared his shoulder and lifted his chin. He hoped he faced the man as he asked, "What is your name?"

"Ruan," came the answer and Lucan felt some relief. He knew this voice, had listened to him tell stories the night before. He had a lilt to his voice that was rhythmic, almost soothing. Lucan imagined his voice might be good for singing songs.

"Ruan," he echoed with a slight nod. "May I touch you?"

There was a pause, then a low rumble of laughter. "May I keep my clothes on?" Other men around them laughed as well, a ripple that extended out to the edges of the audience.

"You may," he allowed, grinning in return. "I need to know how you're built, what training would suit you best."

"Then touch," Ruan invited.

Lucan tucked his staff into the crook of his arm and took a half-step closer, hands lifting. It wasn't hard to find Ruan's shoulders or explore them with his fingertips.

What he felt didn't surprise him. Thick muscle covered very solid, dense bone. Ruan stood not so much taller than Lucan that he had to stretch, but he was broader built, like all of those who lived on the surface. His fingers traced Ruan's arms. He tested Ruan's grip and his arm strength. He squatted to skim his hands over thickly muscled thighs and straightened with a better picture of the man he was meant to train.

So it went. Lucan inspected each of his "students", repeating questions and exploring with his hands. He learned which of them had stronger legs than arms, and vice versa. He

had theories about who could grapple and wrestle and who would be better with a weapon in his hands.

The lessons began. Not, to the group's disappointment, with sticks and swords and eager bloodshed, but with movement. With preparation. Lucan taught them to make fists when he discovered that the strongest of them tucked his thumb inside his fingers when he balled his hand.

Despite their protestations, once he had them moving no one wasted breath or energy on complaints. Even Athel kept quiet while Lucan used him to demonstrate how to break a hold or twist out of an enemy's grip.

He paired them against one another then, letting them discover for themselves that size guaranteed nothing and being weaker than an opponent issued no true disadvantage. He let the murmurs of the ever-growing crowd tell him whether he should interfere. When the audience erupted in cheers and applause, he called a halt to the impromptu match, ordered the two who struggled to shake hands, then moved on to the next. He had no favorites. He punished no one.

Lucan felt the angle of the sun move as they trained. Hours passed and none of the chosen seemed to notice as the heat grew. Fair-skinned and smaller, Lucan knew that he was more affected than they would be, but it wouldn't do to let them work themselves to unconsciousness, either. The Talkirk, indulgent though he might be, would never let him get away with that.

So he called out, "That's enough for one day," and waited through the chorus of protests from his students and the watchers alike. "Tomorrow," he promised. "Tomorrow we'll do more. You need to eat. Have something to drink." *Let me have a minute in the shade.*

"One more demonstration." Athel's voice. He touched the small of Lucan's back as he stepped up beside him. "You've told us how it ought to work, but words can be deceiving. Show us now. I volunteer to let you use me as an example." There were murmurs of encouragement.

Athel spoke beneath them, words meant only for Lucan's ear. "I won't even throw the fight. I won't need to. You're the expert, teacher."

Lucan frowned. He reached for Athel's shoulder and answered in kind. "It's not about fighting, Athel. It's not about me and you."

Athel shrugged off his hand. "Yes, it is. Everything's about me and you, pureblood. Fight or refuse me."

Refuse him and look weak. The words echoed through Lucan's mind. Athel would only stop challenging him when he had no more need. He would either come out on top, or Lucan would prove himself. Only one of those choices held any appeal. "One last match."

He passed his staff to Ruan and stepped off the platform. He could feel the space around them grow as the onlookers drew back to form a circle again. "No bloodshed," he warned Athel. "That's not what this is about."

"I don't intend to bleed," Athel answered and charged. His body crashed into Lucan's, sending him stumbling backward. "Of course, I can only speak for myself."

When he came again, Lucan was ready. Athel grabbed at his shoulders and Lucan ducked away, coming up inside Athel's reach. He wound his arms hard around Athel's ribs and held him, cheek crushed against the other man's chest.

He could hear Athel's lungs bellow. He heard bone and sinew creak. He closed his eyes to avoid long fingers that pushed and pried at his arms. Though he couldn't be blinded again, a finger in the eye would still hurt enough to distract him and end the match abruptly.

They were both soon slicked with sweat and grips became harder to hold. Lucan once caught Athel behind the knee and jerked his leg out from under him. The other man grunted as he crashed to earth. He lashed out too quickly for Lucan to avoid and they both thrashed against the ground, struggling to push off another grip as they reclaimed their feet.

The thundering beat of his own heart deafened Lucan. He missed the change in the tenor of the crowd, failed to notice until too late that an uncomfortable silence had descended. When a heavy hand gripped his shoulder, Lucan turned and lashed out, balled fist snapping up to collide with a thickly muscled chest.

Not Athel. Talkirk, who hardly flinched at the blow. His fingers curled under bone and he hauled Lucan close, pulling him onto his toes. His breath was hot and harsh as he demanded, "Why did you lie to me?"

Chapter Seven

The crowd of anxious onlookers scattered under Talkirk's glare. As well they should. He wasn't in the mood to be gawked at. He hadn't come back to have his business on display.

Lucan didn't answer, startled into speechlessness. He wet his lips and his brow furrowed, but he didn't speak. His fingers curled and flexed.

Talkirk rumbled and wrapped his hand around the back of Lucan's neck, fingers biting into flesh on either side of his spine. The smaller man curled in on himself, the hold as effective as disabling him. Wherever his master directed now, he would go without resisting.

"Go back to your work," Talkirk demanded of the last stragglers. "Go home. Athel." The name weighed heavy on his lips and tongue. He was no more pleased with the golden-haired man than with the pureblood. "Take them back to the Arc. None of you are to leave again without my permission."

Athel slid close, pitching his voice low. He plucked at Talkirk's tunic, but didn't meet his master's gaze. "I don't understand why you're angry. I only brought him out to do what you asked of me."

On another day, he might have let this act sway him. He might have taken mercy on the man he claimed as his favorite, let Athel soothe his nerves and calm him. Another day. Not now. He caught Athel's jaw in his free hand and pulled him close by his chin. "You are abiding by my word and mocking me with timing. I have no patience for it. I've told you what to do."

Athel's eyes closed, a faint line creasing the smooth skin between his eyebrows. When he looked up at Talkirk again, the barest hint of fear showed in his gaze. "Yes, Talkirk, of course. We'll go back to the Arc." His attention drifted to Lucan, still held hapless in the other hand. His lips thinned but he held his peace. He tugged his chin free of Talkirk's grip, bowed just enough not to be insulting, then faced the rest of the waiting men.

"You heard him," he called out. "Back to the Arc. Now. We've had enough sunlight today."

Talkirk didn't watch them go. He turned his attention back to Lucan and curled his fingers harder. "Move," he commanded, steering his captive across the courtyard to the metal stairs that wound up to his rooms. "Step up," he warned and propelled him forward, not letting go his grip until they reached his door.

Only when he'd closed it again did he turn Lucan loose, sending him stumbling away a few steps. Better that there was distance between them. Talkirk turned his back to compose himself.

When he looked again, Lucan had drawn himself up, square-shouldered and prepared. He looked like he thought he could weather anything if he held himself tightly enough. If he braced himself against whatever might come. It was almost enough to make Talkirk laugh.

Almost.

"Did you know," he began, not moving toward Lucan yet. "Did you know that we

would find nothing when we followed your directions?"

Lucan's forehead wrinkled. He tilted his head. "My directions? What do you mean? What directions did I give?"

"To your home," Talkirk reminded him, watching every twitch. "To the rocks and caves where you grew up. The ones you claim hide an army waiting to attack."

Lucan paled to even less than his usual color. "I didn't tell you how to get there."

Talkirk grunted and made a dismissive gesture. "You told us enough. I'm not a stupid man. It was easy enough to find."

Lucan only whispered. "What happened?"

Was that genuine concern in his expression? Talkirk stepped toward him now, heavy-footed so Lucan would be sure to feel his approach. "We explored," he answered. "We looked for traps. For a security system, for weapons. We followed the tunnels down. We searched for some sign of this terrible threat." He stopped a hand's breadth away. "Do you know what we found?"

Lucan shook his head mutely. Talkirk watched him swallow and pursed his lips. He reached into his tunic where the lone artifact rested, a palpable if easily ignored shape against his ribs. He tugged it free and slapped it hard against Lucan's chest. "This."

Lucan flinched and fumbled a hand up to catch it, exploring cloth and the hard sole of the shoe he clutched with deft fingers. His frown deepened as he turned it over, eyes moving as though he sought some visual clue. "Nothing else?"

"Nothing," Talkirk confirmed. "Not a pipe, not a conduit, not a scrap of wire. So I ask again. Did you know that we would find nothing? Did you mean to make me look a fool in front of my men?"

"No." Lucan shook his head, still frowning. "No, I wouldn't. I meant the warning. Maybe you went to the wrong caves. There are many..."

"There is one formation within a day's walk of the Cairn," Talkirk interrupted. "So you lied. You came from somewhere else and lied. Why?" He caught the back of Lucan's neck again. "Why distract us?" He shook him. "Why this trick?"

"It's not a trick," Lucan insisted. "I didn't know. They were there when I left. Talkirk, please, you have to believe me."

"Do I?" The question came out in a rumble. "I don't know you. Delano could be right. Maybe you're a spy. Sent to distract me from some other attack. Why, then, must I believe you? Why should I let you live?"

To his credit, Lucan thought before blurting out an answer. He weighed his words, shifting as much as he could in Talkirk's grip. "If I were a distraction, would I stay? Wouldn't it make more sense to give my warning and disappear again, leaving you scratching your head? It would be better to unbalance you, confuse you in the face of an oncoming attack." He reached up with one hand and gripped Talkirk's arm. "If the plan all along was to trick you into being lax, I'd have left your bed that first night."

He took deep breaths now, streaks of high color on his cheeks. Whether fear or desperation made him tremble was hard to tell. He couldn't see the shivers but Talkirk felt them beneath his hand. Muscle tensed and quivered and jumped. He could see Lucan's pulse hammering hard and fast in his throat.

It reminded him of the feel of it racing against his tongue on the day they'd met. Of the smell and taste of Lucan, startled and unprepared for being claimed so thoroughly. He remembered Lucan's needy gasps for air and the soft, unbidden sounds of pleasure that

escaped him as Talkirk's hands explored his body.

"You wanted to be in my bed." It wasn't a question, words tumbling past Talkirk's lips a low-voiced accusation. "You wanted me."

Lucan's eyes closed at last. "Yes. More than I imagined. More than I knew."

Talkirk leaned closer, mouth nearly grazing the pureblood's. "Do you want me still?"

As he had the first night, Lucan made a sound of surprised desire and struggled out of Talkirk's grip to close the little distance left between them, his lips moving eagerly as he kissed. He stepped closer, pressing his body against Talkirk's. He dropped the shoe he'd been handed and flattened his hands against Talkirk's chest instead, thumbs stroking up the cleft between muscles. He bit Talkirk's bottom lip.

Talkirk jerked his head away. "If you betray me," he warned lowly, pushing Lucan's chin up to expose his throat.

"I won't," Lucan promised.

"I will kill you."

"I know." His hips rolled forward, thrusting his mounting erection against the bigger man's hip.

Talkirk rumbled again, the sound louder, deeper. His cock thickened in response, trapped uncomfortably in his pants. He reached between them, twisting the fastenings open. He let go of Lucan's neck, gathering a handful of hair instead. With that grip, he urged the pureblood to his knees.

Lucan went easily. Eagerly. Without complaint. Those long-fingered hands of his slid beneath loosened fabric and pushed Talkirk's pants down. Warm breath washed over his erection as Lucan mouthed at him, tongue and lips teasing him even harder. Yes, this was what *he* wanted. What he needed after the wasted day. He let his hips move, thrusting against Lucan's cheek.

There was no uncertain hesitation. The pureblood curled one hand around the shaft of his cock and guided Talkirk to his mouth. He licked first, tongue gliding over sensitive skin. He closed his lips just over the head, a hum thrilling through Talkirk's length. "More," he insisted, and Lucan complied. He opened his mouth wider and Talkirk thrust into the wet heat of his mouth. He fisted his hand against Lucan's scalp and clenched his teeth. Yes!

Lucan's head bobbed, Talkirk's cock sliding deeper with every thrust. He sucked and Talkirk's balls drew up tight, pleasure building too quickly to hold back. It felt, in truth, as though some part of him was being pulled out through his cock. Not in pain, but in pleasure. Every part of him participated in rising to the climax. His breath shortened and his heart pounded, making his temples ache. He let his head fall back and let go with a full-voiced shout, spilling himself in heavy pulses against Lucan's tongue.

In the moments after, Lucan murmured something Talkirk couldn't remember for the ringing of his ears. The pureblood cleaned him with soft caresses that made his body jerk. He kissed Talkirk's thighs and rested his cheek against his hip. "I wanted to," he murmured now, more clearly. "I wanted *you*."

Talkirk hauled him to his feet and kissed him, crushing their mouths together hard enough that it made his own sting. He turned them, giving Lucan no room or opportunity to protest and went to the bed, tossing the pureblood down on it roughly. There was a time and a place for gentle touches and consideration. That time was not now.

He stripped Lucan of his clothing and added his own to the pile, then crawled onto

the bed, his knees wedged between Lucan's. When the smaller man twisted, turning onto his stomach, Talkirk stopped him with a heavy hand. "No." His fingers trailed over ribs and stomach and hip to curl around Lucan's cock and stroke him once from base to head. "I want to see you."

Lucan arched with a gasp and a whimper, fingers splaying against his own stomach. He chewed his swollen bottom lip when Talkirk thrust one thick finger into his opening, then worked a second in, stretching and preparing him with something less than caution. He cried out sharply when Talkirk pushed in, Lucan's fingers digging into his shoulders. Lucan lifted his hips to meet Talkirk's, tight heat gripping the man inside him.

Something tender threatened the blazing *need* that drove Talkirk on. The shifts of expression playing over Lucan's narrow features mattered. It was important to know which touch felt better than the others, to see color flood his lover's cheeks and know that it was because of him that Lucan's breath caught and his brow furrowed. A feeling, as warm as Lucan's skin but as alien as his unnatural grace, settled under Talkirk's ribs, making each breath a little less steady, making his thrusts less sure. What was it about Lucan that affected him this way? Why couldn't he push it aside, ignore it rather than keeping it at bay? What power did the pureblood have over him?

