

GUARDIANS OF THE WIND



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Guardians of the Wind

TOP SHELF

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Prologue

There was a man, large and quiet, who lived in the sunlight, ran with the horses and sang a song of life, of joy. He had a wife, a son, a hunting bird, a fine mount. His mother was from the lands beyond the Great Sea, a white-haired beauty that crashed upon the shores in a boat bigger than the sky.

In this life he was hi'icha. Guardian of all he loved, protector of the great gods, the winds that swooped down into the valleys. The horses loved him, came to him and told him their stories; great birds landed on his broad shoulders, preening.

Life was good, and he knew nothing but the winds, singing inside him.

One day, there was smoke to the south, and the men came - dark and armed, hundreds of them pouring down into the valley, setting the world afire. The warrior fell, became slave, and his world became salted with tears. He found himself adrift upon a sea of sand, his world long lost, death riding upon a pale horse, gibbering into his ears.

It took the touch of a healer to unbury the warrior that had been hidden away. That single touch echoed through the ground, over the sea, ringing even within the most distant mountains and telling the monsters that lived within that change was coming.

A warrior had awakened, and that which had broken would become whole again, in a storm of fire and ice.

Before that storm, however, the warrior and the healer had to turn the tide of war.

Mirran's voice faded, his story ringing out, and a tiny hand tugged his legging. "Ata? Da? What war?"

He offered his daughter a soft smile; all their children knew this tale. "Kadras' war, child. The war to save the slaves."

Chapter One

It was ironic, really, that Surial had spent the last half of his life in one place, longing for home, and here he was, wandering the lands on horseback and feeling more at home than he could ever remember.

Mon'Keur was solid beneath him, the steady gait having become as familiar as breathing to him after weeks on the road. Lit'ka's happy whinnies competed with the bugs and birds in the trees, and the whole symphony was underscored by Kade's traveling tunes. Ranging from sad to sweet to bawdy, the deep-voiced songs gave lightness to their travels.

They had split from their fellow travelers, the bard Mirran and his Naik companion Aline, only yesterday, Kade waving sadly as Aline rode away. The warriors had been fast friends, sharing with one another the loss and pain that the slavers wrought, wearing their scars like badges of honor. He and Kade were following a lead, a whisper that had come from another former slave - left with a single limb, a single eye - and they hoped it would bring them to a group of Naik who'd been rumored to be sold in slavery to the north, deep in the forests. Mirran and Aline continued east, having heard of another mage that had been said to dream of the future, much like Mirran himself.

Surial shuddered. He could no more imagine having that gift than he could imagine flying. His own healing powers still sat upon his shoulders like ill-made clothing, years of hidden shame keeping the skills raw and rusty. It was Kade - even more than Mirran and Aline - who allowed him to begin to believe that the healing was a gift, not a curse left to him by his mother.

He wrapped his arms around himself, the act of comfort immediate and familiar. His hands caught in the flowing outer garment he wore, the clothing still the riding habits he had become used to in the vast desert.

"Are you well, ki'ita?" Kade's voice rumbled over at him, the honeyed-brown eyes meeting his. "Are you cold? Aline left me with some more... comfortable riding clothing for you."

He chuckled, shook his head. "You two and your fascination with leathers. These clothes suit me."

"Psht. Even the singer thought that your clothing suited the trees not at all. Fluttery bird." The tease was followed by a wink and Mon'keur danced beneath him, laughing.

Once - on a day not terribly long past, Surial was ashamed to admit - he would have taken offense at the laughter, but now he found himself chuckling, fluttering his arms playfully. So much pain had passed between them; he found himself loath to revisit it.

Kade's laughter grew, filling up the air and leaving him a bit breathless with the joy held inside it. Not for the first time, he found himself warming, whispering a prayer of thanks to any god that might listen that he had been given this gift, this man by his side.

While he liked both Mirran and Aline, especially the bard with his long, involved stories about Pendele, the great mage that was his grandfather, there was an ease to traveling with Kade as his sole companion. Perhaps it was just that he and Kade had been through so much together, from their troubles in Azize to battling that witch, Savina, for his very life; or possibly it had more to do with the heat that Surial could feel between them.

It was growing every day, a pressure that made him acutely aware of Kade, of each of his friend's movements, each look. That could have had something to do with the way Kade seemed to help ease the pain of his gift, the way Kade could bring him back from the weakness that took him over whenever he helped anyone, took their illness and pain within and replaced it with health and wholeness.

It felt like more than that, though.

The feelings made him both anxious and happy inside; little butterflies danced in his belly, their wings crashing and smashing together. They fluttered harder whenever Kade's gaze rested on him.

Surial sighed and stretched, shifted on the saddle. They had spent their first night on their own at an inn in a small village, but as the sun began to set, it seemed that they would not come upon another village in time to take refuge from the night.

He had not been blessed with so many nights on the cold ground in the whole of his life as he had been since they fled the desert for the mountains.

A cool wind blew suddenly from the west, the scent of rain upon it and Surial called to Kade. "Do you think we should find somewhere to set up camp?"

Kade's honey-colored eyes searched the skies, scarred face catching the fading hints of the light as if words were written in the clouds. "I wished a town for you, but yes. I will set our tent."

"I can manage the tent for one night." It wasn't his favorite, though. He liked a soft bed and a warm fire. He liked knowing the elements were safely shut out. He had not been born for such a... rustic life.

Besides, he knew that Kade preferred the open skies, that his friend disliked the press of people in the villages. That the former slave dreaded being trapped inside walls and ceilings.

There was a quick nod and Kade pointed deeper into the trees. "There. Against the big stone. It will protect from the wind."

Surial nudged Mon'Keur in that direction, the big horse picking his way easily through the trees, Lit'ka following. Kade began to sing, the words guttural and rough and, in a way that never ceased to surprise him, the horses nodded and whinnied, snorted and called, singing along as if they understood the man.

He slipped down off Mon'Keur, pulling the saddle bags down. "Do we need to stake the horses?" Kade seemed to believe they wouldn't disappear as long as they were told to stay close. So far, he'd been right. Surial found it unnatural in the extreme.

The look he received was fond. "No. They will stay with us."

One huge hand cupped Lit'ka's cheek and the horse shuddered in what looked like pure pleasure.

A twinge of something that felt distinctly like jealousy went through him and Surial turned his back on Kade and the horse, searching through the packs for a blanket to combat the sudden chill.

Perhaps Aline was correct. Perhaps he should attempt the heavier clothing she made.

It took no time at all for the storm to bubble up, or the tent to be raised, Kade even making an overhang so that they might have a fire.

Sitting in the tent, with a blanket wrapped tightly around himself, he watched as Kade expertly got the fire going and began their supper. "Gruel *again*?"

One ruddy eyebrow lifted, daring to tease. "I could hunt you a bird."

He shuddered lightly. "No!" He couldn't stop his reaction, even though he knew Kade teased him. His friend was well aware he could not eat meat, could not, in fact, eat at all if the smell of death filled his nose.

"Well, then. Perhaps at the next town, we can trade for meal, apples." A packet of dried berries appeared, added with a touch of honey to the bubbling pot of grain.

"That would be nice. And the berries look delicious." He laid a hand on Kade's arm, the flesh warm beneath his fingers, the muscles solid and firm. "I do appreciate the care you take of me."

The smile warmed him, the way Kade looked upon him heated him even more. "It is the way of things. It is mine to do."

"And what is mine to do for you, Kade?" It seemed Kade took such good care of him and all he did was... get taken care of.

"You are my ki'ita." That look slid from warm to confused, as if things should be perfectly clear.

He squeezed Kade's arm, the word filling him with more of that heat that seemed to accompany each and every one of Kade's looks. "As long as you're happy."

"I am." With the passing of every day, Kade seemed to grow stronger and stronger - soaking up sun and freedom, so much more than he had seemed in Sandide. A free man.

He was like a lion, with his main of braids and his strength.

The thought had Surial smiling.

Of course, some marks of those long years of slavery were permanent - deep brutal scars that whips had laid across Kade's chest, back, on the heavy thighs. There were even scars on the man's cheeks, although those were put there purposefully, as a young man.

Surial reached out, fingers tracing the lines on Kade's cheeks, the marks that denoted him as a warrior to his tribesmen. That Kade was the last of his own tribe did not diminish their meaning. The smile he received nearly stopped his heart, the pride there stunning him.

His fingers continued their exploration, tracing Kade's heavy features, the tanned leather of Kade's skin, the tiny copper hairs that dotted the square jaw and teased his fingertips. Surial touched until he had his fill, his eyes following the flow and order that was a man's face. His breath caught in his throat, everything seeming to still, even the birds somehow quiet.

"My One." The sound rumbled out of Kade, through his fingertips, vibrating in the tiny bones in his wrist. The words made him shiver and he was caught in Kade's golden gaze.

Kade jumped, the gruel splashing between them. "Careful. I would not burn you."

"No, I know you wouldn't." Surial backed away and curled his arms around his knees, watching as Kade fetched the hand-carved wooden spoons and offered him one along with the simple bowl. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome." Kade ate little, staring up at the swirling clouds, the flashes of lightning, with fascination.

Surial ate even less, chasing down the berries with his spoon and scooping them up along with the globs of honey that hadn't been completely mixed into the meal.

Another flash of lightning lit the sky, followed immediately by a clap of thunder, the closeness of the noise surprising him, making him jump and be grateful that the mess in

the bowl was thick enough not to splash. Kade, on the other hand, laughed heartily, clapping and looking as excited as a child. The laughter was contagious, and he put down his bowl so he wouldn't spill it as he laughed.

Suddenly Kade stood, hand held out. "Come with me."

He blinked, but put one hand in Kade's, trusting him implicitly. Kade tugged him up, both of them running out into the trees. The light-flies were thick, heralding the rain, making the darkness seem like fairies inhabited it. Magic. Real magic.

"Oh, Kade!" Surial laughed, spinning around and gazing at them.

"Yes. The rains will come and cleanse us." Kade began to strip down, tugging off his vest, the heavy skin leggings.

"You want us to stay out when the rains start?" His eyes were fastened to Kade's body, the scars and muscles competing for his attention.

"It will feel good." Kade smiled at him, arms stretching up together toward the sky.

The wind caught the edge of Surial's light tunic, cold, but refreshing, so Surial stripped out of his clothes as well, laughing at the paleness of his skin in the glow of the light-flies.

"There." Kade hid their clothes in the crook of a tree, giving them some protection. About the time that Kade's hands dropped, the skies opened, the rains pouring down upon them with a crash. He gasped at the sudden flood of cold water splashing against his skin, but Kade's obvious joy soon had him turning his face to the rain. It was amazing, really, to have lived so much of his life in a desert town and now dance in the rain, bare and free.

Kade's song rang out - a rough hooting that sounded as earthy and natural as the patter of the rain against them, the booming of the thunder. It was glorious, as was Kade himself. His friend looked as if he had leapt out of one of the trees -- solid and real and dark gold in the rain.

His hands were taken and he was led into a wild dance, their feet pounding dirt into mud and sliding on the wet grass. It was amazing. He felt like a part of the storm, a part of the ground and the trees, of life itself. Laughing, he moved with more enthusiasm, the slick ground beginning to slide beneath his feet.

"Yes! Yes, ki'ita!" Kade howled, spinning them. His feet went out from under him and he went flying, slamming into Kade's solid body.

The spinning stopped, Kade's arms cradling him, holding him. He shivered, pressing closer to Kade's warmth and looking up into the rain, into Kade's eyes. "I have you, ki'ita."

"You do." He laughed, blinking against the raindrops.

"Come now. The meal will taste better, now that we have danced."

"At least it will be warm." He shivered, pressing closer to Kade's warmth.

Kade dried him with the man's own vest, then helped him dress, protecting him from the rain with that broad body. Hand and hand, they ran back to the tent. He was only a little bit wet, thanks to Kade. Only a bit wet, well-fed, and heading into a safe, dry place to enjoy the rest of the storm.

All thanks to Kade.

He was a very lucky man.

Chapter Two

The farther they moved away from the sight of the mountain of magic, the better Kadrass felt. He could feel his ki'ita's grandfather, black-fury eyes staring down from the huge black crags, watching.

Following.

Hunting.

Hunting them both.

The thought made his lip curl, made him growl deep in his chest, and Lit'ka tossed his head. They were no one's prey.

Never again.

Mon'Keur and Surial sauntered up next to him, Surial's emerald eyes looking at him with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing." He moved them beneath the heavy fringe of the trees. If he was wrong, it would hurt nothing to be cautious.

"Do you think we'll find a village tonight?" Surial asked, eyes shifting from concerned to interested. The grandfather may or may not have been watching, but Surial most certainly was.

"We might." He hadn't seen hints of people, but he could be wrong. The slavers moved quickly in the spring, the summer. They would be difficult to catch, but easy to track, once Surial and Kade came upon their trail. "Soon we must be careful. Soon we will watch for slavers."

Surial reached for him and touched his hand where it had curled into a fist, nails digging into his palm. "We will find others and save them from the fate you suffered, Kade."

His fingers opened, blooming like a flower to the sun, little crimson crescents blooming in the rough skin. "Yes, my One."

Long, slender fingers twisted with his for a moment, Surial's skin so soft, the warm buzzing jolt of healing making him moan. It was better, easier, here under the woods, under the shadow of the leaves. They continued to hold hands for awhile, the mi'it walking slowly beneath them, talking to each other. Surial kept looking at him and smiling, the lovely eyes warm.

"It suits you, being away from the sands."

"Do you think so? I would have thought myself particularly unsuited, actually. Perhaps I am wrong." Surial looked around, and smiled at him. "The company is certainly better."

He didn't know what to say about that; he had little idea what to say about that at all. It was good, that Surial should enjoy his company, but it really mattered very little. He would stay with Surial, regardless.

Surial's hand stayed in his a moment or two longer before sliding away with a soft caress, Surial's fingertips lingering, almost tickling his palm.

He held that soft, warm feeling close to himself, cradled it in toward his center. It would hold him when the shadows of the mountains fell upon him again.

Chapter Three

Surial looked up as they came upon a woman and her child on the side of the road, shrouded in layers of cloth, as if the spring was not upon them fully. The dust of the road mingled with chaff and grasses from the field.

"Please, my lords, my boy is sick. I need coin for the healer." She held her hand out to them, the other curled around a lad of about six sun cycles who sat in her lap, wheezing and gasping for breath. The air around them stank of rot, of death.

Surial stopped immediately, slipping from Mon'Keur's back, the need to help, to heal riding him like a fury. He could do better than offering coin and he would ask for nothing in return. He could feel the boy's sickness; it burned at him.

He could feel Kade, solid and sure and warm behind him. "Surial is a healer. He will help."

Surial nodded, Kade's faith filling him with warmth, with something very close to pride. He was a healer.

He would help.

The woman looked suspicious as Surial knelt next to her, his billowy clothes making the dust around them fly. "It's all right. I'm not going to hurt him."

The child reached for him, tiny hands opening and closing. Smiling, somehow charmed, Surial placed his hand on the boy's chest, immediately feeling the sickness there, the heaviness that made it hard for the boy to breathe.

"I can help him," he assured the boy's mother, holding her dark eyes until he saw her relief, her trust, the expression making her almost beautiful. Then he went to work, closing his eyes and putting his free hand on the ground, drawing the light and health from the soil itself. He was careful not to take too much from the earth, using his own energy to heal the boy.

Kade's hands were on his shoulders, the energy there, huge, waiting for him to take it, like an endless gift.

He tried to resist, unwilling to continue to take from the man who would give everything to him, but the boy was very sick and, finally, he took a little bit of Kade's life force. The power of it surged through him and into the boy, the healing power taking the sickness completely.

The child laughed, clinging to him, kissing his cheek happily. He leaned back against Kade, utterly spent, but smiling and happy, hugging the boy. The child's mother wailed, and started thanking them, kissing Surial's hands. He could hear Kade humming, the

sound happy and satisfied, yet becoming more husky, rough. He patted Kade's arm and smiled at the woman. "You're welcome."

"I don't have anything to pay you." The woman looked as if he might take the healing back if she couldn't find something to pay him with; that fear sickened him.

Surial shook his head. "Live a good life and love your boy. That is enough."

Kade's hand helped him stand, helped him on Mon'Keur. He felt weak, but happy, almost euphoric. The healing was good, it was right.

He waved to the mother and her boy, the little family seeming somehow lovely now, as they headed off, a breeze ruffling through his hair.

Kade watched him, he could *feel* the gaze on him. Then, suddenly, one long, muscled arm reached for him. He nudged Mon'Keur so they were side by side, letting himself lean against Kade. It was like taking a deep breath of fresh air, the way Kade made him feel so much better.

"Ride with me." Kade offered him a space on Lit'ka's back.

"I will." He accepted the offer and leaned harder, trying to figure out how to move from Mon'Keur's back to Lit'ka's. In the end it was Kade's strength that shifted him, settled him. "Oh. Thank you."

Kade was solid and warm behind him, his sense of well-being doubling, tripling as he leaned against Kade's strength.

"Much better." Kade's chest was like a wall behind him, the heart pounding steady and slow.

"Yes. Much." It was like coming out into the sunshine after too long a time in the darkness. Or like leaving the sands to walk in the cool forest.

As they rode, he could not help but notice the heat against the small of his back, the hard flesh. He swallowed, trying to ignore it, to ignore the way his own body responded. However, the longer they rode, the harder his own flesh became.

Kade never spoke on it, but somehow he knew that his friend paid attention. He knew that his warrior, his protector, was hard for him as well.

And now he was more eager than ever to find a village with an inn. He believed they were in need of a bed.

Chapter Four

The village was big enough to please Surial, tiny rows of hovels, a tavern, a graveled road, even a mill by the river, the wooden wheel creaking and groaning as it turned. He chuckled. As a'atima, still so young that he suckled mare's milk from a cloth, his ata had taken him to a Gathering, hundreds of tribesmen together, meeting under a huge wooden place. Then he had boggled that so many people would spend a summer together, trading and learning. Now he knew that people lived like this a purpose, all the seasons. It boggled his mind.

For his ki'ita, though, he would come into the villages.

For his ki'ita, he would do anything.

Kade headed them toward the stables, drawing suspicious glances from the frowning faces, staring out of doors. He bit back a sigh, shook his head, ducking behind his long braids. They may or may not allow him to stay inside the tavern, but Surial, with his pale skin and sleek, long black hair was obviously noble-born. They would allow him in.

The horses were dealt with easily, the horsemaster respectful, honest, the mi'it within singing joyful, simple songs. It was a good place.

Hauling their saddlebags over one of his shoulders, he headed out into the golden, fading light, the fresh scents of the stables fading into something less green, less good. He found a handful of coin from their bags, jingling them in one hand, and handed them over. "For your room."

"You mean our room." He knew the stubborn set of Surial's lips and the sudden temptation to lean down, take them in his own, was strong. He knew that his ki'ita, his One, preferred the company of men. He had seen it in the sands. The winds told him that Surial would prefer the company of the man made solely to touch the lean, fine body.

Surial made an impatient sound, eyebrows arching.

"If they allow Naik, yes." He wanted nothing more than to share a room with Surial.

Nothing.

Not even to do his duty and save his people...

A flash of children, chained together in a long line, the slavers dragging them, entered his mind, shaming him suddenly.

Surial snorted. "If they do not, I will not be staying either."

"This place will have but a single choice for you, Surial."

"They'll have supper and a bed. They will allow us in." Surial patted his hand, not taking the coins, and led the way in.

The inn was near-silent, too early for the rush of farmers seeking ale or most travelers finishing their day. The innkeeper didn't even look at them, simply muttered, 'two bits' and held out a hand. Surial nodded to him to hand the coins over and the innkeeper muttered, "first door upstairs.

He hung back and Surial went ahead, climbing in the near dark. "I hope the room itself has more light."

"Yes." The ceiling weighed down upon him, dragging his shoulders down.

The doors were tiny, wooden things, the cracks filled with bits of straw and mud. He bit back his sigh, letting Surial open the door. His ki'ita immediately went to the window, tugging the ragged curtains aside and opening the window, letting in some fresh air.

He moved to the window himself, looking out into the sky, at the fading sun.

Surial's hand slipped into his, a warm smile on his ki'ita's face. There was heat in Surial's eyes as well -- a need that called to him. His hand reached for that smile, fingertips exploring the lean face before he thought. Surial's smile grew wider and the lean body leaned into his.

"Ki'ita." The word seemed to ring in the air, heavy with his desire, his hope.

One of Surial's hands reached up to cup his cheek, fingers so soft against his skin. Green eyes shone at him as Surial's lips parted in what could only be an invitation. Oh, please. He would offer the winds anything, for this, for a single taste. The winds sang, the music near rocking him back upon his heels.

Still, he had to ask. "May I?"

Please?

"Yes, please." Surial pressed harder against him. "Please."

His hand slid back to cup his ki'ita's head, tilting the pointed chin up so their lips could meet. Surial's lips parted as they touched, a soft breath of air filling his mouth. Moaning, he dared to touch one lip with the tip of his tongue, tasting so briefly.

"Kade." Surial pressed their lips tighter together.

His moan surprised him, pushing into Surial's mouth.

Surial's hands cupped his cheeks, tilting his head slightly, tongue tickling at his lips. He let himself open, let his One, his ki'ita take his lips, join them together. Warm lips encouraged his own to open, Surial's tongue pushing into his mouth, licking through it.

The winds rang, the song so strong and sudden it near buckled his knees.

Surial pressed closer, body warm against his own, the kiss becoming deeper. He could feel Surial's song, its rhythm complimenting his.

Ki'ita.

The word sang through him, sparking his passion, his joy.

As if Surial heard it, he whimpered and pressed closer and he could feel the hardness of his ki'ita's need, like a heat on his thigh. He dared to reach down, take Surial's buttock in one hand and tug the man closer so that they might touch. His reward was a gasp, Surial's hands sliding through his braids, fingers tangling in the strands, and keeping his head where it was. His eyes popped open, he hadn't realized they were closed, and he met deep green eyes.

Surial's eyes were full of heat and love, the need there all for him.

He moaned, stepping closer, body meeting his ki'ita's more fully.

"I want you." Surial moved from side to side, rubbing them together.

"I am yours." That was the easiest thing, to give himself over to his ki'ita.

"Should we move to the bed?" Surial asked, fingers gliding down along his arms, the touch light, arousing, his own need beginning to swell, to fill, to respond.

"I have never been with another not of the Naik. You will have to show me what you expect."

"Am I so different, Kade?"

"Yes." He smiled, stroked Surial's jaw. "You are."

Surial was his.

A bright smile filled his heart. "I imagine all the... essentials fit together the same as they would if I were Naik." Nuzzling into his touch, Surial grabbed his hips and encouraged him toward the bed.

His laughter chased his nerves from their love making. "I have not come willingly with

another in very long. I must beg the winds to assure that my body remembers as well as my mind."

Surial's fingers slid down to cup his hardness. "It seems to be remembering just fine to me."

He sat, drawing his one in close. "Yes, my One."

Surial bent and kissed him again, fingers sliding over his shoulders. His own hands found their home on lean hips, thumbs rolling in lazy circles. Groaning, Surial rubbed against him, need hard and hot on his chest. He shrugged out of his vest, offering his One more skin, more of him.

"Oh, Kade. Look at you." Surial's fingers slid over his shoulders and down along his chest.

Each scar was touched, caressed, the pleasure inside him intensifying. "Do. Do not harm yourself..."

Surial tilted his head. "Harm myself?"

"Giving me too much. I feel you, all through me." Like magic.

"And I feel you all through me." Surial smiled, breathed deeply. "Feels good. Exciting."

He worked the cloth away from Surial's body, fingers sliding and catching on the fine fabric.

Moaning, Surial shivered, fingers brushing past his nipples and then wrapping around his arms. "Yes, please, Kade. Touch me."

"Yes." His fingers moved, exploring the long lines, the fine skin.

Surial pushed into his touches, movements sensual, graceful. He leaned forward, the stones and shells on his heavy braids clinking and clacking. Surial's fingers pushed his own breeches down, sliding them past the hard cock, exposing it to Kade's gaze.

He groaned, he could not help it, and he wrapped his fingers around the thick hardness, stroking Surial with sure pulls.

A shudder moved through the lean body, Surial crying out, hands curling hard around his shoulders. The scent of need filled his nose and he kept touching, fingers tugging harder, his ears drinking in each sound.

"Kade!" The sound of his name was like a bell.

"Yes. Yes, my One." He groaned, pulling harder.

Hips jerking, Surial arched, graceful and fine as he came, seed spilling up over Kade's hand. The scent fascinated him, and he lifted his hand to his lips, licking it clean. Surial groaned and leaned in, tongue joining his own on his fingers.

"My One." He shuddered, body so hard he ached.

"Yes. Thank you." Surial smiled, and then pushed him backward onto the bed.

He bounced, eyes going wide even as he laughed.

Laughing as well, Surial attacked his breeches, fingers hooking beneath the waistband and tugging them down. His ki'ita had seen him as naked as a man could be. Still, he watched, needing to know the man did not find him wanting.

Surial moaned, hands sliding up along his thighs, eyes on his eager prick.

"It is yours." His cock bobbed, trying to catch more attention.

"Mmm... then I am a lucky man." Surial climbed onto the bed between his legs, thumbs sliding from the base of his cock to the tip.

"Surial." He spread wider, moaning low. "My One."

"I think you are mine as well." Bending, Surial kissed the tip.

Lightning shot up along his spine and he arched, toes curling. "I am."

"Good." Surial's mouth closed over the top of his cock, sucking as Surial's agile tongue slid over his flesh.

His teeth clicked together, eyes unseeing as the winds sang for him. Surial bobbed his head, lips sliding on his prick, and a soft hum sent vibrations through him.

His climax roared through him, undeniable, his seed pouring into his One, his ki'ita. His Surial.

Pulling away, Surial smiled up at him, several drops of come on the beautiful lips. He drew Surial in, licking the thin lips clean, daring to cradle the man in his arms.

"Mmm... Kade. I could stay right here all night."

"Yes, my One." He would hold the dear body, protect his ki'ita. Love his One.

All night.

When Surial woke he was comfortable and warm, the inn's mattress surprisingly good to lie upon. It was as he stretched that he realized it wasn't the mattress, but Kade.

"Mmm..." Now that they'd become lovers, he didn't know why they hadn't done this earlier. It felt right and very, very good. He stretched again, this time moving so his prick rubbed against Kade's belly.

Kade hummed softly, hand patting him gently.

Smiling, he rubbed his cheek against Kade's chest. He'd said he could stay here all night and it looked like he had. Kade's heart beat against his ear, strong and steady.

So strong. Kade was like a lion, strong and golden, with an amazing mane of braids. Fierce and protective.

He turned his head, kissing Kade's chest. His lion.

"Ki'ita." That single, still-asleep word was full of pleasure, satisfaction.

He'd known that Kade loved him, cared for him deeply, but to know that they had this to share as well... Surial moaned, the emotions too big to keep in.

Kade's cock was filling, hard and hot against his thigh, answering his own need. He shifted his hips, sliding his erection against Kade's, the need increasing. Huge hands landed on his ass, moving him a bit more firmly, his lion lover murmuring softly.

He raised his head so he could look into Kade's face, smiling into the golden eyes and licking his lips.

"Di'ben sud, ki'ita."

"Di'ben sud to you, too." He kept moving, wriggling and enjoying the feeling of their bodies rubbing together.

Kade moved with him, arching underneath him, adding that strength to his.

"So strong." He loved that amazing power.

"It is the way of things." One hand landed on his buttocks, squeezing.

"I like the way of things." He pressed their lips together, his fingers sliding into Kade's braids, holding onto them.

Kade moaned as he touched the heavy braids. "Yes."

He held onto them as he gave Kade one kiss after another, trusting Kade's big hand to keep them moving the way he needed. They moaned together, Kade's cock leaking against his, slicking the way. Surial pushed faster, his tongue slipping into Kade's mouth over and over.

He could feel Kade's cock, beginning to swell. It was better than anything he could remember.

His eyes dropped closed as the pleasure gathered in his spine.

"Need. Need, my One."

"Yes, please." Surial nodded, hips moving faster, their cocks feeling so good as they slid together.

He was not sure whether it was him who climaxed first, or Kade, but it didn't matter. What mattered was that they did. He kept moving, Kade's belly slick and warm, then he stilled, resting back on Kade.

"Mmm. That is a pleasant waking, my One."

"It is. We should make sure we do it every time we wake."

Kade's low, husky chuckle soothed him, deep down.

He patted one solid shoulder. "I suppose we have to get up and continue on our way..."

"Mmm. We have time." That heavy hand patted again.

"Oh, good." Laughing, he rubbed his cheek against Kade's chest. "Good."

"Yes, my One. It is."

And impossibly, perfectly, it was.

Chapter Five

Surial looked up into the night sky, watching the stars and the moon. Kade had been right; there seemed to be so many more away from Azize.

The sky looked like a sheet of blue velvet so dark it was almost black, scattered with diamonds. He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself, feeling suddenly small and exposed in the open field Kade had chosen to camp in. He was glad they'd taken this trip, but the wide open spaces didn't fill him the way they filled his lover. His lover. He repeated it over and over in his head.

His lover. Only Kade filled him.

His Kadras.

Warm arms encircled him and Kade's body was firm and solid against his back as his lover snuggled close. "Cold, my One? Shall I stoke the fire?"

Lips nuzzled into the hair hiding Surial's neck, seeking sensitive skin. Kade inhaled, moaning softly, the sound vibrating between them. Kade's hands began to move, rubbing sensuously over Surial's arms, fingers massaging and warming. "Or shall I stoke your fire?"

Surial purred and let his head fall back, giving Kade easy access to the sensitive nerves that ran along his neck.

His own hands shifted back, sliding over Kade's hips to his buttocks.

Kade growled low against Surial's throat, pressing against him, hard and eager. The soft kisses slowly became sharp, hungry nips as Surial's hands kneaded the strong muscles they held.

One large hand wrapped around Surial's hip, pulling him close, the other hand moving over his torso, pulling impatiently at the layers of soft cloth separating them.

Kade's lips searched out Surial's ear, whispering low and husky as the stars seemed to whirl madly in the sky. "You were made for my touch, my mouth. I have ached for you since we rode out this morning and I envied the sunlight kissing your hair."

His eyes went wide, the sudden and unexpected poetry from his warrior starting a fire within him.

Surial moaned, the sound coming from deep inside of him as his hips moved from side to side, gliding lightly over Kade's hardness. He loosened his grip, fingers moving teasingly over the taut flesh, keeping his touch light, delicate. He could feel Kade's body moving

toward his touch, trying to increase the friction, the pressure. A soft, needy whimper slid along the skin of Surial's throat, sweet as honey.

The hand creating bursts of sensations along Surial's stomach slid farther, playing against the sharp bones of his hips. "My One."

His insides melted at that, knees buckling out from under him. His hands trailed along Kade's legs as he slid to his knees. Turning his head he breathed against Kade's cock, adding his heat to his lover's.

Cheek pressed against Kade's length, he tilted his head, looking up into eyes the color of wild honey.

One hand reached down, tracing over his cheekbones. A smile bloomed as Kade traced the crescent-shaped mark on his cheek, a gift from the terrifying trek from the sands to the dark mountain that housed his grandfather. It was a tiny mark, a simple imperfection, but one that proved that he had made his escape from Savinia, that the witch had not sacrificed him to her black gods. It was a mark of honor, something much like Kade's mark, a quiet voice reminded him -- the touch filling him with joy.

With an odd grace, one that came from years of riding, Kade slid down beside Surial and tilted his chin. "I can see the stars in your eyes."

Then Kade took his mouth in a hot, sweet kiss.

He opened his mouth wider, greedy for more, for as much of Kade as his lover was willing to give him. He slid his hands over Kade's face, each finger tracing the scars across his lover's cheeks before moving up to slid over the braids of hair. Surial grabbed a handful of the braids in each hand, tugging gently but insistently until their mouths parted, laughter bubbling from his lips.

Fingers still tangled in Kade's braids, he leaned forward and nipped at his lover's lower lip and then the tip of Kade's nose before slipping away, running across the open field.

A low growl sounded and then Kade leapt, moving through the grass, hunting him.

Odd, that a man so large could move so quietly. Not quickly, but almost silent. Not that Kade was bothering with silence, growls rumbling in his chest, as he gave chase, keeping as little distance between their bodies as he could.

The big body brushed against him once and again a few steps later, but Kade made no attempt to bring him down, instead the hunter waited for his prey to grow tired, to run himself into the ground.

Another laugh left him, the sound ringing out across the sky, exhilaration filling him as they played together.

He sidestepped abruptly, his lover shooting well past him before Kade could stop his momentum.

Surial sped up, running full out now, giving his lover the best chase he could; Kade had once told him that too quick a victory made the spoils sour, though he suspected his lover hadn't had this circumstance in mind at the time.

His lungs began to burn, the muscles of his legs trembling.

Suddenly, the world tilted as Kade's hands were on him, pulling him to the ground, pulling him close. His head was tilted up, Kade's mouth hungry and demanding, tongue sliding inside him, claiming him.

Stars bloomed behind Surial's eyes as Kade devoured him, pulling his breath from his lungs and feeding it back to him. With no breath left for moaning, he made do with pressing himself tightly against Kade while his hands roamed with little finesse or even purpose outside of the need to touch.

Hands fisted in his blouse, one on each side of his throat, and yanked, the fabric snarling as it rent. Kade's hands moved immediately to his skin, a groan passing into Surial's mouth as fingers found his nipples.

Surial whimpered as Kade played him, tugging on his nipples, making him squirm.

The night air was cold, but Kade was hot, hands like brands across his skin.

Kade sat up, tearing his own blouse over his head and leaning back down. He latched onto Surial's neck, sucking strongly. "Need you."

Surial's gasp was almost a sob and his hands gripped Kade's shoulders, hanging on as Kade's mouth sent him soaring. His lover knew exactly where to touch him to make him sing. He managed to give voice to a couple of words before Kade's actions made him dizzy with lust. "Want you."

Their hands met, both fighting to touch hot, hard flesh. Their groans harmonized for a second before they were stolen by the wind.

Surial finally opened Kade's waistband, Kade's cock leaping into his hand, needy for his touch.

Kade's sob was lovely in its passion.

Something about doing this beneath the moon's regard made him feel feral, primal and he threw his head back, howling as his hand moved over Kade's shaft.

Another rip sounded and Kade's hands were on him, stroking his erection, the callused palms pulling and squeezing, making him arch and moan. Kade pressed against him, against his hand, his hip, movements desperate and quick, mouth fierce against his shoulder. "Surial... my One. Please, love."

He cried out, his words shooting into the sky, swallowed by its velvet blackness. "Yes, anything!"

Kade roared into his skin, hot seed splashing against his hand, his belly. Before the pulses ceased, their mouths were fused, tongues sliding together. His own release followed quickly, sobbed into his lover's greedy mouth as he bathed Kade's hand with liquid heat.

For a moment he was among the stars that lit the night, sailing through them in Kade's arms.

When he fell back to ground, the truth found him, still in Kade's arms, soft kisses brushing against his face.

"My Surial, my One."

"As you are my Kadrass."

He interrupted the flow of kisses by meeting Kade's mouth with his own, sliding his tongue into the warm depths.

A breeze blew threw the grasses, rustling the leaves, but it couldn't touch him, he was safe and warm in his lover's arms.

Chapter Six

Hair, black and smooth as polished ebony, poured across the pillow, the candlelight dancing upon its rich surface. Kade reached out, brought one strand to his face and inhaled, filling himself with the spice and honey smell of his lover. Surial was sleeping, tiny, soft little groans and whispers filling the air. Kade thought he was dreaming perhaps of dancing or riding, the way his body wiggled slightly, hips moving sensuously on the silken sheets.

Pale and lovely, such fine skin -- Kade was often struck by the fear that his hands, so rough and callused, would rend Surial's flesh, mar its smooth surface, as the slavers had marred him.

With the thought of the slavers, Kade frowned. They had been riding for days, the spring faded into summer, the leaves deep green and heavy, and still there was no sign of his people, of the slavers that took them. Part of him wondered if perhaps he should lead them farther north, up into the lands where there were no craggy mountains, no shadows.

Perhaps he should go there, find his own kind, and follow the slavers south again. Surely there were still Naik to the north past the river of the snake. Surely the tribes still lived.

The thought that there might not be children left, braiding long tano'ka and telling stories of their families, sharing iyossi, the bond of joy, with the long flying ta'akto, the mi'it, made the heavy muscles of his stomach clench in agony.

Surial moaned again, distracting him from his dark thoughts. He reached out with one finger and traced the line of Surial's spine, enjoying the way his lover moved closer, begging for more sensation.

Surial was responsive to him, opening up under his touch like a bloom opens to the sun. It made him wonder that such a flower should have been so neglected that the smallest hint of care brought such bright response. Kade let his hand slide down, moving to cup the thin buttocks, smiling at the contrast of pale skin with his dark. He began to massage gently, groaning as Surial's legs moved, opened and the sweet, hidden skin of his inner thighs was exposed.

Using the back side of his fingers, he savored the softness, closing his eyes as he stroked.

"Insatiable." The word would have had more sting if it hadn't purred from Surial's throat.

"I thought you were sleeping, dreaming of beautiful youths, dancing for your pleasure, perhaps?" Kade leaned forward, lips moving across the nape of Surial's neck, tongue sneaking out to draw in the taste.

A soft gasp met his ears, Surial's muscles clenching and then releasing again. "I don't want beautiful youths, dancing or not. I just want you."

"You have me." Kade moved closer, wrapping his arms around Surial, sighing softly as their skin met, the last of his dark thoughts fading away.

He reached out, pulling Surial's leg up over the top of his own, reveling in the heat. He stroked along the silky skin of stomach, inner thigh, the sweet skin of a hip. Surial pushed back into him, foot slipping behind his leg and hooking there, holding them fast together, even as Surial's arm slid around Kade's back,

"Now I have you."

Kade chuckled against Surial's neck, nipping gently, watching the pale skin pink. "And what would you do with me now that you have me?"

Surial shook his head, his hair sliding away from his neck, baring it to Kade's view... and touch.

"It would seem that I am not in a position to do more than let you have your way with me." Surial's voice dropped to a whisper. "Fill me with your heat, my wild beauty."

Mouth watering, hunger filling him, Kade fastened his mouth over the pulsing vein in Surial's throat. Life, sweet and hot, pumped just beneath his lips, the rhythm of his love, his own, his One, filling his head and heart.

He reached down, sliding his hand over Surial's erection, thumb working the tip slowly, encouraging and arousing. Silk-soft, hot as a brand -- touching Surial was...

Surial's moan distracted him and he left his poetry behind for bliss.

His lover's buttocks were pushing back against him, his own cock sliding along Surial's cleft, slicking it with the eager juices that flowed from the tip. The hand around his back clutched at his skin in a way that was becoming more and more familiar each time they joined together.

"You set me on fire, burn me into ash and then your love is the wind that scatters me." And Surial called him the poet. There was a softness in his ki'ita that he had only suspected before.

"My One." Kade groaned, trying to clear his sight, control this need long enough to find the pot of sweet oil. Surial's body drove him past sense, past anything but the sensations built between them and the sweet pulse of skin beneath his lips. "Need..."

"Yes. Yes! Need you, please Kade, don't tease, not this time..."

Surial was moving now, writhing in his arms, alternating pushing back against him with shoving forward into his hand.

"No teasing." Kade shifted, sticking his fingers in his mouth and wetting them quickly, slicking his throbbing erection. He pushed up against Surial, gasping at the heat. "Open for me."

Surial groaned, the sound deep and full of need, and Surial pressed back, his cock pushing past the tight muscles at his lover's entrance. Another groan and then Surial's body was pulling him in, sinking down on him until he was in as deeply as he could go in this position.

Surial's lilting voice was moving through the air around them, soft words that spoke of need and pleasure and deep, abiding love.

The desperate need eased as he moved within Surial's body, moving in long, lazy strokes. Kade held his lover close, one hand returning to stroke the hard, hot erection, the other pressed against an incredibly soft, black nest of curls creeping up toward Surial's lower belly.

His mouth was busy, feeding with gentle suction against smooth skin.

Kade shivered, the ecstasy, the beauty of Surial all around him, almost more than he could understand.

Surial's moans were growing louder, longer; he was moving with Kade, following the rhythm set by the fucking and sucking.

"Burning for you... into ash." The words were gasped, whispered between shouts of ecstasy.

"Love you." The words were gasped, as Kade moved, thrusting harder, burying himself within Surial's body. He threw his head back, gasping as they writhed together, crying out. "By the winds, how I love you."

Another low cry, and Kade bent forward again, whispering "my One", before latching onto Surial's throat with his teeth.

The body in his arms convulsed, Surial screaming, "Kadras!" as he came.

The sound of his name thrilled him, the word made magic with power and love and he sobbed out his release into Surial's throat. Lost within the heat and tight grip of Surial's body, he flew, boneless and free.

He could hear the echo of his name sliding around the room, ringing in his ears, as he

came back to himself, back to his body, wrapped around his lover's. Surial was heavy in his arms, the slender body lax, Surial's breathing soft, even.

"Love..."

The word was little more than a murmur as Surial drifted back to sleep.

"Until the waters cease and the sun falls, my One." Kade reached for a light blanket, throwing it over them. A mark was forming, blue-black and shocking against Surial's skin. Kade touched it once with his lips before settling into his pillow. A single lock of ebony hair was loosely tangled in his fingers, to ground him as he slept.

Chapter Seven

He was bathing.

The moonlight danced over his body, pooling in the hollow of his throat, the small of his back, the curve of his arms as he stretched to wash his hair. Kade watched, unseen by the bank, eyes fastened on pale skin that drank in the kiss of the moon, one strand of ebony hair curling upon a perfectly formed shoulder.

He couldn't remember the forest ever being so still, so silent. He could hear Surial's soft inhalations, the quiet heartbeats. Not even the wind disturbed the water that welcomed his One. It was as if nature herself was as fascinated by watching Surial as he was.

Sinking, Surial disappeared beneath the water and Kade found himself holding his own breath, growing more anxious with each passing second. It wasn't very long, however, before Surial broke the surface again, hair rinsed clean of soap, drops of water flying from the marble skin.

Kade gasped silently, filling his lungs with air he imagined flavored by Surial.

The lone figure in the lake lay back, floating, hair flowing out around his head like an ebony halo. Kade could hear the soft sounds of contentment Surial was making: almost a purr and not quite a hum.

So lucky, the water -- to eke those happy sounds from Surial's throat with liquid fingers, to slide over unmarked skin, to surround him in a gentle caress.

Kade smiled at himself, at his unending desire. No matter how many times he drank from the well that was his One, his thirst was never quenched, his need drove him to watch, to want.

"Are you just going to watch, or are you coming in?"

He started, eyes flying up to meet a laughing gaze. "I... I didn't intend to disturb you, my One. I was just..." Kade felt his cheeks heat. He couldn't believe he was caught gazing. Again. Playing and loving instead of searching.

Still, the winds called him to this joy and Kade hoped that the winds would forgive a season of indulging himself in lovemaking and joy after the years upon years of slavery.

"Watching me, I know." Surial began to make his way slowly back to the shore. "I could feel your gaze like a touch, leaving a trail of heat along my skin."

Surial stopped in front of him, looking down at him where he was crouched.

"Sometimes," whispered Surial, "I think there's something wrong with me because I can't seem to ever get enough of your skin, your heat, your eyes, your hands, touching me."

He reached up, tracing along Surial's belly with a single finger, moaning softly at the contact. "I cannot help myself. I ache for you, for your lips, your sighs, the taste of your skin."

"Yes, exactly." Surial's fingers traced the scars on his cheeks and then slid into his braids, tangling with them

Kade groaned at the touch, arching his throat. "No one has ever touched me as you do, my One."

Bending, Surial licked along Kade's collarbone, from shoulder to neck. "No one?"

"No one." Kade's voice was a whisper, his attention completely captured. "My heart was silent until you whispered to it."

Surial drifted slowly to his knees, tongue working along Kade's skin, moving all the way down. His One's lips closed briefly over his left nipple and then, in a very soft voice, Surial whispered against his heart. "I love you."

"Oh." Kade felt his heart begin to pound and he cupped Surial's chin in his hand and pulled his lover up for a long, soft kiss. "My One."

Surial's smile was brighter than the moon; his dark eyes were warm and happy, the ghost of irritation having disappeared. Slender arms wrapped around his neck and the body that was pressed against his own was wet and cold.

Kade shivered and pulled Surial closer, using his own body heat to warm the chilled body and his lips to dry the drops from that smiling face. Surial closed their lips together again and then rubbed his nose against Kade's. Another soft touch of lips and then Surial's head went back, leaving the long line of his neck exposed to Kade's gaze. Kade stroked the fine skin with a single fingertip first, just so he could see Surial shiver, watch the green eyes lower in anticipation. Then he surrendered to his own hunger and bent his head to taste.

He started at the hollow beneath Surial's ear, then let his lips slide along toward his One's shoulder, stopping to nibble and lick with every sweet gasp and shudder. By the time he reached Surial's shoulder, he was aching, full of hunger. He fastened his lips onto a fading bruise left a few nights before and began to suck, pulling Surial's flavor into him.

Whimpers filled the air and Surial's fingers bit into his shoulders. Heat pressed against his hip, Surial's cock hard and insistent.

He pulled Surial closer, their bodies beginning to move, to rock together slowly. Kade began to suck harder, testing the pale skin with his teeth.

"Kadras..." his name was whispered, made sacred by the tone of his One's voice.

Kade's body jerked in response to the sound, his hips pushing close, his cock seeking Surial's heat.

"So hot." Surial's body slid against his, the movements growing smooth and slick as sweat painted their skin.

Moaning, Kade kissed his way up to Surial's ear, nibbling and licking as he went. "I want you. Make love to me?"

"I thought I was?" Surial turned, taking his mouth in a deep kiss. "Tell me what you want."

"I want to feel you inside me, on me, all around me," Kade reached down and grasped Surial's erection, stroking it with a light grip. "I was watching you before, you made me wish I was the water. Made me hungry."

Surial's chuckle was rich, thick with arousal. "And I was imagining its touch was yours."

"Were you?" Kade grinned, rotating his hips slowly against Surial, whimpering softly at the sensation.

Surial moaned. "If you want me inside you, you'd better stop."

Hands sliding down to cup Kade's buttocks, Surial took another kiss. "Did you bring oil with you?"

"No. I didn't expect to be caught." Kade grinned sheepishly. "I just came to watch."

"That wouldn't have been fun at all." Surial was all but purring as his hand began to move along Kade's cock with long, easy strokes.

Kade shivered, gasping as clever fingers made him ache. "Watch...watching you is fascinating, my One."

"For you, my lion." Surial's thumb slid across the top of his cock, making him moan. "I much prefer the sight of your honeyed skin."

"But you're so...oh, winds, touch me there again!" Kade jerked and shivered as Surial slowly drove him mad. "You're so lovely and smooth. Your skin is silk."

Surial continued to touch him, driving him closer to the edge with knowing hands. "I'm white as bones, with puny little muscles."

"You... you are like stone, so fine. I cannot believe that I am so lucky." Kade's head was spinning, he couldn't catch his breath. "I am so big and scarred and clumsy beside you. Oh, my One..."

"Big and patterned and muscled. Your skin shines in the sunlight like you were poured from honey." Surial's lips captured his own again, the kiss long, sweet, his One's hands still moving along his erection. "Come for me now, Kadas."

"Yes." Kade sobbed, body responding automatically to Surial's desire as his seed rushed from him, drawn out by his One's words.

"So beautiful. If only you could see yourself through my eyes, my lion. You would never again question your beauty."

Kade forced his eyes open, vision unfocused as his body throbbed. "As long as you look upon me, my One, I am a lucky man."

Surial smiled and then pushed him gently away. "Hands and knees, my lion."

He moved slowly, body trembling slightly. He settled on all fours, spreading his knees and arching as he stretched, braids trailing upon the ground.

"So beautiful."

He could feel the heat of his One as Surial knelt behind him, come-slick fingers sliding into him without preamble.

"Oh..." Kade settled, pushing back onto Surial's fingers, moaning almost silently as he savored the sweet pressure. "So good."

"So tight." Surial's fingers crooked, searching. "So hot." In and out, twist and stretch and search and there it was, that small point inside him that felt like lightning inside his body.

"Surial!" He jerked, head flying up as every muscle in his body clenched, his spent cock filling insistently. "Again. Please, again."

"Liked that, did you?" Surial's voice was teasing, almost light, but the fingers inside him repeated their movements, hitting his gland again and again.

Kade undulated, rocking, pushing onto Surial's fingers with short, needy groans. Filled with pleasure -- all he knew was Surial's voice, Surial's heat, the irresistible press of Surial's fingers.

He cried out when those fingers disappeared, but his lover's lean body pressed along his back, warm lips nibbling at the skin below his ear. "Ready for me?"

"Take me." The words were growled as Kade moved beneath Surial, their skin sliding together. "I need you inside me."

As soon as the words left his mouth he could feel the heat of Surial's cock press against him and then into him.

"So hot."

It was bliss, that soft, slow burn moving through him as he was filled with his One. "Surial. Love you."

"I love you, Kadras, my beautiful lion." Surial's fingers slid along his spine. "So beautiful, spread out before me, taking me deep into your body. There's no feeling that can compare to how you make me feel."

He knew this. His entire world was filled with this little magic that built between them - the freedom to ride, to touch, to heal. His head swam with it.

The touch on his back made Kade's nipples tighten. He moaned, a delicious ache spreading through his body. "My One. Your touch..."

Surial pulled out almost all the way and then pushed slowly back in again. "Touches like this?" His One's hands danced up his sides, nails scraping gently over his ribs.

He nodded almost absently, eyes closed, mouth open and gasping for air. The tremors that rocked through his body felt bone-deep, everything he was reacting to and focusing on the sensation Surial was gifting him with.

Another long, almost lazy thrust, and Surial's hands slid over his shoulders, fingers digging in to his flesh.

"Oh..." Kade's head hung farther down as his shoulders stretched up into the touches. Surial filled him -- body and spirit -- with a sweet, stretching bliss.

Surial reached around him, fingertips sliding across his nipples again and again as the lazy thrusts began to speed.

He heard the hungry growls filling the air, knew they had to be coming from his throat, but all Kade could focus on was the bright series of lightning bolts moving from his nipples and the tight muscles squeezing Surial's cock to his own weeping erection.

"Yes, my lion, that's it. Sing for me." Surial's fingers began to linger over Kade's nipples, tugging and pulling.

Every motion of those fingers made him arch and moan, driving his hips upon Surial's

hard flesh, which, in turn, made him cry out, pushing his burning nipples back into his One's hands.

Surial was speaking again, though Kade couldn't make out the words, but the soft, musical tones of his One's voice was like another caress, stroking him lightly. Surial found a rhythm designed to flay Kade's grip from any semblance of control. He could only feel, dance and sway and sing for his One, deliver himself into Surial's hands without the slightest hesitation.

His One took his love and trust and returned them twofold, turning them into a circle where neither ended or began, they bodies moving together in harmony.

Drops of sweat fell from Kade's face, splashing upon the grass, each drop echoed by answering splashes against his back. He wanted to reach out, wanted to touch, to see. All he could do was feel, his body inching closer and closer to completion.

Surial kept pushing him, moving him forward bit by bit. One of Surial's hands left his nipple and began to wander, almost leisurely, down his chest, playing against his stomach muscles, making them jump.

"Teasing man." The word could have sounded harsh, if Kade's breathless need and fond, almost desperate laughter hadn't filled the sound.

Surial's answering laugh was light and just as breathless as Kade felt. "Which of us am I teasing?" Surial asked his hand wandered down, fingers brushing lightly against the tip of Kade's cock.

"I think that would be me, my One." Kade moaned softly, toes curling.

"You don't think I'm teasing myself as well?" Surial's voice was soft, deep like it always got whenever they were making love. "You don't think I want to grab onto your heat and make you come, make me come, now, now, now? Because I do, my lion. I want so much to rush through this."

The teasing fingers touched the top of Kade's cock and then slid down to grab his hips, holding on as the thrusts increased. "But I want to make it last forever, too."

Kade pushed back into the thrusts, moans coming consistently. He was burning, body shaking. "Please, my One. Harder."

"All right, my lion, no more teasing." One hand remained wrapped around his hip, the other moved to take his erection in hand, circling it tightly.

Surial's thrusts became harder, pushing him into the hand that held him.

"Surial!" Kade felt his body tightening, every nerve firing at once as Surial loved him, pushed him, held him.

"Kadras." His name came back to him, a sweet caress, a promise.

Kade felt the touch of his name slipping along his spine and he came, sobbing quietly in pleasure. Surial continued to move within him, thrusting over and over and then, pushing in with a shout. Kade could feel the heat of Surial's seed fill him. He was trembling, alternating between bliss and exhaustion, the weight on his back warm and comforting.

Soft, slender hands slid along his sides, moving to soothe now instead of arouse.

Kade sighed, smiling as the touch made his body relax. "I love you, my One. Feels so good."

A soft cheek slid against his back. "You do."

He purred softly, content down to the marrow of his bones.

"Forever. I want this -- us -- to outlive the stars themselves."

"Is that all?" Surial asked, voice soft, happy and amused.

"No." Kade shook his head with a wide grin. "I want us to be happy and laughing the whole time, except for when we're happy and moaning or happy and sleeping."

Surial did laugh at that and Kade stretched slightly, his purr resuming.

"Mmm..." Surial placed a warm kiss on his back and then drew back, slipping from his body. A hand appeared at, reaching out to him. "Come on, my lion, let us go back to camp where we can get started on spending the rest of our lives happy and moaning."

Kade laughed, reaching up and allowing Surial to help him to his feet, even as something within him shuddered. There was darkness upon the air, waiting to take their love making, their happiness away. Something awaited them both, only allowing them these stolen summer moments. "Lead on, my One. I'm sure watching your tail on the way will prove a perfect happy and moaning inspiration."

"I'll do my best." Surial grinned and turned, walking slowly away.

Kade watched, a grin splitting his face as Surial's hips beckoned and tempted.

Yes, definitely inspirational.

Chapter Eight

He hummed happily as he swung the axe, loving the burn of muscles, the rapidly growling pile of firewood, the steady, comfortable rhythm and repetition, the light of the sun as it crested over the trees.

Wood for his fire this time, instead of the farmer's, who offered them a shack, a bit of barn, a place to earn coin and things to barter for supplies. He was well-used to manual labor - from harvesting grain to shoring up the barn, Kade earned their keep. Surial did as well, and the high summer and simple work had left them lazy, easy in their skins.

Left them spoiled until one of the farmer's sons had stolen from the farmer, then lied, leaving fingers to point at his heavy braids, his scars, the fact that he had been a slave.

He had heard the rumbling upon the air and, in the darkness, he had gathered Surial up and they had fled, heading deep into the woods to see if perhaps their flight gathered up the interest of those that hunted his kind.

For an entire cycle of the moon, there was nothing. So Kade swung the axe, cut wood.

Fire in his camp.

Camp with his lover, curled up in the bedroll, arm over his eyes to block out the dawn.

After the first hour, he threw off his shirt, letting the sun warm his skin.

After the second hour, Kade's braids had come loose from the leather tie that bound them, bouncing around his face, sweat making them slick and heavy.

Finally he put down the axe and stacked the wood, sweat pouring over his body in the morning sun. Surial was still, quiet by the fading fire and Kade decided not to wake him, grabbing up his pack and heading for the pool that lay nearby.

Throwing his bag down on a flat rock at the shore, Kade stripped off his leathers and waded in, gasping at the cold. He pulled out the multitude of tiny ties that held his braids together and dropped them beside his pack, before turning and swimming out to the deep part of the pond, allowing himself to sink beneath the still waters.

He stayed beneath the surface until his lungs felt as if they would explode. Shooting out of the water, he gasped for air, his hair falling around him the ends well undone from their braids.

"You look like a merman come to seduce me into his lair deep beneath the waters."

"Di'ben sud, my One," Kade greeted him with a smile. "I thought you were still abed."

Working his hands through his braids, Kade waded over to the bank where Surial sat cross-legged and stole a soft kiss. "Sleep well?"

"Until you left my side, yes."

He could feel Surial's eyes on his hair, the dark green hungry on him.

"It was all sweaty and I needed a shave." Kade rubbed his nose against Surial's, water splashing around them. "Not to mention a bath. I know how you feel about grime."

Surial laughed and slid his palm along Kade's cheek. "I'll inspect you for grime later, for now let me shave you? And brush your hair?"

"This mass?" Kade teased gently, scratching the soft palm with his stubble, the heavy weight of his loose hair pulling against his shoulders. "This mass that you wanted all cut off when you met me, those long days past?"

Surial blushed and lowered his eyes. "All I saw was a mess," he admitted softly.

Kade's damp fingers traced along the faint moon gracing Surial's cheek, the moon's gentle kiss etched into smooth cream. "And now, my One. Now what do you see?"

Eyes the color of dark forests rose and looked up at him. "I see the man I love, the man who takes care of me and sometimes gets messy doing so." Surial's hands pushed into his wet hair, rubbing against his scalp. "I see a waterfall of copper and bronze and gold, a precious glittering mane upon my lion."

Kade smiled, feeling his cheeks heat. A contented purr rumbled from his chest and he pushed against Surial's touch. "You honor me." Kade crawled up onto the rock, stretching up into the sun's kiss, muscles bunching and releasing before he settled back. "I would love for you to tend me."

Surial placed a kiss on his lips, licking at them with his tongue before turning and rooting through Kade's pack. A straight razor, a bar of soap, and a brush, carved of wood and toothed with fine horsehair were placed carefully next to the mound of ties. Surial scratched gently through Kade's stubble with his fingertips. "I'm fascinated to see if this grows out in the same living colors your hair claims, but it scratches at me so."

Chuckling, Kade arched his throat. "It's a rough thing, my beard, would take days before it was soft enough to not mark your skin." He smiled at his lover. "I could not wait so long to have your taste upon my tongue."

"Nor could I." Surial dipped the soap into the pond and then rubbed it between his hands until he'd made a generous lather. He rubbed the lather over Kade's beard, working slowly, making sure he didn't miss any spots.

Those long thin fingers felt so good, moving against his skin, careful and thorough. Kade shivered, eyes closing as he savored the sensations, the feeling of being cared for, loved.

"I'm shaving now," Surial warned him quietly. The careful scrape of the razor followed the words, starting at his throat and working up along the skin beneath his chin.

Kade opened his eyes, watching Surial's face as he worked. So focused, so intent -- Kade had to force himself not to reach up and pull his lover close, kiss those full lips until they were swollen and soft. He nearly gave in when Surial's tongue wet his lips before even white teeth bit down into the lower lip, a line appearing between Surial's eyebrows as he concentrated.

Soft, sure movements dragged the razor over each cheek and along his jaw before Surial turned his attention to Kade's chin and the patch between his nose and mouth. Kade could feel arousal, warm and heavy, blooming in his lower belly. The sun was soft and warm, Surial's hands gentle against his skin. He moaned softly, muscles relaxing. A cloth was pressed against his skin, wiping away any extra soap and then Surial's hands were smoothing over his cheeks.

"I should make sure I haven't missed a spot."

It was his only warning before his lover's cheeks were rubbed against his own followed by Surial's soft tongue lapping at him.

"Surial..." Kade tilted his head, searching for Surial's lips. The touch of Surial's tongue was maddening, making his shaft lift and fill, searching for his lover's touch.

Surial rubbed his cheek against Kade's again before returning to his teasing licks. "I have to examine you thoroughly, my beautiful lion, I know how it upsets you to abrade my skin."

Kade moaned, shifting restlessly beneath Surial's ministrations. Such a tease, his One, so thorough, so patient -- oh, how Kade ached, the need primal and intense, a constant presence at the base of his spine, coiled tight. At last Surial's lips pushed against his, the soft, hot tongue pressing against him, begging entrance.

Kade wrapped his arms around Surial, pulling him close, as his lips opened. Sweet, his Surial tasted of honeyed mead and clear spring water and fresh apples plucked from the trees. Surial's tongue pushed deep into his mouth, filling him with the taste.

Soft hands slid against his cheeks and down into his hair, carding through it.

They kissed, long and slow, sharing breath and sweet touches of lips. "Mmm... love."

"I love you." Surial pulled back and took Kade's hands, encouraging him to sit up. "Now I'm going to comb your hair."

"It's tangled. I haven't pulled the tano'ka out in too long." Kade pushed himself up, wringing out the remaining water from the strands, tugging with rough fingers. "I cannot believe it's so long. If I did not believe my ancestors would hunt me in the night, I would cut it off."

A soft slap hit his arm. "Forget your ancestors. You'll have me to deal with."

Surial moved to sit behind him, a leg coming to rest on either side of Kade's as the brush and long fingers began to work through his hair. "If you let me do this more often it wouldn't be so much trouble..."

"I don't want to bother you with it, my One. It's such a time-consuming problem." Kade let his head fall back with a content sigh. Surial's hands felt so good, so right, moving in his hair.

Surial snorted softly. "You don't want to bother me with it? Oh my gentle lion, bother me. Do you know that I have fantasies about your beautiful mane?"

Kade flushed, shifting with a soft moan. "You do? I... I always wanted dark, smooth hair like the tribesman. It was sleek, like a pelt, not coarse and light. It was like yours. Soft."

"Yours is soft when it's been washed. And it shimmers and moves like a live thing." He felt Surial's lips press against his scalp and then Surial's voice sounded near his ear, the words quiet, shy. "I dream about being touched by your hair, about you wrapping it around my cock and making me come."

"Oh." Shuddering, he reached down and began to stroke his erection, Surial's words making him ache and throb. "I would like that, watch your face as you come, my hair wrapped snug around your fine skin, your smell all around me."

"I can see how much you'd enjoy that my lion. Would you like to know what else I've imagined doing with your hair?" All the while he spoke, his fingers and the brush were worked through Kade's hair, the touch gentle, sensual.

"Yes..." Kade bit his lip at the raw need in his voice, so different from Surial's gentle lilt, so musical and rich. Surial made him feel so alive, as if he was something lovely, something beautiful. Not an old, scarred horseman.

Someone special.

"I want to lie beneath you while you kiss me, to be curtained from everything but you behind the living copper of your hair. Gentle breezes would blow it against my skin,

tickle it against my lips, my eyelids... slide it over my neck, it would play against the marks you'd have left earlier."

"I would keep you marked as mine forever." Kade admitted with a whisper, hips beginning to shift as he worked his own cock. Surial scooted closer, Kade could feel the heat against his skin.

"I love the feeling of your lips on my neck. I love the sting of it when you press against the marks, reminding me that I am yours. The touch of your hair would be like that. You allow no one near it, but me you would wrap in it; you would slide it over my skin and make me come in it."

Kade arched backward, leaning against Surial's shoulder, hair trapped between their bodies. His flesh was hot and heavy in his hand, Surial's eyes and touch and words burning into him. "You set me afire."

Surial's fingers slid along his scalp, fingertips rubbing gently. "Do I? Then burn for me, my Kadrass, show me the power my words have over you."

He sobbed, body jerking at the sound of his name on Surial's lips, a prayer. Kade tilted his head, brushing a kiss against Surial's smooth jaw.

"My Kadrass, my beautiful lion."

Kade's eyes flashed open, his thumb sliding over the sensitive bundle of nerves at the ridged head of his cock as Surial's profile came into view.

"My One." Kade wasn't even sure he'd whispered it as his seed poured over his fingers, his vision full of beauty.

When he again became aware of his surroundings, one of Surial's hands was stroking through his hair, the other was on his belly, long fingers smoothing his seed into his skin.

Surial's lilting voice was cradling him in music. "So lovely, my beautiful lion, roaring for me, coming for me."

"My Surial, I waited for you for so long." Kade pushed himself up until he could brush soft kisses along Surial's jaw and throat. "So many years lost."

"No regrets, my lion, don't color the now black with past sorrows that you cannot change. You taught me that." Surial's lips met his in a hard kiss. "I am here now," his lover said fiercely, "as are you. Both whole, together. Let the others drive at us; it matters not."

"Yes. Together. My Surial, my love." Emotion made his voice thick and he pulled Surial close to him. "My One."

Surial straddled him and pressed hot, hard flesh against his belly. "Your needy one."

Kade smiled, sliding one hand down to Surial's hip and pulled him close, kissing him as a sweet moan fell from those full lips. "Take me, make me yours."

"Yes, for as long as there is breath in my body, I will." Surial's body wriggled over him, sliding their skin together as an insistent tongue once again pushed itself deep into Kade's mouth. Kade opened his lips, letting his hungry one feed from him, build the passion between them. He stroked along the long lines of smooth skin, pressing Surial close. Surial was hard and hot against him, his own flesh responding.

Surial was soon sliding rhythmically against him and he swallowed his lover's soft, desperate whimpers. The kiss ended on a loud gasp and Surial leaned away, searching one-handed through Kade's pack. Kade sighed, lifting his knees and tilting his hips. Their erections rubbed together, hot and slick. Kade turned his head and fastened his mouth onto Surial's shoulder, sucking strongly.

Surial jerked against him, head falling to his shoulder as Surial's hips drove against him. He gasped as sharp teeth sank into his shoulder, lips and tongue soothing the hurt moments later.

Kade held Surial's head close, arching up into the sweet heat of his lover. He nuzzled close, lips finding Surial's ear. "Good."

"So good." Surial's whisper echoed his words, his lover's lips were trembling as they found his mouth, nibbling at his lips.

Kade watched as Surial's eyes widened, mottled greens darkened as they moved together, endless forests. "I can see home in your eyes."

"Kadras!" His name was a whisper as Surial came at his words, hands caught in his hair, mouth trembling against his lips.

"So lovely." Kade stole long, sweet kisses as Surial shuddered and shook, eyes heavy and dazed. "So warm."

"Love," Surial murmured, head falling heavily to Kade's shoulder.

Kade stroked him, motions long and relaxing, one leg falling off the stone into the pool and swaying lazily.

"Your skin will burn if we stay here." Kade kissed Surial's jaw gently. "And I need to do my tano'ka."

"May I watch?" The three soft words were filled with need.

"If you wish." Kade smiled, pleased and honored at Surial's interest. "But in the shade. I don't wish a crisped lover and it takes time for these clumsy fingers to work."

Surial took his hand and kissed each finger on it. "These fingers make me sing and fly among the stars."

Standing with obvious reluctance, Surial stretched, his arms reaching above him and then relaxed again, slinking slowly toward the shade, body loose and easy from their lovemaking.

Kade smiled at him and then closed his eyes, focusing on his past, his family, his history. Slowly he began to sing of his lessons, his teachers. Every braid belonged to a person, a mi'it, a hawk. Finally there were three chunks left. The first was his father's braid and Kade sobbed as he sang of his gentleness, his eyes, his pride. The second belonged to his mother and nothing, no sobs, no words came as Kade whispered her strength, her smile, her laughter, her screams as she burned. When they were tied off, Kade took the razor and sliced his palm, opening a thin wound. Vowing vengeance, he dipped the braids in his blood, marking his duty and pain.

Finally, Kade lifted the final piece of hair and smiled. He sang of love, of beauty, of eyes like trees and a heart that beat warm and pure. He sang of faith and truth and wholeness. He sang of his One. He sang his song of Surial, tying his newest braid with a red thread.

When he was done he opened his eyes again, finding Surial surreptitiously wiping at his eyes. Liquid green blazed love at Kade, speaking as eloquently as Surial ever had. Kade drew all the braids into a loose tail at his nape and stood, holding out his arms to Surial.

His lover walked into them, wrapping his arms around Kade's waist and burying his head against Kade's chest.

Pulling him close, Kade petted Surial with long, low sweeps, loving him as best he could. "My One, my own."

"I love you." Surial's words were spoken against his chest, sliding against Kade's skin.

Kade brushed a soft kiss against the top of the dark head. "Are you all right? Did I upset you?"

"I just... I didn't realize you had added a song for me." Surial pressed closer, as if trying to burrow into him. "It was beautiful."

"You are my life, my heart." Kade smiled. "I have worn your braid since..." He flushed and looked up into the sun.

He could feel Surial's head tilt, could feel the forest eyes looking up at him. "Since when?"

Kade's flushed deepened. "Since I knew I loved you... back when I lived in the stables by your house in Azize. Before anything."

"Oh." Surial's voice was soft and he felt something hot and wet hit his chest, looking down he found Surial's eyes filled with tears.

"And the song?"

"It grows with my love for you. It started small and unsure, then it blossomed. Now it fills me, every breath, every moment."

"Oh my Kadrass..." Surial buried his face in Kade's chest.

"Shh... my One. I didn't mean to make you unhappy. Didn't mean to make you cry." Kade ran his fingers through Surial's hair, murmuring softly in Naik, soft, nonsense words to calm and relax.

"Not unhappy." Wet eyes gazed up at him, overflowing with love. "Happy. You make me so happy."

"Oh." Kade felt the smile start in his belly, filling him with pride and pleasure. He beamed at Surial, grin so wide it made his face ache. "Good."

Surial smiled back and pulled his head down, licking at his mouth. "Thank you, Kadrass, for filling me."

Kade deepened the kiss, drinking the joy from Surial's lips. Hands slid up over his jaw, into his braids, wrapping through them with a sure, knowing touch, holding his head captive, holding him to the kiss. It went on and on, Surial hungry.

By the time Surial broke the kiss, Kade was trembling, knees weak and lights sparking behind his eyes. His lips tingled and his tongue slipped out, searching for the mead and spice taste of his lover. Surial's tongue slipped against his, keeping the connection light, teasing. Kade slowly began to back toward the pool, tempting his lover forward with soft, nipping kisses. The sun was high in the sky, the water sparkling and inviting.

"Come swim with me?"

Surial's smile was warm, his eyes bright as he followed. "I knew it all along -- you *are* a merman here to tempt me into your underwater lair."

"You've ferreted out my secrets, you and your sweet lips." Kade chuckled, stepping into

the pool. "Come, my One, let me..." His words trailed off as he admired the sleek, smooth lines of his lover, stepping close -- a water naiad from the old tales come to enthrall him. "...tempt you."

"Oh, I am tempted." Surial stepped into the water and tilted his head to one side as if considering. "And will you breathe for me while we're in your realm?"

"I will be whatever you need, my One. Your air, your champion, your friend, your love. All that and more."

Surial's hand cupped his cheek, soft, gentle, warm. "What have I ever done to deserve you, my lion?"

"I'm not sure. I don't seem to recall any violent coups or black magic in your history. Or wait... Ah, now it all is clear to me..." Kade teased fondly, backing into the watery shadows. "Perhaps something you're paying for from a previous life."

One day he would learn to curb his foolish, sentimental tongue.

Surial shook his head. "Don't do that -- you know I meant what I did I do right."

Stepping up close, Surial moved against him. "You are my prize."

Surial's body was warm, so warm where it pushed the water away and touched him and Kade's arms moved automatically to hold and caress. Nodding, eyes closing at the sensations of warm silk and cool water, he whispered. "Yours."

Kade bent his head to lick the sweet hollow of Surial's collarbone, fingers fascinated by the smooth patch of skin at the top of Surial's cleft.

A soft moan left Surial, his hands coming again to tangle in Kade's braids. "You make me feel so good."

"You're so smooth, but sweet and warm, so wonderful." Kade looked up and shook his head. "And you want me. It's...."

He shrugged, at a loss for words.

Surial grinned, face happy. "Who cares what it is -- now take me to your lair and have your way with me."

With a wicked laugh, Kade pulled Surial off his feet, rolling him into the water, spinning them about before pulling them back to the surface. He kissed the water from Surial's lips before moving away.

"Catch me, my One, and perhaps you can have your wicked way with me." Casting his

challenge, Kade dove beneath the surface, back and buttocks cresting for a second before his body was surrounded by clear water.

He could feel the water being disturbed behind him, knew his Surial was following where he led. A single finger brushed by the sole of his foot before he had to break the surface. A smile and he dove back under, swimming a bit before cresting. He flipped onto his back and stroked lazily, listening to the sound of the water splitting around Surial as his lover moved close. He could hear Surial going beneath the surface again and then his lover popped up out of the water, grabbing his shoulders and trying to pull him under. Kade let himself sink, let the water cover him, let the silken smooth skin of his lover caress him. Then, as Surial's hands relaxed, he planted his feet and twisted as he stood, ending face-to-face with his lover, and the laughing eyes.

"Lion." Surial's voice was full of happiness and closer than expected as his lover leaned forward. Water-cooled lips covered his own, growing warmer as Surial's tongue slid into his mouth.

Kade slid one hand around Surial's neck, the other moving around his waist to haul him close. Kade suckled gently on Surial's tongue, sighing as their bodies rubbed together, slick and hot. Surial's arms slid around his waist, fingers moving restlessly up and down along his spine. Soft noises came from Surial's mouth and his body was moving gently, pushing insistently closer to Kade's.

Kade let his hand trail between their bodies, stroking Surial's erection, tracing the veins with a reverent touch. Their mouths parted as Surial gasped and pushed into the touch.

"You're so very hot."

"You make me hot, my lion. You make me ache."

The words were flames within his belly, making him throb and whimper. Kissing his way across the smooth cheek to a hidden ear, Kade whispered, "Want you, my One. Want to feel you moving deep inside me."

That pleasure, that pressure - it held a particular fascination for him.

Surial shuddered, pushing harder against him. "Yes. Oh yes, my Kadras."

Kade growled, taking a step forward. His name, his own name -- spoken in that exotic, lilting voice, passion threaded through it -- never failed to make his mouth water, his body tighten.

Turning, Surial grabbed his hand and began to stride toward the shore, pushing gracelessly through the water.

They moved together, Kade lagging behind, watching the pull and bunch of Surial's muscles as he walked, devouring every visible inch of smooth skin.

As they reached the shore, Surial turned hungry eyes on him. "If you don't want to..."

Need moved him, making him growl as he stalked forward. "Now, Surial. I *need* you."

"Good." It was all the warning he had before his arms were again full of his lover, Surial kissing him as they moved to where his back had been dropped. Pulling Kade to his knees, Surial fished again for the oil, succeeding in finding it this time. He pressed it into Kade's hands. "Make me ready."

Kade tore the cork from the vial, throwing it aside. He filled his palm with the golden oil, smoothing it between his hands quickly before stroking it into Surial's cock. He pumped firmly, losing himself in the slick slide of skin against skin.

"Stop!" Surial shouted the word, pressing almost desperately against his shoulders.

He stopped the strokes, moving to grasp the base of Surial's cock firmly. The flesh throbbed beneath his touch; he could smell Surial's need. Kade looked into Surial's face, needing too desperately to be touched, taken. "Please."

Eyes intent on his own, Surial pushed against him again, guiding him onto his back and then slipping between his knees. One long, slender finger slipped into his body, a promise of what was to come.

Kade's mouth fell open, his chest tightening at the touch. With a soft groan, he pulled his bent knees up, holding himself open for Surial's eyes, Surial's touch. "More."

"Not more, my lion, all of me." The sweet pressure of Surial's finger slipped away and then his lover was pushing into him, oiled cock pressing against him, demanding entrance, receiving it. Surial's eyes slid closed, a look of sheer amazement and joy moving over his face.

Kade fought to keep his own eyes open, to focus under the waves of pleasure that threatened him. Full, he was so full, his body gripping at Surial's flesh. His lover's eyes opened, blazed down at him with fierce pleasure, the moment holding, drawing out and then ending abruptly with a surge of sensation as Surial began to move. In and out, long, hard strokes, taking him, claiming him, owning him all the way to his soul.

Kade arched, sobbed, fought to disperse the tension and heat building through him. He was burning, aching, his universe centered around the slide of Surial's cock within him, Surial's eyes upon him.

Time bent around them, giving them this moment for an eternity and then Surial's eyes

drifted partway closed and Surial whispered or shouted, Kade couldn't be sure, he only knew it didn't matter, "Kadras."

He came with a whimper, his lover's name silent upon his lips, world collapsing into Surial's eyes.

Deep inside, he could feel Surial's heat flood into him, filling him.

"My One." The words sang through him, sang to him. The missing piece of his soul, the man who the winds themselves blew him to... his Surial.

The sun shone bright through the leaves, blinding him for a moment, before he could focus on Surial's face. There was such joy on that face. Happiness and peace, for the moment all their cares and concerns faded in the light of their love.

Kade smiled, traced a single finger along Surial's jawline. "Thank you."

Nipping at his finger, Surial smiled, eyes warm, full of life and love and laughter. "Thank you, my beautiful lion."

Kade felt his cheeks heat -- 'beautiful lion' -- so odd, to hear the endearment applied to him, so scarred and rough. "So, what shall we do with the rest of our day, my One? Pick berries? Go riding? Search for honey?"

Search for slavers?

Surial lay against him, body warm and pliant. "I have all the sweetness I could want right here."

"Sweet?" Kade grumbled good-naturedly, reaching down to stroke along the line of Surial's spine. "Me? The old bear?"

"Lion," Surial corrected, almost absently, his voice soft, his body growing heavy upon Kade's.

Kade chuckled, reaching out to pull one of his blouses from his pack and drape it over Surial's exposed skin, protecting it from the sun's kiss. "Yes. Your lion."

"Yes, mine." Surial turned, placing a kiss over his heart. "My lion."

Kade pulled the pack over, using it to cradle his head. He watched the sun play in the trees, his arms and heart full.

Chapter Nine

Every time the lash fell, the women screamed. It burned, it always burned so, the skin splitting raw and wet beneath the leather. It smelled, the metallic bite of blood covering the filth and fear and fury that pressed in all around him.

Kade couldn't see, couldn't remember where he was, which pen, which camp, which master. Was he owned, being sold?

Being punished?

Performing?

Lost and confused, colors and faces whirling around him, Kade fell into what he knew, the agony of straps cutting at his wrists, the rhythm of the lash decorating his skin, the screams of the women.

The screams of his people.

The screams of his mother, her hair turning to flame about her.

Her face, blackened and blistered, mouth open.

"Kadras! You did not save us!"

"Kadras! You fell."

"They have taken us."

"Taken us."

Screams filled him, blackened bone-white fingers pointing at him, placing blame and filling him with screams.

His screams.

When Kade woke, his body ached, tense and sore, the dream driving him from any semblance of peace. His cheeks were damp, head throbbing in the darkness. He slid from the unfamiliar, uncomfortable pallet in yet another nameless farmer's barn and stumbled outside into the moonlight, falling hard to his knee as he fought to catch his breath, calm himself.

The leaves were dry here, crunching under his knees, the trees already forgetting the brief kiss of summer and barreling into autumn.

An entire summer they had wasted, lingering in the south too long before turning north, searching for a people that seemed to have disappeared off the ground like they were no more than smoke. For a moment, his heart screamed, needing to see Aline's familiar face again, to know another hi'icha like himself still existed.

To believe that he was not the only one left behind to remember.

His fingers tangled in his braids, pulling, the clink and clatter of the stones decorating them singing his memories. Not even he had enough hair to remember all of the tribes.

"Kade?" The lilting call came from the bedroom, a gentle warning followed by the soft sound of bare feet against the stone.

Warmth gathered beside him and the hand that fell to his shoulder was hot, he could feel the outline of each finger burning into his skin. Surial curled his fingers then and squeezed gently.

"Another nightmare?"

Kade nodded, eyes closed, the images of flesh and flame clear within his head. "M'all right. Didn't mean to wake you." His voice sounded shaken and pained, the normal low rumble erased by distress.

"I'm glad you did."

Surial didn't attempt to hold him or crowd him, just that single hand hot on his skin, beginning to move now, a slow glide up and down his back, soft and soothing, crossing the scars that covered his back.

That touch relaxed him, eased the hard knot that had been squeezing his chest. He leaned into Surial's warmth with a sigh that was more than part sob. "I am sorry."

Surial made a soft, soothing sound in the back of his throat as he went to his haunches and gathered Kade into his arms, hands moving slowly along his cold skin. It took a few moments, but finally he recognized the sound Surial was making; it was the noise he himself might make to calm a skittish colt or soothe a frightened mount.

He let himself sink into those sounds, into Surial's arms. Kade felt the nightmare lose its hold, intensity lost. His body, finally feeling the cold and shock, began to tremble, muscles jumping and twitching.

Surial's breath was warm against his ear. "Are you ready to go back in and get warm again?"

"Yes, please." He felt weak, a bit dizzy and unnerved. He stood, grateful for Surial's

presence as they made their way back into the barn, the sounds of the mi'it welcome, familiar, warm.

Instead of putting him back into the blankets on the side nearest the door, as Kade has expected, Surial pulled away the coverings from the side that he had slept on, protected by the barn wall, encouraging Kade to lie down. He did so and was immediately surrounded by the scent of his lover and hay and the barest hint of warmth from where Surial had lain.

Then Surial was blanketing Kade with his own body, warm and pliant, heavy enough to be solid, real, without making him feel penned in.

Kade floated quietly, breathing deeply, filling his lungs with Surial. He reached out, tracing the soft, smooth, unscarred skin with delicate, searching fingers. "Ki'ita."

"Yes. I love you, my lion." Soft lips nuzzled at his skin. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Just a dream, a ch'wan brought by the demons of the past." Kade shivered again, his scarred back rubbing against the hay. With a sigh, he pushed the memories away, focusing on his lover's lips and weight and sweet touch.

"What can I do to help you?" Surial's fingers stroked gently over his sides, not quite tickling.

"Just love me, my One." Kade wrapped strong arms around Surial, holding him close, moaning softly as Surial's caresses continued. What a gift from the winds, to have this. To be offered this comfort.

"I can think of nothing that would be easier, my lion, nothing that would give me more pleasure." The tip of Surial's nose was cold as he nuzzled into Kade's neck, mouth finding the veins that carried the pulse of his life beneath the skin.

"Oh..." It was delicious, that touch, the brush of lips against his throat and Kade shifted, full attention captured by that mouth.

Surial sucked as if trying to pull Kade's blood into himself through Kade's skin, tongue playing now and then over skin that was growing more sensitive by the moment. When Surial began to hum, it was all Kade could do not to scream.

Suddenly, unbelievably, he was painfully hard, aching, pushing up against Surial desperately, seeking friction and release. "Surial. Help me."

Surial's lips claimed a piece of skin over his heart, the words 'always, my lion' were whispered against him before his lover moved down, sliding down his legs until his cock was engulfed.

He arched, a scream torn from him as he was surrounded by heat. Kade couldn't see, couldn't hear -- knew nothing but the feel of his lover and the pounding of his own need. The suction increased and Surial's hands slid to his hips, encouraging them to move, asking him to take what he needed. Burning, Kade was afire, thrusting into Surial's sweet mouth, burying himself within perfect heat again and again. The air was flavored by sobs and whimpers, a foreign song delivered in his own familiar tones.

Surial was not satisfied with that, though, and his hands slid over Kade's skin, moving between his legs to gently cup his balls and then back, moving behind them, sliding along sensitive skin before breaching his body.

He didn't know where to go, which way to move as his body caught flame. Kade spread his legs, tilting his hips, even as he continued pushing up into Surial's mouth. "More. Please. I need more."

Immediately a second finger joined the first, curling in his body and touching him deep inside, sparking pleasure within him again and again.

The pressure built within him, swelling impossibly.

With a growl, Kade reached down and grabbed Surial's shoulders with rough hands, pulling him up until their eyes met. "Take me. I need you inside me." Then Kade raised his knees, offering himself, body begging. "Please. In me."

He had been taken by so many in anger, in hatred. Only his ki'ita would fill him, would come to him with love.

Surial glanced over at the saddle bags where they kept the oil and then his ki'ita nodded. "I will, my lion. I would not make you beg."

One hand traced over his thigh, petting him, before Surial's warmth disappeared, heading for the bags, for the tiny stoppered vial of oil that he had bartered for only days ago. Then his One was back, fingers slick and soft, pushing within him, spreading him easily.

Kadras waited for the panicked fear, for the tension, but this was his ki'ita. His One. His Surial. No one knew him as well; no one was meant for him but this man. Surial pushed in, again and again, humming softly as the long fingers readied him.

"You feel of silk inside, my lion." Surial's eyes glowed with the light from the moon, the long, dark hair flowed around the lean shoulders.

"I need more." He was empty, the echoing voices of a thousand of his own tribesmen within him.

"Anything you need." Fingers were replaced with the careful press of Surial's hardness, the tip wide enough to make him gasp, groan. "Breathe, my lion."

"There is not enough air."

Heated lips covered his, Surial breathing into his mouth until he took a gasping breath, his very air scented by his ki'ita. Then, as he exhaled, Surial did it again.

And then again, breathing in time with the pressure and thrusts inside him.

"Yes!" The stretching burn of Surial's cock within him was sweet and smooth and perfect and more than he could bear. Kade convulsed, groaning as he spilled his seed between them.

Surial bent and anointed his lips again with a sweet tongue, slipping it into his mouth in soft benediction before pulling away again. Surial began to thrust, a short, quick rhythm as he drove himself to completion within Kade's body.

"My beautiful Surial. Love you, my One." Kade reached up and traced Surial's angular jaw, fingers making love to his face.

With a soft whimper, Surial came, body pushing deep into Kade's, face pushing into his touch. Kade closed his eyes and gathered Surial close, his lover above him, within him, around him.

"Thank you."

"Anytime." There was soft laughter in Surial's voice, and love, and that deeply satisfied tone that Kade loved to listen for when they made love.

Sleep was calling to him, his body relaxing bonelessly into the hay, one hand trailing along Surial's spine. Perhaps this time, with his lover close and warm, there would be no dreams.

"No dreams."

"I'll guard them for you. Only good dreams."

"My One. So good to me." Behind his eyelids, he could see his Surial, fierce and determined, keeping the horrors away, letting him rest, giving him peace.

"Always."

A soft kiss to his shoulder accompanied the word, and a little wriggle as Surial made himself more comfortable.

Kade sank into sleep, his hands and heart full of his One, his own.

He dreamed of sun-dappled forests the color of Surial's eyes.

Chapter Ten

"Kade? What in Alusius' name are you doing?"

Surial's voice was furious, sharp-edged and impossible to ignore. Kade forced his eyes open, a bit confused and dazed. What had he done to upset his lover so?

The snow that fell from his braid as he sat up gave him his first clue. Cold.

By the Winds, it snowed early beyond the dark valley with three stones.

They were traveling farther north, closer to the river of the Snake, following the oddly scribbled map that a trader had given them. The scrap of leather was as one of Surial's books, one with pictures that echoed things he remembered from his life before.

The trader had carried rahats with him, the sharp, hooked knives of the Naik - some old, some so new that they had never been blessed with fire or blood. Surial had paid for the rahat and now there was a pack bulging with them. There had been beads as well, and pieces of leather with the songs of the gods and the winds drawn upon them.

More importantly, the trader's mi'it knew his songs, tossed the lean white head and told promises about valleys where the mi'it ran free. Where boys in leggings and vest ran alongside, running with the foals until the joy that was the iyossi, the bonding, took them.

Magic.

Hope.

Magic and hope and proof that he was not alone.

They had immediately turned more sharply, the mi'it's noses pointed so that the two suns were to his heart, so they moved from the flatlands and the woods and into the hills. Soon, though, Kadras realized he may have waited too long. It was too cold for Surial to sleep upon the ground, and too wet for Surial to travel, so they'd stopped at a good-sized inn off the high road for the better part of a week. It was clean and Surial was happy, but the weight of the ceilings, the crush of dozens of people, the knowledge that his people were awaiting him...Kade couldn't sleep.

He had lain with Surial until his lover was well and truly sleeping, then he sat out on the tiny balcony -- and what a joy was that, a building with a floor on the outside, a safe place to perch -- that framed the window in their room, sneaking back in to dress and retrieve breakfast when dawn colored the sky.

Kade groaned. He must have fallen asleep. Outside.

Surial was going to have his head -- the man was so particular about things like this. Often Kade believed that to be born a nobleman was less a blessing than a curse.

"I am sorry. I was watching the stars and fell asleep."

"Deep enough asleep you didn't wake up when you got snowed on?" Surial's hand was like fire on his cold skin, his lover tugging him inside. "Damn it, you could have died!"

Kade shook his head, wincing as more snow fell to the floor at Surial's feet. "Easy, my One. It was just a nap. Nothing to worry upon." He swallowed a groan as he focused on Surial's face. He knew that look. It meant he was either going to be fussed over, fussed at, or, quite possibly both, in tandem. There was nothing quite like getting hot tea forced into you while listening to a lecture.

Surial pushed him toward the bed, changing his mind midway and shoving him down onto the floor in front of the hearth.

"You're soaking," Surial said shortly, by way of an explanation as he began to pull open Kade's shirt.

"I wouldn't be if you hadn't put me where the snow would melt." Kade blinked. He hadn't really said that aloud, had he? He wasn't that tired, was he? He wasn't an utter idiot, was he?

The rip of fabric and blaze of Surial's eyes confirmed that, yes, he was an utter idiot.

"Stand up." The words were clipped, short, and Surial's hands as he undid the ties on Kade's trousers and pulled them down were quite impersonal.

The clothing was flung into a pile near the fire.

"Sit."

A blanket was dropped on his head as he obeyed and Surial settled in front of the fire, poking at it and adding wood until it was blazing warmly.

Kade watched the stiff back for a long moment, trying to figure out what to say. Finally he settled on the tried and true. "I am sorry, my One."

"No you're not." Surial stood and turned, arms wrapped around himself as he stared down at Kade. "Was this even the first night you spent out there?"

Kade forced himself not to flinch. "It was the first night I slept outside." He squashed the pang of guilt firmly. *It was the truth, after all.*

Surial's expression softened and he took one end of the blanket, using it to wipe at the moisture in Kade's braids. "We shouldn't have stayed so long. I'm sorry."

"Shh. I am fine. The cold cannot hurt me. I have thick skin, meant for the elements. You were not made for harsh winter." Kade unconsciously leaned toward Surial's touch. No one touched his hair, his tano'ka, his braids, but Surial.

His Surial.

"You're still cold and wet." Warm hands cupped his cheeks and turned his face up. "Let me wash it?"

Kade nuzzled into Surial's hands, turning his face to drop a soft kiss into a warm palm. His braids were clammy against his neck. "I would like that. Please."

"I would, too." A soft kiss was placed on the tip of his nose and then Surial turned to check that there was water in the pot that sat over the fire before he moved to kneel behind Kade.

Kade let his head fall forward, allowing Surial the honor of removing the cords which tied each braid off. Not even his wife, gone so many years now, would have been allowed this -- vicinity -- to his memories.

Of course, then there had been few braids. Most of his hair had blown free, along with his heart.

Each tie was handed to him, slowly, one at a time, and then Surial's slender fingers began to work out the braids.

Kade sighed softly, looking at the tiny pieces of colored string. Many times, all he had been able to use were the threads he pulled from his own clothes. Now there were colors - - blacks and reds and blues and greens and yellows and whites.

So many memories. So many stories.

So many songs.

He closed his eyes, enjoying Surial's touch and the tingling of his scalp as the hair was freed. Surial's hands moved through his hair and rubbed over his scalp, Surial making soft, happy noises all the while.

"I think you enjoy this almost as much as I do." Kade smiled at the slurred, fuzzy tone in his voice, as if he were drunk on Surial's care.

"I love your hair. And I'm honored when you let me care for it, for you."

Surial went to their packs and came back with some soft soap, which he began to work into Kade's hair, massaging his scalp while he worked the slick stuff in everywhere.

Kade sighed, relaxing bonelessly as Surial touched him. "It's so heavy, so long... I used to watch the warriors when I was a boy and think that my braids could never grow so long. I can still remember my first braids; they barely reached my shoulder blades."

"I bet you were an adorable child -- all sunshine and laughter." Surial's voice held a hint of melancholy in it.

"I was a menace, quick to adventure and quicker to trouble." Kade smiled. "Nilik and I were banished to clean stalls more often than I care to admit."

He tilted his face, to catch a glimpse of Surial's face. "I would have loved to have you there, then. To have you loved and cared for, your gifts nurtured, your heart protected. You would have been happy."

A soft smile pulled the corners of Surial's mouth up. "I'm happy now, my lion."

The words warmed him, satisfied him. So much sorrow, so much pain held within his One -- it gnawed at him, made him search for the things that would ease those sweet eyes. He bent his head forward again with a happy rumble. "Good."

Surial chuckled as he stood and went to the fire, carefully transferring the hot water in the pot to the large water basin the inn provided. "You're such a softie inside."

"M'not." Kade frowned, looking down at his body, scarred and hard. "There is little about this old warrior that is soft, my One."

"Not when I'm in the room, anyway," teased his lover as he settled behind Kade once again.

One of Surial's hands slid around from behind him, teasing at his belly. "But I think we both know the tough exterior hides the softness inside."