It ended quickly, Talkirk's puzzling over the whys of what he felt robbing him of the ability to hold back from collapsing into pleasure a second time. He came, buried deep in Lucan's body, and stroked the man determinedly through a desperate, gasping orgasm of his own. When the last shudders had passed for them both, Talkirk pushed away. He climbed to his feet and paced to his washroom, cleaning himself with a towel. He spoke from there, looking back over to the bed where Lucan lay, still catching his breath.

"Don't come back here, to the room or to my bed, until this business is settled between us."

Lucan pushed himself onto his stomach, then to his knees. "What? Why? What business?"

"Your people not being where you said they were. Your caves being empty." He tossed the towel toward the collection bin. "Until I know the truth of whether I can trust you, you are not welcome here." Until he knew whether he could trust himself to listen to reason and sense and not give in to feeling instead.

Lucan sat a moment, brow furrowed. Then he moved to the edge of the bed and felt for his clothing, separating them from the tangle on the floor. He dressed and gathered himself, stood and made his way across the room to retrieve the staff left leaning by the door. Only then did he turn back, take a breath and hold it before saying, "As you will, Talkirk."

Then he was gone. Talkirk was alone, as he'd commanded. As he wanted. He stepped into the shower to wash off the feel, the scent of Lucan on his skin. The Cairn needed its leader, not a man confused by new lust and newer emotions. It was better this way.

No matter how it felt.

* * * *

"That was quick. What did you do wrong?"

Lucan's shoulders tightened, lifting toward his ears at the sound of Athel's voice. It rang rich with amusement though the other man didn't quite laugh. Lucan steeled himself and turned into the room.

"He didn't find what he was looking for," he answered flatly. There were twenty-seven paces across the open space to the door of the bathing room. He wanted nothing more than to wash and soak and forget the afternoon's, the evening's, humiliation.

It wouldn't be that easy, not with Athel eager for answers. He moved and drifted closer to Lucan, curiosity an almost palpable aura around him. "What was he looking for?"

Lucan's jaw worked. "Home."

"Yours?"

"Yes." It wasn't often that Lucan regretted his inability to see. He did now, acutely. How could he prove whether the Talkirk had gone to the wrong caves or not if he couldn't see their shape, couldn't describe their size or location by anything other than the things he knew? The time it took an echo to cross the space of a room, the smell of the air, the feel of the rocks beneath his fingers and how they differed from one another?

"And he blames you?" Athel stayed at Lucan's side as they stepped over the threshold and onto the bathing room's slick floor.

"He thinks I lied," Lucan answered. Why shouldn't he? Talkirk would tell his favorite, he knew. There were no secrets here.

"Did you?" Athel sounded thrilled.

Lucan scowled. "You're all alike" he snapped. "So ready to believe that everything I've said is a joke. A trick or a misdirection. No," he said, facing where Athel should be. "I did not lie. If he went to the caves I mentioned, then he should have found them. The others should be there. Hidden, perhaps, but not so well that they couldn't be found. If he'd taken me..."

"He doesn't trust you," Athel pointed out.

Hearing someone else voice what had only just become clear was almost too much to bear. Lucan tensed, rather than letting himself flinch. He lifted his chin but didn't turn his head. Their eyes might not meet but he would not give Athel the benefit of making him seem to look away.

"No," he agreed. "He doesn't trust me." Admitting it made it real. It made Lucan's chest feel hollow. He moved deeper into the bathing room. "I'm to stay here until—unless—he sends for me."

"The bath room in particular?"

Lucan smirked. "In the Arc." He leaned his staff against one wall and began pulling his clothes off. "I'm sorry there's not more space. I don't think he meant the punishment to effect you too."

Athel snorted indelicately. "Don't be so sure of that. The Talkirk very rarely makes a decision without understanding what it means for everyone." He moved behind Lucan, lightly touching his back as he passed. Water splashed and he reported, "Still warm." When Lucan reached the edge, Athel took his hand. "Sit down."

Puzzled, he did as he was told. When a soft cloth touched his shoulder, water spilling down his chest and back in rivulets, he sucked in a breath and murmured, "You don't have to wash me."

Athel tsked. "Of course I don't." He didn't stop, lifting Lucan's hand and washing him to the fingertips. The cloth touched his neck then and brushed his cheek. "Take comfort in the fact that all he did was chase you out. The last man he thought betrayed him never left the Cairn again. Talkirk broke him and left the cleaning up to his men."

Lucan shuddered. "And had he? Betrayed Talkirk?"

"We never knew," Athel said, voice gone a little distant as if it took effort to recall. "There certainly wasn't time to ask. No one's been accused, since."

Lucan's heart beat hard behind his ribs. "Are you trying to comfort me," he asked when Athel moved to his other side, "or scare me into keeping silent with him?"

The smile was back in Athel's voice. "Which one's working?"

In truth, Lucan didn't know the answer. Certainly he heard the warning in the story. And, as Athel pointed out, he hadn't met the same abrupt and violent end. Was that a victory? Shouldn't he take it as one, whether intentional or not?

He stayed silent a while, examining his thoughts while Athel passed the cloth across his shoulders, lifting his hair out of the way. While he would still not count Talkirk's favorite as a friend, he thought that he might number him at least an ally. He had no choice but to trust him enough to ask the question weighing on his mind.

"How do I prove myself," he murmured, hardly daring to breathe. The cloth stilled against his ribs and Lucan tried again. "Athel? I'm asking. I am laid bare. How do I prove to the Talkirk that I'm what I say and nothing more? Not a traitor. Not a liar. Do you know?" His heart pounded. "Will you help me?"

The silence stretched. Neither of them moved, though Lucan knew Athel hadn't left. Now and then he heard him take a breath. Eventually the other man sat on the bench beside him. Their shoulders brushed, and once contact had been made, Athel leaned against him as if he'd exhausted all his strength.

Lucan frowned. "Are you..."

"Trying to decide whether to help my rival or not." He exhaled laughter. "Do you mean to replace me, Lucan? Is that what you want? Having tasted Talkirk, do you hunger to be first among us?" A long finger laid against Lucan's lips when he took a breath to speak. "Answer me truthfully," Athel warned.

Lucan caught his hand at the wrist and pulled it from his mouth. "I want, I will *need*, a place here," he confessed. "But I never meant to cost anyone else theirs. I'd be content to have a room and meals and to train you to fight."

Athel laughed again. "Liar."

Lucan's cheeks heated. "All right. I will settle for that if I must," he amended. "But the answer is the same. No, Athel, I don't want to replace you. I couldn't, and we all know that. The Talkirk knows it too." He still had his fingers curled around Athel's wrist. "So I ask again. Will you help me?"

The silence this time was shorter, less weighty. Athel tugged his wrist free of Lucan's grip and pressed the washcloth into his hand instead. "Wash my back," he instructed, turning away. "And we'll come up with something that will earn you his attention again. What you do once you have it is not up to me, but we'll turn his eye toward you. Press harder, there. That's good."

Chapter Eight

Naliq put his shoulder against rock and pushed. It hadn't been built to be easy to move. It took effort, more than one man's weight against either side. There'd be no point in hiding if the false doors were easy to open. If anyone could stumble into the depths of the warren, then what security did they have?

That didn't mean having to hide at all pleased him. Muscle stretched and strained and the stone slid sideways, letting a current of cool, fresher air in. The murmur of voices raised in relief washed over him. He closed his eyes and basked for a moment.

"That's it." Gyre clapped him on the shoulder. "The tunnels are open again. Not to worry," he promised with a grin. "I sent scouts up to make sure the caves were clear. They're gone, whoever they were."

"We know who they were, Gyre," Naliq countered, though he purposefully unknitted his brow for his friend's sake. "They're the cairn dwellers. The ones Lucan went to find."

Lucan. His brother's name nearly choked him now. Speaking it aloud made his jaw feel tight. His hands balled into fists. Lucan. He wouldn't call his brother a betrayer. The boy was just confused.

He was a dreamer and always had been. When they were small, their father excused it by saying that his mind needed training. He had to find new ways to entertain himself. There were no pictures to see, for him. He couldn't play hiding or chasing games with Naliq and his friends. There were too many corners, too many sharp drops for the boys to be trusted to watch over him. He bored easily and his imagination made the best companion.

But now? Now he should have known better. By now he should have understood that the stories were just that. Stories. Impossible to make real. Wanting to touch the stars wouldn't make it so. Trusting someone else to do it for them would never get them back to the stars he craved.

"You never want to ask for help," Lucan had shouted at him the night before he disappeared. "You think you can do everything by yourself."

"And you never learned to do anything on your own." Naliq shook his head and made a throwaway gesture his brother might feel but would never see. "That's the difference between us, Lucan. You were meant to follow and I'm meant to lead. A leader doesn't get anywhere if he's always asking opinions. He has to decide and act."

"But not alone." Lucan caught his arm. "You're not the only one this affects, Naliq. This is the future of our people. It's our right to touch the stars."

Naliq exhaled, almost laughter, and cupped the back of his brother's neck. He shook him, exasperated and fond all at once. "I know. And we will. It won't be long until we're ready."

Lucan curled a hand around his wrist and held on hard. If he'd had vision, the desperation in his expression would have had twice the impact. As it was, for just a moment, it almost seemed that their gazes locked. "They have numbers, Naliq. They'll beat us without trying."

Naliq loosened his grip on Lucan's neck. "We have surprise. There may be more of them but they won't be expecting us. We'll overpower them. Once we have the Talkirk,

we have control. They'll do what we tell them."

"Or?" Lucan shook his head sadly. "They have other cities, Naliq. They can call in other armies. We might hold them for a little while, but then they'll rise up against us. They'll fight back. If we just asked..."

"No." He scowled. "No, and that's enough of that. I won't argue this again. I will not ask the surface for help."

Lucan meant to say something else, Naliq could read that in the pursing of his lips and tensing of his jaw. Instead he kept his peace. A moment later, he bowed his head. "I hope you rest well tonight, Naliq," he'd murmured as he turned to go. "And forgive me."

It was the last time they'd spoken to each other. Naliq rubbed a hand over his face and shrugged off guilt. Lucan made his decision knowingly. Naliq would not let his brother sway him from the plan. They would strike into the heart of the Cairn and they would take the knowledge they needed to reclaim the stars, their birthright.

Gyre nudged his shoulder, jarring Naliq out of unpleasant thoughts. "I said, come and stretch your legs," he repeated. "This musty air is clouding your mind." He flashed a brief grin and turned to lead the way, not looking back to see that Naliq followed. He knew that he would.

And he did. Naliq climbed upward through the twisting stone passage toward the central cave that opened to the surface. He felt lighter as he went, as if the weight of the rock above him held him down and now had been lifted away. It was all in his mind, he told himself, but that didn't keep the corners of his mouth from lifting.

There were footsteps in the dust they'd put down to cover their presence in the process of hiding. They mapped out the passage of heavy, booted feet. Invaders' footsteps. Naliq's shoulders tightened in anger and his jaw set. "What were they expecting?" he wondered under his breath. He wasn't sure he wanted an answer.

Gyre gave one anyway. "To find people who were easy to intimidate and rule. To find fools who would gape at them in awe. Or." He shrugged. "A fight and a slaughter. There's no doubt they thought they'd win. The big one, their leader? Moved like he'd love nothing more than to round a corner and find an ambush waiting." He grinned, flashing teeth. "I could have had fun with him."

Naliq laughed and shook his head. "You're bloodthirsty, Gyre. Don't you know the purebloods are peaceful people? We hide and wait and bide our time. You belong with them, on the surface, grunting and clawing your way through life."

Gyre's grin only widened. "There's a time and a place for grunting and clawing." He winked and headed for the mouth of the cave.

Naliq followed, chuckling, and paused just outside. The sudden heat and glare of the late day sun stopped him like a hand against his chest. He closed his eyes and tilted his face toward it. His life might be irrevocably tangled up in the tunnels underground, but he was no less a sun-worshipper than any of those who lived on the surface. They would reclaim the daylight, too.

"Look at you," Gyre called. He mimicked Naliq's pose, arms thrown wide and head back. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you wanted to burn."

Naliq let his arms fall to his sides, grinning as he jogged to catch up with his friend. It was true that he was lighter than Gyre, his skin a pale contrast with dark hair, but it had been years since he'd last burned. Since he'd been careless enough to forget himself in a sun-haze and lost track of time.

He bounced his fist off Gyre's shoulder good-naturedly as he fell into step. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? So you could laugh at me."

Gyre fluttered his lashes, teasing. "So I could take care of you, Naliq. Don't you know that I only have your well-being in mind?" He couldn't keep up the act and ruined it by laughing. "You're smiling. That's good to see. Better than the scowl you've been wearing the last few days."

"You know I've had reason to be unhappy."

"I do," Gyre agreed, "and I'll remind you of what I told you when Lucan left. You could not have chosen a better way to bring down their guard. A blind man wanders to them from the wasteland. He tells them that he's come from underground and that there is an army on his heels." He cocked an eyebrow. "Would you believe him?"

"They believed him enough to come here," Naliq pointed out.

"Yes," his friend agreed. "They came and found nothing. Your brother is discredited. If he speaks of armies now, they'll laugh. They think there's no one out here, Naliq. They won't expect us when we come."

It sounded easy. It seemed easy. Naliq shook his head. "I want to believe you."

"You should," Gyre told him and grinned. "I'm always right."

They laughed together, but Naliq found he needed those words to be true. He wanted Gyre to be as right about Lucan's misguided mission as he was about the need to get out and walk off dark thoughts.

But angry as his little brother's impetuous nature made him, the fact remained that he was still family, blood kin. Naliq still had some responsibility to Lucan. He'd promised to protect him when the blindness was discovered. They'd managed to get through fights before. This didn't have to be different.

"I want him back," he blurted, surprising himself with the ferocity of the words.

Gyre was startled and Naliq frowned. "Lucan. I want him back where he belongs. With us. Here or there doesn't matter, but leaving him wandering into who knows what trouble on his own sits badly with me. I want him back."

* * * *

"What did you say to him?" Delano stood by Talkirk's shoulder, staring down at the courtyard below. Talkirk hardly acknowledged him. He'd expected him sooner, with his uncomfortable questions and accusations in his eyes.

He braced himself, muscles in his back shifting, and straightened to take a full, deep breath. He stood taller than his second, broader through the shoulders and chest, and yet for some reason, Delano always made him want to prove himself with posture and gesture and the pitch of his voice. His hands curled around the balcony railing. "What did I say to him about what?"

"About anything," Delano answered incredulously. "I've never seen a man that determined for no reason, Cymren. You must have told him something, asked him some question that's pushed him to...this." He gestured toward the training session beneath them.