Kade snorted, his gaze fastened on the long, pale fingers moving across his skin. Such a contrast, the fine, pale grain of Surial's hand against the darkness of his own.

"Lovely."

"Mmm..." Surial nuzzled against him a moment and then made a spitting noise. "Let me get the soap rinsed out before you start sweet talking me."

Kade laughed, leaning back at Surial's nudge. "No telling you how good your hands feel, how I dream of you and your forest-eyes?"

"Not until it's safe to lick your neck," Surial informed him tartly, but the hands that worked the water through his hair were soft, gentle and loving.

"How about your lips, the way you taste of spiced mead, the sweet sound of your voice when you say my name, the way your eyes widen when you come?" Kade kept his face still, trying to hide the warm smile he felt in his bones.

Surial made a strangled noise and his fingers tangled in Kade's hair, pulling sharply.

"Easy. Ki'ita... don't pluck me bald. I'll be good." Kade chuckled and stretched out his legs, letting Surial finish.

"Sorry," Surial muttered, smoothing through the tangled hair. "I did warn you."

"Mmm. You did." Kade purred as Surial's fingers carded through his hair, the sensation warming him throughout. "Feels so good, my One."

"I like taking care of you for a change."

"You are my family, my clan. You give me purpose." Kade reached for Surial's hand and kissed it. "You make me happy."

Caring for Surial was what he did, who he was. A warrior without a home to protect was an empty shell.

Surial bent and placed a soft kiss on his mouth. "You make me happy, too, Kade."

Then his lover was moving away, carefully carrying the basin of water to the balcony and throwing it out the doors before grabbing a small, soft blanket and returning to Kade's side. Surial began to carefully remove the excess water from his hair.

Once his hair was toweled off, Kade shifted until his head was lying in Surial's lap, watching the fire, sighing as fingers moved over his scalp.

"Isn't this better than lying in the snow, my lion?"

"I'm sorry, my One. I... it gets so close, the walls and ceilings around me. It's easy with you, but they reach into my dreams." Kade nuzzled his cheek against Surial's thigh. "I try not to wake you."

Surial's fingers danced lightly over his cheek. "I just worry about you, my lion. The summer is one thing, but when there's snow on the ground and you fall asleep in it..."

"I don't want to lose you." Surial's fingers curled possessively around his arm.

"I'm strong. A survivor. A little snow is nothing." Kade stroked the long fingers. "You need not worry for me."

"But I do, my lion." Surial nudged him gently, and Kade sat up as Surial leaned over to retrieve a soft comb from his pack. "It's almost dry, let me brush it out."

"You spoil me. Losing rest to my mane." Kade was warm, drowsy, content, surrounded by Surial's care.

"I'd rather lose it to your mane than to worrying about you." As a rebuke it was gentle and soon the long, slow strokes of the brush through his hair made him forget everything but what his lover was doing.

Kade floated, lost in the rhythm of the brush, the beat of Surial's heart. He let himself sink into peace and comfort, forget the walls, the worries.

"I love your hair like this."

"Why?" The question slid from him like water as he relaxed. Surial's hands loved to take out his braids, loved the rare moments his hair was loose and free. Kade *knew* this, he just did not know why.

"Because it's beautiful, like raw gold and it feels good against my skin. Like a thousand tiny fingers dancing on me."

"Oh." Pleasure, mixed with the slightest touch of arousal, bloomed at the base of his spine. He swung his head slowly, letting his hair brush against Surial's torso.

Surial gasped. "Wanton."

Kade made the motion again, rumbling softly as Surial whimpered. Hunger slowly filled him, made him shiver.

"Will you leave it down for a bit?" Surial's voice was breathless.

"If you wish it, my One." Kade turned, letting his hair slide across his lover's body. Once they were facing one another Kade shook his head, his hair flowing around them, smooth and cool. He leaned in close, close enough to share his heat. Catching Surial's eyes, he rumbled, dark and low, "Do you wish it, my One?"

Surial's eyes had gone passion dark and he could read the answer in them even as his lover spoke. "Oh yes, my lion, I wish to feel your mane against my skin as you make love to me."

Nudging Surial backward with a growl, Kade swung his head, slow and easy, sliding his

hair over the pale torso. He started with the flat stomach and moved up, spending his time tickling the peaked nipples, teasing and taunting until Surial writhed.

He looked down into dark, lovely eyes. "Is this what you wish, my beautiful One?"

"Yes!" Surial gasped and arched his back, pushing himself up into more caresses.

Kade sat up, tilting his head until only the tips of his hair brushed against Surial's skin. It was fascinating, from here he could watch as Surial arched and moaned as he teased with tiny motions of his head.

Surial's fingers curled into fists at his side, his toes dug into the carpet, giving him leverage as he tried to move into deeper touches.

"By the winds, you're the most lovely thing I've ever seen." Kade moved lower, letting the ends of his hair trail along Surial's groin, gold mingling with ebony.

A strangled scream left his lover's body as Surial's hips shot up, his cock, hard, flushed red with his blood. Kade bent his head, letting the weight of his hair slide over the hard, needy flesh again and again. Surial's scent filled him, fighting with the smell of the soap in his hair for dominance within his nose.

One long curl twisted itself around the base of Surial's cock and Kade chuckled, lifting his head and forcing it to unwind.

Surial was panting, his hands opening and closing, head moving from side to side, every now and then a small whimper would interrupt his labored breathing.

With a soft smile, Kade wound another strand of hair around Surial's pulsing flesh, surrounding it, base to tip. "Do you feel me, my One? Wrapped around you, holding you?"

"By Alusius, how could I not!"

Kade laughed and stretched back, pulling the hair away with a long, slow motion. Surial's sob filled the air, the fine body shaking with sensation. Again and again, Kade repeated the motion, feeding off the sweet sounds falling from his lover's lips.

"Kade... I'm going to..."

"Yes, my One. Come for me." Another twist of hair and another long, slow glide.

With a scream, his Surial did.

Kade groaned as the smell and heat of his lover splashed upon him, filled his senses. He bent forward, taking Surial's lips in a fierce kiss, his body hard, his hair damp with seed.

Surial met his lips with passion, mouth hungry, hands sliding up into his hair, holding him tight. Kade's erection slid along the smooth hollow of Surial's hip, made slick with sweat and seed. It felt so hot, so right and he groaned into Surial's mouth, need driving him.

Hot hands slid down along his back, grabbing his buttocks and encouraging his movements.

It took little more than that touch, the hungry slide of tongue, the catch of his erection on the peak of Surial's hipbone and Kade came, sobbing his pleasure into soft, swollen lips.

Surial's hands slid along his skin, through his hair, touching, soothing, holding, keeping him close even as he flew.

He collapsed against Surial, breathing heavily. Finally, conscious of his weight, he pushed himself off to one side, letting his lover breathe. "Oh, love."

Surial's fingers were still sliding through his hair and he was chuckling. "I'm going to have to wash this again."

"Mmm... and I should braid it." Kade sighed, trying to force his eyes open, body upright, but his Surial was warm and close, the fire a comfort. He was sated and Surial's hands were soft and he was so tired...

The winter so long, growing before them.

"Later, my lion, sleep now, I'll keep the ceiling from coming down on you."

He would have argued, would have pointed out that the spirit world would not care that he was tired, nor the ceiling that Surial was watching. He would have, but by the time the words had floated to his lips, Kade was asleep.

Chapter Eleven

There were many things he loved about the woods in early spring -- the hints of mud where the snow had so recently melted, the privacy, the shade, the sound of the wind in the trees, the birds.

There were, however, a few things he could do without.

Newly waked hungry bears.

Angry bees.

Slippery creek banks.

Aggravated beavers.

Maybe Surial was right. Perhaps towns weren't so bad.

He had never been quite so pleased to see their tent and a campfire as he carried the bucket full of rescued honeycomb over the sloping hill and into the protected meadow.

Surial was with the mi'it, braiding snowdrop flowers into their manes. His One wore a crown of small white and pink blooms, their tent decorated with yellow and purple flowers and the ground around the fire covered in blue petals.

Kade could hear his voice, gently coaxing the mi'it to be still, soft laughter punctuating the words. Kade chuckled, Surial's laughter a balm to his ear. "Having fun, my One?"

He shook his head at the blossoms everywhere, grinning as he walked over to the fire.

"There were so many flowers, and I wanted to make the camp beauti- Kadrass!" Surial came over to him, hands reaching out for him. "What happened?"

"I played with some of the natives and went wading." Kade rolled his eyes and shrugged and held up the bucket. "I did find you some honey."

"But at what cost? Oh, my lion, you're filthy and you've been stung." Surial's hands slid over his arm. "And what's this? You look like your arm's been mauled."

Kade flushed and backed away a few steps. "Apparently the bear was not really all that pleased about sharing his honey." He was torn between utter hilarity and total embarrassment. "I'm okay. Just need a quick bath."

A quick bath and check to make sure the beaver didn't break the skin.

Surial's face twisted into a frown. "Are you really all right?"

"A few stings, some bites, clawed a bit." Kade held up his arm and wrinkled his nose at the blood and mud encrusting it. That bear was lucky he hadn't been grumpy this morning or Surial would have himself a new rug right now. "Nothing fatal."

Surial's frown twitched suspiciously. "I can take care of those once you're clean."

"Don't you dare laugh or you'll be eating bland oats for a moon." Kade fastened Surial with a fierce and utterly fake look. To be honest, after a winter trapped within the inn, surrounded by people, he would happily face a dozen bears to be riding Lik'ta yet again. "Will you pour the honey off for me while I go spend a bit of time at the pond?"

"The honey can wait, my lion. Let me come with you and take care of these stings." Surial's fingers slid over a particularly irritated sting, soothing it with his touch. His One's lips quirked again. "I'm sure the urge to laugh will disappear once the mud's gone."

Kade chuckled and grabbed a piece of oiled cloth and draped it over the bucket. "I'm just lucky the beaver's dam broke my fall. I'd have been in real trouble with a broken ankle up in the hills without Lik'ta. The camp looks beautiful, by the way."

"Thank you." Surial's lips finally broke into a grin. "I'm glad you weren't hurt too badly."

Kade snorted, winking over good-naturedly. "Try to keep your worry contained." He snatched up his pack that held extra clothes and soap and headed toward the pond. Better him than Surial.

Something told him that Surial's response to an angry bear would be less than calm and at one with nature.

Surial joined him as he arrived at the pond, his One stripping. "I thought I could wash you."

Kade nodded, ducking his head so Surial couldn't see his cheeks heat. "That sounds nice, my One, but let me get a little clean first. I have some stickers in... well, you know... a few delicate spots."

Surial chuckled and his hand slid across the top of Kade's back. "All the better to have someone help."

He leaned over and stole himself a sweet kiss, pulling loose the fastenings of his vest. "So, what have you done today while I was wrestling bears?"

"I slept beneath the sun's warm rays, wishing it was my lion holding me. And I played

with the flowers." Surial laughed softly and ducked his head, cheeks heating. "Not much."

"Sounds like a lovely, restful day." Kade nodded, knowing that Surial did not share his love of travel. He shrugged off his vest with a wince. He was going to be sore tomorrow. He went to remove his breeches, toeing off his boots as he went. "You've been wearing yourself thin, with the croup moving through the villages. You need more days of leisure."

"Not at your expense, my lion." Surial's hands slid across his back, sending soothing tingles along his skin. "What's this?" asked his One, hand sliding down his spine toward his buttocks.

"Don't ask." Kade turned, backing toward the pond. "It's nothing. Only a bruise."

He hated beavers.

Surial's hands stayed on his skin, his One following him. "This looks like a bite mark; the skin is broken here. Kade! You have to let me take care of this, it could fester."

"It's fine, Surial. Let it be." Kade hurried back into the pond, sinking down and swimming toward the cool, deep, still water.

He stayed under as long as he could, cooling his wounded pride and his cheeks. Some Guardian he was -- bested by woodland creatures and a handful of honeybees.

"Kadras..." Surial stripped down the rest of the way and joined him, sliding into the water in front of him when he came up. Warm hands cupped his cheeks, tilting his head up until their eyes met. "What happened, my lion?"

"Nothing. I wrestled a bear, fought bees, fell down through a briar patch into a creek bed and startled some very large cranky beavers." Kade lowered his eyes and he sighed, resigning himself to whatever ribbing Surial handed out. "My pride is tender, that's all."

"The teeth marks in your... backside belong to a beaver?" Surial stood and headed back for the shore. "You show me which one it was and I'll beat the beast into a pulp -- nobody bites those buttocks but me!"

"By the four winds, I'm staying in here until midsummer." Kade sighed to himself, shaking his head, watching his vaguely crazed lover wade away.

"Nonsense. We have leagues to travel, your kinsmen to find. We will simply follow the spring winds north." Surial sounded almost smug.

He should have stayed in the tent today.

The soap landed with a splat in front of him and he could hear the splashing of his One returning.

Surial chuckled. "Come on, my lion. Lets get you clean and healed and maybe then you can see the humor in the situation."

With a nod, Kade grabbed the soap, rolling it between his hands, watching the lather bubble in the slowly fading light. He spread the suds over his torn arm and let them loosen the mess; that would make the scabs and filth come off easier. "I'll be fine, Surial. I won't undo a day of your rest because I'm a clumsy oaf."

Surial snorted and cupped his hands, filling them with water and sluicing it over his head. "You want me to just leave you to your wounds? You must have lost more blood than I first thought."

"Are we going to have this discussion every time I get hurt?" Kade handed Surial the soap, using his thumbnail to scrape out the tiny barbed stingers in his arm and chest. "I don't like tiring you. I am strong. These are minor irritations."

Surial lathered the soap between his fingers and began to scrub his braids. "Yes, we're going to have this discussion every time until you stop arguing with me about it."

"Wouldn't it be simpler if you stopped arguing first?" Kade sank down farther into the water, letting Surial's hands relax him while simultaneously hiding the fact that he had one or two badly placed stickers to remove.

Surial chuckled, hands still working on his braids, fingers sliding along his scalp. "It would be simpler, but it's not going to happen. I can be as stubborn as you, my lion, with the right motivation. And you are definitely the right motivation."

Kade let himself float for a few minutes, let Surial's hands wash him and let himself rest. His arm was beginning to itch and ache and he'd never convince Surial to let it be if he let on it was bothering.

It just seemed a waste -- to spend all that energy on simple things that would heal on their own. There was little that bothered Kade as much as the echoes of exhaustion in those forest green eyes. Knowing he was the cause of that exhaustion was one.

Surial's hands finished their gentle washing and dropped to his shoulders, massaging gently. Soft warm breath slid across his ear. "Come back to camp with me, my lion. Let me soothe your hurts, let me slide my hands over your skin and make you feel good. Kadrass I want to make you feel so good."

A warm, wet tongue slid across the bottom of his ear.

He shivered, pushing back into Surial's body, completely distracted from his musings by the sweet temptation that was his One. "Mmm... I love when you touch me."

"Then let me touch you." Surial's voice whispered through him, his hands sliding down along his arms, warm even in the water.

"Oh..." Kade sighed softly, his head falling back against Surial, arousal beginning to flare within him. "Are you trying to seduce me, my One?"

"I'm glad you noticed." Surial's voice was husky, hands imparting sweet comfort.

Kade was lost in the slick feel of Surial's skin against his back, the sweet, hungry sound of the voice in his ear. "I noticed..."

"Good."

One hand wrapped around his bicep, the skin of Surial's palm tingling against him, warm healing closing the shallow wound, siphoning away the ache.

It felt so good, so warm and...

"Surial! That's... why..." He sputtered, standing up and turning to face Surial. "That's cheating!"

Surial's pale skin was dripping with water, his One's hair adorned with flowers, sun making forest eyes sparkled and dance. "I can make love to you and heal you at the same time, my lion. Come back to camp and let me finish. I can make you feel so good."

Kade shook his head, trying to clear a mind made fuzzy with desire, trying to remember why he was upset, if he was upset. "I... winds, you make me forget myself."

Surial took his hands and began walking him toward the shore. "Come and lose yourself in me, Kadas."

He followed, drawn by his hunger and his love and the sweet sway of Surial's hips. "You shouldn't waste yourself on me. I'll heal with time."

"I want your total attention when I make love to you. If I don't heal you first there will be... distractions."

Kade snorted. "As if a few scratches would distract me from you."

Surial turned and smiled up at him. "Well a few scratches are hardly going to tire me out."

"Well, still." Kade pouted for a moment and then gave up. "One day I will win this argument."

Surial ran his thumb along Kade's lower lip. "Perhaps a different argument, my lion, but not this one. I cannot leave you hurting, not when there's something I can do to help you."

"What a lovely heart you have." Kade ducked his head and nibbled at Surial's thumb. "To care for me, even though it hurts you, tires you. You are so good to me."

Surial whapped him gently with his free hand. "I'm not doing it to be altruistic."

He rolled his eyes and nipped sharply at the thumb near his lips. "No, you do it so you can beat on me and not feel guilty."

Surial grinned at him. "I knew you'd figure it out sooner or later."

His One scooped up their clothing and headed back to camp. "Come on, those stingers have to be driving you crazy by now."

"Yes, there is something driving me crazy." Kade shook his head and grinned. "Absolutely mad."

Surial's laughter drifted back to him and the swing of his hips increased as he walked ahead of Kade.

"And I wouldn't change one hair on your stubborn head." Kade followed his One back to camp, his heart singing.

Chapter Twelve

Surial stalked past the line of villagers still waiting to see him to where Kade stood, talking with Lik'ta and Mon'Keur.

"Get them ready, we're going. Now." He ground the words out from between clenched teeth and then turned back to the assembled crowd. "We've outworn our welcome. If anyone else needs help we'll be at the north crossroads tomorrow midday, then we will continue on our way."

North. Always northward.

Endless travel. Endless moving. Endless dealings with these...

He grumbled under his throat.

"We are ready when you are, my One." Kade finished checking the horses and nodded over, eyes hovering between worry and the dark glint that heralded his protective nature. "Just say the word."

"Oh, you can't go, sir, my daughter, please..." The old woman was obviously poor, the girl with her pale.

"We can't stay," Surial managed to make his tone more gentle, curbing his anger. "Tomorrow at the north crossroads."

His eyes flicked back to the men milling around where he'd been sitting. He turned to Kade. "Now, my lion, before I say something I regret."

Kade made sure Surial was settled on Mon'keur before mounting Lik'ta, eyes burning at the group of men. "Did someone offend you, my One? If you are owed an apology, I can assure you receive it."

Surial shook his head. "It is not me they owe an apology to, and I have known men like them before -- they will not make an apology to the one who deserves it." He moved Mon'Keur a little, running his hand gently along Kade's thigh. "The only way I have of making them realize their attitude is unacceptable is by refusing my services."

His hand turned into a fist on Kade's thigh as he heard the words that had so incensed him again. "You shouldn't have to travel with such a barbarian, sir healer. We can take care of it for you, if you want." The man had spit on the ground.

Surial had demanded an apology, had made it clear that such an attitude would see his departure.

"If that's the only way we'll get such trash out of our town, so be it. Damned wildmen. They should stay up near the lakes, away from civilized men."

Civilized men.

Surial shook the memory of the words away and gave Kade a tight smile. "Let's just get away from here."

Kade nodded, covering Surial's hand for a moment with his own before murmuring to Lik'ta in his deep voice and they began to move down the dirt path. "Straight to camp, or would you like to go for a run?"

Surial smiled; how he loved this man. His voice was slightly husky with his emotions when he answered. "A run, my lion. Let us feel the winds through our hair."

Honeyed eyes twinkled at him, Kade's grin warming him through. "We passed a meadow on our way into town this morning. Summer blossoms still grew there on the hillocks. I could smell them."

"It sounds wonderful."

He could feel the tension and anger leaving him, replaced by his joy for life and Kade. "Shall we race?"

Kade's grin grew sharp and he bent to rub a cheek against Lik'ta's neck. "Well, mi'it? Shall we play with our wind brothers?"

Surial could almost hear Lik'ta's assent, the mount prancing and bobbing his head, muscles bunching in anticipation.

Kade leaned over and gifted Surial with a hot, hard, all too brief kiss. "Let us fly, my One."

Surial tightened his grip on the reins and clicked to Mon'Keur and they were off, the wind rushing through his hair, the beast moving beneath his thighs. He could hear Lik'ta's hoof beats beside them, hear Kade's warm, happy laughter. The sun was shining down, warm and healing. They ran together, four beings moving in concert, dancing over roads and trails and the sweet grass of the meadow.

Joy and peace flowed through him, reminding him of life's pleasures.

At last they stopped, sliding from their mounts, letting the horses rest and feed together.

Kade pulled off his vest, stretching up into the sun, braids falling haphazardly upon his shoulders and chest. "That felt good, my One."

Surial felt his body tighten and his hand reached out automatically, palm lying flat on Kade's stomach and slowly moving upward, enjoying the play of muscles beneath Kade's skin.

Kade purred softly, stretching more, his stance widening as the strong muscles of his belly shifted and twitched, reacting to Surial's touch. "That feels good, too."

Surial grinned and stepped closer, touching Kade now with both hands, letting them slide in random patterns over his lover's skin. "You do."

"Mmm..." The purr grew louder, Kade's head rolling back upon his shoulders, huge, callused hands moving to deliver sweet caresses of their own to Surial's shoulders. "Are you hungry, my One?"

"Oh yes. Absolutely starving." He leaned forward, mouth closing over one of Kade's nipples, sucking the flesh greedily into his mouth.

"Surial!" Kade's cry was delicious -- a mixture of hunger and surprise and joy. The gentle hands moved to cup his head, stroking through his hair with careful, easy touches.

Kade's skin was nutty and sweet, the small nipple growing quickly raised and hard beneath his ministrations. He teased it with his teeth and soothed it with his tongue, loving the small noises that his lover was making. Kade was beginning to shift and tremble, hands tightening and tangling in his hair.

Surial let Kade's nipple go. "You like that, my lion?" he asked, not really expecting words; he already knew the answer. He blew gently across the wet flesh.

An arch and a soft whimper were Kade's reply.

He grinned and moved to Kade's other nipple, rubbing it to hardness with his cheek before taking it into his mouth. His hands were busy, sliding along Kade's sides, fingertips dancing just hard enough not to tickle.

Kade's body was beginning to move rhythmically, hips pulsing with the pulls of Surial's mouth. Sweet, soft sighs poured around him, Kade's need singing to him.

A thrill went through him, he always enjoyed making love to Kade, but such proof of how easily he could turn his lover on made him feel powerful, special. He let his fingers wander down to slid into the top of Kade's breeches, teasing the flesh beneath the leather.

A series of shudders moved through Kade's body, the taste of his flesh becoming almost sweet in his passion.

He sucked harder, pulling more of the flavor of his lover into himself, his own arousal fed

by Kade's obvious pleasure. His fingers fiddled with the laces of Kade's pants, teasing them both.

"Surial, if you don't stop..." The words were forced out on a low, desperate growl, Kade's breath coming in measured pants.

His fingers froze and he drew back slightly, brows coming together. "You want me to stop?" He could feel his lips pulling into a pout. "But you taste so good. You *feel* so good."

"So good." Kade's eyes were hot, unfocused as he reached for Surial, tugging and pulling them both down onto their knees. Kade settled on his heels, thighs parting, thick erection a visible bulge against the brown leather of his breeches. "Need you."

Surial moaned and his hands fumbled against Kade's groin, clumsy now with his own need and desire. A choked noise of frustration sounded at the back of his throat as he pulled at the knots he'd managed to put into Kade's laces.

Kade's hands were busy with their own work, tugging Surial's blouse open, pulling the fabric apart to move over his skin, leaving blazing trails of heat where they traveled.

Surial moaned again, fingers sliding to rest atop Kade's thighs, digging into the bunched muscles as he was distracted from trying to open Kade's breeches. He moved closer, lips meeting Kade's and devouring his lover.

Kade gathered him close, arms strong and hot around his back. The kisses they shared were fierce and hungry, time and wind seeming to stop as they lost themselves within their passion.

His fingers wandered restlessly over Kade's skin, finally finding a home at his nipples, pinching lightly and flicking back and forth across the hard points.

Kade sobbed into his mouth, hands sliding down to grip his hips and pull their groins together, the strength of Kade's body and need controlled only by steel-clad determination.

One more attempt at the recalcitrant ties holding Kade's pants closed and Surial gave up, pressing his groin against Kade with eager desperation. His fingers went back to stroking across Kade's nipples, as he rubbed himself against his lover's body. There was heat and hardness and the slick, wet feeling of Kade's tongue inside his mouth, and it all sent his head spinning with pleasure.

One of Kade's hands moved between them and Surial heard a series of snapping pops. Then again, this time the sound accompanied by the heat of Kade's fingers tearing away his laces and freeing his aching flesh. When their bodies met again, the slick heat of Kade's cock kissed his own.

"Better." The word was muttered against his lips before Kade's tongue pushed within his mouth again.

He mumbled agreement into Kade's mouth, along with a soft wail as their hips stroked together. His fingers clutched clumsily at Kade's skin, the rhythmic tugging and flicking over peaked nipples turning sloppy.

Kade's hands were hard against his buttocks, moving him firmly, pressing them together in sharp thrusts. Dark, deep rumbles echoed beneath Surial's fingers at the apex of each motion.

He slid his arms around Kade's neck, holding on and helping bring their bodies together. He was so close, Kade driving him higher and higher.

Kade tore his mouth away from Surial's, bending to fasten onto the perpetual dark mark that was proof of his hunger. As the hot tongue slid across skin, Surial heard a muffled scream, felt the bloom of heat as his lover shuddered and came.

The scent of Kade's seed filled him, pushing him full tilt into his own orgasm. He threw his head back, shouting his lover's name to the sky as pleasure shuddered through his body.

The mouth upon his throat gentled, hands holding him close, stroking his skin and encouraging any leftover tension to dissolve. Slick, shining braids slid over Surial's shoulder, hanging down to tickle his buttocks and hips.

"Mmm... love you," he murmured, rubbing himself slowly against Kade's body.

"Love you, my One." Kade slid his nose along Surial's shoulder, inhaling deeply. "Smell good."

Surial let one hand move up to circle Kade's head, holding his lover lightly against his skin, the other drifted up and down Kade's back, fingernails scraping gently.

Kade nibbled and licked, feeding lazily on Surial's skin, a happy purr vibrating between them.

He could hear their mounts nickering gently to each other across the meadow and the smell of crushed sweet grasses and wild flowers rose around them. A butterfly, pale butter yellow, fluttered over, landing on Kade's dark shoulder, delicate wings opening and closing in the sunlight, long thread of a tongue uncurled to touch Kade's skin.

Surial stilled, watching with wonder.

It stepped lightly, stopping to sample Kade every few seconds. Kade chuckled soft and

sweet, the sound sliding on Surial's skin like a warm spring raindrop. His lion didn't move though, let it explore and taste at will until it reached one of the long braids and fluttered away in search of another blossom.

"The winds bless you with a jewel."

Surial leaned forward and let his own tongue slip out to taste the sweet skin of his lover's shoulder.

"The winds bless me with you," Kade whispered, voice husky and rich with pleasure.

"I think I'm the one they have blessed by giving me to you."

Kade nuzzled close. "As it should be. What a terrible thing it would be, if I were doomed to ache for your love and you did not wish to give it."

Surial pressed himself closely against Kade, letting his lips continue their journey undaunted by the braids that had sent the butterfly winging away. "I shall always give you my love, Kadras, You are my life."

"And I will spend my life attempting to be worthy of it."

"No." Surial shook his head and held Kadras' cheeks between his palms, gazing into warm honey eyes. "I will spend mine attempting to be worthy of your devotion."

"Worthy?" Kade smiled at him, eyes dancing with love. "You are my heart and home, my love and my joy. You need not attempt something that comes to you easy as breathing."

"Well then, no more talk of needing to be deserving of my love." Surial glared at Kade for a moment, his smile breaking through a moment later and he leaned forward to taste the flavor of his lion's mouth.

Kade chuckled, lips opening for him, the motion natural and easy. As easy as the slide of Kade's fingers against the small of his back or the shifting of weight as Kade settled them more comfortably. He felt happy, safe and loved; home had never been very far away once he and Kade had found each other. They shared soft, heated, drugging kisses until their lips were tingling and swollen, clinging as one caress ended and another began.

Finally, Kade rested his forehead against Surial's, eyes soft and happy. "Do you want to tell me why we left the village, my One?"

"They didn't deserve our help." He stroked Kade's cheek, leaving it at that; the last thing he wanted to do was put an end to that look in his lion's eyes.

"Silly fools." Kade rolled his eyes and nuzzled against Surial's palm. "But lucky me, for I get an entire afternoon of you all to myself."

Surial grinned, pleased Kade was willing to let it end there. "Your luck is my pleasure."

"So, my One." Kade began to drop teasing kisses over Surial's face, making him laugh and squirm. "What else is your pleasure?"

"It all involves you and a lack of clothing, my lion." He smiled up at Kade.

Kade winked at him. "Are you going to take advantage of me? Have your wicked way with me?"

"I certainly hope so."

"Oh, good." Warm lips captured his again in an enthusiastic kiss, the sunbeams playing around them.

He let his fingers tangle with Kade's braids and pushed himself up into the warm, solid body of his lion. Kade tasted sweet, like honey colored with a slight bite of spice. He felt the purr moving up through his own chest, vibrating along his and Kade's tongues as they tangled together inside his mouth. He gave himself over to the sensations, to Kade's arms and the love that surrounded him.

Kade leaned over and propped his head on one hand, bringing Surial down beside him. The admiration was obvious in the golden eyes, heat mixing with a soft knowledge. With his free hand, Kade traced a line up the center of Surial's chest, ending at the dark mark gracing pale skin.

"Love you, my One."

"As I love you."

The smile that pulled the corners of his lips upward was warm and wide and for a moment he thought he might drown in the love he had for this man. He clutched at Kade's side and buried his face in his lion's chest, waiting as it faded back to something more manageable.

"My Everything."

Kade purred for him, hands warm against his skin. "Do you ever miss your big house? Your own bed? Someone to care for your needs?"

"My big house where I was all alone, you mean? How could I miss that compared to being in your arms? My own bed -- Kade you are my bed, my bower, my blankets." He nipped one of Kade's nipples, enjoying the hiss of sound that escaped his lion. "And you care for my needs before I even know I have them."

Kade's voice was husky, goose bumps forming on the rough skin in response to Surial's attention. "I just make sure you're well loved, well rested and well fed -- less than you deserve. You don't miss the fine fabrics? Books everywhere? Madrise's food made just as you like it?"

Surial looked up into his lion's face with wonder. "*Just* well loved, well rested and well fed? No one has ever done that for me, Kadrass, not as long as I can remember." He shook his head and focused back onto the warm body so close to his own.

"As for the rest of it..." He let his hand slide along Kade's chest. "I can think of no finer fabric than your skin." He traced the talon marks on Kade's chest. "No book more entrancing than the one I can read in you." Leaning forward, he flicked his tongue out, gathering the sweet-salty flavor of Kade's skin into his mouth. "No meal will ever match the taste of you."

"My One..." Kade was simply beaming, eyes shining. He pressed Surial's hand to his chest. "You make my heart sing."

"Then I am happy, too."

A shadow passed over them, large and quick moving and Surial startled at Kade's gasp. Looking over Kade's shoulder, he saw Lik'ta dancing away, snorting with mischief.

"He bit me! Spoiled beast!" Kade was trying not to laugh, the patently fake frown on his face amusing Surial to his core.

Surial laughed, fingers automatically going to check Kade's shoulder. Lik'ta had managed to make his point without tearing the flesh and Surial contented himself with simply rubbing the damp skin. "You think he's trying to tell us something?"

Kade chuckled and then looked over at Lik'ta with pursed lips. "He's telling me no sugar for a whole moon. Mean mi'it."

Lik'ta had the good graces to pretend he was sorry, at least long enough to nose through Kade's vest, which was lying upon the ground.

Surial laughed and pushed Kade over onto his back, rubbing happily against the warm skin. "I think he's jealous, and I think we should give him more reason to be."

"Ah, even when he was a babe, you were within every motion, every thought." Kade slid his hands inside Surial's breeches and slipped them down, cupping the rounded buttocks. "He should be used to his place in my heart."

Surial shook his head even as he wriggled happily in Kade's grasp. "Second place with you would never satisfy me; why should he be accepting of it?"

"Why would he fight against something he could never change?" Kade's fingers tickled along Surial's inner thighs, grinning as he jerked and twisted. "Beautiful One."

His answer was lost in arousal and he leaned down, sliding his tongue into Kade's mouth, tasting the love and passion there. Kade captured his tongue, sucking on it, softly at first and then with steadily rising passion. Soft rumbles filled the air, their movements slow and steady, desire flowing easily between them.

"You make me feel so good." He gasped, back arching, pushing their hips together more firmly.

Kade bent his knees, cradling Surial's hips with his thighs, adding his strength to Surial's

"Oh, love you, lion." He leaned down and closed their mouths together again, letting his gasps and whimpers flow into Kade.

Kade's low rumbles answered him, filled him with the knowledge that he was loved, desired, wanted. He let one hand move down Kade's chest, sliding it across Kade's nipples, wanting to push his lover as far into pleasure as possible. Kade whimpered into his lips, arching up into Surial's hands, eyes flying open, coppery lashes close enough to brush along his cheeks.

Surial raised his head and smiled down into honey eyes before moving closer again and letting his tongue brush along Kade's scars, along his eyebrows and over his eyelids. He sucked briefly on the tip of Kade's nose and then his bottom lip followed by his chin. His fingers remained busy the entire time, his hips pushing rhythmically keeping their arousal steady.

Kade's hands traced along his skin, absently, head arching back as Surial's lips traced his jaw.

Surial kisses continued down to Kade's throat, lips sliding along the sweet flesh. He reached the juncture where Kade's throat met shoulders and he opened his mouth wide, first biting and then soothing until he settled into sucking firmly.

Marking his lion.

The effect on Kade was gratifying. Surial found his head held close, Kade's cries coming in tandem with the desperate thrusts that brought their erections together again and again.

"My One!"

He stopped long enough to growl, "My Kadrass," before going back to what he was doing, mouth stretching as wide as possible, wanting his mark large and dark, so that no one would miss it.

At Surial's words, Kade's hand tightened, neck arching, offering himself freely and with hunger. "Yes. Yours. Yours."

Surial slid his mouth over, taking advantage of the exposed neck and making a new mark.

His hips moved without conscious thought, his hands sliding over Kade's body, stopping now and then to pinch and tug on the sensitive nipples. Kade writhed, moans constant. It was a heady feeling, knowing the coiled strength, the passion, Kade's focus and hunger were given to him. He moved the focus of his mouth to one of Kade's nipples, making a mark there, while his fingers slid across the slick skin of Kade's neck, pressing against the marks he'd left on his lion's neck.

Surial moved faster, becoming short of breath as he drove their hips together, determined to make his lion roar.

And roar he did. A great needy noise that echoed through the meadow, causing the horses to rear and call out. Kade arched, lifting them both from the ground, seed spraying between them as his body convulsed, eyes staring wide and unseeing into the sun.

Surial gazed down into Kade's face, watching the passion there in the flushed cheeks and unseeing eyes, all for him.

The sound of Kade's cry slid down his spine, making him shiver.

He bent, taking Kade's lips between his own and gently sipping from them, hands smoothing over the hot, golden flesh, now soothing rather than arousing.

Kade blinked, eyes unfocused and muscles lax, even his lips made clumsy with pleasure. "M'One... so good."

Surial grinned and nibbled gently on Kade's skin, letting his tongue slide across the marks he'd left there. Tiny arches and shivers met each touch, tiny, almost silent moans making Surial smile. He moved his hips gently against Kade, gasping softly as he slid effortlessly, the way made slick with Kade's seed.

"Come inside me, my One. Let me feel you." Kade's voice was slurred and husky, thighs opening with a lazy, sated grace.

His body tightened at the thought, stomach muscles clenching. "Are you sure, my lion? You seem so content as you are."

"Mmm..." Kade stretched, giving Surial a sensuous, warm grin. "Take me. Want to feel you, watch you."

"I'd love to." Surial bent and slipped his tongue briefly into Kade's mouth while his

fingers moved slowly down the muscled chest. He rolled his fingers in Kade's come, spreading it along the flagging flesh of that cock and the sensitive balls before arriving at Kade's opening.

He teased for several moments and then let his fingers push in.

Kade purred softly, body open and relaxed for him, hips canting up. "Love when you touch me, my One. Makes me warm all through."

Each soft, happy word was like a caress and Surial hurried through his preparations, eager to be inside Kade.

As his fingers slipped free from the warm sheath of Kade's body, his lion tugged him close for a long, languorous kiss. "Now, my One. Inside me."

"Yes." His whisper turned into a whimper as he pressed inside Kade, his lover's body loose and eager to take him in.

A happy murmur sounded and Kade pushed down, the look on his face sated and full of peaceful pleasure. The sun was poured down upon him, turning his skin and hair into living bronzes and golds.

Surial nearly came just from the sight, but he held on, wanting to move within the welcoming heat of his lion's body, wanting the moment to never end. He began to move, long, slow strokes that pulled him almost all the way out before slowly moving him back in, Kade's body holding him, caressing him.

Kade's eyes never left him, the gaze almost physical. "Love to watch you, feel you inside me, so warm. Like being filled with joy."

"Oh, Kadras..." A shudder went through him, from his neck, down along his spine and ending at his cock. His thrusts grew faster, the pleasure growing, becoming stronger with each one. He opened his mouth to say something to Kade, to tell his lion how much he loved him, but the words froze, drowning beneath the sensations rolling through him.

A bright smile and a trilling purr surrounded him, held him as close as Kade's body. "I love you too, my One."

He gasped and nodded, hips losing their grace as the pleasure pushed him, sent him careening into Kade's body with hard, jerky movements. Surial caught sight of the marks on Kade's neck and his eyes widened, his vision blurring as he came, a soft "oh" leaving him as he shuddered.

Kade's arms were around him, cradling him in close before the sensations began to lose strength. "Beautiful. You should always be so happy."

He chuckled softly. "Let me get some rest and we can do it again, if you like."

"As often as we can, my One." Kade's grin answered him. "As often as we can."

Happy, warm, home, Kade was the most important thing in his life and he felt suddenly sorry for the men at the village who failed to understand that.

They were to be pitied, not reviled.

He smiled and placed a kiss on the mark around Kade's nipple, letting his tongue drag across the sensitive skin. "I love you."

Kade shifted slightly, even sated, he was beautifully responsive. "Mmm."

"I am the luckiest man in the world."

"Perhaps." Kade winked at him, pulling some fabric over his shoulders to protect him from the sun. "After me."

Surial chuckled, the look on his lion's face prompting him to concede the point. He hoped he could always make his Kadrass look that way.

Surial's pace sped as soon as he left the town behind him and when he left the main road, following the almost invisible path toward the camp where his lover awaited him, he began to run.

The moon was up, full and bright, painting grass and leaves and bark silver, but he barely noticed their beauty. He needed Kade, needed Kade's touch, Kade's love. The need was like a whisper beneath his skin, itchy and unmistakable.

He was out of breath and almost panicked by the time he burst through to the small clearing where Kade's fire blazed warmly, sparks dancing unconcernedly into the night sky.

Kade stood with a frown, eyes searching the trees behind Surial. "Surial? What's the matter?" With a questioning growl, Kade stalked over, pulling Surial close, protecting him instinctively from unseen danger. "Are you all right?"

Wrapping his arms around Kade's waist, Surial pressed himself against Kade's strength, his warmth. He shook his head. "I'm fine now."

Unless Kade can smell him on me. The thought had him trying to back away.

Kade let him go only so far, one hand trailing over his cheek as the frown deepened, true worry shining from the soft brown eyes. "Surial? What's wrong, my One? Did something go wrong in town?"

Worrying his bottom lip, he took Kade's hand in between his own, looking down at the strong, thick fingers. "You have to promise me you'll let it be, that you'll stay here with me tonight and we'll move on tomorrow."

"Let what be?" He could see Kade's nostrils flare, scenting trouble.

"You can't go there and do... something." He insisted, looking up at Kade, staring into worried brown eyes. "You have to trust me that it's over."

"Surial?" Kade shook his head. "What is over? Has someone hurt you? Threatened you? Tell me."

"It was nothing, just... this man... and I'm afraid you're going to go back and hurt him and then what will I do without you and I need you, my lion. I need you so badly." He twisted his hands together, to keep them from shaking. He didn't want to talk about this. He just wanted Kade to hold him.

A low, rumbling growl began in Kade's chest, his eyes flaring. His hand, however, as it covered Surial's, was gentle. "You have me, but I will know what happened, my One. Who hurt you?"

"It was nothing, Kade, really, I'm making too much of it, it just... scared me a little." His hand turned and clutched at Kade's. "Everything was fine until I stopped at an inn for some food. They had a board outside with the day's food on it. Pea soup and bread -- a meal without meat, and you know how healing makes me hungry, but these small taverns never seem to have anything without meat in it."

Kade nodded, reaching out and pulling Surial close, offering his warmth and support. "They're not known for their delicacies, my One. What happened at the inn?"

"I was sitting at the end of the bar, eating my soup and bread and this man sat next to me; he was very nice and we started to talk and after I'd paid he followed me out. He wanted me to go to his room with him. Was quite insistent and very upset when I said no. He kissed me and insisted that I had been teasing him the entire meal. I hadn't, Kade, I was just being friendly!"

"He touched me, he wasn't much bigger than me but seemed to have twice as many hands as he should have and..." Surial felt tears build in his eyes. "I sort of panicked and kicked him in the balls, very hard."

"Good thinking, my One. With luck, you ruptured one. Then he will still be limping when

I go to cut his throat." Kade's voice snarled from him, dark and furious. The hand stroking against Surial's spine remained soft and steady. "What did he look like?"

"No. It's finished. It's bad enough I hurt him, I should have been able to get away without hurting him. I just need you to make love to me. I need to feel you inside me, deep and steady and true."

"It is not finished, my One, but it will be." He pulled back looking at Surial. "A'chaffa! I will not allow those that hurt you to go unpunished. You are my love, my home. I am your hi'icha, sworn by the winds to defend you and those tatika that harm the tribe deserve to bleed so that all may know you are sacrosanct."

The words poured from Kade, a version of a vow that he must have taken years ago. Kade petted Surial carefully, stroking his hair, his neck, the big hands warm and steady. "I'm sorry, ki'ita, it is a frightening thing, to be touched when you do not wish to be."

"I'm more worried about losing you -- you can't just go back there and harm him, they'll kill you in turn for murder." Surial pulled away and began to pace around their small camp. "I've hurt him already -- and that was far worse than him touching me. I know it wasn't the same, but Erulial touched me all the time when I didn't want him to, it's not something new, but to inflict pain on purpose." Surial stopped and shook his head. "That *hurt*, my lion."

Even the thought of his brother, beating him, hands pounding upon him because he was smaller, thinner, weaker, made him shudder, wrap his hands around himself and hold tight, fingertips searching for the lump on his side, the distant memory of the shattered rib there.

Then Kade's hand landed upon his hip and he remembered. That had been the first time his Naik warrior had defended him, protected him. Sent his brother away, broken and bleeding.

"That is why you have me, my One." Kade stood, the fire shining upon his scarred cheeks, turning his braids to flames. "If I die defending you, Surial, I die doing what the winds made me to do."

"No, my Kadras, if you go back and wreak vengeance for me you will die and, in dying, kill me. I have no wish to live without you."

Kade walked up to Surial, his arms wrapping around close. A soft kiss brushed against Surial's cheek. "Surely you do not believe that I am so vulnerable? That I could not protect you?"

"I believe that if you go back, you *will* kill the man who touched me and then the townspeople will take you and hang you for your crime." Surial felt bile rise at the thought. "You can't go back. It is over. I took care of it. Please. Promise me it will be left

alone and then make love to me. Please, I just want you to hold me. Tonight and tomorrow and the day after that and the one after that."

"I will hold you for as long as you need, my One." Kade carefully dropped soft, sweet kisses upon Surial's face. "Tonight and tomorrow and the day after that."

Letting the words and soft kisses soothe him, Surial wrapped his hand around Kade's neck and tilted his head back, offering himself.

Kade kissed his way over to growl in Surial's ear. "I want to kiss you, my One. Take back what is mine. Mine only."

"Oh, yes, please, Kadras. Please." His lover's name was like honeyed tears on his tongue.

"Mine." Eyes that seemed to glow in the firelight stared into him for a moment before Kade took his lips in a deep, thorough kiss.

A large hand cradled Surial's head, tilting him back as Kade explored and caressed, lapped and tasted.

This was what he had been craving all day, since he'd left Kade just after dawn, wandering into town to heal the mayor's wife in return for enough coin to keep them until they moved beyond these last vestiges of civilization and enough honey and meal to keep them beyond that. He had wanted nothing but that touch, always, but especially since that man had stolen a kiss from him. His kisses belonged to no one but Kade now. He knew it was perhaps primitive to feel that way, but he did, and, if it hadn't been for his healing, for his antipathy for violence and his fear for his lover, he would have begged Kade to kill the man.

A rumble sounded, hungry and full of need, and Surial could feel Kade's muscles shiver beneath his hands. Kade's kiss deepened, the intensity ratcheting higher as Kade reclaimed his mouth. One hand slid over his hips, pulling him close enough to feel the hot press of erect flesh against his own.

Moaning, he raised one leg, sliding it up Kade's thigh to wrap around his waist. His other leg followed quickly and he was wrapped around Kade's body like a limpet, with no intention of letting go anytime soon.

"My One." Their lips were separated only long enough for those words to escape on a whimper before Kade's tongue thrust within Surial's lips again.

He let Kade's body wrap him in warmth, let Kade's tongue drive out everything but his need. Kade stumbled backward, finally coming to rest against a tree with a groan. He arched, pushing up into Surial, allowing the tree to help support them both.

Surial needed skin on skin and he began to tear at their clothes, fingers made stronger

than material by his desperation tore open Kade's shirt and ripped his pants, exposing hot flesh.

"Easy, my One. I am right here." The words counseled patience, but the tone was dark, wild, desperate. Kade's tongue slid over his ear before the echo had dissipated. Kade's hands massaged Surial's buttocks, kneading them.

"Not close enough." He tore at his own clothing, his pants frustrating his efforts but he refused to unwrap his legs from Kade's waist.

Kade's mouth moved over his jaw, down to his neck. Lips nipped a line along his collarbone, a hot tongue explored the hollow of his throat. Then sharp teeth fastened upon the curve of his shoulder, the move marking him as Kade's own.