Delano had a point. Yesterday, the training had looked like some odd cross between playing and a lesson in how to fight. Today, though, all levity had been stripped out of Lucan's instruction. Perhaps the fact that the sun had set and daylight faded to darkness made it easier to concentrate. They trained beneath lights that illuminated the courtyard

but gave off no heat.

Lucan wandered between the pairs he'd made, pausing at each, weight braced on his staff and head cocked to one side. He couldn't see what they were doing, so it was hard to know how he judged them successful or not.

It should have been impossible, Talkirk thought, and yet, when he made corrections, they were exactly right for the pair. A higher guard, a faster block. He would pat the man on the shoulder and move on, repeating the process over and over again.

His determination translated to those he taught, too. There was still some teasing and playfulness between the men, though more than a little of it came from nervousness. But the easy banter, the back and forth flow of conversation had disappeared.

"So," Delano prompted again. "What was it?"

Talkirk started, remembering the question he'd been asked. "I told him he wasn't welcome in my bed." He pushed off the railing and headed down the stairs that led to the courtyard. He heard Delano chuckle behind him. He ignored it determinedly.

A crowd of onlookers surrounded Lucan's lesson space, but that wasn't out of the ordinary. The pureblood seemed to attract attention simply by being out and in the public eye. When he taught, when he commanded attention, an audience was to be expected.

They *should* be watching, Talkirk agreed. Let them learn from his example. Let them go home and practice in the privacy of their homes. If his people were prepared for an attack, if and when it came, so much the better.

He paused on the bottommost step watching Lucan demonstrate a move. The blind man's grace still impressed him. It awed him that Lucan knew forms that would protect him. More, that he knew body shapes and positions well enough that he could teach someone else effectively.

And yet he could see it change the confidence with which the men in his Arc sparred. Slowly but surely, Lucan was doing what he promised to do. He would turn this core of twelve into a fighting force. And if he could do it with the softest of the residents of the Cairn, there were no limits to what Talkirk's army might learn.

He waited until there was a pause in the rhythm of the routine Lucan led them through. Talkirk raised his voice to carry and called out, "Impressive, Lucan. You've taught them well."

He had time to register Lucan turning toward him. Several other faces swiveled toward him as well. Then someone shouted, "Lights!" and the world went black.

Talkirk froze, muscles tensing. He held his breath. The darkness wasn't empty. There were bodies around him. His eyes had not yet adjusted but his ears were still sharp. He could hear people breathing, stumbling toward one another as the first voices rang out.

"There's no need to panic," he assured. "The generators will turn on in a moment. There's no reason to be afraid. Stay where you are until the lights are on."

"What if the lights don't come on?" someone trying to disguise his voice asked from behind.

Talkirk hadn't heard him approach, hadn't noticed him on the stairs. He flinched and turned toward the voice. "They will," he insisted. "Unless you've done..."

The blow to his chest caught him off-guard. Whoever had hit him had small, delicate hands and yet they struck with surprising force. Talkirk's breath rushed out of him as he fell to the ground, balance gone just long enough to send him sprawling. An attack? Here? Who would dare?

“Lock it down,” he bellowed as he rolled to one side.

Something whistled over Talkirk's head, cutting air. He felt the breeze of its passing as it skimmed over him. As the hinges on the outer gates of cairn squeaked in protest and swung shut, he turned his attention to this nearer threat.

“Are you trying to kill me?” he asked the figure he could see in faint silhouette. “You ought to work on your aim.” It was a taunt. “You'll have to hit me if you want me to bleed.” More people moved around him now, voices rising. He could hear others calling out commands, trying to calm the gathered. He had to take back control.

He lashed out and closed his hand around his assailant's arm. It felt thin, almost delicate in his grip. He squeezed and heard the other man suck in a sharp breath. Talkirk pulled him close, lips curling in a smile his enemy wouldn't see but might hear in his voice. “What made you think that this was a good idea? I could snap you like a twig.”

“I don't think so,” the man he held whispered, though whether pain strained his voice or his need to keep his identity secret made him hiss, Talkirk couldn't say. He tightened his grip again, gave the man a shake and, to his disbelief, felt him slip out of his grip. A twist of the arm and drop of the shoulder had set him free. Talkirk's fingers collapsed into a loose fist.

And the man he'd held prisoner a heartbeat before now climbed him, long legs winding around his waist, one thin arm snaking beneath his chin and forcing it to lift. Something long and cool pressed against his throat. Talkirk swallowed and it tightened, digging into flesh without biting.

“Yield,” his opponent murmured in his ear. “Do you give up?”

Shadowy figures continued to move at the edges of his vision, hard to make out without light. How many of them were there? How close? Talkirk rumbled, muscles tensing beneath the boy. He could still reclaim the advantage. If he fell backward, he could crush this upstart. His legs would snap if he tried to leap off. But could the boy put the weapon at his throat to use before they landed? Impossible to say. He was quick and long-limbed. If he cut something vital, Talkirk might bleed out before he found help in the chaos.

He had little choice. “I yield,” he agreed, through his teeth.

“Louder,” the boy prompted. “They have to hear.”

His jaw worked but he took a deeper breath and pushed out words. “Stop fighting! The Talkirk yields!”

The struggle stopped as quickly as it began. Shouts became confused murmurs. He heard couples checking over one another somewhere close at hand. He smelled no blood.

Then Jerren murmured, “Got you, Master,” nose against the sensitive skin beneath his ear. He hung on to Talkirk's shoulders a moment, then unwrapped himself and slipped around to stand before him, one hand always on Talkirk to give himself away.

“Jerren?” Talkirk found it hard to think. Harder still to believe his eyes when the lights snapped on and he found himself facing the slim young man.

“Surprise!”

Chapter Nine

"How did you do it?" Talkirk's voice rang out above the milling crowd. He'd learned to talk over a commotion and make his commands heard on the battlefield. It didn't surprise him, then, that Lucan turned to face him, head cocked as if listening very intently. There were other voices raised in surprise or curious conversation. Here and there, scattered clusters of people applauded. Talkirk had no interest in them. It was more important to watch the pureblood's reactions.

"Lucan taught me," Jerren boasted. He beamed, voice full of excitement and enthusiasm.

Lucan ducked his head, hiding a smile behind the fall of his hair and Talkirk shook his head. How could it take so little to make him happy? Were they starved for entertainment here or, more likely, did Jerren have the same ambition Lucan himself harbored? That they all might harbor if he was honest with himself. Why wouldn't they want to be worthy of the Talkirk's praise? What higher honor could the Cairn offer?

Other than the promise of a night in his bed. Oh yes, he knew that people jockeyed for the right to sleep there for an hour or a night, even outside the men in the Arc. No one made a secret of it. Men and women alike teased one another over their less-than-private desires. Many of them lived for some small chance to curry favor with the Talkirk. Few of them would succeed.

Athel stood behind Lucan now, fair hair all but gleaming silver even in the false light. He rubbed his chin against Lucan's shoulder, a gesture that signaled thought more than affection. Still, it was the closest Talkirk had seen them yet and a sudden wave of possessive pride swept through him.

None of the men in the Arc were chosen on a whim, no matter what rumor implied. They all had talents outside the bedroom. Some were healers or entertainers. Athel could act as a diplomat when needed, as capable of debating points of politics as reciting poetry.

Now Lucan was one of them, deceptively easy to discount because of his blindness, and yet skilled enough to have had Talkirk himself at the end of his staff. Sharp enough to teach a boy who'd never fought a day in his life to take advantage of night blindness and catch his master off guard again.

A dull ache of longing pulsed in Talkirk's chest. *No*. He rubbed the heel of his hand against it, willing it into submission. Regardless of whether Lucan deserved respect for this demonstration, the fact remained that his loyalty was untested. The caves had still been empty and no information gained. Talkirk had made a decision and he would abide by it. To do otherwise made him look too weak and easily swayed.

A slight weight against him stole Talkirk's attention. Jerren leaned at his side almost hesitantly, bottom lip caught in his teeth. "Were you really surprised or playing along?" His eyebrows tugged together. "Did you let me win?"

Talkirk laughed, honest, startled sound and shook his head. "I don't give up a fight, even in jest, Jerren. You should know that, hm?" He chuckled the young man under the chin. "You had me, fair and without warning. You did well."

Pride made Jerren straighten. He turned his head to press a quick kiss to Talkirk's

chest, then backed away, bowing quickly before he turned and threaded through the crowd to find his friends. No doubt to boast more about his victory.

His departure left Talkirk free to make his own way through the throng, toward where Lucan and Athel stood, still together, still murmuring secrets.

Athel stood at Lucan's back, his hands settled lightly on the pureblood's hips. His chin rested on Lucan's shoulder, but his gaze stayed on Talkirk as he waded through the spaces left when people stepped aside. He wet his lips and lifted his head just as the last distance between them disappeared. "What do you think," he asked Talkirk, something amused or maybe mischievous sparkling in his eyes. "What do you think of your pureblood now, Talkirk? He is quite the teacher, isn't he?"

"He is," Talkirk agreed, watching Lucan's posture grow more formal and his chin lift. Stripes of color warmed his cheeks. Was he embarrassed for his pride or for his success? It hardly mattered either way. It was good to see his confidence returned. "You did well," he told Lucan aloud, voicing approval he wouldn't otherwise see. "Perhaps, even with your earlier demonstrations, I misjudged your abilities. I apologize."

He'd startled Lucan. That was clear in the way the other man's eyes abruptly widened. "For... Thank you," he managed after clearing his throat. "But you were right to doubt me. If I hadn't been able to train your men, there'd be no point in my having come. You needed an example. A reason."

His pulse beat visibly in his throat. Talkirk wanted to pull him close and press his mouth against it, feel it hammer against his tongue. Whatever it was about the pureblood that appealed to his baser instincts, the same thing meant he should keep his distance.

"It is a start," he allowed, "but you didn't act alone. To have the lights cut on command takes an authority that you don't have." His gaze shifted to Athel, who met it without challenge or flinching. "I'm glad that you have allies. Open the gates," he called without looking away.

The command repeated several times and the massive hinges squealed in protest as they were obeyed. "I'll speak with you come morning about using this training on my army, Lucan. I'll think on it tonight. Athel will advise me."

Athel looked as surprised as Lucan looked disappointed, but when Talkirk held out his hand, Athel took it immediately. "Of course, Talkirk," he answered. "I am yours."

"Go back to the Arc," Talkirk told Lucan over his head, watching the pureblood's jaw tighten. "Get a good night's sleep. I intend to rise early."

"I will," Lucan said, nodding curtly. The knuckles of the hand curled around his staff had gone bloodless white. "Good night."

Talkirk kept Athel at his side as they turned and crossed the courtyard toward the stairs. Neither of them spoke as they climbed. When he looked back from the top, Lucan was nowhere to be seen.

* * * *

Athel strained to catch his breath, so full of his lover there hardly seemed room for air in his lungs. It was an illusion, just a trick of the mind. Talkirk would never hurt him. His hands were nowhere near Athel's throat. It was the hunger and desperation in his thrusts that made his gasps short and hard, his breath impossible to keep.

Talkirk rumbled, mouthing Athel's pulse. His teeth scraped skin, the sting lasting only an instant. Athel arched off the bed, fingers knotted deep in Talkirk's hair. A moan

escaped him and his partner answered with a murmur so low the sound seemed to shudder through his bones. Close, he was so close. His cock pulsed, a warning, and he groaned, arching again.

Talkirk slipped his hand between their bodies, rough fingers curling around hot, too sensitive skin. He stroked hard and fast, a jerky rhythm that didn't match the frantic motion of his hips. His breath came in pants too, half-voiced, half-growled. Athel's heels thumped against his shoulders with each claim, the next one deeper than the last.

Athel couldn't hold back anymore. He clenched his teeth and shut his eyes tight. "There," he panted. Whimpered, "That, yes. More!"

Then it was over, his body lifting from the hips as if someone had reached through him and shaken him by the spine. Heat sped along the nerves to his fingertips, stealing away the last of his control. He keened, cock jerking in Talkirk's hand as he spent himself, thick liquid splattering against his own stomach.

Talkirk came a moment after him, waves of release coaxing more shudders from Athel's body. In these last throes of ecstasy, Talkirk was almost always too rough. There were bruises left on his skin, but the pain faded in a few moments leaving only welcome warmth and tingling skin behind.

They collapsed, tangled around each other, trading breathless kisses. Athel brushed Talkirk's hair back from his face. It was now, always now, that he most loved the man who kept him like a pet. When his eyes were bleary and unfocused. When he mewled and shivered at the barest brush of fingers against his skin. When he was least like the leader the Cairn feared and respected and just a man.

Talkirk pulled out and collapsed beside him, rolling onto his back. One broad hand splayed against his chest. His eyes were closed. Slowly, his breathing settled into a steady rhythm.

Athel rolled to his feet to fetch towels and water to clean them both. He tended to himself first, then came back to the bed, kneeling to wash the evidence of their passion from Talkirk's skin.

"You're quiet," the big man mumbled, not opening his eyes as Athel dried him, touch of the towel meant to be nothing more than a whisper against his skin.

Despite himself, Athel flushed. He had long since outgrown the urge to blush with anyone else. Talkirk was different. He could still make Athel's heart race. "It was good tonight. Better. You worked hard. I thought you might just sleep."

Talkirk grunted. "My mind is racing. I don't know if I can."

Athel frowned, standing to carry the bowl and towel away. When he returned, he brought a blanket, spreading it over the bed. He slipped beneath it and curled into the curve of Talkirk's arm. "Tell me?"

Talkirk sighed and his eyes drifted open. For a moment, he did nothing but trace the lines of Athel's face with the thick pads of his fingers. Then he said, "Lucan."

Athel braced himself for the inevitable wave of jealousy, the spike of anger that would spear through him at mention of another name. He was first, the favorite. In this bed, in Talkirk's arms, no other man should cross his mind. There should be no conversation about other lovers.

Jealousy didn't come. His pulse didn't quicken. He didn't feel the urge to ball his fists or curl his toes to keep from snarling. Instead, he felt a curious sort of ... relief? He'd expected this, he realized. They'd left Lucan standing alone, in the courtyard earlier

tonight, and yet he knew he'd seen longing in Talkirk's expression. He swore that his lover had been about to relent and touch the pureblood. In truth, he wished he had.

"What of him," he murmured, kissing one collarbone. "Did his demonstration upset you so much?"

"No." Talkirk sounded distant somehow. "I meant his congratulations. He deserved them. No, it isn't that, it's." He paused there and exhaled. "Has he said anything to you, Athel? Has he told you why he lied?"