One hand shifted until he was holding Kade's head, pressing his lover against him, wanting the mark made deep.

Kade's teeth tightened for a moment, before his lips fastened over the spot, suckling firmly, drawing the blood up to the surface, soft growls and groans pouring out over Surial's skin.

Surial could feel the suction all the way to his cock, making him ache. His passage throbbed dully, almost painful in its emptiness. "Please," he begged, "I need you."

"You have me." Kade murmured, lifting his head, eyes dazed. "Where?"

"Here! Now! I don't care, just take me, Kadrass, please. Please. Please." His pleas fell away to broken whispers as he rubbed against Kade.

"Shh... easy, now. I don't want to hurt you, my One." Kade's hands slid over the scrunched material around his hips and pulled, tearing the clothes until they were rags. Two large fingers were sucked into Kade's mouth, wetting them before sliding them down to tease at Surial's entrance. "Hold onto me."

He wrapped both arms around Kade's neck again, body pressing down, searching to turn the teasing into penetration. "Forever."

Kade didn't tease, didn't make Surial wait for the slick slide of fingers stretching him, making him ready for the pressure of Kade's cock within him. Before Surial could catch his breath from the pleasure those fingers wrought, they were gone, Kade's flesh hot and insistent in their stead.

The stretch burned up along his spine and down his legs to his very toes. He cried out when Kade filled him completely, his only regret that his lover could not go deeper.

"My One." A series of shivers moved through the big body and then, when the waiting felt unbearable, Kade's hands began to move Surial, raising him and pulling him down.

His scream got caught in his throat and came out as a whimper as Kade did it again. Pleasure shot along his spine, down his legs, following the same tracks the burn had, making him convulse. It almost felt as if Kade were touching his heart from the inside.

"Mine." The word was growled between them, hot breath sliding on Surial's skin. Kade's head bent as they moved, muscles shaking with effort and need. "Tell me, Surial. Mine. Tell me."

He found the breath to say the words that were so necessary to them both. "Yours, Kadras. I am yours alone."

"Yes." Kade bent his knees, back sliding against the bark of the tree, His thrusts shifted, becoming deeper, harder, sparking sheer bliss through Surial's body.

Surial didn't want to come, didn't want this to end, this feeling of being filled by the man who meant everything to him, the man who was everything to him. He held on tighter, head thrown back as soft screams came from his throat with each thrust.

"Isna anili. Mine." The words were released on a soft whimper, Kade's voice almost nonexistent as he moved within Surial's body.

"Yes, yours. I belong to you." He began to repeat his lover's name, the two syllables pushed from his body each time Kade pushed into him. "Kadras."

The hands upon his hips tightened, the thrusts speeding, the rhythm shattering as need overcame skill. Kade threw his head back with a roar, eyes wide and desperate as they stared up into the stars. Surial grabbed onto his lover's braids and tilted his head until their eyes met, and then their lips joined and his world exploded, his orgasm bursting within him until all he became lost in a river of honey, Kade's eyes becoming his entire world.

The kiss continued until Surial's head swam and then Kade pulled back with a gasp. Kade's knees buckled and he sank to the ground, keeping his hold on Surial, keeping them close. The bunched muscles in the strong arms were shivering, trembling beneath Surial's hands.

Burrowing against his lover's warmth, Surial ran soothing hands up and down Kade's arms, murmuring softly, nonsense words that meant love and completion. Kade's head rested heavy against Surial's shoulder, braids falling all about them, his breath coming in short pants.

Surial's hand slid around the braid Kade wore for him, the small tie at the bottom made

from a small piece of material cut from one of his own tunics. Whenever he wore that tunic, his fingers would find the ragged edge at the bottom, playing with the soft threads.

"I need..." he stopped, unsure of how Kade would react to his request, but he needed it to much not to make the request. "I don't know if it's allowed or not, but I want to wear a braid for you -- a sign of who I belong to."

Kade made an odd rumbling noise that sounded almost pained, face hidden from view. The tremors became more pronounced, stomach muscles rippling. "You... you would wear a braid for me?"

The awe and soft, almost-pained hope in the rumbling voice ached between them.

"If you will allow it, I would. For you and for no one else ever. It would mark my devotion to you."

Lifting his head, Kade looked into Surial's eyes, expression serious. "Once you make the braid, it will tie us together within the winds. My ancestors will sing your name with mine. It is not lightly done or undone. I would be honored, but you should be sure. I will not let you go easily, should you choose to be free."

"I belong to you Kadrass, body, heart and soul, already. Nothing can bind me to you more than I am already bound." Surial let the braid Kade wore for him slide through his hand. "I would choose to die before I would choose to be free of you."

"Then let the winds sing of us." Kade took his braid in hand, a soft smile crossing his face. "I am yours, Surial -- your hi'icha, your protector, your friend."

Surial heard the soft words, recognized the rhythm of the Naik song Kade sang as he braided, translated so that Surial could understand. "I belong to the One with a great heart. His eyes are the leaves of the trees, his hands hold magic. He is ebony and marble. He fills me with his song, his hunger, his joy. I live for my name upon his lips. To kiss him is living."

Kade looked up, his eyes were soft, gentle, full of a joyful peace. "I owe him faith and trust, love and defense. He brings me peace and settles the raging winds within me. My One, my Surial, my clan, my home."

Surial felt tears gather in his eyes, watched as Kade's face began to blur. "Oh, my Kadrass..."

It was almost hard to breathe; Kade's love filled him so full there wasn't room for anything else.

He reached out a trembling hand, cupping his lover's face. "I love you."

"My One." Kade's hand covered Surial's, pressing it close before Kade turned his head and dropped a soft kiss into the palm. "The winds have blessed me and I am a lucky man."

"I think I would argue that I have a greater blessing in you." He blinked back the tears and the emotions they were tied to, trying not to be overwhelmed. "I don't think my song for you can compare..."

Kade smiled, brushing a kiss to Surial's wrist, tongue slipping out to taste. "Your song is in the way your eyes love my skin, the weight of your body in the night, the sound of my name upon your lips. You are my own, you love me. That is more song than any man deserves."

Surial shook his head. "You give me so much, my lion, and all you ever ask in return is myself, which you already own."

"You are who I need. I ask for you because I do not wish to face the winds without my family at my side." Kade rubbed his cheek against Surial's wrist. "I am a selfish man."

Chuckling, Surial let his fingers twist into Kade's braids. "In most men selfishness breeds pain and sorrow in others, not such unbelievable joy." Surial's breath hitched as Kade's tongue traced the blue veins beneath the skin of his wrist. "And if you continue to do that I'm not going to get this braid done..."

"But you taste happy..." Kade touched the tip of his nose to the inside of Surial's wrist before releasing the hand. "Braid first, then I will drink from your skin."

Surial closed his eyes. "That will be my pleasure."

He ran his fingers through his hair; it had grown quite long since he'd last cut it, severing his ties with the family that had disowned him, and was currently tangled and snarled together from his run through the woods and their wild love-making.

"Shall I brush it for you?" Kade snatched a lock set loose by Surial's fingers to blow in the wind, holding it to his nose and inhaling. He exhaled with a soft moan.

"That, also, would be my pleasure." His hands returned to Kade's face, sliding over the warm skin, thumbs pressing along the silk of his lover's lips, and then up over the scars high on his lover's cheekbones.

"We'll need to move. The comb's in the pack." Kade's eyes closed as Surial touched his clanmarks, purring softly.

"Move?" Surial grumbled teasingly. "Well then, the whole thing's off; I don't want to move off my warm bed."

"Ah, but the fire is over there, and our bedding and..." Kade dropped a kiss to Surial's fingers. "I will tell you a story, if you wish, as I brush your hair."

"That sounds like a more than fair exchange, though I want it noted that moving away from you, even just to move over there, is agony."

Kade chuckled and patted Surial's hip. "Go on with you. There's some of those sweet pies you like wrapped up by the fire. I'll grab the comb and check Mon'keur and Lit'ka. All our noise may have scared them away."

"It wasn't anything they haven't witnessed dozens of times already." Surial bent for another soft kiss and then stood, reluctantly leaving Kade's warmth.

He chuckled and shook his head at himself as he pulled off his shredded clothes. It only took him a moment to spread out a blanket to sit on next to the fire's warmth, checking the direction of the wind first, as Kade had taught him, so they wouldn't be sitting in the path of the smoke. He poked at one of the pies, finding himself surprisingly hungry.

He could hear Kade humming, the sound happy and warm. Lit'ka's pleased whinny and nickers and Mon'keur's snort told that Kade was spoiling them with sugar again, the soft rumbling of that low voice carried upon the wind.

It was one of the songs Kade had taught him and he found himself singing along, twisting his tongue around the strange, square words.

Kade was smiling widely as he entered the circle of firelight, wooden comb held loosely in his hand. He had removed his clothes and stood, proud and strong, flames playing over muscles and scars. "I love the sound of your voice; it soars."

"Your song teaches it how."

He ran his eyes over Kade's body, feeling his own respond with the hunger that, no matter how much they sated it, always sat just beneath the surface.

"If you keep looking at me like that, I will lose sight of my goal." Kade licked his lips, his cock twitching and beginning to fill as Surial's gaze caressed him.

"Oh, I think you've got your goal more than in sight, my lion."

Chuckling, Kade moved to stand before Surial, murmuring happily at the warmth of the fire. "I have all I need."

Surial reached out to slide his fingertips along the bones of Kade's hip, letting his hand glide down over the strong thigh. "So do I."

Kade purred, eyes closing as his skin was touched. The muscles beneath Surial's fingers bunched and tensed. Touching Kade was fascinating, the skin warm and responsive, appreciation sounding in soft trills and whimpers.

His hand moved around to cup a thick calf, squeezing the muscle gently. Leaning forward, he placed a soft kiss on Kade's knee as his hand circled his lover's ankle.

"I am supposed to be... Oh, you have warm lips, my One..." Kade voice held that gently distracted husky tone that meant arousal and the beginnings of hunger. "Supposed to comb your hair."

"Yes." Surial placed another soft kiss on Kade's knee and then sat back. "Hair and story, braid, and then... this." He slid a single finger along the curve of Kade's erection before primly sitting with his hands folded in his lap.

Kade sighed softly, the sound pleased. "You are a tease." He sat on the bedding, pulling Surial up onto his legs, stroking down Surial's flank as they settled together. Then strong hands curled into Surial's hair, pulling it back before the comb began to work through the tangles.

"Mmm... I love your hands in my hair, on my skin." Surial closed his eyes, letting himself sink into the gentle, soothing sensations. "Whenever we are touching, I know I'm home."

"Yes." The comb slowly smoothed, Kade's body warm behind and beneath him. "Which story would you like, my One? And have a sweet pie before they go bad."

Surial smiled, Kade was always trying to feed him. "I've eaten a bit of this one, and I did have that soup in town."

Kade grumbled beneath his breath for a moment and then relaxed. "Well..." Surial could almost hear Kade looking for a reason to urge him to eat more. "I suppose that will do."

Surial chuckled and rubbed his back against Kade's chest. "Would it please you, my lion, if I shared the rest of this one with you?"

"It would." Kade dropped a kiss upon Surial's shoulder. "Thank you."

A soft smile on his face, Surial leaned back and offered Kade a piece of the pie from his fingers.

Kade nibbled at the pie, using his tongue to lap the sweet remains from Surial's fingers, teeth nipping gently. "Good."

Surial took another small piece and ate this one himself, licking at his fingers until he could taste the subtle flavor Kade's tongue had left on his skin.

"I want my story," he demanded after the pie had been finished, the lion's share going to Kade.

"What would you like to hear about, my One?"

"Your colts."

"Which colts?" The comb was moving smoothly now, the tangles vanquished, the stroking slow and relaxing.

"The ones you wanted to look after before you became hi'icha." Surial loved Kade's tales of his youth, of the days before pain and sorrow had torn his life apart.

"Oh, you would have laughed to see them." Kade chuckled. "They were kept in a meadow -- no fences or walls. They were penned in by the trees and the mountains and the river. We would go and lie beneath the bushes and watch them play.

"Some springs there would be dozens of them, nickering and calling for us. The older students would be out there, listening for the song of iyossi, the ba'chi standing watch." Kade shook his head, braids sliding against Surial's skin. "We were not allowed to touch, to bother them. The ba'chi were very careful about keeping us away. Except on the nights where we celebrated the hunt, of course."

Surial allowed himself a small shudder at the mention of the hunt and then focused his attentions on the more pleasant parts of the tale. "Why weren't you allowed near the colts?"

"Colts are young, hungry -- they want to run, to play, to feel the joy of iyossi -- just like children. It is too easy for the young to get trapped in the joy of running. Then the child and the mi'it might be lost, which hurts the tribe." Kade's voice was serious, the weight of lessons taught for generations behind it. "Too much joy is a dangerous thing; it dissolves the weight of responsibility."

Surial slid his hand along Kade's thigh in a long, slow stroke. "Is that why the winds bring us pain, my lion? So that we don't get lost in our joy?"

Kade nodded, chin rubbing against Surial's hair. "That is why I cannot regret my losses. The winds were simply preparing my heart for you."

"So much pain.... It is hard to imagine that I could bring you such joy that it would need so much to balance it. I'm just..." Surial shrugged, unable to find the right words.

"My One." Kade's voice was full of satisfaction and pleasure. "One touch of your lips erases years of pain."

Turning, he placed his lips on Kade's shoulder. "Then I will spend the rest of my life kissing you."

"Yes." Kade turned Surial and kissed him, long and slow, drinking joy from his lips. When their lips parted, they were both smiling. "Now, your braid."

Surial's hands went to his hair and, tilting his head, he pushed all but a handful over to the other side. The braid would lie protected beneath the top layer of hair, visible and hidden at the same time, just as he was protected by his lover.

Kade's eyes were wide, bright, gaze fastened on Surial's hands. Tiny tremors shook the large hands resting on his skin.

"I don't have a song, but..." He began to braid the hair, speaking softly as he did so. "I wear this for the one to whom I belong. My Kadras keeps me warm, fed, happy, alive. My place is wound within his life, we are joined forever."

Tears formed in Kade's honeyed eyes, spilling out upon his cheeks where they caught the firelight, sparkling like jewels.

He reached out and gathered the tears with his fingertips, bringing them to his mouth. "His joy flavors my own."

The braid was complete, but for a tie. "I don't have anything to tie it off with."

Kade reached for his braids, pulling one close and unfastening it. The piece of leather he removed was finger-length and Kade snapped it in half, handing one half to Surial. "This is the only tie I have from before -- my father wore it in his braids."

"Are you sure?"

"My father would have loved you, my One. You would have been honored as a talik, with a tent of your own and many mi'it. My people would have welcomed you and thought me a blessed man." Kade nodded. "I am sure."

He took the small scrap of leather and tied the end of his braid off. "I am the man who is blessed, my Kadras. Thank you."

Kade reached out, stroked his trembling fingers along the braid. "My One, you honor me so."

"If I'd realized how much it would mean to you, I would have asked sooner. I was," Surial looked down at his hands and then back up into his lover's eyes. "I was worried my wearing one would be an insult to your ancestors."

Kade's eyes were filled with emotion, tears making them shimmer in the fire. "Surial. You are my ki'ita."

As if that were answer enough.

Joy flooded through him, as it always did whenever Kade spoke those words to him. "And I love you, Kadras." He leaned forward and brought their lips together, parting Kade's gently with his tongue.

A sob passed between them, Kade's lips opening beneath the soft touch. Kade leaned back, sighing as their skin slid together and Surial settled upon his chest, the kiss continuing.

Their passion built slowly, gently within the confines of their mouths. His tongue pushed deeper into Kade's mouth, exploring and tasting, leaving no part of his lover's mouth untouched. Kade relaxed, letting Surial kiss him, encouraging the exploration with soft moans and gentle touches of tongue. One hand trailed along Surial's spine, sensitizing and arousing. Surial slid his hands along Kade's face and then into his lover's braids, separating them, letting them tickle his palms and fingertips. Moaning softly, Kade's nuzzled into Surial's hands. His eyelids drooped, closing as Surial's fingers caressed him.

Surial spread the braids out, away from Kade's face and then pulled back far enough to gaze down at his lover. The firelight danced over the strong face, turned the copper hair into a living thing. "You look like the sun."

Kade blushed, eyes remaining closed as his cheeks heated. "You make me feel so good -- make me forget I am old and scarred. I cannot compare to your beauty, my One."

Surial ran his fingers along the clanmarks on Kade's cheeks and then over the talon marks on his chest. "You are a Guardian and there is a beauty in that I can never have."

"I was born to protect the tribe." Kade's nipples hardened as Surial's fingers passed near. "I am honored to protect you."

"And eager to make love to me?" he asked, wriggling his hips, sliding his own growing erection against Kade's. His let his fingers circle the tightening points of flesh, but didn't touch them.

"And eager for you to make love to me, as well." Kade arched, moving his torso toward Surial's fingers, biting his lip as they slipped away.

"It's the same thing, my beautiful lion." He sat, straddling Kade's hips with his own, and took his lover's hand. Licking the tips of Kade's index finger he turned Kade's hand back and ran it over his lover's peaked nipple, wetting it. Bending, he placed a small, soft kiss on Kade's bottom lip and then leaned further to blow across the wet skin.

Kade's mouth fell open on a gasp and needy hips rocked up into Surial, almost unbalancing him. The sweet pink flesh was taut, puckered and flushed, so sensitive from just one touch.

Taking Kade's other hand, Surial repeated the process on Kade's other nipple, this time letting just the tip of his tongue touch the wet nipple briefly before he blew.

"Surial..." Kade's eyes were blazing, hips steadily pressing up against Surial, chest heaving as he fought for more contact, more sensation. "You're teasing."

"Maybe just a little," he admitted, "but have you any idea how you look -- all spread out and desperate for my touch, nipples peaked, skin flushed, cock hard beneath me?"

"My One." Kade reached out and stroked Surial's erection, pumping gently until he gasped and pushed into the touch. "I am a shadow compared to the sight of you, hard and ready within my hand."

Moaning, Surial pushed once more into the touch and then pulled himself away.

"I want to be inside of you," he said the words as he moved Kade's legs apart, settling on his knees between them.

"Yes." Kade stretched out with a soft purring sigh, his hands sliding down his own body, fingers trailing over his nipples, his belly. "Make me yours."

The words made him moan, pushed him a little closer to his need and he grabbed one of Kade's hands, pulling two fingers into his mouth and sucking vigorously. "Get yourself ready for me," he instructed as he pushed Kade's hand downward.

Kade pushed himself up on one elbow, one knee bending as his hand slid past the auburn curls and heavy sacs. The muscles in his torso flexed and tensed as Kade slowly slid both fingers inside the tight circle of muscle. As Surial watched, Kade began to fuck himself languorously, hips rolling, head lolling back, cock hard and weeping.

"Sweet winds..." Surial sucked two of his own fingers into his mouth and then slid them into Kade's body alongside his lover's own fingers.

A sweet, hungry groan fell from Kade's lips, offered up to the stars. His body undulated, dancing gracefully as his hips moved upon their fingers, tight and hot. The tanned skin began to shimmer in the firelight, glistening as Kade rode the fingers within him.

It was incredible to watch, and incredible to feel: Kade's fingers twisted with his own, the heat of him. Surial waited until he thought he would explode just from watching before he pulled his own fingers out and captured Kade's hand, encouraging him to let his fingers slide out as well.

Kade whimpered. "No more teasing please, Surial. Need you."

"Yes, Kadras, as I need you." He slid into Kade's body with a single long, easy stroke and began to move right away. Gentle, slow strokes built the pleasure between them without sending either of them spinning out of control yet.

The look on Kade's face was bliss, sensual and excited. His body rocked easily, pleasure obvious in every motion. When the dark honey eyes focused on Surial, Kade mouthed 'yours.'

Surial moaned, speeding his thrusts as the unspoken word echoed inside him, making him ache. "Mine." He mouthed the word back and then whispered it.

And then whispered it a little louder, increasing the strength of his thrust. Soon he was pounding into Kade's body, the word shouting from him.

A trembling hand reached up and touched Surial's braid, fingers sliding upon the smooth bumps. "Yes, yours."

Kade arched beneath him, a soft whimper falling from his lips as his body tightened, seed splashing between them. A few more graceless thrusts and Surial joined him, spending himself deep inside Kade's body. Kade's heart beat quick and strong beneath Surial's ear as he slumped forward, trying to catch his breath. Finally, that heartbeat slowed and breathless gasps were replaced with a rumbling, sated purr.

"Love you, my One."

Turning his head, Surial placed a long, lingering kiss on Kade's nipple, tugging it gently with his lips before laying his head down again. "As I love you, Kadras."

Kade's hand slowly stroked the single braid, letting it fall between his fingers again and again. "Thank you."

Surial's own fingers stole into Kade's braids, caressing them. "It is my honor to wear it."

Another of those pleased rumbles sounded. "It is a joy to see. The winds will sing our names together."

"Then we will be together always, and that brings me such joy."

Kade nodded. "Always."

The word settled into his heart, the way that Kade already had, filling him with a song of joy and love and belonging that no one could ever take away from him.

Chapter Thirteen

The wind howled harshly and then settled again, leaving behind the crash of the waves along the cliffs, the summer squall driving the waters as if they were a sea. Kade's people called this lake Tilhichikso Wana. The place of dreams and fairies. Never had he seen a lake so big that it could be a sea.

They had left the last bits of village behind as the summer began to fade and his grandfather's mountain, the mountain of the talik, was only a vague memory. With every step into this wilderness, Kade seemed to grow stronger, happier.

Surial curled deeper into Kade's warmth. It wasn't cold in the cave they'd taken as refuge, their small fire assured that, but still the sounds of the wind and the water driving against the rock outside made him feel cold.

He whimpered slightly as the wind picked up again, its scream echoing through the rock cavern.

Kade's chest rumbled softly against him, arms pulling him close and then wrapping around, encircling him. "She is an angry wind, railing at her mate, angry that he is sharing his waves with the ground." A soft kiss brushed across his temple. "She's a jealous lover, the lake wind, but she cannot have you, my One, for you are mine."

"The wailing makes me so cold." He rubbed his nose against Kade's chest. "I was caught out on the cliffs once, when the wind picked up, when I was young."

"Were you scared?" Kade's body moved, arms and legs keeping him protected, warm breath, still scented with spice and honey from the tea Kade favored, brushing through his hair.

"Not at first." He chuckled as he remembered it. "I ran over the rocks, screaming back at her. It wasn't cold yet, or very strong and I just felt... free."

Kade purred softly. "I would have liked to have seen you then, been your friend."

"I could have used a friend like you, my lion. By the time I was old enough to wander the cliffs alone, I was very much content with my own company. Everyone whispered about me when they thought my father wasn't around. And my brothers..." he sighed and let the feeling of Kade's arms around him soothe him. "Well, I was happier away from their presence."

The purr turned deep, an edge playing through it. "If I had been with you, no one would have hurt you."

"I know, my lion." Surial kissed the skin beneath Kade's mouth, licking at the golden flesh. "Just as I know I'm safe now. In your arms."

"Yes." Kade nuzzled at a patch of bare skin, visible through his hair. "Where you belong."

Surial chuckled and tilted his head, letting his hair fall away from his neck. "Making sure everyone knows, Kadras?"

A barely noticeable nibble, and then Kade nodded. "Do they bother you? The marks?"

"Only when they are missing." Surial raised his hand, fingers sliding over the various marks that bruised his skin. "I can tell how old each one is by how it feels when I touch it."

"I..." He could feel Kade's flush against his throat. "I like to see them, dark on your skin. It makes me warm inside."

"I like it when others see them and know that I belong to you."

He tilted his head farther, hands moving into Kade's hair, pressing his mouth tight against Kade's skin. "I like the feeling of you making them, your lips and tongue and teeth on my skin, making me shiver and moan..."

Kade was teasing him, lips warm and playful on his throat. "My One, so lovely, taste so sweet."

Surial laughed, squirming as Kade's touch brushed against him.

Kade chuckled, bringing his hands into play, tickling gently. Then Kade stopped suddenly, head lifting. "Listen, the cave is laughing with you."

Truly enough, his laughter was echoing deep within the mountain. It made him laugh again and the echo rose, drowning out the wind and the waves, surrounding them with happiness.

"See? Your laughter is wonderful. I need more of it." With a wicked smile, Kade bent back to his task, tickling with fingers and tongue.

He wriggled in Kade's embrace, laughter flowing from him without ceasing. The sound grew husky and aroused as their skin slid together.

Kade rolled them over on the blankets until he was resting atop Surial. He looked down, braids falling around them. "My One."

Surial's hands slid over strong shoulders and down Kade's back. "Kadras."

Kade arched, body pushing close. "Mmm... feels good."

"Yes." His voice hissed between them as his laughter faded, replaced by aroused murmurs, hands sliding further to cup Kade's buttocks, pulling his lover closer.

"You think I'll ever feel my skin next to yours and not want you?"

"I hope not, my lion, for I cannot conceive of a time that I would not want you." He arched, sliding their erections together, gasping at the heated glide of silk on silk.

"Oh, good." Kade's words were distracted as his lips began tracing along Surial's face and jaw.

Laughter pushed out of Surial again, warm and loving. His hands pulled Kade's hips down as his own shoved up.

"Mmm...very good." Kade's hips began to push, sliding them together with lazy thrusts.

"Oh, yes... good." Surial wound his legs around the backs of Kade's thighs, joining their movements together.

They moved as one, their passion periodically distracted by moments of laughter, soft whispers of admiration and devotion and unrushed pleasure. Surial's climax built slowly, beginning as a warm tingle at the base of his spine and growing from there.

Kade was smiling down at him, happiness evident as the liquid heat splashed on his belly, the honey eyes widening momentarily, as if the climax was a surprise.

His own smile widened, love washing gently over him and then his own seed added to the heat between their bellies.

Kade kissed him, lips made sloppy with his chuckles. "You make me feel good, my One."

Surial stretched up against his lover, grinning as he realized he was all but purring. "And you make me feel magnificent, my lion."

Cocking his head, Surial listened for a moment to the wind as it drowned out the sound of the waves. "And warm all over."

Another happy grin and Kade reached for a cloth, cleaning them both quickly and rolling onto his back. Without a word he pulled Surial atop him and threw the blankets over them both. "There. You're where you belong."

Surial noted his lion sounded almost smug.

He could feel his own lips pull into an indulgent smile as he settled. "And so are you."

Kade nodded, stroking along Surial's hair, thumb trailing to brush along a dark bruise.
"Yes. So am I."

Surial shivered pleasantly and felt suddenly sorry for the wind; it sounded lonely.

Chapter Fourteen

Surial sat at the top of the hill, arms wrapped around his legs, head on his knees, staring unseeing out over the land. The still-warm wind tossed his hair about his face, soft caresses that wiped away the tears from his cheeks.

He had known that the men he and Kadrass were searching for were cruel.

He had known, he had seen the results, but somehow, deep in his soul, he had not believed.

Not until they had come upon the ravaged remains of a Naik camp where the warriors had fought back, leaving something so much worse than burned earth.

So many, too many. He hadn't known where to start and, once started, could not stop, not until Kade had come and wrapped wide arms around him, pulled him away even as he was pouring everything he had into a little girl who had been... Oh, please.

Just one more, he'd begged, his words barely forming sound, just one more...

Even now he could feel their deaths, like cuts in his skin, paper thin and irritated.

He was rocking, ever so slightly, one of Kade's songs humming through his mind, keeping time with his breathing.

"I tried my best, I did. I would have given everything, but I'm glad he stopped me, I'm glad he didn't let me." He whispered his secrets to the wind, as he had when he was a boy, knowing they were safe, held in its heart.

"People die, my One. It is the way of things. No one can stop that. You are not the evil here." A soft cloak fell about his shoulders, wrapping him in Kade's scent, even as he heard the soft rumbling words. Kade knelt before him, large and dark, filling his vision, honey eyes dark with concern and worry. "May I sit with you, hold you?"

He reached out with one hand, fingers trailing over a warm cheek, sliding across soft lips that had breathed their life into his own more times than he could remember. His lion. His Kadrass. The name shivered like a sweet secret along his spine.

"Yes, hold me. It was what you were made for." The truth of it whispered from his lips, beginning the healing of his own soul.

"Yes." Kade's response was immediate and Surial was cradled safe in strong arms before the word disappeared into the wind. Kade sang softly, loving him with words even as the callused hands stroked along his back, the motion steady and firm as a heartbeat. How could Kade do that, take away the pain and fury and offer him only peace?

He pushed himself more fully into the circle of Kade's arms, the large body warming him deeper than his skin. Finally his eyes closed, the specter of bodies laid out waiting for him, accusing him fading beneath the reality of his lion. The wind played about them, Kade sheltering and supporting, denying it access lest it disturb Surial's rest. The deep voice rumbled beneath Surial's ear, the words foreign and guttural, the warmth and love clear.

The temptation to lose himself within that embrace, to let himself drift away inside this safe haven forever was strong, but at last he wrapped his own arms around Kade's middle, returning the embrace, participating in it.

A soft kiss dropped upon his head, Kade sighing and relaxing a bit. "Would you take some food, Surial? Some drink? You must be worn through."

He shook his head, not yet ready for that. "Just you."

"As long as you need me, my One."

"I shall always need you." It wasn't hyperbole or flattery, just simple truth.

"Then I shall always be with you." Kade's words wrapped around him, sank into him. "The summer vines will be blooming soon, the white ones that smell of passion during the hottest nights. I can smell them in the air."

That made him smile. "Will you let me make you a crown of them to wear?"

Kade chuckled, "Can't you see me, big, growly man-beast wandering about with flowers in my hair? I think you're better suited."

He looked up at his lover, eyes drawn to the braids that Kade wore. "I will wear your crown if you make me one, but can't you see yourself in one as well? A flower for each braid, to send them sweetness and love and let them know you were thinking of them."

Kade colored, a bittersweet, distant grief flitting through his eyes before it passed and he smiled down at Surial again. "They know, my One. They hear my songs."

"I just thought my flowers could..." He shrugged, feeling suddenly foolish and sentimental.

"Your flowers are not the summer vines. Your flowers bloom in the desert, open themselves beneath the sun at dawn, pale and careful." Kade lifted Surial's chin and stole a soft kiss. "Then, as morning blooms, they reach up and touch the sun. They scent the air and tempt all who smell them. Then, as the moon kisses them, they wrap themselves close, holding the dew within."

Another soft touch of lips and a warm smile.

An answering smile pulled at his lips and he raised his face, searching for another kiss, his heart full of his lover.

Kade's lips met his, one soft, easy kiss following another, wrapping Surial in a sweet web of comfort and love. "I love you, my One."

More kisses fell upon his cheeks, his eyelids, his forehead.

Each kiss brought joy, pushing away the sadness the massacre had laid upon his heart and he felt as if he really were a wildflower, opening beneath Kade's sun, reaching up for his kisses.

Gentle fingertips joined the brush of Kade's lips. Surial's face was mapped, tasted, touched. The corners of his mouth were nuzzled gently until he smiled. The crease in his brow was caressed until it smoothed. The tracks his tears left upon his cheeks were smudged and erased.

When Kade's mouth closed over his, his lungs were filled with Kade's breath, flowing cleanly through him. The stench of death and the lingering scent of blood faded into memory as life and love filled him. Kade's tongue brushed softly against his bottom lip, the caress brief and questioning, tasting him with care.

He parted his lips wider, his tongue slipping forward to touch Kade's before retreating again, the invitation clear.

The kiss was lazy, Kade exploring his mouth as if they had never kissed before, as if this connection between them was new and fascinating and more important than breathing. It drove everything from his mind but Kade and Kade's mouth, devouring him, slowly, surely, inexorably.

Kade made love to his mouth for long minutes, retreating to allow Surial to catch his breath before taking his lips again.

It was glorious and arousing and made him feel so alive. His hands began to wander over Kade's body, pushing against seams and collars, searching out warm skin. Kade murmured happily into Surial's mouth as Surial found a way into his shirt, fingers sliding across the hot skin of his stomach.

Surial could feel the muscles of Kade's stomach twitch and jump beneath his touch. He stroked gently, reveling in the way it made Kade breathless.

"So soft, your hands." Kade whispered against his lips, eyes glowing at him, smiling and admiring and full of happiness. "Feels good."

"You feel good, like the whole world under my touch." His own whispers were almost lost as their mouths joined again, tongues sliding together, wrapping around each other.

Kade whimpered, the sound soft and hungry, his desire sweeter than honey. It filled Surial with heat, to hear the passion in those uncontrolled noises.

His fingers climbed the landscape of Kade's chest, sliding over both nipples, coming back to tug and play when the first brush of his fingers over them made Kade gasp into his mouth.

It made him hungry and he continued to feed off of Kade. There was life here, and need and want and lust and so much love that he would overflow with it.

Kade's hand slid around Surial's waist, fingers seeking the soft, delicate skin at the small of his back. The flesh beneath his own fingers hardened, peaked, and Kade arched for him, stretched and twisted into the touches.

Surial pushed Kade's shirt up and began to suckle on the sweet flesh, drawing more soft noises from his lover.

"Love..." One of Kade's hands reached up to cradle Surial's head, tangling in his hair and encouraging the sensations to continue.

He loved it when Kade did that, showed his need with his big hands, held him with them. They were so big compared to his own, and they meant safety and love. Surial sucked harder, scraping across the peak of Kade's nipple with his teeth, he wanted to drive Kade into pressing him closer, to insist he continue.

Kade groaned, shivers running through him. The fingers in Surial's hair clenched, tightened, as he arched in pleasure.

"Yes." He breathed the word against Kade's wet flesh, chasing more shivers across the wide frame. Another bite, another lick and another "yes".

So alive, so responsive, so needy, his Kade was everything he needed him to be right now. Kade always was, as if his simplicity cut right into the heart of Surial.

Kade stretched back, turning them until they were lying side-by-side, half on soft grass and half on Kade's cloak. Large, strong hands pulled him close, one leg wrapping around him until Surial was surrounded by Kade.

"My One." The words were groaned as Kade's hands moved to Surial's head, begging again for the touch of lips and teeth. "More, please."

He gave it to Kade immediately, no teasing, no playing, he would do anything for his

lover when Kade asked like that, just a little bit desperate and so needy it almost hurt to hear.

He mouthed and nibbled and bit at Kade's skin and then soothed with lips and tongue, his breath adding its own caress, his fingers following, until he was entirely focused on touching Kade's flesh with every part of himself.

"Surial, love, you're going to make me... Winds! So close..." Kade growled and convulsed, hands clutching at Surial's shoulders.

He raised his head, joining their mouths to capture that growl within himself; Kade's growls and purrs tasted like honey and clover, made him light headed like wine.

Kade rolled Surial beneath him, one hand sliding beneath Surial's buttocks and pulling his hips up to meet driving thrusts.

The kiss grew wild, passion flaring as Kade's grip on his iron-clad control slipped.

Surial raised one leg, wrapping it around Kade's buttocks, making small noises in the back of his throat to encourage his lover. Their trousers were a frustration, but the strength of Kade's thrusts made up for that and Surial couldn't stop to remove the barriers, he wouldn't.

Kade broke the kiss, burying his face into the curve of Surial's neck with a broken sob, mouth seeking purchase as they rocked together. As sharp teeth tested the texture of smooth skin, Kade's thrusts became arrhythmic, losing their grace.

Arching his head back, Surial gave Kade more flesh to work with; there was a line between his neck and his cock, one that grew more and more taut with every touch of Kade's lips, his tongue, his teeth, against Surial's neck. His fingers dug into Kade's shoulders as he held on, letting himself be carried on the waves of Kade's passion.

The roar that Kade released against Surial's neck as he climaxed echoed between them, the joy and pleasure and unending love obvious in the tones. That, more than the sensations moving through him, pushed him into his own orgasm; Kade's love washed over him and through him, enhancing his pleasure.

Soft lips moved upon his neck, his jaw, his cheek, before finding his mouth in a slow, tender kiss. "Love you so, my One."

Sliding his hands up, he cupped Kade's face between his palms. "I know – it's what fills me with the need to continue, to go on, even when there's so much pain around me and inside me."

"I would take it all from you, if the winds allowed."

"I wouldn't let you, my lion. You've had enough pain in your life; you don't need to take on mine as well." He smiled and brought Kade's head down for another slow, lingering kiss. "Your love is enough."

Kade wrapped Surial close. "It is not enough, but it is what I have. I would see you never hurt, never sorrowed, always laughing and kissed by the morning sun."

"Oh, my Kadras, it is a beautiful thought, but you cannot stop the journey of the sun, just as you cannot take the healing from me. It is my burden, my gift -- you taught me that and you make it bearable."

Kade nodded, eyes bright with hidden tears as he stroked the skin of Surial's face. "It is the way of things."

"Please, my lion, don't cry for me. You are my joy, my reward, my love, my life. No tears, not for me." His voice was fierce, his hands wrapped in his lover's braids, holding him tight.

"And who else would I spend them on? The warriors died defending their homes. The children are broken, but free." Kade's voice was rough. "They don't know how much they ask of you, how it pains you. They cannot know or they would not ask."

"They do not know and they must not know." Leaning up he brought their lips together, his kiss as fierce as his voice. "Only you may know, only in you will I spend my pain. You serve me with your body and your love, my Kadras, you are my salvation. I want that to bring you joy."

"You are my One, sent to me by the winds themselves. You *are* joy."

Surial made a sound, a cross between a sob and a war cry, and then pushed Kade over onto his back, following him, kissing him, trying to bury himself into this man that completed him.

Kade met his kiss with passion, holding Surial tightly, hands roaming over his body. He heard a low growling as his clothes interfered with Kade's ability to touch. Refusing to stop, even for a moment, refusing to break the kiss, he wrapped his hands in his own collar and tore the shirt open, letting Kade's hands pull it from his body.

Hot and firm, Kade's hands moved over his back, his sides. The touches were brands, Surial could feel them long after they moved on, marking him as Kade's own.

He tore at Kade's clothing, fingers made clumsy, desperate, by passion.

Kade tore his lips from Surial's, growling low. "Clothes, my One. Now." Kade ripped his

own blouse away and leaned up to remove his boots and trousers, his torso brushing against Surial's. "Now, Surial. Want you."

Trembling with the need that surged through him, Surial pushed his pants down, kicking off his boots as well. He hissed as he lay back down, body meeting the sweet heat of Kade's skin. "Need to feel you in me."

Kade groaned and wrapped himself around Surial, covering every section of skin he could reach. "I have no oil. Didn't expect that we'd bless the hillside when I came hunting you."

"It doesn't matter; I need you inside me." He kissed his lover once more and then took Kade's hand and brought the thick fingers to his mouth, sucking two of them in, coating them in his own saliva.

Spreading his legs, knees to either side of Kade's hips, he leaned forward, nosing the sensitive skin beneath Kade's ear. "Get me ready."

"Surial..." The needy groan was followed by slick fingers sliding over his erection and then moving beneath him. One finger penetrated Surial, the sensation making him hungry for more. Then as Kade's lips found his shoulder, a second finger joined the first, sending jolts of pleasure through his body.

He moaned, panting as he was caught between the sensations, wanting to move back into the touch of those fingers, but not willing to lose the contact at his shoulder. Kade's fingers slipped from him, large hands fumbling between them before a blunt pressure nudged at him, asking entrance.

He pushed himself up, kneeling over Kade's body, pushing down, taking his lover into himself. A soft moan, half pain, half pleasure, slid from him as the head of Kade's cock sank past the tight ring of muscles.

"Surial?" Bright eyes looked up at him, questioning. Kade's stomach was clenched tight, body tense as he fought for control, refusing to hurt.

He covered Kade's mouth, fingers sliding along the soft skin of his lover's lips. "Shh. I'm fine, my lion."

Surial sank down quickly, gasping as he was abruptly filled. There was still a touch of pain in the moan that followed, but mostly it was pleasure as everything faded away but his lover beneath and within him.

"My... oh!" Kade pushed himself up onto his elbows, muscles bunching as his head fell back between his shoulders.

Surial's hands slid over the strong shoulders, fingers pushing into the skin as they slid

over it. Holding tightly, he rose until just the tip of Kade's cock still breached his body. Crying out, he sank back down, the insides of his thighs meeting Kade's hips.

Kade's head lifted, his eyes flashing hot as summer's sun. "Again. Want to hear you make that sound again."

Eyes locked onto Kade's he rose and sank, the cry pushing unbidden from his lips as Kade filled him.

The growl that came in response ripped through Surial, sending vibrations throughout his body as they began to move together. An upward thrust met each downward movement, driving them both faster and higher.

They moved as if they were a single person, seamlessly driving themselves together, pushing toward ecstasy.

Kade's eyes were glazed as he struggled to focus, softly-fogged and pleasure-filled. "My One, my Surial..."

The whisper was somehow louder than any shout.

It was too intense to last and Surial did shout as he came, seed splashing onto Kade's belly and chest. "Kadras!"

A few more clumsy thrusts and warmth bloomed within him, Kade's fingers trembling upon his cheek. He collapsed against Kade, burying his face against the wide shoulders as great sobs pulled from him.

Again the softness of Kade's cloak fell over his back and again great, warm arms wrapped around him and kept him close. Kade hummed softly, fingers working through his hair, supporting him, body and spirit. His tears soaked Kade's skin as he poured out the pain and the joy, the emotions twisting, wrapped in one another. At length the tears stopped, leaving him empty of the hurt, at peace, Kade's love rushing in to fill the empty places left inside him.

"Better now, my One? Think you can eat?" Kade's voice was gentle, hopeful and Surial chuckled. If he had a coin for every time his lion attempted to humor him into a bite of this or a piece of that...

He nipped gently at Kade's lips. "I think I could manage a bite or two if I can have them from your fingers."

Kade's pleased rumble sounded and he stretched, reaching for his pack. A small loaf of bread, full of dried fruits and nuts appeared, along with a flask and some cheese.

Large fingers plucked off a piece of cheese and held it to Surial's lips. "Open up. It's

good. I bought it from an old woman in the market. I bought you some milksoap there, too."

"Milksoap?" He took the bread, making a happy noise at the flavor. "'s good. And you're spoiling me."

Kade nodded, offering another piece of the pale cheese. "Milksoap. For your hair, your skin. And I am not. Want some apple wine or some bread next?"

"Wine after the cheese." He nibbled at Kade's fingers. "And you are."

Another of those sweet, satisfied rumbles and Kade stole a quick kiss, popping yet another piece of cheese into his mouth as their lips parted. "You have lived with those who waited upon your every need, provided you with the finest foods, clothed you in silks. I feed you apple wine and cheese, wrap you in my old cloak after you're exhausted and you say I spoil you."

He shrugged, unable to deny Kade's words, but feeling the truth of his own nonetheless. "Because you do."

Kade grinned at him, pouring the sweet wine between his lips. "You eat like a bird, snapping at tiny morsels."

"And you're always trying to fatten me. I think you're waiting to take me to market," he teased gently, letting Kade feed him several more pieces before waving any more away.

Kade chuckled, popping a bite of bread into his own mouth. "You are too precious for the market. I believe I'll keep you for my own."

"You'd better." Surial took the food from Kade's hands and began to feed his lover.

Kade ate ravenously, grinning at Surial as he nibbled, pretending to threaten the safety of Surial's fingers. "Careful, my One. You make me hungry."

"I was right, you are fattening me up!"

Kade's laughter filled the air, wrapping around and through Surial, warm and happy and his.

"I love you, my lion." He curled into Kade's warmth, reveling in the peace and happiness that filled him.

They sat, resting together, Kade's cloak shielding them from the wind, watching as the stars came out.

Chapter Fifteen

Surial woke under the tickling touch of the sun's first soft rays. He stretched, enjoying the warm, smooth glide of fur beneath his skin. He reached toward Kade, finding instead only more coverings, these cold, empty.

He opened his eyes, searching the room for his lover, but it too was empty.

Wrapping himself in one of the blankets, he let instinct lead him to the outcropping of rocks that looked out over the valley. There, face kissed by the rising sun, stood his lover, eyes lifted to the sky. Kade hadn't yet tied back his braids and they fell around his face all akimbo. The sun's early touch painted them with light pink and soft blue hues. There was a fierce joy in the honey-colored eyes, a pride that threatened to knock him to his knees.

For the third morning in a row, the wild horses were running free.

Kade said that they must wait, let the tribe come to them. That there would be guards, warriors, others coming soon. Kade said the horses told him this.

There had been such joy in Kade's voice that he could not be sorry.

He watched for a moment, enjoying the way the sun made love to Kade's skin for almost forty heartbeats before he moved forward to claim his lion as his own. The tribes and the horses would have the man soon enough.

As Surial walked through the grass, Kade turned his head and smiled. "Di'ben sud, my One. Bright morning."

"Di'ben sud, my lion." Kade's language still felt odd under his tongue, he suspected it always would, but it made his lover happy that he had wanted to learn, that he used it, and he needed no more reason to do it than that.

Kade turned his face back up to the sun, nostril's flaring as he breathed deeply. "Rain tonight, I think." He reached back, his hand searching for Surial's. "You couldn't sleep?"

Taking the offered hand, he moved up against Kade's back, murmuring happily at the way his lover's skin warmed him. "The furs were cold and lonely without you, my lion. Are they coming yet."

"Soon. Perhaps when the sun sets." Surial smiled as Kade shook his head and snuggled back toward him. "You were sleeping so peacefully. I didn't want to wake you."

He rubbed his face against the skin of Kade's back, finding that spot where he fit perfectly and resting his cheek there. "I would have woken you."

Surial could feel Kade's rumbling before he heard it. "Somehow, my One, I think we wouldn't have been watching the mi'it run had you woken me."

Kade paused, and then teased gently, "Pity you didn't wake first."

He laughed, feeling the sensation bubble up from his belly, sliding along Kade's back. "I must admit that the horses are beautiful, but," he placed a soft, open mouthed kiss against Kade's spine, "we could go back to bed and pretend that I did wake first."

A low groan, and Kade's skin shivered beneath his lips. "I think I can pretend to sleep."

Kade's voice was husky and rough, an edge of hunger creeping in.

Surial let his free hand wander down along Kade's front, smoothing over the thick muscles of his lover's stomach, teasing his way through the curls below, deliberately keeping away from the eager cock. "I know I can pretend to wake you."

"Tease..."

Surial grinned, the hunger and need were clear now, leaping up to meet him just as Kade's cock twitched toward his hand. "Come back to bed and find out if I am or not..." he suggested, squeezing Kade's hand before moving away, walking slowly backward into their tent, away from the eyes that Surial knew watched them.