This was one of Athel's duties, though his least favorite of many. If there were rumors of dissention in the Arc, Talkirk relied on him to tell which one of the men began it. If someone grew unhappy, reporting fell to him. He was a spy. A very pampered, well-tended spy, but the truth stood, no matter how glorified. It left a bad taste in his mouth.

"He says the same thing he tells you to your face, I assume," Athel answered, tracing idle patterns against Talkirk's chest. "The purebloods should have been there. That they weren't troubles him as much as it bothers you." He hesitated, held his breath and looked up at his bedmate. "If there's any deception in him, I haven't yet found it. I believe he is what he says."

Except that he wasn't just a simple man. Athel knew that now, after days of watching him. He was neither easily forgotten nor overlooked, as he claimed. It might be true among his own kind, but here, he stood out, demanding attention. Not cruelly, not boastfully, but it could not be denied that he deserved the respect he'd earned.

Talkirk grunted noncommittally.

Athel chewed the inside of his cheek and dared to say what weighed heavy on his tongue. "Did you bring me up here tonight just to punish him?"

For the first time in memory, Talkirk went still. Completely still, not even breathing where he lay on the bed. It was an answer in and of itself, and yet Athel waited for more. He held his own breath, not daring to blink.

"What he did impressed me," Talkirk allowed eventually, words coming slowly as if it took great effort to force them out. "He possesses skills I only wish I had. Obviously he teaches you well if Jerren bested me." He paused. "But the caves were still empty, either by accident or design."

Athel thumped him soundly on the chest, an impulsive reaction that surprised them both. Their gazes met and locked. Talkirk's eyebrows rose. Athel kept the heat from his cheeks by force of will and bent to kiss the reddening mark from his fist.

"You asked me to watch over him," Athel said, not looking up again. "To take him under our roof. To learn him. If you play us against one another, how am I to be his friend?"

Talkirk rumbled and speared thick fingers into Athel's hair. "It was my understanding that you didn't like him. That you had some sort of rivalry. He drew your blood."

"And I drew his," Athel insisted. "We came to an agreement. It's like you said. I admire him for his skills. Your pureblood has a sharp mind, too. He's almost as quick-witted as he is on his feet."

"And he's handsome." Talkirk probed with a statement that wasn't as simple as it sounded. This, Athel knew, would test his answer. He'd have to give it carefully.

"He's taller than he should be, living underground," he offered. "Just as pale as a man who's rarely seen the sun. But he has a good smile, and all that hair..." Athel could

feel it sliding through his hands even now. It made his fingers twitch toward his palms, as if he could catch a lock and twine it around a finger.

Talkirk rumbled, amused. "And in bed?"

Athel smirked. "He's loyal to you. They all want him, don't doubt that, but it's him who pushes eager hands away. He never says a word against you or anyone in the Cairn. He tells stories of flying between the stars and the world before. At worst, he's a dreamer, but he's not your enemy. He only wants to please you." *Like the rest of us do*, he added silently. He pressed his cheek to the angry spot on Talkirk's chest again.

Talkirk combed his fingers through Athel's hair and his eyes drifted shut. Despite his opposition to the thirteenth member of the Arc when he'd come, Athel hadn't spoken a word of lie in answering Talkirk's question. He genuinely liked Lucan. And knew that the draw the Cairn's leader had wasn't entirely intentional. It was wholly irresistible all the same.

It came from something in his chemistry, some connection that formed when skin touched skin. Athel had struggled with the urges and the ache himself until he learned to control them. That took time and a focus Lucan couldn't afford. Athel didn't want to—wouldn't—be the reminder that made it worse.

"You're not the punishment," Talkirk murmured when it seemed he must have fallen asleep. "I needed you to clear my head. It's been hard to know what exactly to do. I'll give him to the army. Let him teach them."

"And bring him back to your bed when he succeeds?"

"If," Talkirk countered. "Then, yes. Now and again." Unvoiced laughter warmed his voice. "After all, you are first in the Arc. My favorite. I have an obligation."

Athel snorted, amused, and scraped his teeth against Talkirk's shoulder as he felt the thick length of his lover's cock stir to life again. He pushed himself up to sitting and straddled the larger man's hips, palms flat against his chest. He'd done his duty, defending Lucan. The rest of the night belonged to him. "Of course," he answered wryly. "I will try not to be a chore."

Chapter Ten

The low rumble of something shivering through the air registered in Naliq's dreams before he felt it in the stone. He dreamed of massive storm clouds gathering over the open land outside the caves. They roiled and churned and collided with each other, making heavy, booming claps of thunder that resonated in his bones.

He waited, eyes closed and faced lifted toward the sky, for the rain to fall. It had been a long time since he'd been outside in a storm. They happened only rarely and he'd been kept below during the last. He enjoyed the feel of cool water against his skin, especially when the days were too warm to endure.

Something sprinkled his face. Something solid struck his cheek and bounced away. He frowned and blinked his eyes open. The storm continued to swirl above him, but when he brushed his cheek, his fingers came away dusted with grit, like crumbling dust from a stone. Another small pebble fell, then another and a third. It was raining stone? Another clap of thunder came, this one louder and closer. It knocked him off his feet.

He landed, awake now, on the floor of his room. He'd fallen—no, been jarred—from his bed. He shook off the last haze of sleep as he stood. He brushed the grit that had fallen from the roof away from his eyes.

Another dull thud and shudder. He could hear people call to one another. It couldn't be an earthquake. There were no faults here. He headed toward the doorway out.

Gyre skidded into view, out of breath and wide-eyed. "They're sounding for us."

Naliq had seen one of the sounding machines, years ago as a boy and from a distance. They were wheeled vehicles, slow and ponderous. They covered very little ground, but they weren't built for speed. They were made for what the one above them did now.

Instruments lined the bottom of the machine, his father said, that created and projected sound waves through earth. The sensors on board could track those waves and record images based on how they traveled and how long it took them to return. The men aboard could tell where there was stone or water or open space. They could sound out bodies and find children lost in caves.

Or people who didn't want to be found.

"Scramble it," Naliq ordered. His people weren't without defenses against such things. When they'd first moved underground, they hadn't thought the sounding equipment would be used against them. They'd had nothing in place to keep their encampments from being found out.

It had taken only one invasion to change all that. Not only could they scramble the signals, they could scatter sound waves entirely. "Alternate the frequency," he insisted. "Mix up what they're reading. Give us a little shielding."

Gyre shook his head. "We have, but it's too late. They're all but on top of us, Naliq. They know we're here. We have to travel. If we leave now, we can make Zarai's caves in two days..."

"And they'll follow us. I won't lead them to people who aren't prepared."

"*We're* not prepared, Naliq."

"We are," he countered, clapping a hand to the side of his friend's neck, steadying

him. "Look at me. Listen." Their gazes locked. "We planned to go and take the Cairn anyway. The fact that they've come back just means that we have to do it sooner." Gyre tried to pull back and Naliq held him fast. "We can do this, but you have to be at my side. We have to agree. If the others see that we don't believe moving early will give us the advantage, we've lost before we even start."

There was no silence. Another deep vibration shuddered through the rock around and beneath them, answering the metal beast above. No doubt an image of the two men in this tight-shouldered embrace showed on some screen overhead. Everything hinged on Gyre's answer. Naliq couldn't do it alone, no matter that he would try all the same.

Gyre nodded finally, muscle clenched in his jaw. He gave one short, hard dip of his head, but he gripped his friend's arm. "We agree. We'll go early."

Naliq let go the breath he held. "Good. Thank you." Another boom and he glanced at the shuddering ceiling. "They'll record and they'll return. They'll tell the Cairn what they've found. When the sounding's stopped, that's when we gather and go. It has to be tonight. They'll think they've driven us out. We'll prove them wrong."

* * * *

Training Talkirk's army meant starting over again. It didn't thrill Lucan, but he didn't have much choice. It was one thing, after all, to teach a dozen eager men to please the one who provided for them. It was something else altogether to teach the same lesson to hundreds, most of whom weren't convinced that the Talkirk's blind bedmate had anything worth learning.

Lucan spent the first day proving himself over and again. He answered questions and sparred with those who challenged. He never turned down a match and he never struck first. He felt sore enough the second morning that he barely managed to climb out of bed, and was just as determined not to let it show.

Slowly, grudgingly, Talkirk's men listened. They learned the holds and escapes and forms. They pushed and he corrected. They argued and he won. They trained from early morning until well into the night and when the third day dawned, no one sneered at his arrival. They'd reached an understanding, finally.

It relieved him for more than the obvious reasons. No one warned Lucan that time was running out, but he didn't need it. He could tell for himself. The closer it came to the impending eclipse, the shorter, brighter and hotter the days became. To a man accustomed to living on the surface, it was easy to adjust.

Wives and daughters brought out water and sweet-scented drinks. A few of the younger women, nervous and hesitant when they spoke, offered to mop his brow or lead him to the places with the deepest shade. He turned them all away politely. Now was not the time to rest.

Lucan, Athel told him, looked like he'd been baked. He felt it now, lying in the infirmary, letting one of the healers treat his sunburned skin. She had gentle hands and touched his burns carefully. The machine she operated was less concerned for his comfort. Tiny sensors probed him like the touch of a thousand fingers. Some hurt, some itched, others were simply pressure as they recorded information and fed it back to the computer brain, determining which parts would heal and which needed to be repaired.

Lucan took a deep breath and hissed it out again. If he let himself drift, maybe he wouldn't notice the moments of stinging pain. If he planned out his next lesson while he

waited, they would lose no time.

"It's been a while since I've seen someone as red as this." Lucan tensed and the machine chirped a warning. He forced himself to relax as the voice went on. "It's Delano," he explained unnecessarily. Lucan knew the dry scent of him as well as anyone else now. "Come to make sure that you were being seen to. There's no reason to be alarmed. This will all be over soon."

Lucan wet his lips. They were cracked and dry but he'd been promised they'd heal. "You didn't have to check on me, though it's appreciated."

Delano made a low sound, not quite amusement. It might have been discomfort instead. He shifted his weight, the leather of his boots creaking. "Actually, I did." He paused for breath. "We found your friends. Your people."

Lucan tried to sit up. The bed shrilled in protest and damaged nerve endings joined in, pain licking like fire across his skin.

Delano's hand fell heavy on his shoulder, pushing him down. "Let the machine do its work. I've never seen it interrupted. There's no telling what it might do." He drew back once Lucan stopped struggling. "The sounders found them, I should clarify."

"Sounders." Lucan's heartbeat sped. "The caves would collapse."

"We have recordings of all the readings. No structural damage occurred. We were careful," he promised. "No one should have been hurt. It's impressive, really, what you can hide underground. Your network of caves is quite extensive and we had no idea."

Sounders. Lucan tried not to let his worry show. If he shuddered, he could blame it on the machine. He'd heard stories growing up, though. There were nightmare tales about the damage those machines could do. One man's reassurance wasn't enough. He made fists. "I tried to tell you."

"You did," Delano allowed, "and that's part of the reason that I'm here. To apologize."

Lucan frowned. "For what?"

"For doubting you." The other man paused again. "Understand, that as the Talkirk's second, it's my duty to be critical. He may be willing to take you at your word, but I can't afford to rely on untested truths. Sometimes I make mistakes. I'm sorry if I offended you with anything you heard me say. I am not, however, sorry to have been wrong about your intentions."

"Apology accepted," Lucan said when Delano paused. Whether he gave the appropriate response was hard to judge, but with his mind reeling, he could think of nothing else. He'd made his choice to leave the Warren, to come here and warn the Cairn, but they were still his family and it was still his home.

"The Talkirk's asked that you be given private quarters," Delano went on, surprising him. "You're to be taken out of the Arc and given your own rooms. It seems that he feels his new tactician deserves better than a bunk in common space."

"What?" Lucan's worries ground to a halt. "He can't. I mean, I'm flattered. Honored," he amended, "but he can't take me out of the Arc."

Delano paused. "You mean that you'd rather not be moved. The Talkirk can do anything he likes."

"Not if he wants to have peace in his cairn." The machine doing the diagnostic beeped and pieces of it whirled into silence. Lucan sat up, testing stretched and burned skin. What little pain he'd felt now faded away. "Athel will take it badly if I'm given

special treatment.”

“Athel,” Delano echoed, “has been given privileges of his own.”

“But not his own quarters. Am I being punished or praised?”

“Do you know at what a premium space is given in the Cairn? There are more people wanting rooms than we have them to give. You've been offered without requesting. That's a rare gift. I think, if you take a moment to consider, you will understand what a mistake it would be to refuse.”

Always some new pitfall. Some new rule he would trip over, Lucan told himself. He bowed his head. “Then I don't refuse. I accept, gratefully. I will take the room and it will be mine to use as I see fit, yes?”

“Yes,” the Cairn second agreed. “So long as you plot no subterfuge and harm no one under the Talkirk's protection within its walls, it is yours.” He paused again. “What are you thinking, pureblood?”

Lucan began to answer and was interrupted by the snap of circuits in the room shutting off. In the echoing silence that followed, he heard voices outside, and then the hum of generators kicking in. “A power outage?”

No, something more, as the generators went silent too. Delano moved and the door to the room swung open. The sound of voices was louder now. There were footsteps, running. Orders called back and forth to one another.

Delano's voice cut through the rising din. “I want an explanation.”

“It's a simultaneous blackout,” someone called back. “The entire grid's gone down, twice. We're working on getting it back, but nothing's responding.”

Naliq. “It's an attack.” Lucan slid off the bed and reached for the staff he'd left propped nearby.

“An attack? What do you mean?”

“I mean, you sent out sounders to find my people. In the Warren, we'd call that an attack. And when we're attacked, we respond. I told you they were coming.”

“When we entered the eclipse,” Delano challenged. “Tomorrow, or the next day.”

“You changed the schedule.” He picked his way toward the door. “Is it dark?”

“What does that have...”

“Is it night time, Delano?” He'd been on the bed so long that he'd lost track of the time.

He heard the second draw himself up, knew by the tight way he pulled in a breath that he was angry, but there was no time to consider his feelings. “The sun went down half an hour ago. If they were close enough to stage an attack now...”

“You'd never know it,” Lucan interrupted. “Call out your army or you'll lose the Cairn.”

Talkirk's soldiers weren't ready. They hadn't trained nearly long enough. Like Delano, they assumed that they had more days, more hours to practice. Lucan had no room to blame them for their assumptions. He'd provided them. He'd believed them too.

Before he'd left, when *Naliq* shared his plans, he'd told Lucan that he would strike when the next eclipse came. He didn't change without reason. There were too many factors to consider, too many risks to take any other way. *Naliq* planned to the last detail.

Which mattered not at all to Talkirk and his men. The battle they'd been waiting for had come to them.