Kade turned, stalking him quietly, honey eyes warm against his face. When Surial reached the furs and sat, Kade bent forward, taking a long, deep drink from his lips.

When Kade would have pulled away, Surial wrapped his arms around his lover's neck and laid back, pulling Kade down onto him.

Kade caught his weight on his hands, letting his hips nestle with Surial's. He leaned in, nuzzling Surial's neck with warm lips. "Careful, love. I don't want to smash you."

Surial stretched his neck out, a soft moan encouraging Kade's mouth. "I'm not going to break."

Kade's tongue began mapping Surial's throat, unerringly hunting and finding every sensitive bundle of nerves and awakening them until he was gasping and arching up into muscular heat.

He clung to Kade's shoulders, fingers digging into the warm skin as he moaned out his pleasure. Wrapping his legs around Kade's thighs, he pulled their hips together.

Kade groaned, teeth scraping against Surial's collarbone as their cocks slid together. "So hot."

Surial moaned, skin tingling beneath Kade's mouth, pleasure shooting to his groin.

Moving slowly and surely, Kade thrust against him, the lips and tongue upon Surial's neck never ceasing their feasting. Surial could do no more than hang on and enjoy the sensations as they rocked through him; he didn't believe he would ever tire of the feel of Kade's lips upon his throat, licking him, biting him, marking him, sucking him, claiming him, loving him.

"Love you," he whispered softly as he arched, exposing as much of his neck as he could.

Kade hummed, the noise vibrating against his throat. Kade balanced himself on one hand, slipping his other hand beneath Surial's hip, tugging him close. Surial cried out, his climax catching him by surprise as his body responded whole heartedly to Kade's touches. He lay gasping, small aftershocks of pleasure going through him, feeling just a little sheepish.

Kade dropped soft, hot kisses along his jaw line. "So beautiful, my One. So lovely."

"You make me feel so good, my lion." Surial turned his head and caught the wandering mouth with his own, tongue stroking across Kade's lips and then pressing into his lover's heat.

Kade opened to him eagerly, sliding their tongues together, a low groan moving between them. He could feel Kade's heartbeat in the hard shaft that pressed against him, pushing insistently into his hip.

"What do you want?" he asked as he reluctantly let Kade's lips part from his own.

"You."

He laughed happily, pushing his hips up into Kade's body. "You have me, my lion." Leaning up he nipped sharply at Kade's lower lip. "Now what are you going to do with me?"

"I thought I was supposed to pretend to sleep?" Kade fastened his lips to the hollow beneath Surial's ear, sucking fiercely.

"And what are you pretending now, my lion, that you are suckling at your mother's breast?" he asked with a gasp.

Kade laughed and pushed himself up, grinning into Surial's eyes. "No, my One. That would feel like this." Then he dipped his head, latching onto one of Surial's nipples.

Surial shouted out, hands sliding into Kade's braids, holding him in place. His hips moved restlessly against those pressing him down, cock beginning to harden. Kade drove

his arousal relentlessly, feeding desperately at his flesh. Tongue and teeth, lips and teasing breath -- his lion loved him, fed from him, consumed him.

Their skin moved slickly together, hot and urgent. His own breath was gasping from him, the hitching sounds punctuated by soft moans and quiet whimpers.

Kade lifted his head, lips full and swollen, eyes wild, braids falling around his face, sliding from upon his shoulders. His muscles trembled, shifting beneath his skin as they moved. "Please."

"Yes, make love to me -- I want to feel you inside me."

Surial could see the shivers move through Kade, those darkened honey eyes falling closed, a whimper creeping from him. The large hands, hard in the coverings on either side, creaked as the fingers clenched.

"I hope that's a yes, my lion." His own voice was husky, deep with want and need. His body moving insistently up into Kade's.

"Oil." The word was forced out in a low growl, the words rumbling through Kade's chest, the vibrations making Surial shudder.

"Saddlebags."

Kade reached out, fumbling for a moment before he found the vial and unstopped it, the smell of summer grasses filling the air.

Surial watched as his lover coated his fingers and then slid his hand between them, tracing a slick line over his cock and sacs before trailing behind.

"Kade..." Breathless, his lover's name whispered from him. "More."

A thick finger traced around his entrance, slick and hot. Kade was watching him, eyes flashing gold in the morning sun. "More?" The growl was hunger and need and love, all rolled up together and that finger slid inside him in a smooth motion.

Surial gasped and arched, pushing into the invasion. Kade was warm above him and inside him.

"By the winds, you're beautiful. You make me ache."

"I'm aching. More." Half demand, half plea, and his head moved from side to side as he tried to fuck himself on Kade's finger.

Kade slid another finger into him, stretching his body, moving within him slow and lazy.

With sweet care, Kade opened him with gentle fingers, even though Surial could taste Kade's need.

His fingers bit into Kade's shoulders as he clung to his lover. "Faster, harder, I want my lion."

"Surial..." Kade jerked, fingers sinking deep and curling within Surial's body, sending sparks through him, setting him aflame. "Yours, always."

He moaned. "Again."

With a groan that sounded wrenched from his body, Kade complied, nudging the hidden gland within Surial again and again. Surial wrapped his ankles around Kade's thighs and brought their mouths together, trying to climb into Kade. Moans and whimpers poured into Surial's mouth, Kade's fingers working within him, pushing him higher and higher.

Finally Kade tore his mouth from Surial's with a sob, removing his fingers and pressing the head of his cock against Surial's opening. His eyes begged, body trembling as he whispered, "Now. Please."

"Yes..." Surial canted his hips and arched up, pushing himself onto Kade's shaft.

Kade threw his head back, roaring into the air as he sank into Surial's body, hands hot and hard against Surial's hips. He stilled, body racked with tremors as he fought for breath, for control.

Surial shifted, bucking, forcing Kade to move inside him. "More." The demand was low, guttural, desperate.

"My One." Kade pulled him into a deep thrust, their bodies slamming together. Fierce growls filled the air, Kade's hands hard upon his hips, Kade's teeth sharp upon his shoulder. "Mine."

"Yes, yours. *Yours*." He clung to Kade, riding the thrusts, letting his lover push him higher and higher.

Surial's world tilted as Kade slid hot hands beneath his shoulders and sat up, lifting him upright, impaling him deeper upon hard flesh, their torsos sliding together. Surial's cock rubbed against Kade's belly as the thrusts sped. "So tight, love. Need you."

"Oh!" His own grip on Kade's shoulders never faltered, his legs stayed wrapped around Kade's waist, holding on tightly as he became dizzy with pleasure.

Kade dipped his head, burying his face in the curve of Surial's neck. Dark rumbling growls filled the air as they moved, as Kade's thrusts became wilder, his grip tighter.

Tension burned inside of Surial, building with each thrust until he was on the edge of exploding. He uncurled the fingers of one hand long enough to grab Kade's head, holding his lover against his neck.

Teeth fastened onto Surial's skin, smothering the scream that tore from Kade as he stiffened, hips jerking gracelessly as Surial was filled with liquid heat. It sent him skittering over the edge, his own climax pulled from his body along with a deep moan.

They fell back onto the ground, Kade refusing to relinquish his hold, keeping Surial close. "My One."

Surial turned and left a long, lingering kiss on the sweat-salty skin of Kade's chest, gnawing gently on his lover's collarbone.

Kade purred for him, stretching lazily, muscles rippling as he relaxed.

"Oh, my lion, you make me feel so good." He placed another kiss on his lover's skin and then settled more comfortably on his living mattress; he had discovered that he fit perfectly on his lover's body, snug and warm and right.

"Now tell me wasn't that better than the sunrise?"

A soft kiss brushed upon his hair. "I watch the sunrise, my One, to give thanks that I have one more day with you."

"Then I will have to join you, so that I might give thanks that I have one more day with you."

"Tomorrow I believe we will meet the dawn with the tribe." Kade chuckled, the sound happy and warm. "Besides, if you had to waken with me every dawn, we both might have less to be thankful for."

Surial shifted, letting his elbow drop into Kade's stomach. "Are you saying I'm unpleasant in the mornings?"

"No." The word was released on a grunt, Kade's hand beginning to slowly caress Surial's spine. "I'm saying that you look lovely when you sleep and I like to watch you and wonder what you're dreaming."

"Well said," he murmured, rubbing gently against the spot his elbow had dug into.

"I thought so."

Chuckling softly, he arched slightly into the hand moving along his spine, almost purring at Kade's gentle caresses.

"Good."

His eyes closed and he let sleep claim him again, Kade's breath rumbling beneath his ear.

Chapter Sixteen

Surial tipped his head back and squinted, focusing on the horizon and all the stars that he could see in the crisp autumn sky.

He'd had just enough to drink that he was warm and cold, with little effort, let the sounds of the tribe celebrating around him fade into a happy background noise. They were rejoicing at finding another of their own.

They had come for them, three days ago, huge, strong men with scarred cheeks and dark eyes. Kade had nodded to them, offering rahats and honey, furs and tales of his captivity. The people had welcomed them - them both - with open arms. They had sat together - a score of men, more than that of children, women - listening to Kade tell of the deserts, of the slavers, of the years of pain. He had found himself shamed, shrinking, curling into himself before Kade's eyes had found him in the firelight and the story had changed.

He knew the Naik language now; he knew these stories.

In Kade's story, Surial was the hero.

Kade had told of the witch, Savinia, of the little child mages in the mountain, of how Surial had healed his beloved Argent's granddaughter, the burns disappearing under his will. Kade sang of Lit'ka, of the lost foal that still held the mark of his hand on a strong breastbone. When Kade's story had turned to Aline, the women had mourned for her children, the warriors beat their chests and howled.

His Kadras had never been more beautiful.

It was cause for celebration, to have Kade returned to his people, and the tribe would be celebrating every second of it, defying the darkness' hold by refusing sleep.

He chuckled a bit to himself. He was celebrating, too, but for him it was the moon's long visit that was cause for celebration.

He could feel her touch, like a lover's gentle caress.

Tipping his head back down, he searched for his lover, looking for Kade's copper braids among the others.

Kade was dancing with the other hi'icha, the other wild warriors, a huge set of hawk wings strapped to him, a tiny loin cloth draped over his groin. His braids were beaded and decorated, powdered stone painted upon him and sparkling in the firelight.

He swooped and bobbed, hunting another Guardian who was wearing a wooden mask

with a terrifying visage carved upon it. The groups moved, swayed, the dance oddly sensuous and feral, Kade bright and metallic beneath Surial's gaze.

Surial felt his body tighten, need making his skin sensitive, and it felt as if his clothing were scratchy and tight.

His lion was beautiful, especially like this, duty thrown to the winds as he played.

He sipped absently from the bowl that was passed to him, eyes feasting on Kadrass.

The dance continued, the drumbeats faster, driving Surial's blood through his body. Kade was hunting, muscles rippling, skin gleaming. The honey eyes were intent, otherworldly, the focus of the ta'akto shining in them.

Surial's breathing grew short, it felt as if he were performing the dance with Kade, moving through the other hi'icha, hunting the masked-one. The music sped and he leaned forward. The hawk circled, closing in with a hungry screech. The other Guardians rushed in as the hawk swooped, the masked invader screaming as he fell.

Surial leapt to his feet, barely suppressing the urge to run into the circle.

Dozens of dark hands covered in sparkling power stroked over his lion -- gilding his limbs, his hair, his chest -- as he preened over his kill.

He felt one of Kade's own growls begin to build in his belly. That was his lion they were touching. His.

He took a step toward the circle.

Kade's head turned, eyes fastened upon Surial's face. He slowly began to move, displaying himself -- the hands that moved upon him sliding as he attracted his mate, his One. The music slowed, became slower, throbbing.

Surial's eyes were fastened on his lion. As he stalked slowly forward, his awareness of the other revelers, of the music and singing faded. There was only him and his lion, the low throbbing beat of their hearts drawing him forward.

Kade began to move toward him, eyes fierce, movements liquid heat in the firelight. His wings fluttered, head bobbing, braids moving over his chest.

Surial swallowed and licked his lips, heat consuming him. He kept moving forward, opening his tunic and sliding it from his shoulders, letting it drop on the ground behind him.

Kade called for him, voice harsh and needy. He arched, wings spreading wide, denying the other Guardians a chance to hunt, to display to Surial and catch his attention. The gold eyes were fastened onto him; Surial could feel their hunger.

Surial shook out his hair, changing the angle of his approach, moving slightly to the side, eyes still locked onto his lion. Slowly Kade undulated for Surial's eyes, the thick muscles in his thighs clenching. As he circled, his loin cloth slipped slightly, copper curls appearing above the leather.

Surial's head fell back with a moan and he slid his hands down along his sides, fingers sliding beneath his waistband.

Another harsh cry and suddenly Surial's vision was filled with gold and copper, Kade swooping around him. He felt more than heard the hungry 'my One' as Kade pressed close, body kissing his for the briefest moment before moving away toward the darkness. The hot eyes lured him.

Surial followed, hands moving to undo his breeches, another moan leaving him as his erection was freed.

He could see Kade's buttocks as he moved, flesh left bare, the feathers from his golden wings brushing the tops of the muscled curves.

Pushing his pants to the ground, Surial left them behind him as he began to speed after his golden lion, not caring who saw him as he gave chase.

Kade took off, wings fluttering as he moved, drawing Surial farther away from the fire and the crowds. Surial only noticed the growing darkness as it obscured his view of his target and the growl that had been building all this time broke free, roaring from him as he began to run.

The cry that answered Surial rang through the night, Kade close enough to smell, to feel the heat that pulsed from his lover. He reached out, Kade managing to elude him, and the chase continued. He could feel his need pulsing through him, through his veins and in his stomach, his cock, the soles of his feet.

Kade ran into a thicket, trapped on three sides by thick growth. The moon poured down over him, making him shine and glow. He turned to face Surial, powerful body exposed, displayed.

Surial slowed when he realized he had his prey. He stalked slowly up to Kade, stopping only when he stood directly in front of his lion, the honey eyes made translucent by the moon's gentle beams. Surial felt his pulse drumming through him, his love and arousal twisting together. His mouth opened and he threw his head back, letting his love howl burst from him.

A thrumming cry answered him, begging and needy. Kade pushed in close, Surial could feel hot breath upon his throat, slick braids sliding against his chest.

Kade hovered, breathing him in and waiting. Surial leaned forward, leaving his head tipped, offering his neck, even as his hands slid to Kade's hips, holding them possessively. The skin beneath his hands shifted sweetly as sharp, ravenous teeth fastened upon his throat. Crying out, Surial came, hips jerking against Kade's as his seed spilled from him. A soft noise was lost upon Surial's skin, Kade arching close, seeking friction, his arms and hands trapped within the framework of their wings.

Surial pushed against Kade, his arousal unabated by his climax, letting their erections slide together. He slid his hands up the muscled chest, palms resting over Kade's nipples; he raised one leg, sliding it up and hooking it around his lion's thigh. Each movement of his hips, no matter how small brought pleasure and heat. Kade's wings circled him, adding a soft counterpoint to the heat and slick suede feel of Kade's skin. His lion was calling for him, trills and growls chased by purrs and sighs.

Surial let one hand slip to pull the tiny loincloth from Kade's hips, gasping as the heat against him doubled. He pressed Kade's head into his neck, shuddering as sharp teeth grazed his skin again. Kade's cock burned against him, the flesh taut and slick with proof of his lion's hunger. The hot mouth pulled at him, drew his blood up to the surface of his skin with a strong rhythmic suction. He tried to tell his lion how much he loved him, but managed only another low growl, his fingers digging into Kade's shoulder and the small of his back. Another bright flash of sensation burst upon his throat as Kade sobbed and jerked, heat splashing against his skin, Kade's scent filling his nose.

He growled again and leaned forward to bite at the skin of Kade's neck as well. "Want you." He managed the words, as if Kade's orgasm had freed them from his throat, though the words were little more than growls themselves. "Now."

The beaded braids clicked against each other as the heavy head fell back, throat offered freely. "Take me."

Surial's teeth and tongue and lips moved over Kade's skin, biting and licking and sucking until he could feel Kade's cock stirring once more. "Hands and knees, my lion."

Kade moved with fluid, fascinating grace, folding down before him, wings ruffling as the muscled body settled, the tips of the feathers resting upon the small of Kade's back. His thighs spread, he arched, body begging for Surial's possession.

Another growl left Surial and he dropped to his own knees behind Kade, hands pushing apart the round cheeks.

"Mine," he managed as he slid deep into his lion's body, a single insistent thrust.

A soft cry, warm and full of passion, fell from Kade's lips, body pushing back eagerly, welcoming him in.

"You are mine, Kadas." He pulled out and plunged back in hard. "Mine."

"Yours." Kade's voice was a sob, a plea, an exultation. "Yours."

Sliding his hand around Kade's hip, Surial grasped his lion's erection, pumping it as he continued to thrust.

They moved together, passion sending them higher and farther with every moment. A sound filled the air, Kade's low voice surrounding Surial. As he pressed in deep, Kade's words hit him. "Easna anilas i'chaffa." *I belong to you, my One.*

"Yes," he whispered.

"Yes!" he shouted.

He came, seed moving deep into Kade's body, hand clutching Kade's cock.

"Yes." The word was simply breathed as heat splashed over his fingers.

He slid from Kade's body, collapsing against the feathered back. "So beautiful. Mine. My lion. Mine."

"Yours." Kade purred. "Only and forever."

Surial's murmur of happiness was interrupted by his sneeze as one of Kade's feather's tickled his nose.

Kade chuckled and shifted. "Help me out of these and I can hold you, touch you."

Surial stood and helped Kade up, fingers running along Kade's shoulders as he tried to figure out how the wings were attached.

"Wrists and elbows, my One. Un-knot the leather." Kade stretched, turning his arms palms up.

Surial let his hands dance along Kade's outstretched arms, humming happily. "You look amazing."

"The hands who made the wings were clever."

"It almost seems a shame to take them off." He leaned up against the solid body. "Maybe you should just fly away and bring me to your nest?"

He was answered with a warm laugh and a long undulation of bronze skin. "They are lovely, but they pale to being able to touch you."

Surial chuckled, warmth filling him. "Well then, far be it from me to deny my lion on this glorious homecoming."

Kade caught his gaze and smiled. "May I spend every night from here until we pass into the land of eternal summer with your laughter in my ears and your skin soft upon mine."

A shiver of delight went through him and he leaned up to slide his tongue between Kade's lips, tasting and loving.

Kade's eyes were shining as the kiss ended. "And your kisses making my head spin."

"I think I might leave you like this; it makes you poetic."

"Surial..." The bracings on the wings creaked as Kade's muscles flexed, eyes twinkling at him. "If you don't set me free, you'll get more than poetry."

"Oh?" He leaned forward and swiped his tongue across Kade's lower lip, and then his chin and then his nipple. "Is that a promise?"

Another creak and Kade rumbled. "A threat."

Surial grinned and shook his head. "I don't think you should threaten me, my lover is a lovely but strong and possessive man. He wouldn't like you threatening me."

"I'm not worried. I am a hi'icha. Your lover would run in terror from my ire."

"Ah, but my lover is also a Guardian. Golden and fierce."

"There is no hi'icha who could withstand me." Kade grinned ferally, puffing up his chest. "I have been sent by the winds themselves for you."

"Mmm..." Surial murmured his delight, hands sliding slowly along Kade's muscles, enjoying the sight and the sensation of them beneath his fingers. "Beautiful." Leaning forward he flicked his tongue into the hollow at the base of Kade's neck; his lion tasted good. Taking a deep breath, he raised his head and grinned back up at Kade. "You know, my lover also claims to have been sent to me by the winds."

Kade swooped down, taking his lips in a hot, sweet kiss that seemed endless, stealing his breath. "Does your lover need you as I do?"

"Yes," Surial gasped. His head swam dizzily, and he leaned up for another kiss, teasing forgotten. "As I need him."

Kade gave him the kiss he asked for, then another and another. The touches were gentle, yet deep, as if Kade were drawing his love and passion and need up through his spine and sipping at it. He twisted his fingers through Kade's braids, clinging. His body pressed against Kade's, skin sliding on skin, soothing the need for contact. With the urgency gone, sated, the need was purer, more focused.

Kade's lips began to move over his face, sampling his skin with tiny, gentle kisses, the tip of Kade's nose brushing against him. "I love you, Surial."

The sound of the words made him shudder, which dragged his skin against Kade's and suddenly he very badly needed those arms around him properly, needed to feel the large, callused hands touching him, stroking him, holding him.

Whimpering, he fumbled against the leather at Kade's wrist.

Kade was purring for him, vibration and sound soothing and warm. "Kama'asi, my One. I am here."

Surial noticed, although Kade's words counseled patience, the large hands were trembling, reaching toward him with their own need. He laughed, the sound shaky and full of want. Closing his eyes he begged for another deep kiss before turning his full attention to the leather that bound the wings to Kade's arms. Forcing his impatience away, he carefully undid the knots, trying to avoid tightening them.

As the ties unraveled, the golden wings fell away, forced to the ground by the surge of Kade's arms. They folded around him, holding him close, one hand sliding to stroke softly at the small of his back, the other a heated band across his shoulders. He pressed back against them, wanting their heat, their warmth, reveling in their strength.

Kade's lips returned to his, resting gently against him, sharing his breath. Eyes the color of wild honey stared into him, loving him, the moon's light sliding over them both.

"The moon makes you glow, my One." Kade touched his tongue to Surial's bottom lip, sliding over it with a fascinated care.

"You make me glow." Surial wound his arms around Kade's neck, moaning happily at the feel of his lion's braids sliding over his skin.

Kade shifted, finally settling Surial in his lap, legs wrapped around his waist, his hands stroking in random patterns. "Mmm... you feel good, your skin."

Surial returned the caresses, brushing the rest of the colored powder off Kade's skin. "You shone like the stars tonight."

"It has been many, many years since I flew with the spirits. I was afraid I had forgotten how."

"You feared for nothing. You were amazing." Surial looked up into honey eyes as his fingers curled possessively around Kade's biceps. "Everyone was watching you, everyone wanted to touch you."

"Did they?" Kade stole another kiss. "I could only see you."

"Their hands moved over your body at the end, and I wanted to rip them from their sockets for touching you." He pressed himself as close as he could, fingers digging in sharply -- Kade would have bruises by the time the night finally eased her hold on the sky. "You're Mine."

Kade nodded, cheeks nuzzling against his. "Yours. My fierce lover." Kade's voice was rich, erotic, full of a sweet purring pleasure.

Surial chuckled, happy, sated and aroused at the same time. "Of course I would have had to heal them back together again after, and I had much better things to do."

"That would have been a bit problematic, my One. It always makes you so tired, reattaching limbs."

Surial grinned, reaching up to bring Kade's mouth down to his own. "Wouldn't have been able to take you. Wanted to take you. Needed to." He pulled Kade's lower lip between his own, tugging gently before letting it slide back out from between his lips. "Want you to take me now."

Kade rumbled softly, sliding his hands over Surial's hips, teasing and caressing. "I could feel your eyes on me. I ached inside, needing you."

"And now? Can you feel me now? Watching you. Wanting you." The words ended on a moan as he rubbed himself against Kade.

The hands on his hips tightened, the rumble escalating into something closer to a growl. "Yes. Your hunger tastes sweet to me."

"Then your mouth must be full of sugar because I want you so..."

"Oh, yes." Kade pushed up, his cock firming, rubbing against Surial like heated silk.

Surial's head dropped back, his eyes finding the stars, as he invited Kade to taste from his throat. With a movement that was as right and natural as breathing, Kade's lips found his skin, found the most sensitive bundles of nerves and brushed against them, appreciative moans filling the air.

His own moan started deep inside of him; his throat was made for Kade's lips, made to be marked by his lover's teeth, made to wear those bruises.

He felt naked without them.

He loved how it felt when Kade made them, every time different and yet the same. He loved how it felt when Kade's eyes lit upon them, the pride and possession coloring the honey eyes dark. He loved it when other people noticed them, looked knowing or startled, mouths smirking or twisted.

He would shudder if his fingers brushed against one of them, the skin ultra-sensitive.

He gasped, losing his focus on the stars as teeth grazed his skin.

"My One." Kade whispered on his skin, lips brushing against him, sending sparks zinging through him. "Taste so good."

"Feel like I could fly." He wrapped his hands in Kade's braids, twisting his fingers through the ropes of hair: he wasn't going anywhere without his lion.

Kade's smile tickled his throat. "I can see you, dancing, winged, body glowing in the moonlight as the ta'akto spirits took you."

"They wouldn't want me, my lion, not with you to take instead."

"Not want you?" Kade lifted his head, eyes wide. "Oh, my One, with your grace, the long, sleek lines of your body? You would soar upon the winds, dance among the stars. The moon would envy you making love to the night sky." Kade smiled, eyes dream-filled. "There is not a spirit who would not be proud to share with you."

"Poet." Surial let his hands caress Kade's cheeks, fingers sliding across scars and then lips. "But I don't want the spirits, I want you."

"You have me." Kade's hips pushed up against him. "All that you want."

Moaning, he pressed down against his lion. "Everything, Kadrass. I want everything you have to give and then I want the rest."

The sky was beginning to lighten, the sun waging its daily fight with the night. Kade smiled, pulling Surial's hips close, letting their erections meet, share a heated kiss. "How do you want me, my One?"

"Inside me. I want to feel your heat deep inside me as the sun kisses the sky."

The smile Kade gave Surial was filled with a quiet joy, a peaceful bliss that made the hunger glinting behind it unimportant. Quickly and without any production, Kade slicked his own fingers in his mouth and slid them down to press against Surial's opening. Pressing down, Surial invited them into him, mouth meeting Kade's as thick fingers penetrated his body, piercing him the way Kade had already pierced his soul.

The kiss continued, wrapping Surial in soft arousal, his body fluid against Kade's strength. The sensations built, broad fingers sliding away, only to be replaced by the blunt pressure of Kade's cock, hands hot upon his hips, pulling him down.

The thick cock stretched him, the sweet burn easing, giving way as he opened to his lover.

Kade stilled, moaning into Surial's mouth. They rested together, enjoying their connection, their joining. Surial could feel Kade inside him, all around him, his air came from Kade's lungs, his warmth from Kade's body. He would stay like this forever.

When Kade began to move them, slow and easy, something more than passion built between their slick bodies as the sun rose. He could feel their spirits twining together, floating up into the sky, riding the wind as if they had wings.

Sharp, bright eyes fastened on him, the light beginning to touch Kade's scarred cheeks. "Fly with me."

"Forever." Gaze locked with Kade's, he brought their lips together.

Kade made love to him, feeding his hunger with a constant passion, burning as steady and pure as the sun pouring into the thicket.

Kade's skin moved like liquid gold under his hands while liquid heat filled his passage and his mouth.

The sun could never hold the heat of Kade's body.

"We have found the morning, my One, and staved off the endless night." The words were soft whispered, breathless but still strong.

"I love you, Kadras. Day or night." Surial's words turned into a cry as he came, more heat spilling between them.

Kade sighed softly, eyelids drooping, cradling Surial upon his chest as he leaned back against a tree. His hands encouraged each tiny aftershock, pulling out Surial's pleasure as long as possible.

Sweet shudders and fine tremors shook Surial's body, whimpers and pleased moans filling the spaces between them.

At last his body stilled and he lay against Kade's warmth, whole and at peace.

Kade's head dipped, resting against his shoulder, braids sliding all around him. A soft purr sounded and Kade mumbled sleepily. "Di'ben sud, ki'ita."

Surial rubbed his cheek against Kade's chest. "Di'ben sud, my lion."

Surrounded by the heat of Kade and the sun, Surial let himself melt into sleep, joining his lion in the world of dreams.

Chapter Seventeen

The smoke made Kade's eyes burn, but the feeling was comforting. The fire blazed between them, flames licking toward the stars, the drums behind them fading.

"The hunt was good. You throw the rahat well." The eldest Guardian, scars of rank blazoned upon his face nodded at Kade. "Your ki'ita, he does not hunt with you?"

Kade shook his head. "My ki'ita is a talik. The winds do not allow him to take life."

One of the younger warriors grinned, nudging Kade with his shoulder. "He is like a cave stone, your ki'ita. Does he sing when you stroke him?"

The men laughed, the bowl of honeyed wine passed around again. Another man, the keeper of the hawks, claws scrawled across his face asked, "You do not hunt with a ta'akto, Kadras. Are you in search of one?"

Kade nodded. "I have been traveling. Searching for those tatika that would take us. Hunting those that hunt us. Looking for others. The winds have not sent me a winghunter."

"I have some younglings. Tomorrow, in the sun, you will visit me and we will talk."

A blast of warmth went through Kade and he nodded.

Surial suddenly appeared at his side, sitting on the log between him and the young man who'd teased him about his One's song. Dark eyes sparkled up at him and Surial's smile was wide, almost eager.

Kade smiled back, passing Surial the bowl of wine after taking a long drink. "Did the Old Ones bore you, my One, with their songs and tales of the winds?"

The young warrior's eyes admired Surial and Kade made a low rumbling noise, catching the man's gaze and whispering "T'Isna anilo."

The claim was made and the young man shifted away slightly, nodding.

Surial's eyes glowed brighter and Kade heard him whisper, "And you belong to me," before he put the bowl to his lips and took a small sip.

"I wasn't bored, but it grows late." Surial's eyes never left his own. "Time for bed."

"Our tent is set, my One. Can you find it?" Kade was warm and comfortable, enjoying the company of fellow Guardians, reluctant to move.

Surial's hand was warm on his arm. "Time for both of us to find it."

Kade looked, there was a warm, almost hungry look in his One's eyes. The Elder leaned forward and murmured in Naik, "A good warrior knows when he is being hunted, Kadras, and I believe you want to be caught."

With a laugh, Kade nodded. He smiled over at Surial and winked. "You're sure, my One? You don't want to stay and hear the story of the hunt?"

He could see Surial struggling not to grimace and insult the warriors around the fire. "Perhaps another time." There was an eager neediness in Surial's voice now and he watched the pale cheeks grow red when several of the men around the campfire chuckled.

With another rumble, Kade stood, drawing Surial up with him, automatically shielding his lover with his body. He would not have that pleasure tainted by embarrassment. "Di'ben nor."

The warriors nodded. "Di'ben nor. Good hunting, Kadras."

"Di'ben nor. Thank you for your hospitality." Surial's voice was soft among the deeper rumbles of the warriors, his hand sliding into Kade's and tugging. "Now, my lion."

"Yes, my One." Kade followed Surial out toward the edge of camp, where the tents lay in scattered patterns. Theirs was at the very outer rim, where Kade could pace and wander at his leisure.

"Did you enjoy the Old Ones? They tell wonderful stories."

"They do, don't they?" Surial slid beneath his arm, walking close, hands sliding over Kade's body. "One of them was ki'ita with a healer, though she's been dead for many years."

"Mmm... Your hands feel good, my One." Kade was purring softly as they walked, body loose and warm from the wine, the fire, the successful hunt. "It is a sad thing, to outlive one who sings to your heart."

"He sang their song for me -- he would live another thousand years without her and still be happy for the time they had." Surial smiled up at him. "I think I know how he feels."

"I treasure our time, but I have little wish to imagine rising in the morning without your heartbeat upon my own." They stopped before their tent and Kade bent to drink from Surial's lips. "Enough of such sorrowful things, my One. Did you enjoy the dancing? Were the young hunters tempting in the firelight?"

Surial laughed. "I'm afraid my eyes were only looking inward at this moment." Surial's hands took his and drew him into their tent, sliding beneath his tunic and helping him

take it off. "The Old One shared a secret, something he used to do sometimes, with his ki'ita."

Kade shucked his clothes happily, murmuring softly as Surial's hands touched his torso. "A secret? The Old Ones do honor you. Will you share with me?"

Kade's hands moved to unfasten Surial's breeches and slide them over the thin hips.

Another laugh, giddy and excited. "That's why I brought you here, my lion."

Kade chuckled and stole another kiss, enjoying the excitement and anticipation shining from deep forest eyes. "And I just thought you wanted to make love to me until dawn."

"I do -- Anariana, the Old One's ki'ita, used to do something that enhanced the pleasure. He explained how it felt to him, and I think I can reproduce it. Would you like that, my lion?"

"I cannot imagine more pleasure than your touch already gives me." Kade drew Surial close, moaning softly as their skin touched. "But I would be honored to try this with you."

"What if you could feel my pleasure as well -- and I yours?" Surial's mouth took his before he could answer and then his One pulled away and lay down on the bedroll, hands linked above his head. "Touch me, Kadrass, make me feel good."

"Oh, yes." Arousal burned with him, the fire steady. Kade reached down, ran his hands up lean legs, fingers rubbing gently. His lips followed close behind, nibbling and licking ankles and knee and sweet inner thighs.

Surial's moans and whimpers bade him continue.

Moving upward, Kade stroked and kissed soft sacs, nuzzled the dark curls that grew in the hollow of thin hips, lapped gently at the swollen flesh of a hard cock. Then he moved on, exploring the protruding hipbones before moving to trace the indentation of navel with his tongue.

"Come a little closer, lover, let me touch you, show you what you do to me." Surial's voice was low, husky.

Kade groaned softly against Surial's soft belly, kissing his way up along a heated line of skin. When he reached the arched neck of his One, Kade sank down until their bodies touched, lips and tongue tracing over the dark mark left the night before. "Is this close enough?"

"Yes," Surial hissed, body arching as his head fell back.

Surial brought his hands down from above his head and laid them gently on Kade's shoulders. Surial slid his hands back and forth over Kade's skin and suddenly he noticed a strange, pleasurable sensation. It started where Surial's hands met his skin, and slid over him in waves, pulsing in his neck.

When his teeth sank into Surial's skin in reaction, he could feel the sharp bite of pain, feel how Surial's excitement jumped at the sudden sensation.

Kade lifted his head, blinking wildly as he fought to control his breath. "Surial! I... I felt..."

His neck throbbed, needing to be touched again, needing the touch of lips and tongue to soothe, to arouse, to excite.

Surial was panting, hands drifting up to cup Kade's cheeks, stroking, imparting pleasure in him and sharing pleasure that wasn't his own. "And I can feel how it makes you feel. He told me that it builds and builds until it's too much and orgasm is shared on a deeper level."

One of Surial's fingers fluttered against his neck, against the spot that begged for more even as his One arched his head back again, offering the long pale neck to him. "Do as your body demands, my lion."

With a growl that was torn from his body, Kade ducked his head, latching onto his spot and sucking strongly. He fed from Surial's skin, almost sobbing as his own throat throbbed with the rhythm.

One of his hands slid down Surial's body, drawing one leg up to curl over his hips. Then that hand cupped a sweet, curved buttock, drawing their erections together.

Surial's moan was loud against his ears... or was that his own moan? He couldn't tell and it didn't matter, because every touch generated pleasure and need and every need generated a touch, pleasure following pleasure following pleasure in an endless, building loop.

Kade's body moved, primal, driven by the sensations pouring through him, Surial's need and love intoxicating, inflaming. His lips moved across the silk-smooth skin, tongue dragging along and tasting pockets of salt and musk and sweet.

Suddenly, irresistibly, he needed Surial's lips, needed to feel that tongue sliding against his own, tasting him.

Kade lifted his head and surged up, only to find Surial's mouth moving toward his own, lips already parted.

Kissing his One had never felt so full, he could feel what it was like to be Surial, kissing him, sucking on his tongue, tasting, being tasted. Their bodies moved together, the lines between them fading, there was only pleasure, his, Surial's, theirs.

The fire between them flared, growing brighter and brighter until all Kade could do was surrender to it. The only way to quench it was the touch, the taste, the sound of the man in his arms.

Surial was writhing beneath him, sobbing out his pleasure; his hands moved over Kade's flesh, never breaking contact.

It was more than he could stand, more than his body could understand -- this bliss, this joy. Suddenly, from deep within him he heard a song, clear and loud. It was Surial's song, the one his heart sang, the one that had whispered silent within him for so long seeking harmony.

Now it filled him, overcame him, enthralled him.

He was unaware of the tears slipping from his eyes until he felt the ghost sensations of them splashing upon his One's cheeks.

"Ki'ita!"

He felt the answer in his mind, in his heart, in his body. He didn't want it to end, but the Old One had spoken true and he could feel the sharing build beyond what either of them could withstand.

Surial's scream of pleasure roared through him, was his own.

He collapsed onto his One, body still shaking. Beneath him Surial was still.

Fighting to catch his breath, to gather his wit into some reason, Kade softly kissed Surial's throat before rolling off to the side. "Winds, that was... I don't even know what that was... Surial, are you all right, my One?"

Surial lay quietly, breathing soft, even, eyes closed.

Kade watched him, stroking his forehead quietly, whispering soft endearments, trying to fight back slowly welling feelings of guilt and panic. Reaching over, Kade pulled Surial atop his chest, arranging his lover and himself in the position they typically slept. He continued to pet, watching with worried eyes.

After some time Surial stirred, shifting his hips slightly. Dazed eyes the color of forests at night blinked open, gazing up at him. "Kadras?"

Relief swept through him, leaving a metallic taste behind it. Kade smiled, nodding as he began to rub Surial's back a little more firmly. "Surial, my One. Are you all right? Does anything hurt?"

"Hurt?" Surial smiled slowly and stretched languidly before settling back down, curled up on Kade's chest. "I feel... like I've been loved into liquid."

"Oh." Kade let himself relax, felt the sick worried knot in his stomach dissolve. He pulled a blanket up over Surial's back with a soft sigh, continuing his simple massage. "I was worried."

"Didn't you like it, my lion?"

"It was..." Kade shrugged, unable to put into words what he felt. It had been amazing, intense and wonderful, and not at all worth the chance of hurting his Surial.

"Oh." Disappointment flooded Surial's face. "I guess I didn't do it right. I don't understand, I could feel you, your pleasure, it was intense." A soft kiss was placed on his chest. "I'm sorry, my lion, I didn't mean for it to be selfish."

"No... no, you don't understand. I... how can I describe what I cannot understand? I *heard* you, within me, singing to me. But then you were so still and quiet and I thought I had hurt you..." Kade could hear the nerves, the emotion burbling within him, his control off-kilter from the intensity of before.

"Oh, you did feel it, too." Another kiss touched his chest, warm and lingering. "And you didn't hurt me, I'm just... tired -- like after a healing."

"Well, rest then." Kade fought back his jangling nerves, forced his voice into normalcy and his body to relax. He could hear Surial, hear that song within him, ever-so slowly fading.

Surial's hand slid over his heart and a soothing pulse of love, pleasure and peace ran through Kade. "Sleep, my lion." A soft chuckle. "You're going to need your strength."

"Why is that, my One?" Kade let his fingers trail through Surial's hair, smiling as he encountered the thin braid that rested hidden within the dark strands. His braid.

"Gonna do 't 'gain t'morrow." The words slurred together tiredly.

Not a rabbit's chance in a hawk's eye.

Kade clamped down hard on the immediate protest and petted Surial gently. He would not be party to something that brought his One so close to danger, no matter how it felt.

"We'll talk on it tomorrow, my One. Sleep."

A soft, snuffling snore was his answer.

Kade waited until Surial was sound asleep to get up, to go pull his weapons from his pack to sharpen and clean. He spent the warm night guarding his tent, his ki'ita, his One and thinking on the winds and their gifts.

Kade watched with tired eyes as the camp slowly came to life with the kiss of the sun.

He had maintained the small fire by their tent all through the night, scaring off a few curious animals, heating himself some water for tea. He threw a few logs upon it, letting it build so that he could cook breakfast after seeing to the mi'it.

Kade peeked in at Surial, who was sound asleep, curled within the blankets, a vague frown on his face. Grabbing up a fresh tunic, Kade silently changed and slipped on his soft leather shoes before throwing another blanket atop his lover and smoothing the tousled ebony hair. He backed out quickly, before the temptation to kiss his One awake and that frown away became unbearable.

Lit'ka and Mon'keur were roaming in one of the open paddocks, grazing lazily until they heard Kade's nicker and whistle. Lit'ka's ear perked and he pranced up, tossing his head with pleasure and nosing around for a treat.

"Spoiled mi'it... your belly is full of grass and oats and still you stomp for sugar."

"Your mounts are spoiled." It was Rotzir, the hawker.

"Only well-loved and gently handled. This one is young still, only five summers past and happy as the spring breeze." Kade would not let this man, elder or not criticize his handling of his own mi'it. His ba'chi deserved no less.

Rotzir chuckled. "You guard everyone under your care with such fierceness. It is good to see one who has not been with his people still hold to the old ways."

"It is my duty and my heart." Kade grinned. "It is good to be among my own people, to be in the trees."

Lit'ka snorted and nickered and Kade reached up to scratch around his long ears. "This mi'it is desert bred and this other from beyond the mountains beside the sea. They seem so thin beside the others, but they can run as if carried by the wind itself."

"You have been well blessed by the wind." Rotzir chuckled again and nodded his head

back toward Kade's tent. "Extremely well blessed, if the screams were anything to judge by."

Kade laughed loudly, clapping the Elder on the shoulder in an expression of friendship. "The Old Ones say that you should sing out your pleasures upon the winds. Perhaps we were assuring that the winds heard us."

"I can't speak for the winds, but I can tell you that my younglings heard your ki'ita's cries and called back to him. Perhaps one of them will recognize your heart."

"If the wind wills it. I would be honored to meet your younglings." Kade swallowed a faint pang. "I have not hunted with a ta'akto in sixteen springs."

Rotzir shook his head. "Sixteen springs? I would not have survived."

The man looked out at the sky. "A mi'it between my legs, and a ta'akto upon my arm. It is how I live, how I will die."

Kade nodded, a soft gnawing ache growing within him. "That is how it should be. I lived then with the knowledge that I have a tribe to avenge, that there is blood to be spilled, screams of pain to offer to my ancestors' ears. And now I have a ki'ita who would not wish my death."

Suddenly the sleepless night weighed heavy upon him, these people so like his memories unleashing years of pain and regret that only Surial seemed to ease.

"I have never found a ki'ita. It would take someone very strong not to mind sharing me with the ta'akto. They would always be second to the birds." Rotzir gestured toward the aviary. "Come, while it is still cool and the birds are lively."

Kade nodded, his enthusiasm rebounding. The ta'akto were calling and fluttering about on their perches, feathers of gold and copper, browns banded with red and blues. Bright eyes stared at him, blinking and curious.

There were a series of young birds, fastened to low perches, their movements unsure and clumsy. "The younglings?"

"Yes." Rotzir's answer was slightly distracted as he walked among the birds, stroking and speaking to them softly in a series of clicks. One bird jumped onto his shoulder and seemed almost to be scolding until a treat appeared from between Rotzir's fingers.

The bird grabbed it and hopped back onto its perch. Kade had to fight his grin as he realized the ta'akto were as 'spoiled' as Mon'keur and Lit'ka.

They were lovely, with their bobbing heads and sharp beaks, so fierce and deadly, yet somehow delicate.

Kade wandered about, calling softly, listening to the random chatter. The ta'akto did not relax him as the mi'it did. They filled his blood with a hunger for the hunt, the winds blowing through him.

One bird in particular caught his eye: one of the young ones, it was broader than its brethren and slightly more awkward, it was banded, not by red and blue feathers, but by black and white ones.

"She's a bit of a freak that one." Rotzir's voice startled him. "Came three days after her nestmates. I thought we'd lost her, but she was only waiting for the full moon."

Kade walked over and looked at her, calling softly. The ta'akto tilted her head and blinked, answering back with a high, shrill cry that sounded remarkably familiar. She called again and Kade heard Lit'ka whinny, trying to catch Mon'keur's attention, tell him his Surial was mad. Kade rumbled softly at her and she quieted immediately, returning to her slow blinking.

"Does she have a name?"

"Tatofi. You see how she's different? Her brothers are as alike as blades of grass, but she is the clover that grows with it." Rotzir handed Kade a treat to give to the bird. "Do you always choose the ones that are... different?"

Kade gave the question serious consideration as he pulled off his vest to wrap it around his arm and unhook the bird from her perch. "I am a hi'icha, called by the wind to protect the tribe. My tribe is oft made of those in need of special care, which is why the winds have given me a small tribe."

Tatofi hopped onto his arm, calling for her treat, feathers ruffling as she swallowed it down. Kade then met Rotzir's eyes. "I have great honor in being chosen by those who are different."

Rotzir nodded. "Anyone can love a talik, but it takes a strong man to be his mate, his hi'icha." The man nodded at the bird, smiling. "She likes you. Knows that you'll have her where no one else will. And with the right hand, she'll turn into a fine ta'akto; she has a loyal and true heart."

Kade looked at Tatofi. "Will you have me, ride with me, ta'akto?"

When she called out, screaming and spreading her wings, both Kade and Rotzir laughed. "I will take that as a yes."

Kade reached into his pouch and pulled out a newly finished rahat. "Will you take this in trade?"

Rotzir took the weapon and inspected it closely, testing the blade along the edge of his thumb. "Nice work. It is an honor to trade with you." He nodded back at the bird. "The perch is hers until your tribe follows its own path again."

"You have my thanks." Kade attached Tatofi back to her perch and she cried out, voice angry. "I wish to go to my One, ta'akto. I will bring him to meet you soon."

Rotzir laughed again. "That is a meeting I'd like to see."

"There will be some... discussion, between them, I imagine. My ki'ita is no hunter and will not understand the need for marking or allowing the kill." Kade sighed. "His ways are not our own."

"The talik are strange ones. My ata used to say that the talik paid for their gifts with every breath, that to wish to be gifted was folly."

Kade nodded. "It is not an easy burden. My ki'ita suffers much, but he brings much peace where he walks."

Rotzir laughed again and nodded his head. "Or at least much desire where he walks."

Kade followed the man's gaze, discovering Surial, out without his cloak, arms wrapped around himself as he moved from tent to tent; it was no doubt Kade himself who his One sought.

"Di'ben sud, Rotzir. I have a ki'ita to feed and enjoy." With that, Kade turned and hurried toward Surial with a warm smile. "Di'ben sud, my One, are you looking for someone?"

"Yes, I am. My lover's left me to wake cold and alone. Big warrior, scars on his cheeks and sugar in his pockets, he should be wearing a wide smile from our lovemaking last night, have you seen him?"

Kade chuckled, reaching out and wrapping Surial in a hug, bending his head to drop a soft kiss on a smooth cheek. "I have all but the sugar, I'm afraid Lit'ka sniffed that out first thing. Have you eaten? I got sidetracked after the paddocks."

"I've only just crawled out of bed, my lion. I dreamt you'd disappeared and I couldn't find you -- it was an unhappy coincidence to find you gone when I woke."

Kade frowned and spat. "What an awful vision. Let us crawl back in bed and I will tell you about what I did this morning while I warm you?"

"You're in an even better mood than usual -- it must be something wonderful." Surial's hand slid into his as they made their way back to their own tent, stopping to greet the people they met along the way.

"It is." Kade lifted up the flap of their tent, breathing in their combined scents as he followed Surial inside. "I was chosen by a ta'akto this morning. She is quite distinctive and lovely and reminds me of you."

"I remind you of a bird made for killing?"

Kade closed his eyes. Winds above and below he was tired. "No, Surial. She has white and black banding on her wingtips. She's quite lovely, like you."

"I'm sorry. I just... I can't help how I feel about hunting." His One's hand was soft, sensual on his arm. "I realize she's more than just a tool for the hunt though, isn't she?" Surial's fingertips slid over the talon scars on his chest.

"She's a..." Rotzir's words burned within him -- *A mi'it between my legs and a ta'akto upon my arm. It is how I live, how I will die* -- and he sat down hard on the blankets. "You will simply have to meet her. If you do not find her pleasing, I will set her free."

"I'm sure I will, my lion." Surial knelt next to him, hand brushing along his braids. "Are you all right? Did last night upset you?"

"No... yes..." Kade sighed. "I did not like the fact that you were so tired, that it hurt you. The act itself was intense, beautiful... to know I give you such pleasure makes my heart sing."

Kade curled onto the blankets, resting his head against Surial as best he could. "I'm just tired and things are so much the same here, yet I am so different. My spirit aches as if it were trapped between worlds."

"Oh, my lion." Surial lay down with him and pulled his head onto his One's shoulder. First of all, it didn't hurt me, it just tired me out -- that's nothing new and I'd rather feel it from something wonderful like that than...."

Surial sighed, and began to stroke him gently. "Second... tell me how to make your pains ease, my lion."

Kade relaxed beneath Surial's touch, he could almost feel love soaking into his skin, making him warm and comfortable. "You do ease me, my One. You remind me who I am, not who I was or would have been, but the man I am."

"And is that enough?"

Kade looked over into the still forest eyes and told Surial the simple truth. "My One, I would have willingly walked and chained myself to the slavers' cart if I had known it would lead me to your arms." He let his eyes drift closed again. "You will always be what I need."

Surial's arms tightened around him and he felt himself drifting, Surial's caresses sweet and warm. A clang of cooking pans startled him and he forced his eyes open. "I should fix us food to break our fast."

"I'll not starve if you sleep awhile." A soft heat began to flow with the touch of his One's hands. "Sleep now, be at peace."

Kade's eyes fell closed and he stretched, a soft purr slipping from his throat as pockets of tension dissolved. "Feels good. Love you."

"I love you." The words followed him into his dreams.

He was warm and comfortable and settled deep within, leaving behind a dream of swimming with his One in a cool pond for the reality for that soft, smooth skin. Surial smelled good, sweet as honey, and Kade nuzzled close, still mostly asleep, mouth opening to kiss and nibble, filling his mouth with the addictive flavor.

The chest beneath his head rumbled with a happy purr as smooth hands slid against his skin.

Kade trilled back, responding immediately to the gentle touches. His lips searched, discovering a straight collarbone, a salt-sweet hollow of throat, a tempting, warm arch of neck. His hand wrapped around the slender body, sighing as his fingers found flat plains of skin that felt like home. He felt Surial's legs fall open, sliding along his thighs. Those hands, hot now, slid into his pants, cupping his buttocks.

Kade sighed, arching into Surial's touch with a purr of his own, nuzzling into Surial's hair and inhaling, breathing in deeply. "Mmm...my One."

"And only." Surial's whisper tickled at his scalp. Surial's hips began to rock against him.

"Was dreaming about you." Kade began to nibble on Surial's ear, letting his hands roam. "We were swimming beneath the trees."

"Wish we were there now -- we'd be naked then." Surial's hands pulled him more firmly into the cradle of his One's hips. "And I could feel your skin, slick and wet next to my own."

"Oh, yes." His body began to undulate, rocking against Surial's heat. "We should go, just us and the mi'it, in the open where we can make love all day."

"And all night." Surial's body was meeting his eagerly, his words breathless. "I'll watch the stars in your eyes as you come."

"Your cries will echo in the trees." Kade's head was spinning, Surial filling his senses. "I want to... oh, my One... I want..."

"Yes...Kadras...oh!"

He cried out as he came, sobbing against Surial's shoulder, feeling the shudders move throughout his entire body.

Surial was murmuring, soft sounds of love, hands still moving, now against his clothing, now against his skin.

Kade whispered soft nonsense against his lover's skin, tongue slipping out to taste lazily. "My One."

Surial's hands slid up into his braids and tugged, tilting his face up. The kiss was gentle, but thorough, Surial's tongue delving deep.

"You feel so good." Kade took another long, sweet kiss, wrapping Surial close. "Stay in here with me forever?"

"My feet only know how to walk so that they might bring me to you."

Kade smiled widely, feeling his cheeks heat. He bent forward, rubbing his stubbled cheek lightly along one of Surial's nipples. "You make me happy, my One."

"Good." The word was more gasp than anything, Surial's body arching closer, looking for more.

"Mmm... you like this." Kade chuckled and repeated the action, keeping the touch too light to mark. "Are you rethinking your position on shaving?"

"Rethinking? Can't think when you...oh! Do it again."

"This?" Kade rubbed over the peaked flesh with his chin and then soothed the scratch with the tip of his tongue. "Or do you prefer something smoother?"

"Do I have to choose?"

"Oh, I believe you deserve both." Kade smiled up with a wink, drinking up the pleasure and happiness in Surial's eyes. Then he began to repeat the pattern of chin and tongue again and again, alternating nipples as Surial began to moan and twist.

His One's hands found their way to his shoulders, fingernails digging in as Surial held on, riding the waves of pleasure.

"So lovely, taste so good." Kade began to suck upon the hard nubs, pulling back only to scrape across the sensitive skin with his cheeks and then returning to feast.

Surial's legs wrapped back around his waist, hips driving up into him. A soft whimper echoed his own frustration at the layers that still separated their cocks.

He reached down, tugging roughly at the fabric of Surial's breeches. "Take them off. I want to touch you."

Surial's hands tightened briefly on his shoulders and then slid down to fumble with the ties on both their pants. Surial began to wriggle, slowly, maddeningly working off the breeches.

"Tease" Kade groaned, nipping at Surial's skin, rolling a nipple with his teeth.

Surial's moan was loud, his hands working harder to get the breeches down, out of the way. Kade sucked harder, growling low in his throat as Surial's writhed against him. His hand worked feverishly to open the damp laces at his own waist. Surial finally kicked the pants off, and his hands knocked Kade's away, taking over the task.

Warm hands slid against his skin as his One slid his breeches down past his hips. With a moan Kade kicked the clothes off the rest of the way, calling out in pleasure as their bodies met. Surial was hot, burning beneath him and Kade couldn't help but press into that sweet warmth.

Surial's legs came around Kade's waist again, heels digging into his buttocks, his hands were trapped between them, one pressing against his stomach, the other wrapped around his hip.

"Good." Kade whispered the word against Surial's lips before taking them in a frantic kiss, sliding his tongue deep within the sweet mouth to taste and pleasure.

He swallowed the sounds Surial was making, taking them inside himself, feeling their echo within himself.

Those echoes bred hungry purrs, deep, low noises that were fed by hunger and need. Surial's body rubbed slick and smooth beneath him, feeding his ache, his passion.

He slid his hand beneath Surial's buttocks, pulling his One closer with a groan. Surial began to move frantically beneath him, writhing like a man possessed, kisses becoming sloppy. Kade slid his hand around Surial, wrapping both their cocks together in his fingers, fisting them as their flesh slid together, wet and hard.

Surial's hand slid down from his abdomen, curling with his hand, the smooth fingers joining the dance over their erections.

"So good, lion."

Kade nodded, whimpering as Surial's fingers swept over the weeping slit of his cock, spreading the moisture over the sensitive tip. "We...we are good. Love you, my One."

The words made Surial stiffen, his seed bathing their hands.

"Kadras." His name was a soft sob.

The heat, combined with the rhythmic clutch of Surial's fingers and the heady smell of musk and seed, drove Kade beyond the edge of pleasure. With a quiet sob, he came, eyes open, focused on his One's sated face.

He let himself settle beside his One, twining their fingers and slowly massaging their seed into the smooth, pale flesh of Surial's belly.

Surial tugged on Kade's hand, bringing it up to his mouth and licking it clean. "We taste good together."

Kade took his taste from Surial's lips, kissing him for a long moment before pulling back and nodding, grinning happily. "We do."

His heart was eased, the frustrated discomfort rinsed away by his Surial's care and passion. Kade leaned forward for another soft kiss, basking in the joy they built between them.

One of Surial's fingertips slid across the markings on his face, almost tickling his skin. "I love you, so much, my lion."

Kade purred softly, lifting his chin to encourage the soft caresses.

Surial continued to stroke his scars, the dark green eyes adding their own caresses to his face. "We can stay with your tribe as long as you want to."

Kade looked up into Surial's eyes. "And if I said I thought we should go soon? After the celebrations? Go on our own? I... I have not been a warrior for many years, have not lived among the tribe, and these people are not my own. You are my family, Surial and I am a selfish man. I want to spend my life with you."

Surial's smile grew wide and his eyes flooded with something that Kade thought looked very much like relief. "I have enjoyed our stay, especially seeing you honored among a tribe, my lion, but there are things about life here that... disturb me. And," Surial's cheeks grew pink. "I miss not being able to stop whatever we are doing and make love to you. Here we have to go look for our privacy."

With a happy chuckle, Kade rolled onto his back, pulling Surial along atop him. "We have been spoiled in that, haven't we? I enjoy being able to love you as we wish, to hear your voice ringing through the trees, to watch the sun play across your skin. Of course, the winter is closer than I'd like. We would need to find a place to winter."

Now that the tribes knew to warn of the slavers, the word would carry. No outsiders.

Trust none. Protect the mi'it. Search the mountains for strange fires.

Surial seemed to glow with happiness. "I can't think of anything that makes me happier than being able to touch your skin with mine."

Kade grinned, full with a warm, sated pleasure. "Don't forget kissing. I like kissing you."

"Oh, yes. Kissing is good." Surial leaned down, proving it with a long kiss. "This makes me happy, too," Surial added, fingers sliding across Kade's nipples, making them peak.

Kade shifted beneath the touch, swallowing back a soft moan and pushing the worry about the slavers away yet again. "You are a tease." Kade slid his hands along Surial's spine, massaging as he went. "And you have more faith in this old warrior's body than I do, if you think you can raise me again."

Surial laughed. "Is that a challenge, my lion?"

"More truth than challenge, my One. I am not as young as you, remember?" Kade dropped his hands down to tickle along Surial's ribs. "Soon I will be grey and will have to pleasure you only with my fingers and tongue. Will you still want this scarred man then, do you think?"

"I will want you until the day I die. Besides, you bring me more pleasure with your fingers and tongue than I ever dreamed possible." Surial's eyes twinkled at him. "And you never know what tricks I might be able to perform."

Laughing, he leaned up and kissed his One, sliding his tongue inside to taste for just a moment before settling back down, chuckles still slipping from him. "Tricks, hmmm? So a man who has lost the bloom of youth can come three times in a day? You would be a much sought-after talik."

Surial pulled back to look down on him, fingers still teasing along his ribs. "Don't you already come more than that, my lion? Doesn't my body already move you to achieve the impossible?"

"You are inspirational, my One." Kade let the admiration, the desire, the love he held within him shine up at Surial. "You make me believe I could do anything."

Surial's gaze softened. "I believe you can do anything."

"For you, I will do all I can." Kade let his eyes roam over Surial's skin, drinking in the sight like clear water. "Winds help me, but you are easy to look upon."

"You're not so bad yourself, my lion. By far the most handsome warrior here."

"I worry about your eyesight sometimes, Surial. There are many here who only wear ritual marks, whose hair is glossy and sleek, who are graceful and light upon their feet." Kade shook his head. "I am lucky you look upon me with favor, for I am not the only warrior who has been admiring you."

Surial made a dismissive noise. "There isn't one with your copper hair or honey eyes. None of them wear their skin as if it belongs to them the way you do. And you are graceful, my lion -- one only has to watch you ride or swim or make love to you to see it."

Kade opened his mouth to protest, to give thanks, to say something and then simply pulled Surial down for a kiss, letting his lips and tongue speak for his heart.

Surial murmured happily into the kiss, participating eagerly.

A shadow passed beside the tent and then a deep voice called out. "Kadras! I have need to speak with you."

Kade recognized it as the Elder Guardian's and frowned. "Partake of my fire, Elder, and I will share my tea with you."

With a groan, Kade slid from beneath Surial, muttering. "I am serious, Surial. We will feast tonight, trade tomorrow and then ride."

Surial's hands were at his middle, wiping him clean with a corner of their blanket, before sprawling back on the ground, arms over his head, legs splayed enticingly. "Whatever you wish, my lion."

Kade's hands stuttered as he yanked on his breeches. "You know full well what I wish, my One." He reached down and hauled Surial up for a deep, passionate kiss. "I *wish* to lie abed with you and slide deep within you, take you until you scream. I wish to be filled with your seed. I wish to feel your mouth upon my body as I feed upon yours. We will leave tomorrow. I have done my duty here."

"Yes, Kadras. Tomorrow." Surial's arm wound round his neck, holding him in place as they kissed again and then again.

A rustle and a clearing of throat separated them. Kade fastened his breeches and threw on his vest. "Come out when you are dressed? I will fix us some food?"

Surial nodded, eyes dark with arousal. Kade stepped outside, nodding at the Elder who was smiling, a knowing look on his face. "Ah, di'ben nor, Kadras."

"Di'ben nor," he replied automatically, looking at the sun with a grin. It was late afternoon, he had slept and loved the day away. "Would you like some tea?"

The Elder nodded and then pulled out a pipe. "It is a good life, to have a ki'ita warm beside you. It is of your ki'ita that we need to speak."

Kade frowned as he set their kettle upon the coals. A faint feeling of unease began to creep up on him. "What of Surial? The Old Ones seem pleased with him."

The Elder nodded. "They are not the only ones who are pleased. There has been a challenge issued for the right to court your ki'ita. A hi'icha, younger than you, but he holds three clanmarks. You cannot refuse it."

At that moment Surial came out of the tent, pushing his hair away from his face. He frowned as he looked from Kade to the Elder and back again. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, my One." Kade shook his head and smiled at Surial for a moment before turning back to the Elder. "What sort of challenge?"

The Elder sucked upon his pipe. "You will fight with the rahat. The first to call mercy loses."

"When?" Kade's mind was already winging toward his weapon, freshly sharpened and ready to defend his One.

"Tonight, before the feast." The Elder stood, a disturbed look upon his face. "Keep your tea, Kadras, and share it with your ki'ita, for it may be the last. Cho'ota is a fierce man and has never lost a challenge. I do hope the winds favor you in this. To challenge over ki'ita is a bad breath."

With that, he walked away, leaving Kade and Surial alone at the fire.

"Challenge? Rahat? Over ki'ita? I'm *your* ki'ita -- what was he talking about?"

Kade sighed. "Another warrior -- a hi'icha -- wishes to court you. He has challenged me for that right."

He headed over to his packs and removed some flatbread and still-fresh cheese, along with the oiled rags which protected the curved blades of his weapon.

Surial's voice followed him. "So? I don't want to be courted by anyone. And we're leaving in the morning anyway, so the point is moot."

"The challenge is to be decided tonight, Surial. Then tomorrow, we will leave." He placed the food between them, throwing some dried leaves into the kettle.

"You're going to fight with someone with a rahat tonight, with someone that the Elder thinks you're going to have a hard time defeating, over the right to *court me*? Don't I get a say in this? Doesn't anyone care that I don't want some barbaric display of strength performed over me? All the man has to do is ask me and I'll turn him down and that'll be the end of it." Surial was standing across from him, arms over his chest, eyebrows pulled together.

"Come sit with me, please." Kade sighed. "This is not about you, my One. After tonight, if I lose, you are free to refuse him, to love who you wish. This is to prove to the tribe whether or not I am the strongest Guardian, whether I am deserving in the winds to call you ki'ita."

"Whether you are deserving... Alusius' memory! Where was this tribe when Erulial was intent on killing me? Where was this Cho'ota when I was accused of rape and about to be whipped to death? Where was he when I was being chased for my power? You are deserving in the winds to call me ki'ita -- you have done nothing but prove your love and your ability to protect and take care of me over and over again. And I choose you to be my guardian, my lover, my life, Kadrass -- you are my life."

Surial took a deep breath and sat with him, taking his hands, squeezing them. "Why would anyone think that the way to prove their ability to protect, love, court a healer would be by hurting each other?"

"I am yours." Kade squeezed back, heart full of honor with his One's words. "It is our way. I have never seen a challenge over ki'ita, but I must answer it. There is no choice."

He pulled Surial into a warm hug that felt uncomfortably desperate. "I love you, my One."

"Then you will refuse to do this."

Kade pulled back and looked into Surial's eyes. "You would have me branded a coward? Let them take my braids and drive me out in disgrace? That is a high price, my One. I will pay it, if you ask me to, but it is a high price."

"Why can't we just leave?" Surial stood again and began pacing. "What if I refuse this instead of you? Go to this Cho'ota and tell him that I won't have people fighting over me, that to do so would hurt me."

"I told you, my One, this is not about you. This is between Cho'ota and me. He is not fighting for you, but against me, my right to claim you as ki'ita." Kade poured himself a cup of tea and tried to relax. He would win, the winds had brought him into Surial's arms; they would allow him to remain. "I will not lose this fight, my One."

Surial's hands slid away and his One stood, face closed, unhappy. "I won't make you refuse, Kade, but I don't like it. I have put up with the hunting celebrations, watched people dance and drink the blood of the beast they murdered and remained quiet. I have watched the warriors fight each other, blooding their rahat on their brethren and remained quiet. But know this. If you kill this man in this... this... *sport*, I will leave tonight, on my own. Please, Kadrass, I beg of you, don't make me do that."

His One's eyes were wet, swimming with unshed tears. "I love you." The words were wet as well.

Surial turned on his heel and walked from the camp, heading for the trees on the western edge of the camp.

Kade watched Surial go, stomach sinking as he finished his tea. When the cup was empty he put their belongings in order, packing both bags well and striking the tent so that Surial could load Mon'keur easily. His own things he set to the side, Surial's words ringing within him. No matter the outcome now, Kade would be facing the winds alone.

No Guardian had ever asked for mercy.

Chapter Eighteen

The fires were blazing, the sun kissing the tops of the trees when Kade stepped into the crowded circle of men, wearing nothing but a brief loincloth and his braids, rahat gleaming at his side. Cho'ota nodded to him, a hunger and ferocity in the dark eyes gleaming above the marked cheeks that Kade could not find answer to in his own heart.

The air reeked of anticipation and Kade closed his eyes, taking a long moment to remember the feel of Surial's hands within his own, the taste of Surial's lips.

The Elder Guardian stepped between the men. "Cho'ota has challenged a lower ranked Guardian for courting rights. Do you accept the challenge, Kadras?"

Kade opened his eyes and nodded. "I will be judged by the winds."

"And by your ki'ita." Surial's voice rang out and the air became charged. "I will judge you all by your actions here tonight."

Surial walked into the centre of the circle, not seeming to care that he was the smallest of the men there, his slender frame and pale coloring setting him apart.

"I am a healer and you are using me as an excuse to fight. I will leave here tonight, no matter what the outcome. I feel as if I am being driven away by the very people that welcomed me and my Kadras with open arms, the people that came to me and asked for my help, my healing. Fight your fight, but know that you do it for yourselves, not for me. No one wins anything when this is done. Nothing. And know that every drop of blood that falls here tonight insults me, hurts me."

Surial walked up to him and laid a hand over his heart. "You are my life, Kadras."

Then his One went and stood at the edge of the circle, pale face watching him.

The Elder Guardian looked at Surial, sorrow shining in his eyes. "Your ways are not our own, talik. I regret that this displeases you. Cho'ota, the talik will refuse your advance, will you withdraw your challenge?"

Cho'ota stood ready, braids decorated with small bright beads. "It is an insult to the winds that a hi'icha wear the marks of a slave and call the talik ki'ita. I will not withdraw."

"Then let us fight, Cho'ota. Let the winds judge us."

A quick nod and their blades clanged together. Cho'ota was thinner, shorter, but much quicker and had the stamina of the young. Before the sun had slipped fully beneath the trees, Kade was bleeding from a dozen slices, sweat stinging the wounds.

They danced, deadly and quick, both men growling and rumbling low, their emotion filling the circle.

He had pulled three killing blows, attempting to twist the younger man into a position where Kade could use a subduing hold. The rahats clashed again and again, short, deadly, curved double blades twisting between their slick handles.

Finally, Kade twisted, taking a slice to the stomach, but ending with his blade at Cho'ota's throat, the rahat biting in. "Ask mercy." Kade growled. "I don't wish to kill you, boy. Ask mercy."

"I will not." Cho'ota's voice was dark, but proud, ringing out so that all could hear. "No hi'icha has ever asked mercy. Kill me, the winds have judged me."

Kade looked up and saw Surial's face, pale, eyes miserable and pained. He mouthed, 'my One,' and released the young man, who spun and attacked again, slicing Kade's arm deeply.

Kade moved sluggishly, body and heart unwilling to continue. He would die now, but he would die with pride.

Suddenly Surial stood between them, shoving Cho'ota away. "Are you so stupid? He spared your life because I asked him to. Would you really deprive your tribe of a strong guardian, of your possible children for nothing?"

Surial turned his back on Cho'ota, looking into Kade's face. "I take back my words, my lion. The only thing that would hurt me more than you killing him is you dying. I need you to live." There were tears pouring down Surial's face, agony in his voice.

Before he could reply, Cho'ota lunged and Kade acted immediately, shoving Surial to the ground with a growl. The blade sank into his shoulder, a bright burn moving through him. With a roar of pain, Kade dropped his rahat and struck, slamming his fist into the angry face.

Cho'ota hit the ground with a loud, dull thump.

Kade tore the blade from his flesh and tossed it down. "The winds have chosen."

Without looking at anyone, Kade scooped up his fallen rahat and pushed through the crowd, heading toward the paddocks and Lit'ka's song.

When he got there he found both Lit'ka and Mon'keur packed and ready to go, tied to the fence. Moments later Surial's subdued voice came from behind him. "Thank you for not killing him. If you are well enough to ride without my aid, we'll go now. I can heal you when we stop."

"I can ride." Kade bit back his cry of pain as he mounted. Lit'ka danced beneath him, distressed. Surial had already started to move when Kade heard his name called out.

Rotzir stood close, Tatofi's jesses caught in his hand. "Do not forget your ta'akto, Kadras. She was calling for you."

Kade raised his bare arm and called for her. She settled easily, claw digging into his flesh, marking him as hers. She called, fluttering her wings.

Rotzir attached a bag to Kade's saddle. "Some supplies, bandages, things for the ta'akto, Kadras. You are a true Guardian; wear your marks proudly."

Surial had stopped, waiting, his back stiff and turned to the camp.

"Thank you. Di'ben nor. May the winds blow us close again. Watch to the south for strange fires. Protect your children." Kade nodded down and then tightened his heels around Lit'ka, coming up near Surial, but not near enough to touch. "Which way?"

Surial shook his head. "Just away." His One's voice was rough and there were still tears in it, the pale face shone in the moonlight.

Kade sighed and headed off toward the mountains that rose above the trees. Every jostle, every missed step that Lit'ka made sent pain flaring through him, blood pooling at his groin, soaking into the cloth he wore. He chuckled, an edge of exhausted, devastated hysteria in his voice. At least this time, he thought, he was bleeding and sore in the saddle and not being dragged off somewhere behind a cart.

They'd been riding for several hours, the silence heavy and broken only by the sound of the horses' hooves on the ground, when Surial reigned in before of him. "We need to stop. I can smell your blood."

Kade nodded, almost unable to lift his head. "I can hear running water. If you will build the fire here, I will go bathe."

"You will not!" Surial snarled at him. Suddenly his One had dismounted and was at his side. "I'll help you down and you can lie down while I heal you. And then you can sleep where you are while I get our camp set up."

"Enough orders, Surial. Go build a fire and let me find fresh water." Kade sighed, the ta'akto fluttered a bit at the sound. "I wish to keep the wounds. I do not wish them healed. They are mine."

"You're hurt and you want me to just ignore it?" Surial sounded outraged.

"I want you to build a fire. I want to bathe and to put on my clothes." To Kade's horror, he could feel tears threatening, his pain and sorrow and exhaustion making him weak.

"I have to find water." With those words forced out, Kade pushed Lit'ka forward, toward the river he could hear close by, before Surial could see the tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Fine, you *do* that. And I'll build your ridiculous fire and then you can come back and we'll just pretend you aren't bleeding and hurt and we'll pretend that I can't help you and..." the angry words faded on a sob.

Rage filled Kade, pushing aside the tears. "Shall we also pretend that you do not find me repellent? That in your heart you do not believe me a murderer, a barbarian? Shall we pretend that this body that has bled, *bled* for you again and again, that it was not made strong and true by the people you despise so?"

He was screaming, howling into the night. "I am HI'ICHA, Surial! I cannot change what I am, who I am. I cannot be what you need me to be!"

With that, Kade dug his heels into Lit'ka's sides and bade the mount to run.

He had found the river, water bitter cold and strong as he crawled in, letting the water pour over him as he rested. He thought he had fallen asleep, in his memory, there was the icy water and the night sky, then the morning sun and Lit'ka nosing him worriedly, the ta'akto flying from tree to tree, shrieking at him.

Kade moaned, the effort of moving his head almost too much to bear. His left arm lay dead and motionless in the water, the shoulder would swollen and raw, the slices on his arm irritated by the insects flying around. The slice on his belly was long, crossing his entire torso, but not too deep. The other wounds, covering his chest and legs were simple.

Lit'ka nickered, dancing about and tossing his head.

"Yes, mi'it. I hear you. I just... I did not know you were so tall."

It had taken him the entire morning to settle upon Lit'ka's back, shoulder and stomach beginning to seep blood again.

"Find Mon'keur, Lit'ka. Find my One, my home." He whistled to Tatofi, watched her circling above him.

Kade almost made it into the trees before he slumped forward, trusting in Lit'ka to lead him home.

He came to again, with something hitting his leg, repeatedly.

"...fall will kill you. Come on, Kade. Wake up."

"Why are you hitting me?" Kade blinked, vision blurred. "You still mad at me?" He felt woozy, more asleep than awake, body chilled through, but he was unwilling to move.

"Thank Alusius!" The hitting stopped. "No! Don't go back to sleep. I can't get you down on my own, not without hurting you more. You've got to help me get you down, Kade. Your bed roll is right here. Come on."

Surial was speaking slowly, clearly, as if speaking to a child.

"M'One? S'okay...can sleep here, Lit'ka's a good mi'it." Kade tried to reach out to pat Lit'ka's pelt, but his hand wouldn't work, didn't want to move.

Suddenly his vision cleared, he could see Surial's eyes -- forest green, so lovely. "Missed you." Then those eyes blurred again.

"And I've been worried sick about you -- I didn't know if you'd even come back." Surial hit his leg again and then grabbed his arm and began to tug. "All right then, have it your way, risk cracking your skull open."

Kade jerked in agony as the motion stretched his wound and pain brought everything into sharp focus. "Stop! I'll get down. Don't pull, please."

One leg slid over Lit'ka's back and Kade bit back a scream as the wound on his stomach caught on the saddle. Finally, both feet landed on the ground, Kade holding himself upright with one arm.

He took one step away from Lit'ka before his legs buckled.

Surial guided him down onto something soft and it was a moment or two before he realized it was his bedroll. He heard Lit'ka nicker and whinny followed by Surial speaking in soft soothing tones.

A moment or an eternity later Surial was back, warm hands moving over his chilled skin.

"Damn you, you stubborn... Kade."

He felt the heat of Surial's hands increase, could feel the growing tingle of his One's healing moving through him as Surial's hands slid over his injured belly.

"Not stubborn... don't, Surial... you'll be tired and I can't make you bread... gotta feed the

mi'it...did you know your hands are warm?" The random chatter seemed to flow endlessly from him, the relief from agony making him giddy.

"You are so stubborn." Surial's hands moved from his belly to his shoulder, a soft shudder went through his One and then the warm hands were touching him, healing. "The mi'it can make do with grass and I'm not hungry. Shh, now. Let me finish."

"But you didn't eat today... yesterd... Surial, when did it get to be morning?" Kade sighed as the dull, throbbing ache in his shoulder eased, released its grip on him. "Oh, so much better..."

"Tsk. Stubborn." Surial's hands continued to move over him, finding each ache and soothing it. Surial's hands slid down along his good arm, reaching the claw marks in his forearm. "I suppose you want these to leave scars?"

Kade shook his head, a frown covering his face. "Gon' set her free. Let her go already."

Tatofi shrieked from her perch in a nearby tree as if on cue and Kade turned his head. "She's hard-headed, though."

Surial snorted. "She's chosen you; she won't let you go anymore than Lit'ka would. I'll just make sure they don't get infected and let them heal on their own."

Surial's hands slid over his entire body, Kade could feel well-being and strength left in their wake.

Kade let his body relax. He knew there were things to discuss, but he was finally warm, finally comfortable, finally with his One.

"I love you." It seemed important to remind Surial.

"I know." Surial's voice was quiet and the hand that cupped Kade's face was trembling. Surial curled up at his side with a heavy sigh.

He wrapped his arm around Surial, tugging his One up until he could feel the familiar warm weight of Surial's body on his. "'M clean, bathed in the river. Don't leave, please?"

"Couldn't even if I wanted to," mumbled Surial.

Kade's eyes were drooping, but he forced them open to ask, "Do you want to?"

Surial's arms slid around his sides and held him. "No."

"Oh, good." Kade let his eyes drift closed with a soft sigh.

"May not think so when we start yelling 'gain."

"Shh...we'll yell t'morrow. Now want to hold my One." His fingers curled into Surial's lower back, stroking.

Kade was asleep before he heard Surial's response, if there was one to hear at all.

Chapter Nineteen

Kade opened his eyes to a dark sky. Surial was curled atop him, shivering and moaning softly. Kade reached for a blanket, groaning as his quickly healing flesh protested.

Once he started moving, things got easier. Surial had built the fire beside some large stones, one right behind them. Once Kade sat up, propped against the stone, he got Surial wrapped up and pulled the exhausted man into his lap.

Then he whistled for Lit'ka, pulling off the packs. From his position, Kade got the fire roaring -- for which he spent a moment in thanks for Surial's forethought in putting the wood nearby -- and a pot of their spare water warming over the flames.

As he waited for the water to boil, Kade looked Surial over. Oatmeal, definitely and, damn, but he should have bartered for more milk. Perhaps in the extra pack from Rotzir. Kade rummaged... no milk, but a bit a cheese, some flatbread, some dried berries and a goodly amount of honey.

Once the water boiled, Kade made oatmeal and tea, fingers clumsy and working around the sleeping bundle in his lap, but finally it was done, rich meal sweetened with honey, tea steaming in a cup.

Kade kissed Surial gently, watching the sun lighten the sky. "My One, you need to eat. I made breakfast."

Surial snuffled and buried his face in Kade's shoulder.

"Surial, my One, the sun is rising and I have food." Kade kissed him again, tickling him gently with soft touches of lips.

"Wanna sleep." The words were accompanied by wriggling which managed to bury Surial's face more deeply into him.

"You can sleep after you eat." Kade picked up a spoon and brought it close enough for Surial to smell. "You'll make yourself ill, if you don't."

"I don't wan- is that honey?"

With a chuckle, Kade brought the spoon closer. "It is. You don't even have to open your eyes. Just your mouth." He leaned in, whispering close, "It's fresh honey, sweet and clear. Just have a taste."

Surial's head tilted up, his bottom lip dropping, opening his mouth.

Kade slid the spoon in, watching Surial's face light up at the taste. Unable to resist, he kissed Surial's cheek as he pulled the empty spoon away. "More?"

Surial's eyes opened slightly and he nodded, mouth opening once again.

Another spoonful, another kiss, this one pressed to Surial's brow.

"Did you eat yet?"

"Mmm?" Kade coaxed another bite between those lips before Surial could answer.

Surial's chewed the food, but his eyes narrowed. "Not another bite until you eat, too."

"Demanding One." Kade took a bite, sighing at the warm sweetness. "It's good, but I didn't get a kiss."

Surial turned his head and placed a soft, open-mouthed kiss against Kade's collarbone.

"Oh, that's better. Thank you." Kade smiled and offered Surial the tea. "It should be cool enough to drink."

"What do I get for drinking some tea?"

Kade chuckled, bringing the mug to Surial's lips. "Anything you want."

Surial took a sip of the tea. "Anything? Are you sure?"

"Yes." Kade took a sip for himself, the mixture of morning sun and warm liquid making him feel more and more human. "I'm sure."

"Then I want..." Surial's eyes dropped. "I want you not to be mad at me anymore."

"My One," Kade set down the cup and turned Surial so he could look into those eyes. "I was hurt and tired and just needed some time to put my temper in order. I'm not mad at you. I just... I worry, Surial." He took a deep breath. "I'm afraid that I cannot be the person you want, the person you need beside you. I'm afraid of what losing you will do to me."

"You are the person I need beside me, Kadras -- I would die without you, as I would without my heart." Surial's fingertips slid over the marks on his cheeks. "I know you grew up with the Naik, but you are not of them, not anymore. You only kill and fight when you must, to protect yourself and me. I know you see the difference. Didn't you see the futility of a fight like the one between you and Cho'ota? What good did that do? Name me one."

"It weeds out the weak from the warriors, which strengthens the tribe. It removes those who cannot hunt, but will not admit it, from danger." Kade sighed. "It is not your way, but it is not wrong, Surial."

"How does killing someone remove them from danger?"

The sad, sick feeling was creeping back into Kade's stomach, making it hard to breathe. "The challenges rarely end in death."

"This one would have! You tried to show him mercy and he refused it." Surial's eyes were tearing again. "And you can't tell me he wasn't intent on killing you."

"What do you wish me to say, Surial?" Kade looked down at one of the braids lying on his bare chest, resting upon the talons which marked him a Guardian. "What can I do?"

"You can promise me you won't kill in cold blood, that you won't fight just for fighting's sake." Surial threw his hands in the air and let them drop again. "Do you understand how much it hurts me inside when you're hurt, when you hurt others?"

Kade nodded, something deep within him aching. He didn't have any words, anything to express his confusion, his sorrow. He did the only thing he could, the only answer when his own pain would not be quenched. "You have my word."

"I'm sorry." Surial buried his face back in Kade's shoulder. "I know it isn't fair, I know it's selfish, but I need you. I can't do this without you."

Kade held Surial close, stroking his back slowly. "You have me, my One." The hawk called, her voice high and strident, and Lit'ka whinnied back. "Have some more oatmeal, then you can rest more."

"Give me the bowl and go see to your bird. You haven't introduced me yet."

Kade handed the bowl over to Surial, walking over to find his breeches, pulling them on and whistling to Tatofi. Holding out his arm, he winced as she settled.

He stroked her feathers, hearing the falconer's words move through him again, the insistence that death was preferable to the life Kade had lived.

"You should be free, Tatofi." Kade whispered, soft and low. "I will hunt no more."

"What's her name?"

"Tatofi." Kade smiled at Surial. "It means 'out of place.'"

"Like us?"

"Yes." Kade looked at her, bright eyes and sharp beak. "She is beautiful, isn't she?"

As if she heard him, Tatofi spread her wings and called to him. Surial laughed. "She's smart, too -- she chose you."

Kade shook his head, finding a treat in his pack and feeding her. "If she stays, it is because she wishes it."

"And how does that make you different now, my lion?" Surial sat up. "Lit'ka, me, now Tatofi -- which of us would you force to be here?"

Kade frowned, confused. "I would never force anyone to stay with me."

"Exactly."

"Surial, I am too tired to play games with you. What do you mean?" Kade forced down his aggravation, lifting his arm so Tatofi flew back up into the trees.

"You seem upset about having her, like you've stolen her or something. But she chose you, Kade. Just like Lit'ka, just like me. You haven't trapped her here. She wants to be here with you and I want to be here with you."

"No, I am not upset that she flies with us. She is too unlike the other birds to have chosen differently. Most hunters will bind their ta'akto to them with leather, until they know where home is." Kade shrugged. "This one will either know or not."

"She'll know." Surial sighed and pushed the bowl away, arms wrapping around himself. "It's cold this morning."

"Winter will be here soon and we have traveled very far north, almost to the end of the world itself." Kade looked around at the clearing. "Shall we set camp here or move on? There is fresh water here, but we can follow the river, if you'd like."

"Follow the river. But maybe not today?" Surial pulled the blanket closer.

Kade pulled another blanket out of the pack and brought it over to Surial, wrapping him in its warmth. "I will go and fetch some water, some wood. You try and rest."

"Are you all right?" Surial made a soft noise and took Kade's arm, closing his eyes as he moved his hand over the fresh scratches from Tatofi's claws.

"I will be fine, my One." Kade traced his One's cheeks, an empty hollow silence ringing within him.

Surial smiled at him. Surial's hand warmed, the soft tingle of healing touching him briefly before Surial's hand fell away, his One collapsing forward onto him.

"Surial!" Kade caught him with a cry. "Surial! What's wrong, my One? Please..."

Surial's head lolled against him.

Kade thought quickly, unwrapping Surial and holding him close, pressing the still hands against his own whole chest. "Take from me. Please, my One. Please, you cannot... take from me."

His tears fell upon Surial's face. "Please."

Surial's eyes fluttered open. "Kade?" his voice was soft, weak.

"Surial." Kade pressed the hands against his chest. "Take from me. Please, you're sick. Heal yourself."

"Not sick. Tired. Cold."

"Then sleep, my One. Please." Kade was shivering himself, utterly overwhelmed, tears streaming unnoticed down his cheeks.

Surial's shaking hand slid over his cheek. "What wrong?"

"You're scaring me."

"Nothing scares my lion." Surial smiled faintly, tapped one hand against his chest. "Good heart. My heart." Surial curled into him. "Hold me."

"As long as you need me." Kade wrapped the blankets around Surial, stroking him quietly. "And it scares me when you're ill. I can't heal you."

"Not sick." Surial nuzzled into his chest, his eyes dropping closed and his breathing growing slow and even.

Kade held Surial, stroking the fine skin constantly as he watched the winds push the clouds across the sky.

The sun was setting, Lit'ka and Mon'keur grazing happily, Tatofi screeching as she dove after mice and bunnies and random blades of grass. Kade kept holding Surial, periodically nodding off after stirring the coals, keeping the fire going.

He didn't think, didn't feel, didn't do anything but hold his heart in his hands.

"...muzzle that damned bird."

"She's just playing... Surial? My One?" Kade looked down at the man in his arms. "How do you feel?"

"Like someone hit me over the head with a horse."

"Wasn't me." Kade nuzzled him gently. "I'm careful with my One... and my mi'it."

Surial chuckled, one hand sliding around Kade's neck, pulling him down to meet a soft kiss.

Kade kissed Surial again and again, enjoying the warmth and softness of his One's skin before sitting up with a smile. "Love you, Surial. Now, food? I have some bread, some cheese. I could make you more oatmeal..."

"You're always feeding me. Maybe a little bread."

"You never eat enough. You want honey?"

"I eat when I'm hungry. The same honey from the oatmeal?"

"Then you need to be hungry more often." Kade tore off a piece of bread and held up the jug of honey. "And yes, the same honey. How much?"

Surial's smile was warm. "Enough to make you happy."

Kade slathered the bread with the sticky liquid and held the slice to his One's lips. "Finish this slice and then I'll make oatmeal."

"Oh no, what have I done?" Surial's eyes twinkled softly as he bit into the sweet-slathered bread.

"Managed to exhaust yourself into a stupor where you cannot resist me and I can feed you as my heart wishes." Kade grinned. "Have another bite."

Surial did, chewing obediently and licking the excess honey from his lips.

Kade reached over to heat more water, using the last of their supply. As soon as Surial swallowed, Kade fed him another bite, grinning innocently at Surial's aggravated look.

"You want berries in your oatmeal?"

"There's berries? Why didn't you say so earlier?" Surial yawned and shook his head. "I'm so tired."

"Because I was saving them." Looking into the bruised, tired eyes, Kade took Surial's hand and placed it against his chest. "Take from me, my One. Let me help you. Please."

"You're barely healed," protested Surial, trying to tug his hand away.

Kade pressed the hand closer. "Please. Take what I can give you."

"I'm so tired, maybe just a bit..." Surial's eyes closed and his hand grew warm and a small sting snapped briefly at Kade's body. "Happy now?"

"No." Kade set his mouth, looking at Surial. "More."

"Kade... I don't want to hurt you."

"More, Surial. Heal yourself." Kade stared into those deep forest eyes, refusing to back down. "Now, ki'ita. Please."

"I won't hurt you. I won't take so much you're too weak." Surial stared back, equally seriously, then his eyes drifted shut again.

This time it was more than a sting, and he gasped at the flash of pain that hit him; Surial stopped immediately. Other than the echo of the flash beneath Surial's hand, Kade could feel nothing different in himself.

"Better?"

"Do you feel better?" Kade looked at Surial's face, the shadows seemed lighter, but there were still traces of exhaustion. "Do you need more?"

Surial's free hand slid along his cheek and into his braids, pulling at them gently. "I've taken all I will, my lion. How would you be able to fuss if I took too much?"

"I could manage." Kade nuzzled into the touch. "Taking care of you is what I do."

Surial's smile was brilliant. "I know. You are too good to me."

"I love you." Kade stole another soft, incredibly sweet kiss, letting himself focus only on the man he held, leaving his doubts, his questions, his distress behind for a bit. "Now, oatmeal? With berries?"

"With berries." Surial tugged him gently back down and Kade wondered if the touch was so soft because that was all the strength his One had left.

"You need to rest." Kade buried his face in the curve of Surial's neck, worry zinging through him. After the lovemaking, then the fight and healing -- he'd exhausted Surial, the one he'd sworn to protect.

Leaving one soft kiss upon the smooth skin of Surial's neck, Kade threw some oatmeal into the water and placed the tea within the fire to heat. "I'm going to have to go fetch wood and water soon."

"Give me a chance to eat and I'll help."

"No." Kade shook his head as he stirred the pot. "You'll eat, then you'll sleep."

"All right." Surial gave him a little smile at his surprised look. "Now you see why I won't take more from you. You need your strength, my lion."

Kade snorted. "I have enough strength for both of us. That is why you chose me."

Surial shook his head. "I love you -- *that* is why I chose you."

"It is not the same." Kade poured meal into a bowl and added berries and honey before handing it over to Surial. "Here, my One, eat."

Surial took the bowl but frowned up at him. "What are you talking about -- it's not the same?"

He went to work fixing another cup of tea and tearing off a chunk of bread for himself. "Your love for me is eternal, it is written upon the winds. Your choice -- whether you stay with me, allow me to be part of your life -- that comes with boundaries. If I refuse to accept those boundaries, cannot meet them, then I will no longer be your hi'icha, but I know you will still feel love for me."

Surial's face had gone white and he dropped the bowl. "What do you mean you won't be my hi'icha? This is about the fight isn't it, and my asking you not to kill or hurt without cause. Kade, please, I need you. If you can't make that promise, can't do that, I'll deal with it, all right? I'll find some way to make it work. Please, Kadrass, don't leave me."

"Leave you?" Kade frowned, picking the bowl up and rescuing the meal. "I could no more leave you than I could choose to begin breathing water instead of air.""

"Then I'm confused. What are we talking about?" Surial's hand clutched at his arm. "You aren't leaving me? You love me? We're together for always?"

"I will not leave you. I love you. I will be beside you until I no longer live." Kade scooped up a spoonful of meal and held it to Surial's lips, aggravated at himself. He talked too much. "You need to eat."

Surial opened his mouth, letting Kade feed him, but his hand stayed tight on Kade's arm.

Kade stayed quiet, slowly feeding Surial, keeping his One close and warm, using his presence and strength to comfort and relax. Surial needed that, the rest, the relaxation, the peace.

The bowl was nearly finished when Surial turned his face away and pushed at the bowl. "Enough -- I'm going to explode."

Kade nodded and quickly wolfed down the remainder, smiling sheepishly at Surial's chuckle. "Just making sure the bowl is clean."

"You have to eat, too." Surial yawned again.

"You should sleep, my One." Kade settled Surial more comfortably on his chest, finishing his bread and tea and throwing another log upon the fire. "I will go for water in the morning."

"I love you."

The words were quiet, mumbled, Surial already half asleep.

"As I love you, my One. Sleep."

Surial did, safe and warm in his arms.

Kade watched the moon cross the sky, counting one star for each beat of his One's heart.

Chapter Twenty

The night passed quickly, the sky lightening with the rose-colored light of dawn. The fire was fading, so Kade threw the final logs on the coals and wrapped Surial up in the extra blankets before heading out into the woods, nickering for Lit'ka to follow.

By the time he washed his face and gathered clean water, a few armfuls of wood and two handfuls of rosehips to boil down for tea, the sun was up, the morning birds singing.

As he built up the fire and cooked, Kade judged their stores. If Surial wanted to stay in the mountains for winter, they would need to find a place to set up tents, gather food. They had enough oats for two weeks, perhaps three and the ground flour, but they wouldn't survive a winter.

There were villages at the foot of the mountains, four or five hard days ride away, perhaps he could barter there for food, enough meal and flour and honey and dried beans to last through the snows.

Kade poured the rosehip tea into a mug, its dark rose color and tart smell reminding him of his youth. He drank his portion while waiting for the flatbread to bake.

Surial murmured and wriggled. "Something smells good." He yawned and stretched and the green eyes blinked open, a warm smile in them.

Kade smiled over. "Rosehip tea and fresh flatbread. How are you feeling, my One?"

Surial pushed himself up, resting on his elbows, the blankets slipping down to his abdomen. He grinned at Kade. "Better."

"I am glad of that." Kade pulled the bread from the coals, rubbing honey along the top and slicing off a chunk for Surial, placing it in a bowl with a good-sized piece of cheese. He handed that, plus a mug of tea, over with a warm smile. "Eat, my One, and build your strength."