Chapter Eleven

Chaos reigned in the courtyard, to put it mildly. People reacted with fear in the face of the unexpected. Talkirk understood that rationally, but it made his shoulders tight and his mood dark.

Bodies crisscrossed the open space as people ran for their homes and families, the sound of names being called and questions being shouted hard to make out beneath the shrill of the Cairn's alarms. With the power cut and the generators down, they could not be easily silenced. It added to the confusion. It made conversation nearly impossible. The attackers might as well walk in through the main gates.

If they were foolishly brave. The sun hadn't set long ago. There was still enough of a glow in the sky that he could make out silhouettes. Some of them he recognized. None of them moved like they had secrets to keep. Good enough.

He snatched at the arm of the next man to pass him, jerking him to an abrupt, clumsy halt. Fear rolled off the man in waves that were nearly as palpable as they were easy to smell. Talkirk rumbled but loosened his grip. "Delano," he rumbled. "Echo the name. Spread it. Tell him to find me."

The man he held nodded fast, chin jerking up and down. "Y-Yes, Talkirk. I will. I swear." He stumbled when turned loose and loped off calling the seneschal's name.

Talkirk had no doubt that Delano would find him, but he didn't mean to stand and wait. There were things to be done, weak spots in the defenses to check and shore up if need be. No one had spotted any of the incoming force, so they had no direction to face. If the purebloods were bold, if they had the means, they might batter down a gate. Then again, these were Lucan's friends, and they had already demonstrated that straightforward tactics were not their usual plan.

The question of whether to trust Lucan at his word remained. Deciding that might be enough to drive any other man insane, much less one with the weight of an entire settlement on his shoulders. It should have been easy to know who to trust and who to expel, and yet this one man, this one outsider, had Talkirk's mind so twisted up with possibility that he found it hard to think at all.

On the one hand, he'd proven himself. The sounders showed that there were people in the caves where he said they'd be. He'd taught Jerren well enough to catch Talkirk off guard and Athel spoke well of him. That alone might have been enough to tip the scale in his favor.

But now this attack had Talkirk wondering if the little victories were simply distractions. Misdirections. Had he been played for a fool? Had he let his hunger for Lucan blind him, the way Delano warned? Was he risking his people for a taste of something new? No. He had to believe himself stronger and smarter than that. He was Talkirk because his people believed in him.

As he'd believed in the man who held the title before him. He called himself Seshran and he'd come to the Cairn as a young man, just of age. He'd been raised in a smaller settlement on the far side of the overgrown plains they called the Waste. He'd left his home with enough water to last him and the dream that he might one day rule the Cairn. It was a fool's hope, but he didn't give up.

Nor did he show his hand when he'd made it to the gates. Seshran didn't boast or overstate his case. When they asked him why he'd traveled so far, he said only that he wanted to improve his lot in life, and that anything removed from harvesting water from Wasteland plants would suit him. His honesty charmed the Cairn's people. His wit kept them amused.

Step by step, he worked his way toward a friendship with the man called Talkirk then. Seshran impressed the man with his easy, open nature. They became confidantes and some said more than that. In short order, they were inseparable, one never seen without the other at his side.

Then one night came a rainstorm, out of season and unexpected, but not strange enough to cause alarm. Residents of the Cairn stayed in their rooms. No one lingered outside to witness what Seshran claimed by morning's light. Yes, some admitted that they'd heard a clap of thunder or seen the flash of lightning that meant the storm had shifted overhead. The burst of sparks and sudden explosion of a damaged power conduit drew more attention, but no one knew how much it had cost them until a bloodied young man stumbled from the Talkirk's room.

His hands were burned and his eyes were wild. He told a story no one wanted to believe. The Talkirk, his friend, his mentor or lover or brother-at-heart, had been killed in the night, by a lightning bolt. It was a miracle, the healers said, examining Seshran, that both of them had not perished. The Cairn mourned their leader. The healers mended the survivor's body.

And when he could stand on his own again, Seshran took his title from the man he'd slain.

He confessed as much when he lay dying at Cymren's feet. This time there would be no question of how he'd died. The old man—for he was old then—wanted to leave the world with his conscience clear. He'd fought like no other man Cymren knew. He hadn't made it easy to replace him. He deserved an ear to remember all he'd seen, all he wanted to share before he was gone.

Cymren—the new Talkirk—never forgot that lesson of deceit. It made him push Delano into marrying. It explained why he'd encouraged his truest friend to fall in love. It taught him to keep his bedmates close together. Let them vent their frustrations on their roommates, if they chose, and not on him.

It made him weigh Lucan with a skeptical eye and troubled him over the strength of the pureblood's appeal. There was treachery around every turn.

Delano announced himself by clearing his throat an instant before he'd reached Talkirk's side. He looked calm and steady despite having crossed a courtyard peopled with the panicked and confused.

"Your men are already moving," he reported, gesturing out into the darkness where more shadows stirred. These did not stumble or stagger or wander off in all directions. Scores of men moved as one unit, shoulder to shoulder, booted feet falling in rhythm. Talkirk felt them before the heavy sound reached his ears. Before another shrill blast from the Cairn alarms buried the beat.

Delano's shoulders hitched and settled as he tucked his hands behind his back. "I've had the gates locked down and guarded. There are men on watch." He gestured with his chin, nodding up toward the top of the walls at the stations that crowned them. Figures could be seen in faint silhouette, their attention turned outward. "If they're coming in,

we'll see them."

"Unless they're already here." Talkirk watched his men peel off and jog away from each other, filtering out through the Cairn. If there were intruders on the ground, in the buildings or lurking in the narrow twisting turns of streets that threaded between them, they would be found. He had no doubt of that.

It wasn't who might be among them that troubled him. Instead, he wondered what might lie below.

"Bring the sounders out again."

"What?" Despite the riot of sound around them, Talkirk knew he'd heard and simply stalled for time to understand. "What are you looking for? We found the tunnels."

"Yes," he agreed and gestured toward the gates. "Out there. We didn't look closer to our walls. We don't know how far they stretch."

"Not this far," Delano answered almost curtly. "We saw the end of them, Talkirk. There were tunnels beneath us and then solid stone."

"Out there," Talkirk said again. "Not here. Not close to us. There are other mountains and other caves. I want to know if there's space beneath us."

"Talkirk."

"The sounders, Delano."

He stepped in close and lowered his voice. "It's a mistake, Cymren. The Cairn wasn't built for this. If you set off the sounders inside these walls, they'll..."

"Then we'll put them back up." Talkirk left no room to argue, the answer spoken through his teeth. Their gazes met. The last remains of light showed the astonishment in Delano's eyes. "Do I need to make it an order?"

Delano exhaled and ducked his head. "No, Talkirk. The sounders, of course." He touched his fist to his chest in salute and turned in preparation to pass the demand along.

Talkirk squinted over his head. "Where is Lucan?"

Delano's shoulders tightened. "He was just behind me. I was with him in the infirmary when the alarms went off."

The growl rolled out of him before Talkirk thought to bite it back. "You left him on his own?"

"Perhaps if the pureblood needs keeping, you should watch over him yourself!"

Despite the clamor in the courtyard, a silence rose between Talkirk and his second, sudden and heavy enough to muffle thought. Anger surged beneath Talkirk's ribs, but it cooled quickly, robbed of force by the truth of the statement. He'd taken Lucan in. The pureblood was his responsibility.

Delano spoke before Talkirk could. He turned back toward his leader but didn't lift his gaze. "I'll bring the sounders out." He sketched a bow and went.

And Talkirk, in the middle of a swarming army of men determined to protect him, stood alone.

* * * *

The air buzzed with voices, so many that Lucan's ears itched. They threw off his balance, making him stumble for it and catch his weight on his staff as he picked his way down the curving staircase to the courtyard below. One misstep and he would fall. His descent seemed to take an eternity.

Bodies brushed by his, close but not quite touching. The scent of sweat and fear

made it hard to breathe. He gave in to the urge to close his eyes. It made no difference in what he saw and helped to center him. He had a job to do.

So he drew himself up and started forward. The butt of his staff thudded dully against packed earth and slid a bit in the loose top-layer. He counted twenty-four paces under his breath, working hard not to let the occasional jostle from a panicked passerby ruin his count. He turned to the right and went on. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen more steps. Another and he'd turn left, angling for the doorway that led to the Talkirk's council hall.

Someone stopped directly in front of him. Lucan caught a whiff of an impossible memory. Not here, not yet. His mind played tricks, he hoped. Taller than Lucan, judging by the way sound bent around the other body. Lucan tipped his chin up, murmured an apology, and resolved to go around.

The man in his path moved with him. A second hand closed around Lucan's staff, fingers curled just above Lucan's own. When he snapped the staff up, to break the stranger's grip and jerk free, the other man caught it and used his height to off-balance Lucan, pulling him close. They collided and the attacker chuckled lowly, breath hot against Lucan's cheek. "If I'd known we were going to dance, I'd have asked for music."

"Gyre." Now he'd confirmed what his senses warned. The blood drained from Lucan's face, leaving him suddenly light-headed.

"He remembers." Gyre sounded impressed. "We thought you'd forgotten where and who you came from, little brother." He'd used Naliq's nickname for as long as Lucan could remember, playing on the fact that they'd grown up as close friends. As close as brothers, they'd promised one another, once. The words weren't spoken with such an edge, then.

"I wouldn't. How could I? Gyre, you can't be here."

"But I am," he argued, slinging his arm around Lucan's neck. He turned them and moved, pushing Lucan ahead of him. He wasn't rough about it, but the grip and length of his strides proved that he didn't intend to give Lucan a choice about going along.

"How many came with you?" He stumbled over a patch of rough ground. Gyre kept him on his feet.

And grinned. Lucan could hear it in his voice when he answered, "None. Let them scramble and look for ghosts. It will teach them lessons."

"It will bring them after you."

Gyre's hand curled around the back of Lucan's neck, grip abruptly tightening to the point of pain. "*You* sent them after us, Lucan. Coming here, telling them where we were. You sent them with their machines to shake us out of hiding. It's long past time that you came home."

Being steered, caught in Gyre's iron grip, Lucan lost track of the paces he'd taken. He couldn't tell which direction he faced or how to get back to where he'd been. He was completely at the mercy of his brother's right hand man and it made a knot of sickness beneath his ribs. "I didn't know," he blurted. "I didn't know they were going out again. When they tried the first time..."

"They shouldn't have tried at all. Generations have come and gone, all but forgotten us, and in the space of a few days, you've undone it. You've forced our hands, Lucan. You must answer for that."

He swallowed hard. "Where's Naliq?"

Gyre opened a door. Its hinges complained loudly. In the customary quiet of the

Cairn, the sound might have alerted someone and brought them to investigate. Now, beneath the shouting and the klaxon and the constant drumbeat of running feet, no one would notice. They would make a flawless escape.

"Gyre," Lucan tried again as the other man pressed his head down, forcing him to duck beneath a low doorway. "Where's Naliq? If I'm to be punished, then take me to my brother."

The door closed behind them. Gyre said nothing. He pushed Lucan ahead of him, long fingers never leaving the nape of his neck. There was not enough room to twist away or lash out. The walls of the corridor they'd entered brushed Lucan's shoulders. If he straightened, the ceiling brushed his head. The air smelled of stale, standing water and old metal. It must have been a way into the Cairn that Talkirk and his people had forgotten long ago.

They walked for what seemed to be an hour. Down slight slopes and up again, turning so often that they should have doubled back. The walls shifted, becoming stone rather than metal. The temperature rose and Lucan knew they were underground. Things didn't echo in the same way down here. Nothing sounded the same.

They stopped at last when they exited the tunnel. A breeze blew through here, a current of fresh air carrying echoes and the sound of moving bodies. Lucan pushed against Gyre's hand until he could straighten and give the aching muscles in his back some relief.

Then someone sighed and footsteps drifted close. A cool hand gripped his chin. The other slapped his cheek. Then he was pulled into a shoulder-pounding embrace and his brother murmured, "Never again."

It should have been a comfort, after Gyre's rough handling. For a moment, Lucan leaned, trusting that he wouldn't fall. He curled one arm around his brother's neck and held on, hard, but the knot of anxiety beneath his ribs didn't uncoil. "Hello, Naliq."

"Hello," his brother echoed, laughter brightening his voice. "Do you hear how he says it, Gyre? Like nothing in the world could be wrong. Like we've just been out of one another's company for a day or two." He touched Lucan's chin more gently this time. "Thought you were gone for good."

Lucan's brow furrowed. "I told you I'd go."

"But not where," Naliq countered. "You could have wandered into the waste for all I knew."

Lucan ducked his head. Their foreheads collided lightly and he laughed out loud. "I was about to say that I had better direction sense than that. It's grace that I lack." He sobered. "I knew the way." They all knew the way. Every child in the Warren knew how to find the Cairn. Lucan's parents made no exceptions for him.

"It doesn't matter now. We'll go home." Naliq gripped his shoulder briefly and let go.

They'd come to this crossroad the last time they talked and Lucan dreaded it now as much as he had then. If he was honest with himself, he felt more than a little glad to be with Naliq again. After his parents' death, he and his brother grew close and relied on each other. Despite Naliq's rise to power in the Warren, he'd never brushed Lucan aside. He listened to his concerns and heard his suggestions. They often debated a question for hours until one or the other gave in. Lucan loved him with a ferocity that had no match.

Until he'd given himself to the Talkirk.

"I can't, Naliq." The words came out high and faint. Lucan didn't have the air to

make them stronger. He hated the sound and squared his shoulders to make up for what he lacked.

"Can't? Can't what?" His brother paused. "If you're tired, we'll rest a while longer, but that mess up there won't last forever and they'll come looking. We have to be gone."

"You should be gone." Lucan took a step back and stopped, aware that Gyre still stood behind him. "They'll expect me to be here. I'll explain that in the chaos, I got confused. Lost. There'll be time for you to get away." *Please go away*, he added silently. They'd come back, he knew, and this time in earnest, but if he could have a few more days to train—

"But you're not lost." Naliq sounded confused, either in earnest or by artifice. Lucan couldn't tell which. "You're with us now. Safe with us. You belong in the Warren."

He shook his head. "I belong here. I made a promise, Naliq. I swore to help them."

The pause, the silence, fell heavy on his ears. Like the preparation for a blow. Like an inhalation. "Swore to help them with what, Lucan?"

He would not cringe. He would not shrink from the choice he'd made. "I taught them how to fight us. In shadow, in darkness, how to hold back what they can't see. You were going to come anyway. I wanted them to have a chance."

Anger lurked in the quiet this time, violence in the spaces around words. "You told them we were coming." It wasn't a question. Naliq's voice sounded flat and hard. "You warned them."

"I *had* to," Lucan insisted. "When we talked, Naliq, when you made your plans, you left no room to negotiate. You told me about taking and controlling, but not talking about what these people know. If you conquer and command them, do you really think that they'll share their knowledge willingly? They're proud, just as proud as you are. Fight with them, and all you'll get is a war. We'll never touch the stars."

Naliq exhaled sharply. "Touch the stars," he sneered. "You and that dream. When will you wake up and realize that we're stuck here, little brother. There are no stars for us. All we can do is find better ways to live on *this* world, in *this* place."

Lucan struggled not to let his surprise show. "We used to talk about it," he said when he found his voice. "We used to plan where we wanted to go, Naliq, don't you remember? You were the one who told me stories about before after our parents died. You made me want to go back, for all of us. How can you believe..."

"I grew up, Lucan." There was a grim note in that answer. A tired and matter-of-fact finality. "There are dreams, and there is reality, and the reality is, we've lived on Shadow so long that none of us, whether pureblood or surface-dweller, would know what to do out there. Up there. Drifting among the stars."

His hands fell on Lucan's shoulders again. "All that's left to us is finding better ways to live. This cairn is a better way for people tired of huddling underground. It's time for us to come up into the light again. Our ancestors brought us here, built the walls of the Cairn in their ships. If anyone deserves to live here, it's us. And we will."

Lucan reached for Naliq's shoulders in turn, forehead creasing. "Growing up doesn't mean giving up on your dreams, Naliq. You taught me that, too."

Behind him, Gyre snorted and moved, circling the brothers. "One boy's optimism is another man's foolishness. You rely on your ears, Lucan, but Naliq can see what living in the Warren has done to us. And he understands how much better we'll be with room to move and breathe, with all the benefits that the Cairn's technology will give us. He

understands that we have to move forward, and that to do so, we'll have to fight. It's a leader who makes those sort of hard decisions and doesn't shrink from them. A man like your brother. It's the coward who runs away and hides."

So that was it. Gyre had gotten to Naliq. Gyre, who'd always been eager to challenge someone. He made a reliable friend, but he had never been the patient sort. If he could take rather than ask, he would and did.

"Naliq, listen to me."

"Did you tell them where to find us?" Naliq's thumbs dug in to the muscles in Lucan's shoulders, sending bursts of tingling fire out to his fingertips as the nerves protested. "Are you the one that sent them back again with the sounders? The one who tried to drive us out by bringing down our walls?"

"No." Lucan started shaking his head with the first question. "No, Naliq. I didn't know about the sounders. They told me no one got hurt, that no walls came down."

"But you told them where we were," Gyre insisted again. "They couldn't have known which way to try unless someone with the knowledge opened his mouth. The only person that could be is you, Lucan."

He stood trapped between them, his brother and his one-time friend. He wouldn't lie, hadn't yet, but he didn't have a good answer. No matter what he said, one of them would be upset. So he took as deep a breath as he could and steeled himself again. "I had to explain where I'd come from. Men don't simply walk out of the waste. Yes." He dipped his chin in a very slight nod. "I told them where we were."

Gyre hit him. Naliq's hands were on his shoulders until the last. The blow came from his right side, hard and fast. He heard the air move only a second before the fist connected and pain blossomed in his cheek. There was no time to dodge or get out of the way. He stumbled sideways and fell, newly healed arms scraping raw again against the rough ground.

And Naliq did nothing to help.

Chapter Twelve

Athel's pulse pounded through his veins. Find him, find him, find Lucan. The chant resounded in his mind, growing louder by the second. It wasn't only for the Talkirk. Certainly he and the rest of the Arc wanted to do something to cool the fire of terrible rage that burned in their master's eyes and had him wound tight and barking harsh words. Of course they wanted to give him peace, but that wasn't all that drove Athel on.

Somehow, he'd come to think of the pureblood as a friend, a companion, perhaps a confidante. Lucan had shared his secrets, at least, and Athel found himself murmuring half-voiced promises to do the same. There were things he would gladly tell the other man if he found him again.

The usual places had been checked and rechecked. The council hall, the new rooms he'd been given, the storage areas around the Cairn barracks. No one could report having seen him, though Delano remembered leaving him in the infirmary. Still, they'd scattered to the less used areas now, shouting out Lucan's name. The alarms had been silenced, the power spliced back into functionality, and hopes were high.

Of course, Athel admitted to himself as he pushed open the doors on still-abandoned rooms, the pureblood might have fooled them all and played his part in some grand scheme. There were reasons why a man might stage an attack to make his escape, but the risk of making mistakes mounted when chaos factored in. A deception as complicated as this one would have been difficult at best for someone born to the Cairn to manage. A blind man who counted every step?

"Lucan! Come out and stop hiding," he shouted into the silence. "The attack is over. Everyone's safe. Come on now, you and that staff of yours can't be afraid!"

Nothing stirred in this part of the Cairn. There were old stores kept here, but no residences. No one had a reason to come here, even in a panic. Athel expected nothing. There should have been no answer.

A door somewhere deeper in the section creaked. Screamed in protest. Old hinges that had seen little use were moving again when they shouldn't be. Athel frowned and moved forward, cautiously. How could Lucan have found his way to a place Athel knew he'd never been?

"Lucan?" If they'd been wrong about an attack after all, this would be a good place to set up an ambush. Athel walked on the balls of his feet, ready at the first hint of trouble not to fight, but to flee. He wasn't a fool. He'd call for help. "Lucan, if that's you, say something."

A long silence descended. What he'd heard could have been metal settling. The walls had not fallen as Delano feared with the sounders out, but the ground shook hard enough that the structure might readjust. It could still be nothing. "Lucan, answer me!"

There! A noise that sounded more like a groan than shifting buildings. Athel moved, hoping it would come again when he heard Lucan's voice.

He found the pureblood standing—listing, more accurately—on his staff outside an unused storage locker. One eye was bruised and bloodied, already nearly swollen shut. He curled in on himself and breathed fast and shallow. He kept his weight on one leg only, the knee of the other likewise purpling. His knuckles were more than usually

bloodless due no doubt to the determined grip on the ever-present stick.

"Athel?" His voice held a note of desperate hope.

Athel touched his shoulder and held on when he flinched. His chest ached with each of Lucan's panted breaths. "What happened to you? Here." He touched his elbow, prompting him to let go. "Lean on me."

He ducked beneath the pureblood's arm and curled his other around Lucan's waist. "Who did this to you," he asked, brow furrowed. "We didn't find anyone, Lucan. Who was here?"

Lucan leaned against him heavily and Athel felt him shudder within the curve of his support. "The Talkirk," he murmured, not quite answering the question. "The Talkirk needs to know. I have to tell him."

That was an absolute truth. Whatever had happened had to be reported by one or the other of them and quickly, but Athel worried whether Lucan knew that he'd spoken at all. The pureblood had been beaten badly. Athel shifted his hold, taking on more of Lucan's weight. The fact that he didn't object troubled Athel more than the bruises darkening his skin. "All right," Athel told him, frowning. "Hold on to me."

The trip across the Cairn had a special sort of agony surrounding it. He guided and half-carried Lucan all the way, listening to the battered man murmur apologies and unfinished sentences, thinking out loud as they went. Athel's mind churned, too, anger making his stomach ache and his temples pound.

It made sense to impair the tactician. If the only man who knew what to expect was too injured to be of use, any attack would be doubly effective. It served as a diversion, too. Distract the defenders with worry for their friend and exploit their weaknesses. From the outside, it would look like an easy victory.

Jerren spotted them when they reached the courtyard. The sound he made was half dismay and half relief. He ran to them, expression full of anguish, and would have touched Lucan's face if Athel hadn't caught his hand.

"Go and find the Talkirk."

Jerren frowned. "He needs the infirmary."

"And I'll take him," Athel insisted. "But the Talkirk needs to see." He gave Jerren a careful backward push.

"Shouldn't *you* go?" Jerren's gaze bounced between Athel and Lucan nervously. "He'll want to know what happened. You were there. I'll only stutter."

Athel clenched his teeth against the urge to snap. "Find him," he murmured, exhaling slowly. "Send him to the infirmary. Lucan can tell us both. Understand me?"

Jerren nodded and backed another step on his own. He looked like he might say something else but swallowed breath with the words. He stole one last glance at Lucan where he leaned, then turned on his heel and lit out across the courtyard, long strides covering distance quickly.

One obstacle conquered. Athel tightened the arm around Lucan's waist and turned him toward the stairway that led up to the infirmary. The pureblood still tried to help. He walked more or less under his own power, but he dragged his toes when they climbed the steps and he didn't say a word. Athel thought he might be concentrating on simply breathing.

It took only a little more effort to move him from the infirmary to the Arc when the diagnostic bed had done all that it could. Ribs were knitted, cuts had been disinfected and

grafted to heal. What remained had been left to Lucan's body. At least he moved and breathed without pain. He'd reclaimed his usual, improbable grace, though a hint of weariness still haunted his eyes.

"I don't know about you," Athel murmured as he collapsed down beside him on the bed in his room. "But I'm exhausted. You'll forgive me if I rest, I hope."

"I couldn't stop you," Lucan answered wryly. He fell silent a moment, then added, "I owe you. You could have said good riddance. You'd never have to worry about your place as his favorite again."

It wasn't possible that Lucan, outsider or not, had failed to grasp the importance of being chosen. Not when Athel himself could see it, nearly feel it, as clearly as his own. So he thumped Lucan on the thigh, somewhere that showed no sign of bruising. "You're not that slow, pureblood. The act doesn't do any good."

Lucan's brow furrowed. His eyes moved in another of those rare moments when he seemed to look for something. "Act? What act?"

"The one where you pretend not to know that you're bound to us, now. That you belong to the Talkirk. Even if you disappear, you'll never really leave. You would haunt us," Athel went on, reaching over to brush a lock of dark hair away from Lucan's forehead. "I would miss you."

He said the words without thinking, without choosing them for effect as he usually did when he bothered to be complimentary. They'd rolled off his tongue without any sort of planning, which meant that they were sincere. It surprised him almost as much as the look of shock on Lucan's face.

Athel laughed and leaned in with same sort of spontaneity and kissed him. Brief, sweet. He meant it to be just a brush of mouth to mouth, but then Lucan made a quiet sound, almost like a plea, and his lips softened beneath Athel's. The gentle kiss became a request for more.

Clever hands. Athel had noticed them when they'd first met. They were long-fingered and deft, and despite himself, he'd wondered what they might feel like against his skin. When the blind man sifted one hand's fingers into his hair, Athel groaned out a low, unintentional sound and leaned closer. His tongue snaked out to trace Lucan's bottom lip. He gripped the other man's shoulder, thumb absently tracing the line of bone.

"I see you've found him."

No other deterrent would have worked so well. Athel jerked away from Lucan as if he'd been shoved. Lucan caught his weight on his elbows as he fell back to the bed. Athel stood and willed the heat that mounted in his chest to stay out of his cheeks. He'd shamed himself enough. Blushing wouldn't help.

"He'd been taken to the warehouse quarter. They tended him in the infirmary. We sent word for you," Athel reported, unable to meet his master's gaze. "We waited."

"Did you?" Amusement rang in the question. "We must see things differently."

They were beautiful together. The thought struck Talkirk abruptly, without warning. It took him completely off-guard.

In the Cairn, the man called Talkirk made the rules. He took what he wanted. People offered him more. He could live a life of excess if he so chose. Men fought and died for the right to hold the title, just for a little while. Talkirk had done the same.

And in all the time that he had ruled here, deciding who would share his bed and who to ignore, he'd never been surprised. No one questioned his decisions. He didn't

doubt himself. He'd never wanted to share.

Before now. He swallowed the beginnings of a rumble as desire thrummed through him. Heat began to pool in his groin, thickening him. He offered his hand to Athel as he stepped forward.

"What you saw," Athel began, stepping into the curve of his arm.

"I know what I saw. I want to see more." He tugged Athel down with him as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"Talkirk?" Lucan's brow furrowed, color bright in his cheeks. Days beneath the sun had browned him somewhat, but the pureblood still turned red more easily than any other man the Talkirk had ever known.

"Are you still injured?" he asked Lucan, gaze roaming over exposed skin, taking note of bruises that had already faded from purple to green. "Does anything hurt?"

Lucan shook his head slowly, the crease between his eyebrows mirrored almost identically in Athel's expression. "There are places that are tender, but nothing hurts."

Talkirk murmured a brief oath of thanks, and covered Lucan's mouth with his own. Athel's fingers tightened in his, and Talkirk guided the hand he held to the waistband of his pants. He held it there, invitation and instruction all at once, until Athel twisted free of his grip and unfastened the clasp.

Yes. He hardened further, nearly painful, his pulse beating an insistent rhythm against Athel's fingers as Talkirk's pants were undone. Athel's hand lingered, fingers tracing the proud length, his touch cool enough to make Talkirk jerk and growl against Lucan's skin.

They moved together clumsily, climbing over one another as they stripped off clothing and struggled not to topple off the sides of the bed. Talkirk settled between them on his back, one hand still tangled in Lucan's hair. The other knotted in the bedclothes as Athel kissed and bit his throat, one long leg snaked over Talkirk's as he rocked himself against Talkirk's hip.

Lucan curled his fingers around Talkirk's length without prompting, once he'd settled by his side. He stroked slowly, his grip just shy of too light to do more than tease. Talkirk could feel the pureblood's erection, hot as a brand against his thigh.

As if he'd been prompted, Athel's gaze lifted to meet Talkirk's. His pupils were wide, color swallowed by dark desire. They didn't speak, but Athel understood. He skimmed a hand over Talkirk's ribs as he reached toward Lucan.

The pureblood's breath hitched when he felt Athel's touch. He stilled for a moment, then his eyes shuttered as Athel wrapped the reaching hand around his cock and stroked.

Pleasure rippled between the three of them. Lucan's hand tightened on Talkirk's length and he groaned in pleasure, sliding a hand down Athel's back. He pulled Athel's hips tighter against his own and felt the man shudder as he thrust harder, more hungrily. Athel bit at his shoulder and stroked Lucan faster.

They made a perfect circuit, each feeding the others' desire, driving it higher until they panted together, not enough air in the room for any one of them to catch his breath. Another second and it would end. One last stroke and Talkirk would lose control and spill himself into Lucan's hand. His toes curled as he held out, demanding one more second's patience from his aching body.

The Cairn alarms began to shrill again.

Chapter Thirteen

“You're mad!”