"Yes, I need strength if I plan to do more than sleep the day away again." Surial's smile grew sultry. "And I do have plans."

"Do you?" Kade shook his head with a chuckle. "Perhaps, if you manage to stay awake for longer than a candlemark after your belly's full, we can discuss these plans of yours."

He walked back to the fire and cut himself a slice of bread, eating with one hand while adding more rosehips to the kettle with the other.

"Discussion isn't a part of these plans, my lion. Not to begin with anyway." Surial was eating with more appetite than Kade had seen in days, perhaps even weeks.

Pouring himself another mug of tea, Kade poked at the fire, making it pop and roar. Then he added another slice of bread to Surial's bowl and sat down beside him, nibbling on a piece of cheese.

Leaning, Surial rested against him, head heavy but right against his shoulder. One of Surial's hands slid along his leg, resting on his thigh; Kade could feel the heat of it through his breeches.

"So, my One, do your plans include staying put or moving on? I think there's a chill rain coming, the sky was pink this morning. If we stay, I think I should pitch the tent, find a good covered place for our fire."

"Can we stay another day before moving on? I want..." Surial's grip on his thigh tightened and then gentled again. "I need you, my lion. I need to feel your skin against me, your heat and passion. There's an aching empty spot inside me that only you can fill."

"We can stay as long as you would like." Kade reached down and covered Surial's hand with his own. "And I am yours, whenever you need me."

Turning his hand, Surial linked their fingers. "And is it what you need as well, my lion? Am I what you want?" Dark eyes looked up at him, solemn, slightly worried.

"Why would you ask me that, my One?" Kade frowned. "Have I done anything to make you doubt me?" Deep inside, Kade cringed, waiting to discover what else he was that hurt his lover, what other part of himself needed to be cut away to give Surial peace.

Surial's hands slid over his face, caressing, thumbs sliding over his lips and then his scars. "You just seem..." Surial shrugged. "I don't know, it just feels like you're sad, that something's not right inside. I can't really explain it."

"You fret too much." Kade closed his eyes, bending his head toward Surial's touch. "I have been worried about you. You have been so tired, so weak. I want my ki'ita whole and healthy."

He felt Surial's smile against his lips. "I'm not weak anymore, my lion."

With a sob, Kade leaned forward and drank from those lips, drawing comfort and peace from the warmth of Surial's hands that held him close.

Clarity -- oh, life was so much simpler when viewed from the circle of Surial's arms -- Kade's ghosts receded, his sorrow and confusion fading, the only speaking hunger one that was pure and true and fed.

Surial met his hunger, matched it and asked for more, the sweet lips eager, almost desperate to offer themselves.

"Surial... my One... I need you." Kade's passion swelled, crashing over him in a wave. "Please."

"Oh, yes. Inside me, my lion. I want to feel you. Need you to fill me." Surial's body twisted and arched against him, seeking contact.

Kade pushed Surial backward, stretching above, pressing his One into the blankets even as he fastened his lips upon the fading bruise on Surial's throat. He had no grace, no patience, nothing left within him but hunger and need, flavored by love.

Surial's head arched back, offering him more of the long throat, even as fingers fumbled with his clothing, pushing up his shirt and tearing at his laces

"Skin... "

"Yes, by the winds. Please." Kade would have helped, but his hands were busy, sliding beneath the blankets to touch and caress, fill themselves with the flesh they craved.

He knew the moment Surial breached his trousers, soft, hot skin circled him, pulled and tugged and slid over his cock. Surial was making soft, mewling sounds, body moving into his touches. Kade feasted, unthinking, unknowing, his only thought the body writhing beneath him. He took a moment to slick two fingers in his mouth before sliding them to Surial's entrance, pushing over the hidden ring of muscles even as his lips returned to feed upon Surial's flesh.

Bucking up against him, Surial sought to encourage the penetration. "Please."

"Yes." Kade slid one finger within the warm tight grip of Surial's body, sobbing against the arched skin that called his lips so. "So tight, my One. So hot."

"So good." Surial's words echoed his own. "More. More, my lion."

Kade began to move, thrusting a single finger within Surial's body, pushing deep. As the tight grip eased, his One gasping beneath him, he added the second finger, sliding them within his lover, seeking the hidden spot that made Surial scream.

His One did scream, loud and full as the slender body arched up against him. Tatofi screeched back, making it sound as if the woods around them were responding to their lovemaking.

Kade lifted his head with a low growl, staring down into forest-green eyes that burned. He bent to share a fierce, brief kiss, teeth and tongues struggling together. "I want you. Now."

Surial's eyes never left his as his One's legs parted, hands holding them open. "Now."

"Now."

Kade slid within Surial, low cry torn from his lips as he was surrounded by heat. He kept his focus on those eyes, holding onto the truths they held, filling himself with Surial's love as surely as he filled Surial's body.

Surial's legs slid around his waist, pulling him in closer, deeper. He could feel the bones in his One's heels as Surial's ankles crossed behind him, locking them together. Hands, warm and smooth, slid over his shoulders, across his nipples and over the jumping muscles in his stomach.

Kade began to move, long, slow steady thrusts into Surial, breath sobbing from him with each push. His mind spun with sensation, Surial's face blurring in front of his eyes. Surial was whimpering and moaning, moving in tandem with him, making each thrust more than it was. The wandering hands slowed, stopped, wrapped around his waist and held on. Kade reached beneath, lifted Surial up onto his lap and brought their lips together in a kiss. Surial's hands twined around his neck, burying themselves in his braids. Kade spread his thighs, using their strength to push himself deeper within his One.

Surial's lips were slick and soft, his tongue wet and hot. The sounds his One made were pushed into him now, whimpers and sobs and moans that slid down his throat, caressing him from the inside. Kade held him close, thrusting endlessly, body rocking, heart and mouth and hands full. Surial's body became slick with sweat, his breath coming in soft gasps. They weren't kissing anymore, but their lips were touching, lips, cheeks, noses, throats, the contact close, soft, full of love.

Peace poured through him, easing his soul. Kade began to smile, joy bubbling up within him. "You make my heart sing."

"You are my heart."

"You honor me, my One." Kade lifted one hand to Surial's hair, stroking through the long, dark strands. Surial nuzzled into his hand, body undulating, moving like a spirit over him, with him. Kade gasped as his body insisted its needs be met, back arching as his thrusts quickened.

Surial moaned, pushing closer, his cock hard and slick between them. Kade's head dropped to Surial's shoulder, lips opening over the skin. The taste of salt-sweet flesh was heady, and Kade fastened on, sucking firmly, shuddering as his body tightened. Surial's scream heralded his orgasm, seed hot and pungent between them. Arms, legs and passage tightened around Kade, keeping him close.

"My One." Kade let Surial hold him, cradle him as he shattered with a low groan, body jerking as he came.

Surial's lips were on his face, kissing, licking, sucking gently at his skin, a soft "love you" punctuating each touch.

"Surial." Kade slumped, boneless and sated, tremors rocketing through him. "My One." He swayed for a moment, head spinning, then he steadied, focusing on Surial. "Love you."

Surial clung to him, soft shivers going through him every time Kade moved. His kisses continued to brush across Kade's face, his hands firm and strong against Kade's scalp. The soft words of love continued to drop with each kiss. The air smelled of sunshine gilded with rain and of their love, sweat and seed, mixed and mingled.

Somehow, Surial managed to get them settled, curled lazily in the blankets, Kade's body held down by a familiar, comforting weight, whispers moving through him, Surial's hands running along his braids. Kade surrendered to these touches, reveled in them, completely unaware of the tears that streaked his face, pain and fear and anger releasing beneath Surial's touch. Surial's fingers returned again and again to the scars on his cheeks, stroking them. Lips like fire danced over his collarbone, sucked at his neck, giving him new marks.

"My lion, my Kadrass. Love you so much. You make me so happy."

"Yours." The word was husky and heartfelt. Surial's hands felt so good, warm and comforting and right. They were his home.

"Yes, mine. You're mine. My very own." The touches never stopped. "You were made for me, made to be mine. Just like I was made for you."

Kade nodded. "You make my heart sing, silence my ghosts."

Eyes the color of the forest at night gazed down at him. "I'm so glad, my lion. I want to make you happy. I want to make you sing and laugh. I want to be enough -- to make up for all your pains."

"You are my One, my home. How could you not be enough? It is me who is not enough. I am the one who sows unhappiness and sorrow." Kade closed his eyes, sighing deeply. With that sigh, he could smell the rains. "I need to put the tent up. There's a storm coming."

"Will you talk to me first, Kadrass? Explain why you think you aren't enough?" Surial leaned forward, nuzzling for a moment. "You are my lion, my Kadrass. You are my heart - how could you not be enough?"

"I hurt you by being who I am. My tribe is gone and to other tribes I am a stranger -- a wrongly marked slave who does not live as he should, does not wear the pride he should."

My ancestors scream for revenge, which I have promised I will not seek. I wear braids I do not deserve -- for I cannot find any ease except within your arms."

Kade's eyes filled with tears again. "You said it yourself, my One. I am no longer of the Naik. I am no longer a part of the tribe. My people, my traditions -- I have turned my back upon them of my own will and no longer deserve to call myself hi'icha."

"Oh, my lion, I did not realize how much I have wounded you with my needs." Surial caught each tear with his tongue as they fell from Kade's eyes. "I have been so selfish -- you have given up everything for me and I just keep asking for more."

"You are my One, my home. It is my duty, my honor to give you peace." Kade sighed, fingering his braids. "I do not belong to the Naik and have not for more moons that I can count. I belong to you. I should cut my hair and face and cease searching for a past that burned long ago."

"Oh, my lion." Surial's mouth closed over his, the kiss soft and gentle and almost trembling with love.

Kade kissed Surial back, the slow trail of tears slowing. He was tired, body exhausted from worry and sorrow. Surial's hands moved over his braids, his cheeks, the touch making him sigh with warm pleasure.

"What can I do, my lion? How do I make this right for you?"

Kade laughed, the sound humorless even to his own ears. "Lie to me. Tell me in the next life my trip to find you will be short and easy."

"I would take away the pain if I could." Surial's hands moved over his body. "All this so-called power and I can't make you stop hurting..."

Kade caught Surial's gaze. "Your arms are the only place I find ease from my pain."

"Then I shall spend the rest of my life holding you."

"You are called to greater things than you will ever find in my arms, my One, and it is my honor to assure you find those things." Kade held Surial close. "We are only men; it is not our place to struggle against the wind, but only to go where it needs us."

Surial's breath shivered across his neck, his One's hands warm and soothing, constantly in motion over his skin. "I love you, Kadrass, and I'm sorry. I know you say it isn't our place to struggle, but I still wish I had nothing but happiness for you."

Kade smiled at Surial. "You are happiness. My sorrow does not spring from you, but from myself. I do not know how not to be a Naik, but I am not one. I do not know how

not to sing to the One who is All, yet I do not deserve my braids, my clanmarks. You do not bring this confusion; you remind me who I thought I was."

"Your braids are in memory of all the ones you loved and lost, Kade. How could you not deserve them? Do you not still mourn them? Are they not still in your heart?" Surial leaned up and separated out the braid he wore in his hair. "Is it wrong of me to wear this?"

Kade reached out and stroked the piece of hair, a small smile blooming upon his face. "You made that for me, because you love me. How can something so lovely be wrong?"

"And you wear yours for the people you love. How can something so lovely be wrong?"

"I would have died for them, killed for them, for what they represent." Kade frowned and finally confessed to his One the ache deep in his heart. "And now I would give them up if you asked. That frightens me, how much I would sacrifice at your whim."

"It frightens me as well, Kadas. That I have that kind of power over you." Surial's hands never stopped moving, keeping that connection between them. "That you give me that power..."

"You are my One, you hold my home, my heart and my happiness within your hands. They belong to no one else."

Kade sighed softly, his aches fading with his words and the strokes of his One's hands. No matter how much of his fear he released into Surial's care, it was always respected, eased, and replaced with peace.

"You give me an incredible gift and a huge responsibility and I am honored to carry it." Surial brought his braid up to his lips and kissed it and then Kade's lips. "I can promise you that I will never deliberately hurt you or take advantage of the trust you put in me. Your happiness is mine."

Kade grabbed one of Surial's hands and kissed each finger, nibbling gently on the fingertips, nuzzling his near full beard against the palm. "You ease my heart, and I am never so sure of my place in the world than I am when I am near you."

"Then we have indeed been blessed by the winds because I am never happier than when you are near me." Surial's hand jerked and he chuckled. "You tickle."

Mischief flared within Kade, his relief and pleasure making him almost giddy. He chuckled and rubbed his chin against the thin, pale skin of Surial's inner wrist. "Do I?"

Surial laughed outright this time, his hand jerking strongly in reaction.

"You do, my lion."

"And where else might you be ticklish, my One?" Kade grabbed Surial's arm and began working his way toward his sensitive elbow.

Surial was wriggling in earnest now, trying to get his arm out of Kade's grasp, giggling as Kade's beard slid across sensitive skin.

He nibbled on the smooth skin, grinning as his One twisted and laughed. The sound was bright, happy and it fostered joy within Kade. He wanted to hear it again and again.

Surial tried to retaliate, fingers dancing over Kade's ribs, beneath his chin, along his hips, but Kade was bigger, stronger, and less ticklish.

Kade wrapped his arms around Surial and rolled, grinning down at his One. "I have you now."

Then he bent and began to run his chin along Surial's belly, periodically stopping to nibble softly at the exposed flesh.

Surial's abdomen jumped beneath his touch, muscles bunching and releasing as his One wriggled and laughed. Kade moved lower, finding traces of Surial's seed, salt-sweet like the desert sea and he forgot his tickling as he mouthed along the black curls. He nuzzled, breathing in Surial's musk, sucking softly at one hipbone before lapping along the crease where thigh met torso. The wriggling stopped as Surial began to arch, moving into the touches instead of away from them. The laughter faded, sounding now and then, but more often the sounds were soft whimpers and moans.

Kade licked and nibbled, keeping away from Surial's shaft, slowly driving his One's arousal higher. He made love to Surial's skin, humming and moaning, his own body arching with passion. He began to purr as he lapped up the clear drops that fell upon the white skin of Surial's belly, feeding himself from their passion. Surial's hands sunk into his braids, holding tightly. Every now and then his One would try to guide him, urge his mouth toward the reddened shaft, but he resisted and Surial's hands would soften their hold, only to tighten again moments later as they began the dance again.

Kade continued his feast, waiting until he heard Surial sob before looking up at him. Once Surial's passion-glazed gaze met his, he growled, "Want you to make love to me, my One. Let me feel you inside me."

Surial convulsed, his whole body arching as if he were trying to curl around Kade's head. The hands in his braids tightened and tugged him up to meet lips swollen and red from earlier kisses. "Inside you."

The words were whispered before their lips met.

Surial's tongue pressed inside his mouth, trapping his low cry between them. Kade

fastened his lips around the wet heat, sucking as their bodies slid together, Surial's hands hard in his braids.

"Ride me." Surial ordered between long, desperate kisses.

Then he pulled back, one hand staying wrapped around his braids, holding him in place, making him watch as the other hand slipped from his hair, two fingers going into Surial's mouth. Dark forest eyes watched him as Surial sucked on his own fingers.

Kade's hips rocked in time with the slide of Surial's fingers within those sweet, swollen lips, full cock pressing against the soft belly rhythmically. He couldn't look away, couldn't stop the needy growls and whimpers as his desire became near unbearable.

Surial seemed to sense when he could stand no more and just as he thought he would come just from watching, those fingers left the ruby mouth with a soft pop. Surial's fingers slid wetly down his stomach, bypassing his erection, but tickling lightly against his balls before moving back, pressing, teasing against his opening.

And still the dark forest of his One's eyes watched him.

"Please, my One. I ache for you." Kade arched, trying to force those fingers inside him. He bent forward, sliding his tongue along Surial's bottom lip. "I need you."

Surial leaned up and grabbed his tongue, sucking it into the warm mouth even as his body was breached by Surial's fingers.

Tremors rocked him, a moan forced from his lungs as Surial flooded him with sensation. He undulated, pushing himself between fingers and sweet mouth. All too soon those fingers disappeared, but they were replaced by the blunt heat of Surial's cock, pressing hard and insistent against him.

"Ride me." Surial whispered again, letting his tongue and lips go, eyes once again watching him intently.

Kade leaned up, sitting back and sinking down on Surial's cock. His head fell back, mouth open in a silent scream of pleasure as he was filled with pressure and heat. He could feel his braids sliding over his torso, his nipples, his throbbing erection as he settled down fully upon Surial's hips.

He waited for his breath to even, his arousal to fade from its fever pitch.

Then he began to move.

"By the winds you are beautiful!" Surial's voice was husky, dark and rich with passion. His One's hands moved through his braids, making them slide against him. It was as if Surial had suddenly grown extra hands and could touch him all over at once.

Kade drove himself onto Surial, arching as pleasure rocketed through him. His skin felt alive, burning with sensation, his muscles flexing as he moved for his One, for his Surial's eyes.

He could feel them on him, like another caress, the heated stare followed his movements, demanded them. Kade cried out as Surial's hands wrapped around his hips, pulling him down as Surial began to meet his downward slide with sharp thrusts. He forced his head up, wanting to look into those eyes that were his home. They blazed at him, making him hot, sending pulses of lightning chittering across his nerves that exploded each time their bodies met.

Kade reached for his erection, fisting it, spreading the moisture over the shaft. "See what you do to me, my One? How I want you?"

"Yes." Surial thrust harder, meeting his decent with more force. "Yes, I see you, my lion, my Kadrass, my sun-kissed god."

He shuddered, the pleasure almost painful in its intensity. "Yours. Your own. Oh, my One, how I love you..."

Surial brought his knees up against Kade's back, digging his heels in to the ground. It shifted Kade slightly forward and the new angle brought Surial's cock against that place inside Kade that shot everything into the sky. Surial thrust in again and again, hitting it each time.

Kade roared into the sky, shattering into a thousand shards of lights, his seed spilling over his hand in hot pulses.

Surial's cry mingled with the echoes of his roar, filling the sky with their song. Kade collapsed forward, fighting to catch his breath. Tremors rocked through him, echoes of sheer joy. Surial's hands moved over his back, slow motion glides that soothed even as they coaxed a few more shivers from him.

Kade floated, purring softly, sated and settled in body and mind.

At length Surial's cock slid from his body, but the connection remained in the smooth motion of his One's hands sweeping over his back, in the gentle murmurs against his ear, soft lips tickling lightly against his skin.

He let Surial hold him, heal him. He found bliss here, again and again, vulnerable and open in the arms of the One who knew him, knew all of him, and loved him anyway.

Loved him *because*.

"Kadrass?" Surial's hands slowed but didn't stop. "Would you mind shifting over?"

"Sorry, my One. Got lost for a bit. I know better." Kade pulled away, shaking his head and trying to bring his mind back from the sweet, peaceful place it had been basking.

Surial pushed him down onto his back, settling on his chest with a happy sigh. "You just got heavy." A soft kiss slid across his collarbone and then those smooth hands began to move again, sliding along his sides, finding new patterns and paths through his skin.

"I love touching you."

"Your hands make me feel so much." Kade relaxed, contentment purring from him, one hand moving to rest on the small of Surial's back, making sure his One was not chilled. "They show me what is important, remind me where I belong."

"You belong right where you are -- in my arms."

"Yes." Kade let those words move through him, answering that voice that had been screaming for years, needing to belong somewhere. As in so many things, his heart called out and Surial answered. "I do."

Surial nuzzled him. "I love you, Kadrass." The words were soft, but seemed to gather strength as they rose, echoing through the forest.

"I love you, my One." Kade whispered the words, listening for the echoing of his name spoken in love, bouncing about the trees.

"You know," he mused, once the echoes had faded away, "I used to think that I loved the sound of my name in your voice because no one called me 'Kadrass'. I was wrong. We have been among the tribes, been where my name is known. I love the sound of my name because it is in your voice."

"Kadrass..." Surial's arms tightened around him, hugging him fiercely. "I love you."

He smiled up into Surial's beautiful eyes. "I know, my One. You show me every day." Then he stole a kiss, unable to stop his smile, his joy. "I love you, too."

Chapter Twenty One

The snow fell steadily, covering the path, covering his cloak.

Covering his shame.

Lik'ta stumbled over the gravel, tired and heartsore. They had been tracking the slavers for weeks, the path fresh when they had come down to gather supplies, and his plans to hole up for the winter had shattered. He had left his ki'ita behind and fled for the tribe, the warriors that he knew, burning for the kill.

They had ridden, dozens of them, and when they had come upon their caravan, the rahats had flown. Many Naik had escaped into the woods; many others had died in the flurry of arrows and blades.

When the fires died down, no slavers remained standing in the snow, no slaves would be delivered. Kade had taken eleven scalps himself, bound his own wounds, and left the carnage as a warning.

The Naik lived. Free men.

The warriors had roared together, dripping with gore, rejoicing, and something deep within him began to heal, the screams of his father fading a bit.

It was not until he and Lik'ta were near the village, near the inn where Surial waited that Kade realized he might not be welcome. They had rescued many, but many had died. He had bathed himself in their screams, letting their pain satisfy the screaming of his ancestors.

He could only hope Surial would not know.

The inn was quiet and still in the early morning light. Kade dismounted and led Lik'ta into the stables, nickering to Mon'Keur as he entered. He settled the mounts, waiting until the need to see his One, to touch him, to find the man he had lost up in the mountain passes, was irresistible. He stroked Lik'ta's nose and turned toward the inn. He was no coward. He would face Surial like a man and if his One turned him away, he would return to the mountains, to the tribe.

Kade took the stairs two at a time, until he reached Surial's door. He was unsure whether to knock or enter. Finally, he simply walked in, heart in his throat.

Surial lay curled up in a chair near the blazing fire, wrapped in blankets, his gaze locked on the flames.

"Surial? Can... can I come in?" Kade couldn't stop his hands from trembling, his heart was pounding with a mixture of fear and hope.

Surial started and turned. "Kade? You're back!" Surial pushed his way out of the blankets, nearly tripping over them in his haste to stand.

Unable to speak, Kade took a step forward, nodding and holding out his hands, needing to touch his One, to hold him. Surial ran to him, arms going around his waist, face burying into his chest.

Oh, so good, so very good and he might have lost it, lost this love and care and wonder, just to silence his ancestors' cries. Kade wrapped Surial in his arms, dropping his head onto the thin shoulder. "My One."

A sound close to a sob came from Surial and his arms tightened around Kade. "I missed you so."

"Love." Kade closed his eyes, breathing in Surial's scent, letting it fill him, warm him, comfort him.

"I love you, my lion." Surial kissed him and then drew back with a frown, hands coming around, one to touch his head, the other over his heart. "You're hurt!"

"I am well now." Kade covered Surial's hand with his own, heart singing. Surial loved him. His One loved him. He was home. "Don't fret over me, my One. If I have wounds, I deserve them."

Surial's frown remained. "Let me heal you and you can tell me all about it. All about this thing you had to do on your own that brings you home to me hurt."

Kade lowered his eyes, heart sinking. "And if I tell you things that send you away from me, will you regret wasting your gift on my flesh?"

"I've only just gotten you back, my lion, why would I send you away?" Surial was leading him to the chair, fingers working on the fasteners of his tunic. He grabbed Surial's fingers in his own, stopping their movements. He would not take comfort he did not deserve.

"You should not. Not until you have heard what I have done. Then, if you... if you still wish to touch me..." Kade was horrified at the sorrow and loss evident in his voice.

"You're scaring me, Kadrass." Surial stared at him a moment and then nodded at the chair. "Then sit and talk."

Kade sat, wincing slightly at the twinges of pain that filled him. His heart was thrumming, its beat fast as a bird's. "I... there were some slavers due to make the far pass, you know this. Lit'ka and I went to the tribe, we gathered the men, we went to intercept them, to stop them."

Surial grew stiff, face clearly unhappy. "Go on."

"They had a caravan -- maybe fifty slaves. I... there was a fight. I freed as many as I could, but some died. They set the carts on fire." Kade rested his head on his hand, sighing softly and sounded his own death knell. "We killed the slavers, Surial. All of them. I killed them." He'd rejoiced in it.

"Kade..."

Kade looked up into Surial's eyes. "They deserved to die. They tried to steal those people's lives."

Surial was nodding, but he looked as if he were going to be sick.

"I should go, stop hurting you." Kade stood, head pounding, eyes burning. "I am sorry, my One. I had to follow my heart."

"Go?" Surial looked around somewhat wildly. "Sit. Let me just--"

Surial went to the bed, pulling the chamber pot from beneath it and throwing up into it.

He couldn't stop the tears, couldn't stop the ache within him. He had hurt his One, would do it again and again until the slavers stopped or he died protecting his people.

"Forgive me." Then Kade turned toward the door. He would sleep with Lit'ka until nightfall and then head for the mountains again.

"I can't if you leave. Please, Kadrass, don't leave."

Kade stopped, resting his head on the door frame. He could do many things, but deny his One, to ignore the sound of his own name, his true name spoken in that voice, was more than he could do.

Surial moved over to the dresser and rinsed his mouth out and then turned back to him, the dark green eyes huge in his pale face. "Sit down and let me heal you. And then we can talk about it."

"No. You're tired, already ill. I will not hurt you anymore." Kade sighed, his body aching and heart sore. "I missed you, Surial. I wanted to come to you."

"I am not ill. I just..." Surial waved toward the chamber pot and shrugged slightly. "To hear you speaking of killing... You know how I feel about that --I'm not condemning you, what those men were doing, setting the wagons carrying the slaves on fire, it was wrong, they had to be stopped." Surial's smiled sadly. "I wish someone else could stop them."

Surial took a step forward and then stopped, hesitating. "I missed you, Kade. I couldn't sleep or eat properly without you. Everything seemed wrong. You are home now, please, stay and let me make you well again so you can hold me. I need you to hold me and tell me again how they deserved their fate."

"They had children, Surial. Babies that would be sold, whipped, broken." Kade slowly sank to the floor. "Have you ever seen a child beaten to death? Heard them screaming? Heard them burning?" He shook his head, lost for the moment in years and years of memories, of pain.

Gentle hands slid through his hair, fingers tangling familiarly through his braids. Surial bent and pressed their foreheads together. "I am sorry, my lion. I am sorry to make your burden heavier with my disapproval." Hot tears splashed across his cheeks from Surial's eyes. "You have returned lives that were stolen, saved those deserving of a second chance and all I've done is make you pay for it, focused on the death." Surial drew back. "I'm not surprised you wish to leave me. I won't force you to stay."

"Please." Kade looked up into Surial's eyes, heart raw with pain and need. "Please, my One. Don't send me away."

Surial's hands moved slowly through his hair. "I couldn't send you away, even if I wanted to, my Kadrass, you are my life. I don't want you to go. I want you to stay."

Kade closed his eyes, pushing into the touch, beginning to relax for the first time in days. "Forgive me."

"I forgive you, my lion, if you will forgive me, as well."

"Anything. I would forgive you anything." Kade sighed as Surial's fingers brought him peace.

"I missed your touch."

"Then let me touch you, let me heal you and then let me prove my love to you."

Kade nodded, attention focused on Surial's hands, the heat of his One's body, the comfort of the words that washed over him. He needed this -- needed his One to soothe the raw, aching edges of his soul.

Slender fingers pulled his tunic from him, Surial hissing when he saw the damage.

He looked down at the dozens of raw cuts and bruises and oddly-shaped burns. Hoping to ease Surial's worry, he shrugged, forcing himself not to wince. "There were many of them and so few of us; they had only whips and torches. It is nothing I have not survived before."

Soft hands slid over his face in a loving caress and then moved down to his chest. Surial's eyes closed, hands growing warm, tingling against Kade as they slid along his skin.

The warmth made him shudder, almost shocked by the sudden cessation of pain. It was frightening how quickly his body remembered how to hurt. "Don't tire yourself, my One."

"Shh..." Surial's hands continued to move until his torso was no longer hurting. "Being a little tired never hurt anyone. Now are you going to take off your pants and show me where else you're hurting or will I have to do it for you?"

Kade chuckled, "Are you trying to get me naked, my One?"

"That is my ultimate goal, yes." Surial smiled softly at him, hands moving up to cup his cheeks. Kade could feel well-being and energy washing through him with the touches.

"Oh." Kade reached up, pressed Surial's hands between his own hands and his face. "I need this -- your touch, your care, the taste of your love in the back of my throat. I should not need you so, but I do."

"No more than I need you, my lion." Surial closed his eyes and sent more healing and love through his hands. "Now take your pants off and let me finish."

Another laugh, this one lighter and more natural, passed through Kade's lips as he shimmied carefully out of his trousers. His leg had the worst wound where an arrow had passed through his thigh, leaving the thick muscle torn and raw.

"Oh, my lion..." Surial's voice was soft, pained, and he dropped slowly to his knees, hands moving with care and tenderness over Kade's legs. He left the arrow wound to last, eyes closed, lips moving with silent words as his hands grew hot, the tingling strong and unabated for several minutes. When Surial finally dropped his hands, leaning forward to rest his head against Kade's hip, the pain was gone,

"Surial, are you all right?" Kade bent, not waiting for Surial's answer, and lifted him up, carrying him to the bed. "You should not tire yourself for me, my One."

Surial's arms slid around his neck, holding on strongly. "There is no one I would rather tire myself out for. Besides, these were easy wounds to heal. I'm not *that* tired."

Kade smiled and kissed the closest patch of skin he could find before depositing Surial on the bed. "I'll try harder next time, so you'll have a challenge."

Surial's hand came up and stroked along his cheek. "I'd rather have to focus my attentions on others next time. The next time when you take me with you."

"With me? But Surial, you can't. It's not safe, it's too dangerous." Kade crawled down

next to Surial, holding him tight, head shaking at the thought of Surial near those butchers.

Surial's hands slid over his skin in random patterns. "But I could help people, heal them. And I could make sure you were all right."

"I'm fine, my One. I... you wouldn't like what I have to do, and I couldn't bear it if you were wounded." Kade sighed, pushing against Surial's touch.

"We can discuss it the next time you feel a need to leave me behind."

"I..." Kade stuttered, felt his cheeks flush. He buried his face against Surial's skin, breathing in the scent of home and love. "I'm so sorry I left. I missed you, was lost and aching and sore without you, but my ata, he screamed for revenge. I cannot deny his will and the will of the Winds. They brought me to you."

"Show me. Show me how you missed me," whispered Surial.

Kade lifted his head, looking into forest-green eyes for a long moment, memorizing each swirl and spark of color. Then he leaned in and brushed his lips against Surial's, chaste and careful. He could feel a spark arcing between them, hear his heart begin to sing.

Surial's eyes filled and several tears leaked down his cheeks. "I feel dead without you, Kadas."

"I am death without you, my One." Kade closed his eyes, banishing the images of blood and fury and replacing them with his One. He brought their lips together again and again, quiet, slowly building kisses that made him shiver. He busied his hands with unfastening laces, exposing skin that was softer than any cloth, but his focus, his heart was on the connection of their lips.

Surial lay quietly in his arms, hands moving constantly over his skin, touching him everywhere.

Kade pushed Surial's shirt away, trailing his hand down the slim belly, sighing at the feel of skin beneath his fingers. "My One."

"My Kadas." The sound was almost a purr.

"I missed you." Kade scooted lower, tears filling his eyes at the expanse of smooth, fair skin of Surial's throat. He had been gone so long; his mark had faded. He kissed the soft skin gently, nuzzling into the warmth.

Surial gasped, head stretching back, hips arching, pushing up into Kade.

Mine. The word echoed within him, silent and necessary. Kade opened his lips, letting his tongue trace along the skin, drawing Surial's taste into him.

"By the moons sweet light I missed you, my lion."

"I was afraid you would not let me come home." The words were whispered against Surial's pulse, Kade unwilling to relinquish contact.

Surial's hands slid into his hair, tangling familiarly in his braids. "Refusing you would be like refusing to breathe... impossible."

"Impossible." Kade groaned and fastened his lips upon Surial's skin. The action, the taste, the smell of Surial -- it was as close to perfection as Kade understood. He sucked strongly, drawing the blood to the surface, leaving the dark bruise that drew his fingers, his eyes again and again.

His mark.

Surial's fingers moved up and slid against the mark and a smile lit his face. "Now I'm yours again."

Kade nodded, letting a slow smile cross his face. "Mine."

Surial tugged on his hair, urging him closer. Their lips closed together, Surial's tongue sliding urgently into his mouth. Hunger, deep and insistent, flared between them. Never breaking the kiss, Kade rolled onto his back, pulling Surial atop him. As their tongues thrust and tasted, Kade removed the last of Surial's clothes, crying out as their skin met. Sweet whimpers filled the air as Surial writhed, the lithe body moving against him.

Kade arched up, gasping as their erections slid together. "Oh, my One." Kade reached down and grasped Surial's buttocks, stroking the soft skin for a moment before moving their bodies together again. "So good."

Surial murmured his assent and braced his forearms against Kade's chest, pressing down and sliding against him.

"Been so long..."

"Too long. Never again." Kade spread his legs, bracing his feet against the mattress and pushing up against Surial's skin. Joy rushed through him, making him dizzy with sweet, pure pleasure. "Need you, my One. Need this."

"Yes. Yes." Surial repeated the word over and over, head arching back, the fresh mark on his throat gleaming.

Kade dipped his head, fastening his lips on Surial's throat. The skin there tasted salty and sweet, and Kade feasted, body tightening as his orgasm rushed through him. Surial's cry echoed through the room, the sound loud in his ears, heat spreading between their hips and bellies.

He held Surial tight as their hearts slowed, bliss easing into something more manageable.

Surial's body was heavy with satiation, pliant and limp upon him. "Don't ever want to be separated from you like that again."

"No. I need you." Kade let his fingers settle against the base of Surial's spine. "I get lost in the winds without you."

"I just plain get lost. It's like I forget where I was going and what I was doing." Surial's hands clutched at him for a moment and then loosened. "You were gone so long I was worried I'd forget how to breathe."

"I was scared." Kade stroked the fine skin of Surial's back, enjoying the texture, the warmth. "I was afraid you wouldn't want me, wouldn't forgive me."

"Oh, my lion, I could never turn you away." Surial raised his head, forest eyes gazing down at Kade. "You know if you don't dump me in some inn and leave me behind next time, you won't have to worry about coming back to me..."

Kade shook his head, gaze fastened on the mottled green eyes that held his home. "It's not safe, my One. People die, they kill. I cannot bring my family into that."

"But by going yourself you already bring your family into it."

Frowning, Kade shook his head, his hand continuing to move and stroke, unable and unwilling to lose contact. "I don't understand. I left you here, where you were safe."

"And if you'd died? How safe would I have been then?"

"I did not die, Surial. I was judged worthy by the winds." Kade tilted his head, stretching slightly and enjoying the slide of their bodies. "If I am judged unworthy, then I am not strong enough to be your hi'icha."

"Mmm, feels good." Surial moved slowly, continuing the gentle glide of skin on skin. "If you die, Kadas, it won't be long before I go with you. I could feel myself shutting down the longer you were gone."

"Surial, do not even think it." Kade's hands tightened, his heart skipping a beat. "I... you cannot believe that, my One. I have so many years more than you. You will live after me."

"I have a feeling that unless you get yourself killed doing something stupid you will live as long as I do." Surial leaned down and kissed him softly, lips like velvet upon his own. "I keep you young, my Kadrass."

"You keep me whole, my One." Kade moaned softly, lifting his head to beg another kiss. "Perhaps we will simply grow old in one another's arms, loving each other until the end of time."

"That is my fondest dream, my lion." Surial's kiss was slow and deep.

Kade closed his eyes, losing himself in the soft, sweet touch of Surial's lips. To be kissed by his One was to be swimming in the sea at midnight, the intensity deceptive in its power, what seemed at first a delicate pull became overwhelming waves of desire. Surial's body was undulating against his own, skin gliding along skin.

A low rumble -- too dark and hungry for a purr, too warm and happy for a growl -- filled the air, breaking free from Kade's chest. Kade arched as Surial's skin kissed his, warmed him from deep within.

"Going to ride you, my lion."

"Surial!" Kade jerked, body responding immediately, insistently to his One's words.

"Mmm, you like that don't you?" Surial began to push himself up, legs shifting to straddle Kade's hips. "I like it. I like having you inside me."

"Yes. Inside you, loving you." Kade's hands slid down to caress Surial's hips, thumbs circling in toward his One's erection.

The tip was wet, a clear drop forming there and Kade watched it grow, moved his hand to catch it as it fell. He brought the drop to his lips and licked it off, moaning as Surial's flavor filled his mouth.

His One's moan answered his own and then was cut off as Surial began to suck on his own fingers, wetting them.

"Oh." Kade's belly tightened, passion flaring within him as he watched those long fingers sliding in and out of kiss-swollen lips, green eyes dancing down at him. Watching Surial like this was a fantasy come to life.

Surial sucked his fingers for awhile, hips moving in time, making soft, muted noises of pleasure. At last he slid them from his mouth and rose up to his knees.

He ached, from tip to toes, his hunger as raw as if they had not just touched. "You are like a dream, my One. A piece of marble breathed into life."

Surial's head went back on a moan as his fingers slid into his opening, his other hand slid up along his own chest. "Could a piece of marble do this, my lion?" Surial grabbed one of Kade's hands and guided it along the same path. "Is marble warm like my skin?"

Kade whimpered, holding onto his control with everything he possessed. "Nothing... nothing is like your skin."

Surial shifted, taking Kade in hand and pressing down just enough to hold them suspended on the edge of penetration.

"And nothing else feels like this." His One's voice was little more than a whisper that faded into a soft whimper as he pushed down, taking Kade into his body.

"My One!" Hot, tight -- so perfect and right... Kade's hips pushed up, needing more, needing Surial with everything he was.

Surial's hands moved to his chest, palms covering his nipples. He watched as Surial's head dropped forward, eyes open, but glazed, lips parted and sweet, needy sounds coming from them. Then Surial began to move, lifting himself away and pushing back down onto Kade's cock with long, slow motions.

Burning. He was aflame -- the heat beginning at the point where their bodies joined, traveling up his spine. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Kade simply felt, dissolving in the sensation of Surial's body moving on him.

Surial kept the pace slow, the pleasure building, becoming more intense with each long stroke. Suddenly his One moaned and began to move faster, dropping harder each time he moved down.

Hips moving up each time Surial sank down, their bodies met again and again. Kade reached out, wrapping his fingers around his One's cock, pulling in time with the thrusts. "Surial. Hot. So hot."

"Oh, Kadras." Surial's voice was breathless, words soft and gasping. "Need this. Need you. Always."

"Yes." Kade cried out and grabbed Surial's hips, pulling his One down onto his cock in quick, fierce motions. "Yes, my One. Please."

Surial's hands wrapped around his, holding them down, holding on, and his One's head went back, body arching as their movements became erratic. With a scream, Surial convulsed, his seed flowing from his cock, bathing Kade's belly with warmth. Kade may have screamed himself, or perhaps he whimpered. He wasn't sure. All he knew was the ripple of muscles around his cock as he came, body jerking in a pleasure so intense it consumed him.

He was still buried inside Surial when the sensations finally stopped shuddering through him. His One's weight was solid and familiar against him, Surial's hand sliding along his flank almost absently.

"Ki'ita." Tears began to flow, days of adrenaline and panic and fear releasing their hold on Kade's heart, unable to remain in the face of Surial's care. "I..."

"I know. I love you, too." Surial fingers slid over his cheeks, drying his tears as quickly as they fell.

A smile formed, pulling up the corners of Kade's lips as he nuzzled into the touch, peace filling him, settling into his bones. "So good to me."

"I have to be," whispered Surial. "You're mine."

"With all I am, my One." Kade softly kissed Surial's palm. "Until the sun dies and the moon falls from the sky."

Surial's hand turned to cup his face, soft skin sliding over his cheek. "And wherever we might roam."

Kade nodded with a tiny grin. "Can we wait to roam for a candlemark or twelve? Lit'ka and I just got here."

Surial chuckled and then moaned softly as Kade's cock finally slipped from his body. He raised his head, eyes softly caressing Kade's face. "We can stay as long you want. We can go whenever and wherever you want. Anything you want, my lion. All I ask is that we do it together."

"You're asking me to lead you into danger, into a place where I know you will be hurt, my One. How could I do that?" Kade sighed, looking for an easy answer where there were none. "They are destroying my people, Surial, stealing the tribes away. Someone has to stop them."

"And wouldn't someone have a better chance if they were two someones? I'm not helpless, Kade. I can take care of myself and if it comes down to taking a life to save yours or my own or a child's... I would take that life."

Surial rolled off Kade and sat cross-legged next to him, slender hands moving through the air as he spoke. "I don't think I can live through another separation like this one, especially now that I know for sure what you are doing. It would kill me, Kadrās, to be left behind like that again."

"Surial, listen to what you are saying. You? Take another's life? You ache when I hunt, when the birds -- even my own Tatofī, who was made by the wind to hunt -- bring their

kill." Kade turned to his side, propping one head up on his arm, slowly tracing patterns on Surial's leg. "This is war. What would you do, my One, if they did disable me? If they took you? How long do you think it would take before they killed you, used you? I... that is more than I can imagine."

"Then you tell me what we're going to do, because I can't be left behind again like that Kade. I can't."

"You are not thinking, my One. You were safe here. Warm, fed -- you know I will return to you." It itched at Kade, the fact that Surial was asking this. The thought of Surial watching him, the care in those green eyes fading as they saw him lost in his bloodlust, was almost as terrifying as the thought that Surial might be hurt.

Or that his One might be taken.

Kade shuddered, bile rising in his throat. They would kill him; he was too violent and too old to sell, but Surial...

"You were gone for weeks!" Surial's voice had risen, worry and panic ringing through it. "I had no idea when you'd be back and every day that you were gone hurt a little more. I couldn't eat, I slept as much as possible and when I wasn't sleeping I just... I wasn't alive."

"You survived without me for years, Surial. Years on your own -- working, playing, making love, making friends." Kade sighed. "You can survive without me now, but you will not survive having to slit a man's throat, feel his life pour over your hands, see his eyes beg you for mercy."

Surial's arms slid around his own chest, holding himself tightly. "That was before I knew you, when I still had a place to belong. Before I started healing." His One was blinking furiously, keeping the wetness in those eyes from falling. "I can't do this without you, Kadas."

It was more than anyone could ask him, to have his One so close and hurting and not give comfort. Kade sat up and pulled Surial into his arms. "You do belong, my One, my heart."

"With you," Surial whispered fiercely. "I belong with you."

Kade couldn't argue that point, no amount of reason could supercede the truth that beat between them. His One belonged in his arms, in his sight, in his care.

Unable to find a balance, Kade did what he understood, what he knew, what he was made to do. He held onto his One, searching with eyes and hands and heart for ways to bring those green eyes peace and health. "When was the last time you ate?"

Surial laughed a little shakily and then kissed him, mouth gentle and just a little sloppy. "How upset will you be if I say I can't remember?"

"My One, you have to eat." Kade grumbled softly, taking another kiss and then another. "Is there food here? Something you will enjoy?" He nuzzled his lips over Surial's face. "I will feed you, if you wish, but you need to eat for me."

"The cook here is awful. And it doesn't matter what I ask for they send up meat... and I couldn't get them to understand." Surial pouted.

"A'chaffa! Trusted my heart to idiots." Kade's grumble deepened into something closer to aggravation. "How do you get them up here again?"

"The rope by the door rings a bell in the kitchen. Takes them awhile to get here though, so you can come back to bed and... feed me." Surial leaned forward and ghosted a kiss across Kade's lips before nibbling on them gently.

"Mmm... you are hungry." Kade traced over Surial's face with one finger, smiling as Surial relaxed and sighed. He tilted the pointed chin up and took his One's mouth in a gentle kiss, using lips and tongue to soothe and comfort, sharing his joy and love.

"And you taste so good." Surial latched onto his tongue, sucking it.

Kade murmured happily, heat washing through him, his hands full of Surial's warmth. Smooth planes of skin were like living silk beneath his fingers. Surial arched into his hands, making soft noises of pleasure.

"Love touching you." Kade purred as Surial rubbed against him, jolts of lightning arcing through him where they touched. "I need to find you food, before we get distracted again, my One."

"There's something I could eat that would let us do both..." Surial's hand slid down his body and wrapped around his cock, stroking it to life.

Kade moaned softly, catching Surial's gaze with a happy, hungry grin. "I'm too old for this, you know. You'll wear me out."

"No, I'm keeping you young." Happiness colored Surial's face, his eyes shining like a forest in the sunlight.

"I love you." Kade toppled them over onto the bed, burying his face in Surial's neck and nipping lightly.

"I love you." He chuckled the words over a peaked nipple, murmured them as he nuzzled into ticklish ribs, whispered them joyously over the beat of his One's heart.

Surial didn't respond with words, instead his gasps and moans, his arching body and his wandering hands answered for him. There was love in each sound, each touch.

Kade kissed his way back up the pale torso to look into Surial's eyes, smiling as his braids fell around them. "You are joy made flesh."

Surial's fingers played through his braids, the smile on his One's face complete. "You are my joy."

Kade stroked the purpled bruise along Surial's neck, teasing the skin with feather-light touches. "My One."

A shudder went through the slender body beneath him and Surial arched his neck, offering more of the pale skin to Kade's gaze and touch. Kade resisted burying his face into that soft, sweet skin made for the touch of his lips for three entire heartbeats, trying to remind himself that his One needed food, needed care. Then the call of that curve of flesh overrode everything, the instinct to taste, to claim Surial as his own filling him.

Surial's hands slid more firmly into his hair, holding him against the sweet flesh. Soft whimpers and needy moans rewarded his efforts. Kade let himself feast on Surial, teeth and tongue moving over the smooth skin. The hollow of his throat was salty where the sensitive spot below his right ear was sweeter. The angled jaw was made to be nibbled and the pulsing vein in Surial's throat made Kade ache as he fastened his lips around it.

He felt Surial's legs slide around his waist, locking behind his back, and Surial began to cant up, sliding their groins together.

Kade's hands slid down, cupping Surial's buttocks, growling at the sensation of Surial's flesh in his hands, beneath his lips, against his body.

"Oh, Kadas..." Surial's voice was part needy moan, part sultry seduction.

A shudder rocked through him and another growl forced its way from his chest, vibrating onto Surial's throat. He bit down briefly before finding his control and forcing himself to relax, laving the fine skin with his tongue.