The memory of the words echoed through Naliq's mind. Perhaps they were true. Maybe he should have taken Gyre's exclamation to heart. Sitting outside the walls of the Cairn, watching sentries pace their posts atop the walls, he could understand why his long-time friend, his second, would say such a thing.

But it didn't change what needed to happen or what he would do. No matter whether it should have. There would be time for regrets after, if they came. Not here. Not now. It had been settled.

Naliq had stopped moving when Gyre challenged him. His advisor stood at one side of the room, watching him pace, but he'd been unable to keep silent then. He'd listened to Naliq's plans and offered nothing, letting him rant and vent his ideas uncontested. Now that he'd spent them, now that he'd paused for breath and to let the next ideas form, Gyre finally spoke. He didn't say what Naliq wanted to hear.

“You can't just charge into them, full of fury. They'll be waiting for us, Naliq. You'll kill us all.”

“Can't?” Naliq's eyebrows rose. “This, from the man encouraging me to get Lucan back, to take their inside man away from them by any means necessary? You've always been the voice of aggression. Now you're calling me mad?”

Gyre held his hands up, a gesture that Naliq recognized as meant to soothe and placate. It did neither as his friend stepped forward. “I'm warning you. Cautioning,” he amended. “You're angry and not thinking clearly.”

Naliq shook his head. “I've never been more clear. I've been content to plot and plan and wait for a good opportunity. I've been a fool,” he spat. “I see that now and now it ends.”

He crossed the space between them in just a few long strides and caught Gyre by the shoulders, fingers knotting in his sleeves. “All this time you've waited to do something. You've put up with my hesitations, with my thinking and waiting and reluctance to act. That's all gone, Gyre, and I need you by my side. If we don't move on them together, we'll divide all the rest. They won't fight for me if they're worried that you disapprove. I need you,” he repeated. “Are you with me?”

Gyre frowned, but his gaze didn't waver. “This is about Lucan.”

Naliq pushed away, a low sound escaping him as he paced in a tight loop and faced his companion again. “It's more than Lucan. It's about loyalty and power. It's about being betrayed.”

But he couldn't ignore the fact that it *did* have something to do with Lucan's presence in the Cairn. His brother had been glad to see him, and Naliq felt the same, but they hadn't talked about Lucan coming home. He'd taken things more seriously than Naliq imagined he would. His younger brother, his responsibility, had turned his back on family and everything their parents, their people, had worked so hard to maintain.

Of course he didn't see it that way. Lucan had never seen things as Naliq did. His head stayed in the stars despite the fact that he'd never seen them. He didn't need to, he boasted. It was enough for him to know that they were there and that, someday, he'd fly

among them, even if he had to wait until he'd left this life behind.

Naliq had always thought they'd have more time.

"I need you," he said a third time, hands once more on Gyre's shoulders. This time he didn't cling. He put his trust in Gyre with the touch, but he wouldn't hold him, couldn't force him. The decision to help had to be sincere.

It came after only a moment's consideration. Gyre searched his gaze and found what he sought. He lifted his hands to Naliq's shoulders too, nodding once and giving the Warren's leader a determined nod. "Then you have me," he promised. "As always. Where you lead I follow."

Naliq smiled. It felt dangerous. He didn't doubt that it looked worse. "We're going back."

So they had. Here they sat, biding their time. Waiting for true darkness to settle. Once the last light disappeared, they would move in earnest. What Lucan started, Naliq would end, once and for all.

* * * *

Lucan froze as the ringing klaxon seemed to shiver through his blood, the tightness in his chest having nothing to do with the intense pleasures of a moment before.

Then, he'd been drowning in touch and scent and the sound of his lovers' breathing. Lovers. Both of them, Athel and the Talkirk alike. They were tangled together, extensions of one another, and he'd been one thrust, one hitched-in breath away from release.

No, this was nothing like that moment. Fear swept through him, cooling passion's heat into a sick, clinging chill.

"They're back." He whispered for fear that speaking louder would lead them through the door. Them. His people. His brother and friends that once he'd sworn to protect with all he had. Now he'd fight against them with the same desperate loyalty.

"They're back," he said again, sitting up, hands flat against the Talkirk's chest. He felt the sound the big man made before he heard it, a shudder that started deep inside.

"Lucan?" Athel moved, his hand sliding off Lucan's shoulder and sending another shiver racing his spine. "Who's back? What do you mean?"

"It's Naliq," Lucan answered. "My brother. He'll have brought the rest. They'll try for the Cairn again tonight."

The bed dipped and shifted as the Talkirk moved, air escaping him in a dissatisfied grunt. "Again? What do you mean?"

There hadn't been time to explain before, when the Talkirk had caught him and Athel together. Explanations had been pushed aside as they touched and kissed and tangled with one another. There'd be time to explain later, Lucan thought. Enough time to warn the Talkirk and make everyone ready.

He should have known better. He *did* know better. He'd hurt Naliq tonight. Until Lucan left, they'd always stuck together. Arguments aside, Naliq had been his defender and protector and champion. By choosing the Talkirk, by staying in the Cairn, he'd rejected Naliq and the life he'd left behind. He hadn't meant things to go this way. He'd had no idea what to expect.

It didn't matter now.

"I didn't get to the warehousing quarter on my own. I was taken." He steeled himself.

"They were here, Talkirk. My family. My people. There's another way into the cairn."

Lucan thought himself ready for any reaction. He'd expected rage or angry disbelief. He might even have accepted a physical punishment. He half anticipated the blow. The silence that answered his revelation chilled him far more than any of those.

In contrast to the clamor outside the doors, the Talkirk's lack of response felt oppressive and heavy. Neither he nor Athel moved or spoke. For one moment, Lucan thought he might somehow have missed their departure and been confessing to empty air, but no. He could feel them if not hear their breathing. The weight of their combined gazes nearly pushed him onto his back again.

Then it broke and there was not a moment of stillness in either of them.

"Your clothing," Athel murmured as he pressed them into Lucan's hands. He hesitated long enough for Lucan to clutch them against his chest before he pulled Lucan to his feet and added, "Get dressed."

The Talkirk moved like a mounting storm. Lucan felt him pass, angry and roiling. He heard him stop again, just by the door. If the man's teeth had been stubs of worn-down stone and his throat full of the grit of grinding them, his voice could not have sounded more ragged and abused.

"I need to know where your loyalties lie," he demanded of Lucan. "Here. Now. No hesitating, no hedging. Do you stand with us or with them?"

Lucan managed not to flinch by making fists in his discarded shirt. He'd suffered a beating while his brother looked on and the Talkirk still wondered? No, he didn't know the details. He didn't have time to explain now. "With you," he answered as he pushed his arms through the sleeves. "I stand with you."

Talkirk grunted. "My men will be waiting on your command." That said, the door to the courtyard rasped open and his heavy footsteps thudded away before it closed again.

Athel sucked in a breath. "Bad timing. Bad timing all around."

Lucan pulled his pants on, startled when Athel batted his hands out of the way to fasten them. "I meant to tell him, to tell both of you. I got distracted."

Athel snorted. "Oh, I know. He'll hold it against you anyway. He'll reason that you should have blurted it out in the throes of ecstasy. Harder, faster, my brother knows a back way in." The words sounded wry, but Lucan could hear the affection in them all the same. "He's a soldier first, Lucan. When it comes to fighting, everything else gets put out of his mind. You'll learn." He brushed his thumb against Lucan's cheek, then stepped away.

"What about you?" Lucan's hands closed on empty air.

"Me?" Athel took Lucan's hand and fitted the wooden staff against his palm. "What have I got to do with anything?"

Lucan laughed. "Everything. You're the center, Athel. If you hadn't kissed me..."

Athel stopped his mouth with a kiss that matched the first, warm, tender, and powerful enough to muffle all thoughts of protest. When they parted again, he murmured, "Go and lead the men, Lucan. Worry about me after, when we're celebrating your victory. I'll tell you what I intend to do then. If you want to know, you'll just have to survive."

Athel walked beside him to the door and opened it for him. He followed Lucan through it, hands warm on his shoulders, and once they stood outside, he slid his arms around Lucan's waist. The sounds of preparations in the courtyard below surrounded them, voices riding currents of still-warm air.

"They shouldn't have come back so quickly," Lucan murmured. "This is Gyre's doing. Naliq knows better than this. He'd expect us to be waiting. Gyre has no patience."

Athel's voice sounded richer for the amusement in it, no hint of nerves or worry in his words. "Stubbornness and determination are things that all of you purebloods share. Go," he prompted again, dropping a kiss on Lucan's shoulder. "If the Talkirk has to fetch you, he'll be even more upset."

Lucan shivered as Athel's arms slid away. He tightened his grip on the ever-present staff to keep himself from reaching for the other man again. *You are not afraid of what's to come*, he chided himself. *No more delaying. Do what you've promised to do.*

So he squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. Seventeen steps to the top of the stairs.

And a descent into chaos.

From above, things seemed calmer. It must have been the breeze. On the ground, dodging moving bodies, awash in the clash of fists and weapons and the smells of uncertainty and fear, nothing seemed certain anymore.

Lucan snapped his staff up to block the incoming swing of another. The shock of wood colliding shuddered through his arms. He heard the other man grunt with exertion, then a sharp inhalation and the pressure against him withdrew.

"Lucan." His name was a murmur. "You need bells, or something to make you stand out. They're everywhere. Tall and pale like you. Someone will make a mistake."

Then they were inside already. He should have known. He should have warned the Talkirk before now. If there were losses within the Cairn, the blame for them would land squarely on Lucan's head.

"Calling out my presence would be a mistake," he answered. "If someone else mistakes me, I'll defend myself." He paused for breath, then asked a cautious, "How goes the fight?"

For the truth was that, just listening, he couldn't tell. Either side could have the advantage. It could change and he would have no idea, as one man hitting another sounded the same, no matter who had the upper hand.

The man he'd stopped sighed and shifted his weight, tilting closer to where Lucan stood. He lowered his voice as if he wanted his words to disappear beneath the sounds of conflict.

"There are more of us, but they're faster. I've seen one of them take down half a dozen of us and not slow down before going on to the next. We're trying to remember what you taught us, but this is different. They don't fight by the rules."

The rules. That had tripped Lucan up in teaching as well. He'd never learned the ways and means of war or what was considered polite and allowed in combat. In the Warren, they learned to take advantages when they came, however they came.

"You know what to do," Lucan insisted. "Don't think. Just let your body remember what we drilled on. No matter what goes on around you, that hasn't changed."

"*Everything's* changed," the soldier snapped, frustration clear in his voice. "You taught us theory. This is real. Flesh and bones, pureblood. People are getting hurt. Maybe dying." He paused, and in the silence, the fighting went on around them. Another shift of weight and he snorted. "I'm not going to die for you."

The murmur started behind them, accompanied by the clearing of throats and rustle of fabric that meant bodies were moving, changing position. Someone was coming.

The Talkirk. Lucan knew before he spoke and less because of the readjusting of posture in the men around him. He knew because he could feel awareness of the Cairn leader buzz beneath his skin. The bond they'd had before felt stronger now. Insistent. Possessive.

“Then die for me.”

The murmuring grew louder. Lucan felt the man who'd complained flinch. Conversations began on all sides, some agreeing, some arguing that only a fool would agree to stand against unknown odds, but the thing that bound them all together was their leader. Talkirk.

The man who stood in their midst and called out, “You all swore to fight for me. Have you changed your minds? Then leave us. Now. Go, while you still can. Those who stay will fight as I command. And if they die, they'll know that they did so freely.”

“Or,” another voice called in response, “you could all stay, and watch the spectacle. No one has to die.” More murmurs erupted and yet the voice rose above them, clear and cutting. “I don't want to fight a war. I just want my little brother to face me.”

Chapter Fourteen

"Wanting keeps us sharp. On our toes, I understand." Talkirk paused. "What you're asking is out of the question."

Some voices raised in agreement, others in dismay. The one closest, the man Talkirk least wanted to hear, laid his hand against his arm and said, "Let me."

"No." No question, no hesitation. Talkirk looked down at Lucan and shook his head, despite that it went unseen. "I don't care who this man is, to himself or to you. I will not allow any man to bring an army through my gate and set terms after. The fight began in my cairn and it ends with me."

"Then by all means," came the other pureblood's voice again. "Let's end it here and now."

People moved, creak of leather and pop of joints giving it away. Talkirk turned and felt more than saw his men parting like water before the intruder's approach. Only as he drew nearer could the Cairn leader make out details.

He stood taller than his brother, but broader through the shoulders, muscle more evident. He carried himself with a different sort of confidence than Lucan displayed. Sure of himself and his prowess, yes, but not as graceful. Maybe not as fast.

"You have injured men on the ground," he reported. "We will not interfere if you wish to move them. Tend them," he amended, amusement thickening his voice. "You never know when you might need your army again."

Talkirk growled before he spoke, shoulders tight and hands balled into fists tight enough that his nails bit crescents in his palms. "You laugh at us?"

"At any man who fights so hard for someone he doesn't know." He paused. "Do you trust Lucan because he's given you reason or because he tells you to? Is it pity? He is a master at manipulating people to get what he wants."

"Naliq." Lucan stepped forward, colliding with Talkirk from behind.

"Lucan," Talkirk countered, looking over his shoulder. Sightless eyes or not, he waited for the man to look up. "This is not the time or place. The lessons are ended, the fight is mine. Leave us to it."

"But..."

"But nothing." Talkirk turned his back on the brother and put his hands on Lucan's shoulders. He turned the pureblood under his hands so that he faced away from the center of the cairn. "Count steps from the center," he murmured over his hair before giving him a shove hard enough to sending him stumbling.

He didn't wait to see if Lucan obeyed. He would correct him when the time came. What mattered now was winning the fight that had been brought to him. He turned back to face the pureblood leader and spread his arms.

"He obeys you," the other man told him. "That's impressive. Lucan's always been headstrong. Maybe you are good for him after all. Perhaps I should thank you for taking him in." He tilted his head as if considering it, then shook it. "No."

Talkirk had been wrong. The man had a stockier build than Lucan, true, but it didn't slow him down. It didn't keep him from kicking out with such force and speed he couldn't anticipate. The blow caught him high on the thigh, not disabling him, but stealing his

balance. The muscle cramped and knotted painfully. He staggered, catching his weight on the protesting leg and a cry of pain escaped him.

The men that stood around them surged forward, as if to protect him. Talkirk braced a hand against the ground to keep himself from falling, locked his jaws together and gritted out a command to halt.

The army, his army, hesitated and milled. Questions passed between the men, some whispered, some half-voiced, as Talkirk straightened.

"Attacking me in the middle of my men. You're either very confident," he told Naliq, "or a fool."

"There's a third option." Naliq paused. "A show of good faith," he said, when Talkirk said nothing. "I believe that you are an honorable man and that your army will listen to your command to stand down and leave the fight between us."

"Does an honorable man strike a blow like you did?"

Naliq's eyebrows lifted. "That was revenge." He spread his arms as Talkirk had done and backed a few paces away. "Your army."

"Will stand down," Talkirk called out, though his gaze never left the man taunting him. "No one is to interfere or intervene." He tilted his head. "Good enough?"

"Good enough," the pureblood answered and rushed in for an attack.

If he'd been outside the fight, he might have appreciated the man's efficiency. Talkirk might have admired Naliq's skill and control if they fought as companions and not combatants. Instead he struggled to keep his feet.

Blows came from too many directions, as if the man had grown a second pair of arms. By the time Talkirk turned to face the attack, Naliq had moved again and struck him from behind or at the side, staying always out of reach.

He used no weapons. He had no need. He struck only at Talkirk's most vulnerable places, setting off another spasm in the abused thigh muscle. An elbow between his shoulder blades robbed him of breath. With every moment that passed, Naliq proved his skill, forcing Talkirk to the defensive, trying to avoid blows he'd grown too slow to avoid.

And his men looked on, watching a man with no weapon in hand drive their leader to his knees. They heard his grunts as blows drove air from his lungs. They must have felt the ground shudder when he toppled at last.

To their credit, they obeyed his command. No one came to his rescue, though they shouted encouragements and threats at Naliq's back. To Talkirk's own, the pureblood had been winded, breath bellowing in and out of his lungs audibly when the fight came to an end. Talkirk could feel tremors of exhaustion shiver through the man's leg when he set his foot beneath Talkirk's chin and nudged it upward. He had won the victory.

"Declare me the winner," Naliq panted. "Give me the Cairn."

"If you want it," Talkirk spat between his teeth, "kill me and claim it."

"He'll have to go through me first."

Lucan thumped the butt of his staff down soundly by his foot. In the pregnant silence that followed, it sounded loud to his ears. It should have been loud. He'd made a heavy pronouncement. He would stand by it. If Naliq meant to have this fight, then Lucan would match him. He would defend the man he'd sworn to protect. His master, his partner. His lover.

Naliq clicked his tongue. "Ah, but we had an agreement, little brother. The fight is

between the Talkirk and me. No one must interfere.”

“No part of his army must interfere,” Lucan corrected crisply. “As I am not one of his soldiers, I am breaking no one's word. His army hasn't acted against you, but I will. You will not kill the Talkirk before you kill me.”

More murmurs came from the men surrounding them. Lucan lifted his chin. He didn't need to know that the Cairn's army thought him a fool for this show of defiance. At the moment, no one mattered but Naliq and what he did, how he answered the challenge Lucan gave him. For that answer, Lucan would hold his breath.

And did until he heard his brother exhale, a sound almost like laughter. He heard the tremble in the stream of air that gave Naliq's uneasiness away.

“You don't know what you're saying, Lucan. You don't want to fight me. I don't want to fight *you*.”

“Perhaps you should have thought of that before you came back, then. This is my place now, Naliq. You've made it clear that I'm not welcome in the Warren.”

“What? Madness. You could come home with me. You *should*. Didn't I tell you?”

Lucan's jaw ached. “Yes. Just before you let your second beat me until I couldn't stand. I don't think I misunderstood the message, no matter how you phrased it, Naliq. The Cairn is my home now. These are my family and friends, and if you mean to take them from me, I will fight until my very last breath.”

Nothing else could be said. Lucan had offered his challenge. Now it was up to Naliq to accept or forfeit.

“I should have known,” his brother said when the silence stretched too thin to hold. “I should have known that this would be your choice. That you'd turn your back on those who've protected you all along. And for what, Lucan? For a dream. What does it matter if you reach the stars? The world won't look different to you. You'll still be blind.”

He meant the words to sting, Lucan knew. Naliq wanted him to hurt, to reel with pain. But the insult didn't hit as hard as Gyre's fists and they left no mark. Lucan squared his shoulders, bearing up under the onslaught, and waited until Naliq paused to suck in a deep draught of air.

He took up his staff and held it at the ready. “I don't need to see a storm to feel the wind change. I don't have to *see* the stars to know that they are there. From the stars we came. To them we will return. Now *fight* me,” he demanded. “Or quit the Cairn.”

It shouldn't have worked. As provocations went, the one Lucan offered sounded weak. Naliq could have walked away and lost not an ounce of honor. Lucan's grip tightened briefly on the wood in his hands. Perhaps he would. Perhaps their argument had blown itself out and they would go their separate ways without another word said.

Wishful thinking; false hope. Naliq charged.

Their first blow clashed over the Talkirk's prone body. Lucan heard him grunt and bark out a command. Ruan's distinctive footsteps came close and he helped the Cairn leader to his feet. The imagined weight of his gaze fell heavy on Lucan's shoulder, but now wasn't the time for hesitation or apology. Later he would take his punishment, whatever it might be, when the fight had ended.

For now, his attention belonged to Naliq. His brother had trained, practiced moves that were familiar and yet jarring to Lucan. He knew Naliq's usual sparring style, the feints he used and the way his body moved. Had moved, in the past. Now, here, things were different. Naliq fought in earnest, not pulling punches. He meant to win, no matter

the cost. They were no longer brothers playing at a fight. They were enemies and the cost was spilled blood.

“Good,” Naliq praised him as they circled one another, between blows. “Teaching others has taught you the things that I tried and never could. Your guard is better,” he went on. “You don’t drop your shoulders anymore. You’ve grown into a good soldier. I wish that made me happy.”

They clashed again and Lucan understood why Naliq ruled the Warren. Even without a weapon in hand, he was dangerous. Deadly. He moved nearly faster than Lucan thought, blows raining down on him like flesh-wrapped blades. He knew just the moment to turn his hand so that his fingers slipped between the ribs. He could steal a man’s breath that way, drive him to his knees and defeat him.

So Lucan had to be faster. Better. He learned to anticipate, to listen for the whistle of the wind. He strained to feel the air move in the seconds before a blow came in and then he would twist, dodge, bend, throw himself to the side and feel Naliq’s fingers graze him, rather than the jarring bolt of a solid blow.

That attention to detail, the almost-painful way in which he listened, gave him warning to tuck and roll when Naliq picked up a blade.

Where it came from, Lucan couldn’t say. It was an act of desperation. Frustration. It didn’t matter. What had been familiar became the unknown. The sword in his brother’s hand cut air differently. It made him adjust his moves and as much as Naliq scrambled to control his swings, Lucan hurried to get out of the way.

“You really want to kill me?” Lucan locked a wave of sickness behind his teeth, but he didn’t stop moving. “A sword, Naliq. You who swore that you’d never use one, when we were boys.”

“We swore a lot of things to one another when we were young,” Naliq spat in answer. “Oaths break. People change. You vowed to fight for him until your last breath. Did you mean it or did you just say it for show?”

He didn’t give Lucan time to answer, charging instead. The blade skimmed Lucan’s skin, tearing but not driving deep. Not an accident. Naliq didn’t make mistakes like that. A point driven home when their bodies crashed together again and Naliq wound his arms under Lucan’s, grappling with him until neither of them had much room to move. The cool steel of the blade crossed Lucan’s back, blunt edge not biting but all too palpable.

Naliq’s chest heaved against his own. He heard his brother start to speak and stop several times before words escaped him, low and ragged: “I just wanted you to come home.”

“Blind him!” The command came from behind them. The Talkirk’s voice rang out, clear and true. Lucan was startled, then staggered. The words made no sense. Blind who?

He understood when he heard the snap of circuits and felt the sudden heat of light on his skin. The courtyard lights. The false illumination that made the Cairn safe to travel at night. They’d been repaired or the generators restarted. How it had been done didn’t matter as much as the effect.

Naliq made a hoarse sound and jerked away. Lucan heard his footsteps falter and stumble. They’d fought in darkness. Now the courtyard would blaze as bright as day. It would hurt Naliq’s eyes, blind him indeed. Lucan once more had the upper hand.

He charged after his brother, taking the advantage that had been offered. They grappled again, stumbling over one another, their feet and legs so tangled that Lucan

could hardly tell which steps were his and which his brother's. He felt their balance shift, felt the world topple sideways and he knew that on the ground, the odds would even again.

So he summoned one last burst of strength. He wrenched free of his brother's grip, and pushed himself backward with all his might. He shouted as the blade twisted in Naliq's hand and laid open a long line of blazing fire across his shoulders, just shy of his neck.

He heard it clatter to the ground. Naliq had been disarmed. Lucan, still with staff in hand, brought the fight to an end.

He snapped the ground end forward sharply and heard it connect with bone and flesh before he heard Naliq's leg snap. The cry Naliq gave shook Lucan to the core and yet he couldn't stop, wouldn't, until his brother stayed down. *Stay down!*

He followed the sound of panting breath and stepped forward three paces until his toes touched Naliq's calf. Then he slipped the end of the offending staff under Naliq's chin and pried it up. Both men knew that in this position it would take nothing to crush Naliq's throat. It counted as a victory. A win Lucan didn't want.

"Yield, Naliq. Yield and leave the Cairn." When his brother hesitated, Lucan leaned into the staff, pressing the end against his throat for a moment. He drew back when he heard Naliq cough. "Yield," he said again, quieter. "Let me let you live. Please."

It felt as though the entire cairn held its breath, waiting for Naliq to answer with a ragged, "Yes." He sucked in air and repeated so that his surrender was clear, "I yield. Your Cairn has a new champion. I am defeated."

Chapter Fifteen

"You can't hide in here forever."

Lucan felt sunlight against his skin and turned his head, as if by avoiding it he could somehow chase it away. "Not forever," he agreed. "A few more days."

"No." No question, no room for arguing. Athel invited himself in without asking. Lucan heard him pace close, felt the bed dip and heard plates rattle against a metal tray. "Today is the last day of hiding. You've had more than enough. Today," he said, "you eat something. And then, you take a bath." He touched Lucan's hair briefly, made a sound of disgust and drew his hand back again. "You're filthy."

"How can I be filthy when I haven't done anything?"

"When it comes to you, pureblood, all things are possible."

Lucan smiled despite himself. "Was that a compliment?"

Athel snorted. "Not even close. You stink. Eat your breakfast. There's a bath already warming." He didn't stand or give any indication that he meant to leave.

The smell of the food he'd brought made Lucan's stomach cramp. He could hardly remember his last meal. Maybe Athel had the right idea. He reached for the tray, exploring it with his hands. He paused when Athel cleared his throat. Lucan's eyebrows rose. "Are you going to watch me?"

"I'll feed you if I have to. No more sulking."

"I'm not..."

"You are." Athel's hand rested warm and soft against Lucan's lips. The touch set off a sudden longing. Lucan heard himself groan and heat flooded his cheeks.

Not a hidden blush either, judging by the way Athel's voice warmed. "Filthy," he repeated. "I know what you're thinking, but there'll be none of that either. Not until you're clean."

Another fair point. "How long has it been?"

"Three days," Athel answered, "and no sign of him, if you're curious." His shoulder brushed Lucan's lightly. "It was good of you to let him go. The Talkirk would have had him killed."

The tightness in his gut twisted harder. "I know. I couldn't let him. Opposite sides of the battle or not, Naliq is still my brother. Was."

"Is," Athel echoed. "He may not like you, but you still share blood." His thumb stroked Lucan's temple. "Remember good things, Lucan, and never doubt that you did what had to be done." A nudge and he added, "Now eat, before you starve."

Lucan laughed breathlessly and reached again, fingers closing over the curve of a still-warm sweet bun.

The Talkirk would have killed Naliq. Lucan knew that from the start. He'd felt the big man's anger when he pleaded for Naliq's release. Let him go back to the Warren, Lucan sued. They would disappear. They would move from the caves that were so close and perhaps never be heard from again. If Naliq returned, he could tell them to go. If he was dead, Lucan's people would strike again and again in revenge.

He ached to think of never touching the stone walls that surrounded him as he grew up. Lucan's world consisted of cool, metal buildings now, the constant hum of electricity,

the rise and fall of a sun that he'd never seen.

And the company of two men who had come to mean the world to him during his short time thus far on the surface. He had no right to be unhappy.

In truth, he wasn't, and that bothered him a bit. He would learn to push down the lingering feelings of doubt. He would one day stop wondering whether he'd done the right thing or made the wrong choice. Done was done.

"Will it make you eat faster," Athel wondered, chin on Lucan's shoulder now, "if I tell you that the Talkirk is waiting for us?"

Lucan's heart leapt against his ribs. He swallowed hard to get the last bite of bread down. "What? Why?"

Athel laughed. "Three days, pureblood. I've never seen the man pine before, but he longs for you. No matter what I do, his thoughts drift away. You should be flattered. I can be very distracting."

Lucan grinned too. "I know. Believe me, I know." He frowned a moment later. "He could have called for me."

Athel tsked. "You needed time and space, and we managed to sit on him long enough to give it to you. You had to heal, Lucan. So did we all. But healing's done and now it's time to take your place."

He had to ask. "What place is that?"

Athel must have left the door open, Lucan realized the instant after the Talkirk spoke. He didn't hear the Cairn leader's approach but his voice could be mistaken for no one else. "Your place is at my side. At ours."

Now Lucan heard his heavy footsteps, felt them vibrate through the metal floor as he approached. His hunger disappeared. His appetite was a different sort.

Lucan stood to meet him, comforted by the wave of heat that surrounded the Talkirk and proved him real. "At your side?"

Talkirk made a gruff sound. "Will your ears fail you too? At my side," he repeated, wrapping a thick arm around Lucan's waist and pulling him close. "In all things. You have taught us to change. You will continue to do so, I hope. How else will we learn to touch the stars?"

They were the words he needed. Lucan leaned against Talkirk's chest. As his eyes drifted shut, he felt Athel's fingers against his back, followed by the slighter weight of his one-time rival. Right. Good. He was meant to be in this place.

"I will show you."

"But not," Athel insisted again, laughter brightening his voice, "until he's clean."

The End

About the Author:

Sienna Black is a thirty-something author living in northern California with her partner and a handful of animals, large and small. She's been writing since she was small, but she's a relative newcomer to the world of m/m fiction. To say that she's thrilled to have found an audience would be an understatement.

She more often than not favors man love, but she's found herself often forced to give

in to a particularly strong female character. She writes primarily paranormal romances for her boys, but there's no telling where they'll lead her next.

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