Surial rubbed against him frantically, erection hot and hard, pressing insistently against his own.

Kade pulled away, suddenly filled with hunger, with irresistible desire. Pushing himself downward on the mattress, he pulled Surial's hips up toward his mouth, and swallowed the hard cock down to the root. The flavor of seasalt and moonlight and his One burst within his mouth and he suckled feverishly, needing more, needing everything Surial could give him.

Surial wailed and began to push his hips up into Kade, moving with abandon.

"Kadras!" The sound of his name shouted, the echo moving around the room, was his only warning before Surial's seed spilled into his mouth. Kade pulled Surial closer, feeding from him, drawing each pulse of bliss from his throbbing flesh. Surial groaned softly, the sound happy, sated.

Long after the last pulse of seed had come, Kade gently licked and sucked, enjoying the warmth, the feel of Surial's body upon his tongue. Finally, Kade let the spent flesh slip free, letting his mouth play upon the ebony curls gracing the hollow of thin hips.

Surial's hands moved slowly through his braids. "Love you." The words were softly spoken, slightly slurred.

Lips still warm and soft upon the pale skin, Kade began to run his hands along Surial's legs, gently massaging the long limbs, working each muscle until they were loose and relaxed.

"Mmm..." Surial's murmurs of appreciation faded away as he lay, sprawled and open. Kade moved up Surial's body, fingers working their own healing, touching every inch of skin, pulling tension and unhappiness away as they moved. His One began to warm, pale skin responding to his hands, to his touch.

"So good... don't leave me again... can't be without you."

"Shh, my One." Kade slowly rolled Surial over and began to massage along Surial's back. "I am right here. You are my heart, my home. I am lost without you."

"Yours. Home." Surial took a deep shuddering breath and then grew quiet again, breath growing soft, quiet and even.

"Yes, mine." Kade smiled, brushing a kiss along one sharp shoulder blade.

Once Surial was well asleep, he would go and force whatever blithering idiot that passed for a cook in this place to make his One some food -- some beans, perhaps. And bread with honey. Then something sweet. Then he would have water brought so Surial could bathe. Then, Kade pondered, they should go find somewhere of their own for the spring. Somewhere the mi'it could play and that had berries...

His musings were interrupted as Surial shifted, hand reaching out blindly, searching until it found his arm. Surial's fingers wrapped gently around his arm as his One settled down again.

"I'm going to have a hard time getting you food if you hold onto me." Kade pulled the blankets over Surial, tucking him in and dropping sweet kisses on the exposed skin.

Surial just sighed, a soft, satisfied sound, and burrowed into the blankets. Kade sat for a long moment, stroking the dark hair and watching the other half of his soul sleep, before standing and finding his clothes so that he could find something to tempt Surial's appetite.

The hall was deserted, the only sounds of life coming from below, along with enough good smells in the kitchen to remind him that it had been awhile since he'd last eaten himself.

He followed his nose into a large, dark kitchen with a thin, pinched woman glaring at a group of grubby, pale children. "I told you ragamuffins to stop coming in here looking for handouts. No money, no food!"

Kade frowned as thin, hungry shoulders slumped and the little group moved as one toward the door. "If there is enough, why deny the little ones a meal? They are hungry."

She turned her glare on him. "This ain't no charity. If you can't pay you don't stay. Or eat." She gave him a belligerent look. "You don't look like you can pay anymore than they can!"

He swallowed hard against the growl that formed in his chest. "I am the Guardian of the talik, of the healer, Lord Banshinaree. I have paid, for him to be cared for, not starved and left to wait while you screech at hungry babes!"

"Nobody's cheatin' ya. Three squares a day go into his room." She sniffed. "Come out untouched most of the time. Nobody paid me to feed anyone by hand."

Kade slammed his hand upon the oak table, the sound ringing throughout the room, silence falling in its wake. His temper flared, dark and dangerous, too close to the edges of his control. His voice, when he spoke, was low and deadly quiet, somehow filling the room with menace. "Perhaps, if you sent food that he could eat, there would be less trouble. I have explained this to you. I will not explain it again. No meat. Beans, meal, grains, breads, cheese, fresh milk. No meat."

He rounded the table, drawing himself up tall and fierce. "I want a tray fixed for him. Now. Then I want a bath warmed and sent up so he can bathe. And feed the children. No child deserves to be hungry. I will pay for their meal."

Her face grew pinched. "Nobody said nothing 'bout no meat. Who's ever heard of such a thing? Mind you he had more than that on his plate and never ate none of it, so I don't see what the difference is." She held up her hands like she expected to be hit. "I'll get yer tray made up. But I ain't making no special food. Everyone expects special treatment."

"Thank you." Kade watched her as she made up the tray. The food looked solid enough, well-made and filling -- a bowl of oatmeal, a small loaf of bread and four tiny sweet pies along with a mug of cold sweet milk.

As she handed the tray to him, Kade nodded. "I will assure your food is not wasted if you continue to leave the meat off the tray. Lord Surial cannot eat the flesh of animals. Please give the children a meal. I will pay."

"Can the children eat meat?" she asked sarcastically.

"Watch yourself, woman. You are being paid to care for your boarders and to feed these babes. I suggest you keep your sharp tongue for your own children and look to your work." Kade's eyebrows drew together as he snarled. "I am not as patient as my Lord and will assure that he is well cared for."

She cringed back. "I'll feed them, Sir," she muttered unhappily.

"Good." Kade turned, nodding at the children as he passed. As he walked up the stairs, balancing the tray, he forced himself to relax, to bury his temper deep within where Surial could not touch it, could not be touched by it.

By the time he reached their door, his nerves had stopped jangling.

Surial lay sprawled on the bed, a smile on his face, one arm wrapped around a pillow. There were dark smudges under his eyes and he was thinner than Kade remembered, a gauntness that spoke of his fasting.

"A'chaffa, my One, what am I going to do with you?" Kade shook his head and put the tray on the bedside table. He stoked the fire and stripped, washing himself quickly and tossing the torn and dirty clothes aside.

When he was dry and the room warm and put to rights, Kade slipped into bed with Surial, kissing him softly. "Time to eat, my One."

"Lion?" Surial's arms slid around his waist. "I thought I'd dreamed you."

"I am here, and I brought food for you." Kade pushed close, letting Surial feel him, warm and real. "Wake up for me and eat."

Surial chuckled. "Now I know you're real."

"I brought up bread and oatmeal. There are even some fruit pies, to satisfy your sweet tooth." Kade kissed Surial's smile, tickling softly with his nose. "Open your eyes and eat for me, my One."

Forest green blinked up at him, Surial's face happy and at peace. "Did you convince them to keep the meat off the plate?"

"Of course." Kade dropped a kiss on Surial's forehead. "No meat at all."

"You must have been formidable as ever, my lion." Surial grinned and pushed himself up, sitting cross-legged on the bed, pale skin bright against the blankets.

"Formidable?" Kade shook his head, turning to grab the tray and hide his heated cheeks. "I simply asked for your meal and reminded her that you didn't prefer meat."

Surial chuckled again, peering at the food on the tray. "That looks pretty good. And I think you must have been formidable just to brave the cook. Mean old witch, always yelling. She scared me."

Kade handed Surial a spoon with a grin. "She was grumpy. She was yelling at some children when I went down. I had her feed them."

Surial beamed at him. "You are such a good man, my lion."

Warmth filled him, made his stomach flutter and his fingers tremble. He focused on the tray, pushing the oatmeal over to his One, pleased to his bones. "No one should go hungry."

"No, they shouldn't. I wish more people had a heart like yours." Surial dipped his spoon into the oatmeal and began to eat. "Yours is much better," he mumbled around a mouthful.

Though Kade noticed the quality of the gruel didn't seem to be slowing Surial down any, the spoon moving quickly between the bowl and his One's mouth.

"I'll make yours tomorrow. Maybe I'll find some honey for it." Kade pulled himself off a piece of bread and nibbled, watching his One eat. "Maybe some beans, too. That way all we'll need the grouch for is milk, cheese and bread."

"And sweet pies," Surial added as he replaced the empty bowl on the tray and reached for one of the sweets.

"And sweet pies." He chuckled, the sound fond. Surial's eyes lit up, his One's childlike pleasure with sugared foods amused Kade, made him feel happy and warm. "I'll have to ask her for double for you."

Surial snorted. "And pay her double, too." But the bite of the words was mellowed by the fruit pie in his mouth and his eyelids dropped to halfmast, his tongue snaking out to lick at the smudge on his lips.

"These sure are good for being baked by someone with such a sour disposition..."

"Maybe she has a baker." Kade was distracted, eyes focused on Surial's lips. "Can I have a taste?"

At Surial's nod, he leaned forward, ignoring the hand that held out the pastry, licking the fruit from sweet, soft lips. Surial's lips opened on a warm smile and then widened farther, inviting his tongue in. The taste of the fruit was stronger in Surial's mouth, but flavored with his One's sweetness.

The kiss was long, deep, and so right that Kade's toes curled. When it ended, he was breathless. "Sweet."

"You are." Surial nodded agreeably and popped the rest of the pie into his mouth, chewing slowly, dark gaze on Kade's face the entire time.

"Drink your milk. It's cold and good." Kade handed the mug over to Surial, along with another pie before moving the tray and curling on the mattress next to his One.

Surial obediently drank the milk, emptying the glass after he'd eaten the last of the pie. His tongue snaked out, licking across the moustache the white drink had left and then he was leaning forward, mouth fusing with Kade's.

Oh, Surial tasted sweet, cream and berries and spice and moonlight all swirled together into one kiss. Kade wrapped his arms around Surial and held him, purring softly.

"You make me so hungry," Surial whispered against his lips. Soft bites were soothed by a warm, wet tongue, while Surial's fingers danced down his spine, following the tracks of his vertebrae, one by one by one.

"Good. Love when you touch me." Kade watched the greens swirl and shift in those fascinating, endless eyes.

Surial smiled, hands cupping Kade's buttocks, thumbs sliding between his cheeks, teasing along his cleft, pressing against his opening before continuing down to slide over the backs of his thighs.

"Oh." Kade sighed, body shifting, reacting automatically to Surial's hands. "So good."

Surial's touch moved back up, sliding over the mounds of his bottom this time and then tracing sweet paths, following the scars from whips and worse, his One's fingers moving knowingly over them, tracing along them as if his fingers had eyes and he could see them at this moment.

Kade shivered. Whenever Surial touched his scars he was caught between shame that they existed and sweet pleasure at being loved, being known. Surial slid down and began to lap at the talon marks on his chest, tongue slick and hot against them.

Kade stroked Surial's hair, legs moving restlessly as Surial tasted his skin. Arousal, always evident when he was close to his One, was a bright burn in his belly.

"I'm going to taste all of you," murmured Surial. "Touch and taste every bit of you because you make me so hungry."

"All of me?" Kade groaned, pushing his head into the pillows as he stretched up toward Surial's lips.

"Every single bit."

Surial shifted nuzzling into his armpit and licking across the sensitive skin there, making Kade squirm. His One's head came up briefly, bright smile on his face. "I love how you respond to my touch."

"I was formed for your hands, your touch." Kade smiled back, moving to curl closer to Surial's sweet skin.

"My lips," added Surial. He leaned down and licked across Kade's throat before returning to his self appointed task.

Surial's focus was pure, tongue sliding over Kade's body, drawing groans and whimpers and soft sighs from deep within him.

Every part of him was thoroughly explored, from his shoulders on down to his toes and then Surial turned him onto his stomach and repeated the process, moving from his feet on up. Kade settled comfortably, relaxing into the pillows, limbs loose and skin shivering beneath Surial's attention. "Make me feel so good."

"Good. Want you to feel good." He slid briefly past the crevice between Kade's buttocks, planning to come back once he'd finished tracing the scars that criss-crossed Kade's back.

Kade moaned and wriggled, braids shifting, falling over his back and shoulders.

"You're so hot, my lion." He mouthed the larger scars, tongue flicking across the rest, exploring the different textures.

"I'm sorry." Kade whispered, voice betraying his desire and nervous agitation. "I wish I were smooth, unmarked, like you."

Surial shook his head and Kade could feel the brush of silken hair against his skin. "I wish you were smooth, too, because I would take away the pain if I could, but I don't mind how it looks. There's a terrible beauty in each mark. And it changes how you taste, makes your back sweet and spicy and all mixed up in strange layers."

"They feel different, some are sensitive, some are numb." Kade smiled into the pillows. "No one has ever touched them but you. You never shied away from them."

"They are a part of you -- how could I turn away from that?"

Surial's lips arrived at the top of his neck, nibbling at his skin through his braids. "Tell me which ones are sensitive," Surial whispered before beginning the journey downward, tongue swiping along a long, thin scar.

Kade arched as heat suffused him. Surial chuckled and switched scars, this time choosing a thick, heavy mark and Kade relaxed as the intensity lowered.

It became a kind of game, Kade's body played by Surial's tongue -- his arousal ratcheted up and then eased for long moments. At last Surial moved lower, focusing his attention on the crease between his buttocks. His One's hands were warm against his skin, holding him open for that slick tongue.

"Oh... your tongue... so hot..." Kade was shifting, whimpering, needy little noises that would be embarrassing if they were not made for Surial's ears.

His One's tongue pushed inside him, taking him with wet heat, a slick glide of soft flesh that moved in and out of his body.

He was lost, lost within the waves of pleasure that Surial was giving him. Shudders rocked his body and he rose up upon his knees letting his body move and sway as it needed to.

Surial's tongue slid away, down over his balls and up along his erection before tracing backward along the same trail. Then Surial was inside again, tongue fucking him, one hand sliding over his cock, stroking.

"Please. Love you. Need you." Kade shuddered, slipping unconsciously into his native tongue, pleading breathlessly for more, for Surial's touch, for Surial to take him, fill him. Anything. Everything.

"Anything you want." Surial replied in Naik, the words singing beneath his tongue in a way that was strange and yet oddly right in Kade's ears. He had little time to enjoy it, though, before his One's cock slid into his body.

Kade threw his head back with a hungry cry, the sweet pressure filling him, pressing everything aside but Surial. Kade lifted himself up, grabbing the headboard, pushing himself down onto hot, hard flesh.

Surial's hands wrapped around his hips, pulling him back with each thrust. "So hot. Love you, Kadas."

"Tell me again?" Kade was flying, the sound of his name and love in Surial's lilting voice making him gasp.

"Love you, Kadras." Surial began to repeat it, each word punctuated by a thrust.

Anything. Kade would sacrifice the world, his honor, his life -- anything for this man and the love and care and passion...

Kade roared as he came, body shaking uncontrollably, the headboard cracking beneath his hands. Surial sobbed his name once more and thrust in, filling him with heat and his love and seed.

"Surial." Little lights were dancing around Kade's vision, head swimming as he fought to catch his breath.

His One's weight lay against his back, breath panting across his skin, arms holding him tight.

Kade slowly slumped to the mattress, boneless and utterly dissolved, assuring himself that Surial was settled upon his back before closing his eyes.

"Love you, lion."

Surial's words whispered across his neck.

"Love you." Kade was sliding, body succumbing to pillows and warmth and the first time he'd had more than a few stolen moments in weeks. "Love..."

"Sleep, my lion, you're home." Surial's words were the last he heard as sleep claimed him.

He slept, trapped within dream after dream. Periodically his eyes would open, focus upon Surial's face and then the images would pull him down again.

Children burning, men screaming, blood pouring upon white snow. Surial's eyes blazing at him through the darkness, calling him home.

Kade was lost, Lit'ka limping, the ghosts of his parents close and angry, his Guardian's mark aflame.

"Kade..." Surial called out to him, voice worried, frightened. He could feel his One's hands sliding over his skin, hot and smooth.

"Come on Kadras, come back to me now."

Surial. His One. Kade pushed the dreams away, arching blindly toward the warm touch. "Home. My One. Love you."

"That's right, my lion." Surial nuzzled against his skin, nose cold.

Kade chuckled, wrapping his arms around Surial and hugging. "Di'ben sud, my One"

Surial laughed. "Di'ben nor, you mean. You slept the night and the day away, my lion."

"A whole day!" Kade opened his eyes, blinking at Surial owlishly, stunned and confused. "I was tired. Did you eat?"

"I slept with you, love."

"Oh." That pleased him and he nuzzled into Surial with a soft purr. "Was looking for you."

"I'm here, where you left me." Surial smiled against his skin.

"Heard your heart, calling to me. Needed you." He was still foggy, slipping in and out of a doze. The reality of Surial's skin kept him near coherence.

"I'm here, Kadrass." Surial's lips were on his face, soft, sweet kisses. "I'm here."

He was almost giddy, raising his face to meet Surial's lips, a happy smile taking up residence upon his lips. "Love you."

Surial smiled, but his response was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"That's probably evening meal -- you think the grump remembered about the meat?"

Surial asked as he climbed out of their bed, wrapping a blanket around his naked body.

"If she didn't, she will once I follow her downstairs." Kade's growl was low and irritated, the bed was not comfortable without Surial's body to warm and soothe him.

"My hero." Surial teased him softly before opening the door and taking the tray from the young girl waiting there.

He came back to the bed, grin wide. "No meat."

"Good." Kade smiled and scooted over. "What did they send you to eat, my One?"

"You mean us." Surial gave him a quick kiss and settled the tray between them. "Some sort of bean and rice casserole, vegetable broth, bread, and more sweet pies."

"Smells good." Kade settled into the pillows and handed Surial a spoon. "Eat."

It did smell good, hearty and warm, a perfect balm for the wind howling at the window.

Wind. Window. Kade sat up with a gasp, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. "The mi'it!"

"Shh." Surial's hands soothed along his back. "I asked one of the boys to take care of them this morning. They'll be fine until morning."

Kade looked over at his lover with a wry grin, relaxing beneath the soft touch. "I haven't been doing a good job of taking care of us lately, have I?"

"You haven't been here." Surial blinked and then smiled again, hands coaxing him back onto the bed. "But you are now."

"I am." Kade let himself be settled in, sliding next to Surial with a soft sigh. "Every time I have to leave you behind, it gets harder."

"I have the solution for that." Surial held a spoonful of broth out to him.

Kade opened his mouth and sighed as the warm soup hit his empty belly. "Tastes good. Haven't eaten since... What solution?"

Surial grinned and spooned another mouthful of the soup into his mouth before breaking off a chunk of bread and handing it to him. "A way to make it easier when you leave me behind."

Kade pulled off a bite of bread and fed it to Surial with a grin. "I knew you would find an answer for us."

"It's the same answer I've had from the start, my lion. You don't leave me behind."

Kade frowned. "That's not our answer, my One. I won't lead you into danger."

He sat up straighter, scooping up a bit of casserole and handing the fork to Surial with a sigh. "If they take me, they'll kill me, Surial. It won't be quick or easy, but it'll be the end. You... you're young, lovely... if they took you..." Kade shuddered, flashes of the torn and broken skin of the Naik slaves stealing through his mind. "I won't take you with me."

"Then don't go."

Surial slid his fingers across Kade's lips. "If they kill you they will have killed me as well, without ever even seeing me. I know you think that I'm exaggerating, but I mean it, Kadrass. I can't do this without you."

Kade looked at Surial, heart in his eyes. "Then help me. I cannot let them continue to destroy my people. My ancestors will haunt me if I do not avenge them. My heart will not allow me to lead you into pain. I am lost, Surial. Help me."

"Then take me as far as you can. I will wait for you at a camp nearby. That way it won't be weeks before I know that you're safe."

"And if you see something -- something that makes you despise me? Will you still need me then?"

"I will always need you, my lion. And how could I despise you if you are saving the lives of your people?" Surial's hands were on his face, keeping their gazes locked.

Kade lowered his eyes, unable to look into those loving eyes. "You've never seen me, when I hunt. It's like a hunger, and when I see them, I want to hurt them, to stop them. You'll see it, if you come too close and you'll turn away from me."

"I could never turn away from you, Kadrass." Surial's hands slid along his face, thumbs brushing over the scars across his cheeks. "No matter what you do."

But Surial had before.

And would again.

A single tear broke free from Kade's lashes. He wanted -- needed to believe what Surial was telling him, even as his good sense told him that the man who could not bear to see a sick animal suffer would never bear loving him. "You need to eat, my One. You'll fade away."

Surial leaned forward to lick away the tear. "You don't believe me. Don't you have faith in my love?"

"It is the reason I live." Kade looked down, his gaze caught by the moon's kiss on Surial's cheek. "Your love is the most precious gift I have ever been entrusted with."

"Then trust in my love, Kadrass. Believe me when I tell you that I will always need you. You are my life."

Unerringly, he found his braid, hidden within the dark hair. "Our names will live together upon the wind forever. I belong to you as you belong to me."

Surial rubbed his cheek against Kade's hand. "Yes. And all you need to do is trust it. Trust me and your wind."

"Is it that simple?" Kade caressed Surial's cheek, soft and easy. "Trust in my One that the

winds blew me to; trust in your love and your eyes that hold my home?" He smiled, thumb moving to trace a full bottom lip. "You make things so clear. You always have."

Surial leaned into his touch. "All I know is that I love you and I need you. That's all that matters, Kadas."

He smiled and his thumbs slid across the marks on Kade's cheeks. "Well, and that you love me, too."

"With all I am." Kade closed his eyes for a moment and then looked into Surial's eyes. "I will not leave you behind again, but you will remain hidden away, safe and warm."

"Thank you." Surial kissed him slowly and then sat back. "Now eat, so we can make up for lost time."

"We will eat, together." Kade reached out to touch, to enjoy the texture of Surial's skin. "And then we will make love until spring."

"I like the sound of that."

Kade scooped up a bite of casserole and popped it in Surial's mouth. "Somehow, I thought you would. Eat."

Chapter Twenty Two

Surial lay curled on Kade's chest, listening to the sound of nightbugs chirping, fighting the crackle of the fire for aural dominance.

Spring.

Spring.

The winter had been long and harsh, but it had finally loosed its grip, allowing them to ride.

He slid off of Kade to lie on his back next to him, watching the stars light up the night sky.

He sighed heavily.

The truth was, he was restless -- a state much better suited his companion, but nonetheless his, this night.

He was waiting for something, though he didn't know what, but the anticipation was sitting like fire at the base of his spine.

Suddenly, the moon rose past the edge of the trees, shining its full, brilliant light on him and Kade, and he knew.

The moon's call was strong in him, stronger now that he'd accepted his power, his special ability, than it had been in a long time.

Surial got up and slipped away from the camp, following the call of the moon's music. He could remember doing this as a boy, slipping away to do what he must; it used to drive his father to anger and shouting, his mother to worry, but it made him feel so good.

He left his clothing behind, piece by piece as he walked, following a path his feet seemed to know, though he'd never been here before.

By the time he was naked, he'd arrived at a small glade, bushes surrounded sweet smelling grasses and small, white flowers that bloomed everywhere. His feet crushed them, releasing a light, spicy scent, and he bent, gathering them, knitting them together into garlands.

He wound them through his hair and around his neck, wrists and ankles.

Standing in the center of the glade he looked up into the sky, watching the moon, waiting for her music to reach him, and, when it did, he began to dance.

The music washed through him, sweet and clear as he twirled and swayed. The perfume of the trees and flowers and soil filled his nose and made his head spin, made him almost giddy.

He moved, danced, full of joy and passion, for long moments, losing himself in the constant, cool caress of the moon's light.

Peace and renewal washed through him as he danced, the more he moved, the more of himself he spent, the greater the return. For each drop of sweat that beaded on his skin, the moon filled him with purpose. He could feel that she was delighted by him, his return after long years denying himself.

He danced until the large disk passed across the sky, setting beyond the trees. As the last silver sliver slid out of sight he sank to the ground, spent, happy, holding onto the feeling of bewitchment.

"You are beautiful, my One." Kade's voice was husky, rumbling across the clearing. "The moon, she makes love to your skin, your spirit."

"Kadras." He held out his arms, inviting his lover into the glade. He looked back up into the sky, but the moon was gone, leaving only the canopy of stars to light the night in her stead. "It has something to do with my healing -- I used to dance with her when I was a child."

Kade walked around Surial, slowly circling before sinking to the ground behind him, wrapping strong, warm arms around his waist, face burying against his neck. "It was lovely. *You* are lovely."

Tilting his head to the side, Surial slid his arms up and back, linking his hands behind Kade's head. "I feel lovely tonight," he said softly. He did, he felt radiant and glorious.

Kade kissed his throat softly. "You are magic made flesh. I love you, my beautiful One."

"The moon has made me beautiful tonight -- usually it is you who does so, my lion." He rubbed his back against Kade's warm body. "I love you, too."

Kade purred and nuzzled, rubbing Surial's stomach with a feather-light touch. Surial could feel Kade's heat reaching out for him, caressing him.

"You smell like spring."

"It's the flowers. They only bloom at night, under the moon's touch."

Another warm nuzzle came to his neck and he felt Kade inhale deeply. "No. It's not the flowers."

Pleasure bloomed through him, his cock, already interested, firmed; this particular flower bloomed under Kade's touch.

Kade's hand slid lower, fingers tracing Surial's hipbones for a moment before moving down to cup his sacs, holding them warm and careful in huge hands.

Shivering, but not from the cold, Surial moaned softly.

Kade's lips traced up Surial's neck, moving until he found the sensitive hollow beneath Surial's ear. He suckled, hand beginning to stroke the silken skin of the tightening sacs, sliding down periodically to rub behind, setting Surial's nerves alight.

Surial let his hands move over Kade's braids, tugging and pulling on them gently before his hands moved down, traveling over the hot skin until he could hold the powerful thighs, feel Kade's muscles shift and flex beneath his palms.

A rumbling growl sounded by Surial's ear, vibrating down into his torso. Then the suction against his throat intensified, teeth beginning to press into his flesh.

It felt like lightning had struck him and was pulsing between Kade's teeth and his fingers, bringing each point between his neck and his balls to glorious life. He cried out, arching, rocking, trying to push into both points of contact, trying to deepen each.

"Lovely." The word was groaned, Kade's voice full of need and hunger. "My One."

Surial rubbed his head against Kade's shoulder, his buttocks against Kade's groin. "I want to feel the blooms kissed by the moon on my back, and the skin kissed by the sun on my front. Make love to me?"

"With every thought, every breath." Kade's voice was almost reverent, as if he were delivering a vow.

Surial felt himself turned, drawn into arms that were made to hold him, and gifted with a sweet, hungry kiss.

Kade's hunger fed his own, and he pushed himself into the heat of Kade's body, their skin sliding together, slick and warm. One kiss flowed into two, into three and then he lost track, lust and love flooding his mind, drowning out everything else.

Kade's hands were in his hair, sliding along his spine, his legs. Dozens of braids tickled against him, touching him, holding him close, tangling around his hands.

It didn't matter how many times they did this, it was new every time, a new scent, a new sensation, a new degree of pleasure found.

His body thrummed with need, shook with lust, and he felt wanton and wild.

"Are you dancing for me, my One?" Kade's hunger was delivered into his hands, the huge body pressing close.

"Always."

Kade chuckled and then took another kiss, wrapping his hand through Surial's hair and holding their bodies close together. Surial could feel Kade's erection, hot and hard between them.

He took it in his hand, thumb sliding across the top, spreading the drops of liquid that had gathered there, further proof of Kade's desire for him. He pumped several times and then brought his hand up to his mouth, sucking on his thumb, moaning at the sharp sweetness he found there. Kade's come tasted like wild honey, strong, dark, spicy and sweet. It made him moan.

"Surial..." Kade's eyes were fastened on Surial's lips and hand, his tongue searching over his own lips unconsciously, tremors moving through his body.

"You want a taste?" Surial slid his hand back down between them, gathering more of the drops from the top of Kade's cock and held his thumb to Kade's lips.

Kade dropped his mouth over Surial's thumb, purring softly as he suckled, eyes drooping closed. His head moved slowly, bobbing up and down, braids moving lightly over his shoulders. Whimpering, Surial shivered, body tightening; if Kade didn't stop he was going to...

He screamed as Kade's teeth scraped over the pad of his thumb, his body convulsing, hot seed spilling between them.

Kade held him close, mouth moving to kiss across his palm, moving toward his wrist.

Then, as the last of his tremors left him, Kade brought their joined hands down to slide through the slickness on his belly before bringing their fingers up toward that smiling, hungry mouth. "I want a taste."

That was all it took for Surial to be hard again, body growing taut as Kade took their fingers into his mouth, sucking and licking Surial's and his own.

"Good. So good." Kade's eyes were glowing, sunlight filtered through honey. "You taste like the sea."

He leaned forward, sliding his tongue along Kade's knuckles, his own taste sharp, but colored by the flavor of his lover's skin.

"Do you want me, Kadrass? Do you want to be inside me now?"

"Yes. Now." Kade groaned, leaning forward, using his hands to cushion Surial as he laid them down upon the fallen petals.

"Love you inside me..." Surial pulled Kade's head down, licking at his lips. "So hard, so hot."

Kade cried out, hand gathering the moisture from Surial's belly, stroking it on his cock. His eyes were wild as two fingers moved to slide inside Surial's body. "Need you. Now."

Surial arched up, breath leaving him in a gasp as Kade's fingers penetrated him. Thick, blunt and warm, they stretched him, opened him, prepared him for Kade's cock.

Kade's fingers pushed and twisted, sending sparks ricocheting through him, driven by the hungry moans whispered against his throat. His hands slid automatically to Kade's braids, twining in them, holding Kade tight against his neck. Kade's lips fastened onto his throat as the stroking of those fingers ceased and the blunt pressure of Kade's erection began to press within him. He moaned as he was stretched, the sweet burning ache as Kade entered him spread out along his skin, sending shivers of delight chasing up his spine.

With every long pull of Kade's mouth, he pushed in, moving further within Surial's body. Then, as the suction eased, the pressure did also. Soon Surial was captured within Kade's rhythm, slow and sure.

He let his eyes drop closed, let go of his control and just felt: felt Kade's lips at his throat, sucking gently, pulling on his skin, felt the cock within him, pushing and pulling, in and out, felt the large hands on his skin, one still beneath him, cushioning him from the ground, the other heavy and hot on his hip.

Kade lifted his head and looked at Surial, face softened in passion, in joy. "My One."

Then he bent, gathering Surial close for a shatteringly tender kiss, even as his hips continued their dance.

Surial felt himself melt, boneless and limp but for his erection, pressed hard and hot in between them.

Kade filled him, supported him, gave him wings and flew with him. His lion held him close, taking endless soft kisses, mingling their breath, their heartbeats. The forest glade disappeared, the moon, the flowers, the grass -- all of it fell away beneath Kade's love.

If he could have, he would have stayed there forever, wrapped in Kade, but his body had demands of its own. He came, crying out into Kade's mouth.

Surial felt an answering warmth fill him, heard the almost silent whimper that Kade fed into his lips. The arms around him trembled, shivered and Kade slipped from his body, rolling them both over to settle Surial upon the wide chest.

Kade's body kept him warm and he turned to kiss the skin beneath his head, pulling the salty sweat flavor into his mouth. "I love you, Kadas."

"As I love you, my One." Kade's voice was soft, sated, the purr that invariably rumbled from him when he was happy and pleased filling the air.

He settled himself more comfortably, letting the night's dancing finally leave exhaustion in its wake. The moon's glade was a good place in which to let dawn find them.

Surial flopped over onto his back with a sigh.

He was chilled.

The blankets felt rough and scratched at his skin.

His pillow was hard and the ground beneath him harder.

The wind had changed direction since he'd gone to bed and now the smoke from the fire was blowing into his face.

Finally he gave up on trying to sleep and, wrapping a blanket around himself, he wandered to the edge of the small glade and stared up into the night sky.

He was lonely and tired, cold and feeling more than a little sorry for himself. The plain truth of it was he missed his lover.

Kade had been gone for five days. Hunting the slavers. Surial had decided to forgo the stench of meat and the press of women at the warriors' camp and had told Kade that he would use the time to meditate and commune with the land.

Kade had believed him and so he'd spent the last five days moping around, sleeping fitfully during the day and watching the sky at night. There was a new moon tonight, and she peeked at him from between the clouds, teasing him with her light. He took it as a good omen.

The smell of spices and warmth and home hit Surial just seconds before strong arms wrapped around his waist and soft, searching lips brushed against his ear. "My One."

"Oh." His hands slid along Kade's arms, covering his lover's hands, holding them in place as his head tilted automatically, inviting that warm mouth to explore.

He leaned back into Kade's body.

"Missed you." Kade's tongue trailed along the skin of Surial's throat, tasting him almost lazily. "Couldn't wait to get back to your arms."

He murmured something nonsensical and tightened his hold on Kade's arms as his eyes dropped closed. He'd missed this. Things hadn't been right since Kade had ridden off and the forced smile on his own face had faded, but now...

Now he was warm, now he was home.

Sweet, soft, hungry kisses dropped upon his neck, trailing up his jaw. Kade was heat and solid strength behind him, surrounding him with a quiet joy that Surial could hear in the purr rumbling from Kade's chest.

"Next time I suggest you go somewhere without me for more than an afternoon, throw me over the front of your horse and take me with you."

Kade nodded, tongue busy teasing the hollow beneath Surial's ear. One hand moved down to slide beneath his blanket. He heard Kade's hiss as that warm hand touched the skin of his belly, tracing small circles.

His own moan was low and heartfelt, rising from deep inside him. His hands moved back, grabbing onto Kade's hips. "Nothing feels as good as you."

"I need you, Surial." With those quietly growled words, Kade lifted him from the ground -- one hand beneath his knees, the other behind his shoulders -- and headed back to their camp.

He slid his arms around Kade's shoulders, urgency filling him. "Yes, need you," he agreed breathlessly as his head dropped back in invitation.

Kade stumbled as his eyes fastened upon Surial's throat, hot and desperate. Surial watched as Kade licked his own lips, firm teeth nibbling upon the wet skin. "We won't make it to our bedding if you tempt me, my One."

He shrugged, making sure the motion rolled his shoulders, making his skin ripple.

"I don't care where you take me, as long as you do."

"Surial..." This growl was a clear warning -- Surial could see the muscles clench beneath

Kade's vest, hear the harsh inhalation as Kade breathed him in, feel the hands cradling his body pull him closer even as Kade continued walking.

"Kadras." He whispered his lover's name, putting all of his longing and loneliness of the past days into the name.

"Oh." Before the syllable faded away on the wind, Kade was on his knees, one hand tangling into Surial's hair, tongue sliding between Surial's lips.

Heat filled him as the sweet necessity of the kiss soothed nerves made raw and left wanting.

They feasted upon each other, feeding the wind with whimpers and moans. Kade's hands stroked, caressed, loved Surial's skin, making him twist and purr, arch into Kade's body and sigh into Kade's lips.

"Missed this," he murmured against Kade's lips, hands moving to slide into his lover's braids, fingers twisting through them.

Kade's head pushed into his hands, encouraging more contact, a pleasure-filled rumble falling between them. "Missed you, my One. I was empty without my heart near."

"I have never been so lonely as I was these last days." He leaned forward again, sharing another long, deep kiss until he could feel it all the way to his toes. "I don't know how I managed before you were mine."

"It does not matter." Kade shuddered and pulled Surial even closer, sliding gentle lips over his cheeks, his temples, across his forehead in a soft benediction. "That was before. This is now."

Lifting his face for more of the sweet kisses, Surial sighed, hands tugging Kade's head closer. Eyes the color of sun-kissed honey blazed at him, hot and fierce, even as the careful, easy kisses brushed feather-light over his face. Leaning back, he pulled Kade with him. "Make love to me, my lion."

"Always." Kade settled Surial upon the blanket and then straightened, pulling off his vest and unlacing his leathers, erect flesh pushing, throbbing against the loosened ties.

Surial moaned, arm stretching up reaching toward the promise of heat and silk covered hardness.

Kade shook his head, chuckling as his body arched involuntarily toward Surial's touch. "You are distracting me again."

"I can't help myself. Your body calls to me." He leaned up far enough to slide his hand along Kade's length, encouraging it to free itself of Kade's breeches.

It was fascinating, the roll of Kade's stomach, the muscles jumping and twitching at his touch. So much power, so much strength -- it was all offered up to Surial's hands.

Surial went to his knees, letting his hands play over those warm muscles as he nuzzled Kade's cock, moaning at the sharp scent of his lover. He could hear Kade's breath catch, feel the way the large body tightened at his touch. One hand trailed over his cheek, trembling slightly as it caressed. He licked at the tip of Kade's erection and then took the head into his mouth, sucking lightly, gasping with pleasure as the first drops of liquid hit his tongue.

"Surial!" He could hear the echoes of his name, gasped in tones full of awe-struck hunger, moving in between the trees and offered up to the moon.

He pulled away long enough to growl "more" and then took Kade back into his mouth, sucking strongly.

Kade's body shifted, muscles convulsing beneath Surial's hands as those hips remained still. Harsh cries were torn from an arched throat, an addictive mixture of need and passion and wonder all flavored with the love Surial heard any time Kade spoke his name.

It made him shudder, his own cock hard and needy as he continued to suck, pulling more and more of Kade's length into his mouth.

Kade's hips began to move, rocking toward Surial's mouth. "My One... so hot."

Surial slid one hand around to Kade's buttocks, encouraging the thrusts into his mouth. He grabbed his own cock with his other hand, fisting his flesh.

Sweet sobbing sounds poured over Surial as Kade slid in and out of his lips, the muscles beneath his hand clenching and relaxing, heat building between them. Surial breathed through his nose and swallowed each time Kade's cock slid into his throat. Kade's erection was silk and steel and heat and tasted like something precious. Kade was whimpering, soft endearments in his native tongue whispered between them. Surial looked up over rippling muscles and into honeyed eyes that watched with a dazed hunger.

A pleasure deeper than the physical rolled through him; his love for this man was overwhelming, Kade was everything. He let it show in his eyes, bared his soul to the man who knew it almost better than he himself did. One finger traced along his eyebrow and down his cheek, the motion tender and shattering.

"Ki'ita." With that whisper, Kade shivered and came, spending himself with a slow, soft moan, his eyes fastened upon Surial's face.

Surial had stopped stroking himself, but Kade's orgasm, the come flooding his mouth and throat and the look in his lover's eyes pushed him into his own orgasm.

Kade's knees buckled, spent flesh slipping from Surial's lips as he slid to the ground and pulled their bodies together. "Love you."

Melting against Kade's warmth, Surial murmured the words back, even as he brought their lips together, sharing the taste of Kade's love. Kade was rumbling, purring softly into Surial's lips as they kissed. That sound held comfort, contentment, sheer peace and joy within it and its vibrations sent those gentle emotions deep into Surial's bones.

"Welcome home," he whispered as he drew back to look up into Kade's eyes, unsure of whether he spoke the words to his lover or to himself.

Kade smiled, eyes happy and warm as the noon sun. With another of those trilling purrs, he bent close to rub his nose against Surial's. "Yes, my One. Home."

Surial laughed, his delight bubbling from him.

"Love the sound of your happiness." Kade continued tracing along Surial's skin with the tip of his nose. "It sounds like magic."

"You're the magic -- you make me happy."

"Good." Kade nuzzled into his neck, leaving soft, lazy kisses. "I am glad to be back where I belong, my One."

"Me, too." He let his head slip back, as he always did, giving Kade more skin to play with.

"Mmm." Kade busied himself with Surial's flesh, his words tickling as they brushed across the sensitive nerves. "I traded with the tribe -- have some oats, some meal, good cheese, some honey, two new blankets. And I found you something on my travels."

Surial squirmed, body moving against Kade's, noting that his lover spoke not a word about the fact that he had hunted slavers, other men. "A present?"

Kade nodded with a chuckle, his braids tickling Surial's chest and stomach. "I traded two bone daggers and a rahat for it."

"Two bone daggers *and* a rahat?" Surial pushed himself up and held out his hand to Kade, unable to hide his eagerness. "This must be quite the present if you parted with all that."

Kade let himself be hauled up with a grin. He gathered up his fallen vest and tossed the blanket to Surial. "Go sit by our fire and close your eyes."

Wrapping the blanket around his shoulders, Surial leaned in and gave Kade a quick hard kiss before grinning and heading for their campfire. He sat on the bedroll, happy to find the fire crackling and warm. He spared a last approving glance at his lover's body and then closed his eyes as he'd been bid.

Surial could hear Kade humming, unloading saddlebags, murmuring happily and taking his own sweet time about getting things accomplished.

Finally, after taking care of Lit'ka getting the camp organized, growing ten or twelve crops and raising five small children from birth, Kade finally settled down beside Surial. "Are you ready, my One?"

"Am I ready?" Surial swung blindly and managed to connect a thump to Kade's arm. "I've been ready for hours."

Kade chuckled. "You have a better aim blind than when you are trying, Surial. I hope you like these."

Kade handed the present over and Surial knew the feel of paper and leather before he opened his eyes and saw the two books he held.

"Oh..." His tone was as reverent as he felt, fingers moving over the front covers and gliding along the spines of first one and then the other.

He turned to Kade, an amazed smile on his face. "Books; you bought me books," he said softly. He leaned up and gave Kade a quick kiss before turning back to the leather bound pages. "The Horseman's Journey and Favorite Positions in Winter."

Kade looked over the fire, cheeks heating slightly. "I could understand some of the words in the one about the mi'it."

"I'll read it to you, or help you read it." He slid his fingers along the heated cheeks, wondering at Kade's response to admitting he couldn't read very well -- Surial already knew that.

Then he flipped through the other book and felt his own cheeks heat at the pictures he found there, one every two or three pages. The positions referred to in the title obviously meant sexual positions and there were quite a few described and pictured.

He chuckled. "I don't think being able to read is essential for this one, my lion."

His flush deepening, Kade's gaze remained fastened upon the flames. "The trader only had the two books. I... some of the pictures were interesting."

Surial whistled as he came to a picture of a particularly limber couple. "Interesting indeed." He stared a bit longer at the two men in the picture. "I wonder if that's even possible."

A warm chuckle met Surial's words and bright eyes gleamed over. "Well, if it were, both people would need to be very surefooted. Imagine if that one balancing on the rock slipped..."

He winced. "Ouch."

Grinning back at Kade he added, "It would be fun to find out though, wouldn't it?"

"Actually, I thought this one looked... nice." Kade turned toward the middle of the book, stopping at an illustration of two men wrapped in a cloak, making love before a fire. Both men were kneeling and looking out from the page, the man behind had his face buried in the curve of the other's neck.

Surial couldn't help but notice that Kade seemed to know exactly where that image was.

He reached out and slid his fingertips along Kade's cheek before returning them to the book. "This would be me?" he asked, running his finger over the man in front. "And this you?" This time his finger slid over the second man, behind the first.

Kade nodded, swallowing heavily, eyes on the curve of Surial's throat. He reached out to stroke the almost permanent dark bruise that rested upon the pale skin. Surial shivered. He arranged the blankets on the ground and then knelt in front of Kade. He looked back over his shoulder. "Show me."

Kade's eyes flared and Surial could see the tremors pass through the fire-lit muscles. Kade pushed up behind him, hands moving to massage his spine with slow, deep strokes. "Lean forward and let me touch you, get you ready for me."

A shudder went through him at Kade's words and he complied, hands warming on the outer edges of the rocks that ringed the fire. "I'll have to come up with some way to say thank you for my gifts," he murmured, hips shifting, searching already for Kade's touch.

"You like them?" Kade's hands slid down to Surial's hips as a hot tongue began to trace along his back.

"Y-yes." His voice stuttered as Kade's tongue slid along his spine.

"Mmm. Taste so good, my One." Kade's fingers moved to his inner thighs, teasing and tickling. Warm lips were caressing the small of his back, making him arch and moan.

He murmured something indistinct in reply, unable to formulate a proper answer, not with Kade's tongue drifting lower...

Kade's tongue played at the top of his cleft, sliding lower for brief breathless seconds before returning to tease. He moaned and rocked back, wordlessly begging for what he wanted.

As in so many things, Kade moved to satisfy Surial's need, tongue sliding against his entrance, sweet pressure increasing with each pass.

He was making sobbing sounds now, rocking toward Kade's tongue, begging with words and body and heart. He was on fire, every nerve ending screaming with the pleasure his lover was giving him. Kade's hands were busy, dancing over his skin, stroking him into a frenzy as his body was penetrated, opened by slick heat. Kade was rocking, pushing into him, the ends of those long braids brushing against his calves, sliding over the backs of his knees.

His entire focus was narrowed to Kade, to Kade's hands on his skin, Kade's braids against his legs, Kade's tongue inside him. The pressure built and built, their passion stoked by sheer need. As they threatened to combust, Surial felt Kade back away, the touches easing, the intensity becoming manageable yet again. "Want you, my One. Want you to come with me inside you, filling you."

"Yes, oh, yes, Kadras. With your lips on my neck, so we both know you're home."

Surial heard the low growl a mere second before Kade surged up behind him, covered his back with the heat of that flesh. Kade's forehead dropped to Surial's spine as a slick cock pressed against him, into him. "Now, Surial. I need..."

Surial took what he needed, surging backward and taking Kade deep inside himself, knowing it was what his lover needed as well. Kade cried out with pleasure, the sound skittering down Surial's spine like a chill.

"Hot. Oh, my One." Kade's whispers were barely audible, random sobs as he moved within Surial's body.

Surial let his head hang down, arms braced as he rocked back into Kade's thrusts, letting Kade push him closer and closer to the edge. At last he raised his head far enough to murmur, "Up. Like the picture, my lion, with your lips on my neck."

"Yes." Surial felt the strong muscles of Kade's thighs bunch as Kade's hands slid around him and brought them up together, Surial cradled in Kade's lap. Before Surial was even

settled, he felt the heat of Kade's lips upon his throat, pulling on his skin, feeding from him. He cried out, sitting heavily into Kade's lap, his lover's cock going deep.

Kade began to move, hips rocking in time with the suction on Surial's neck. One hand trailed along Surial's belly, the other circled his erection and began to stroke. Surial rose and fell with each heartbeat -- moving into the hand that held him and dropping back onto the hard heat that penetrated him. The suction on his neck kept him from soaring too far, even as it sent him into the sky.

Surial was surrounded by Kade, filled by him, protected, adored, desired. They moved together, Kade's low rumbling growls punctuating the cries that pulsed from Surial's throat. It was sheer bliss on every plane and Surial was lost in it, lost in his Kadras, and he let the feeling roll over him.

Kade's lips left his throat, sliding up to suckle at his earlobe for a moment. "So beautiful, my One. So tight, so good."

He moaned his reply, hands sliding back to cling to Kade's thighs.

The breath upon his jaw grew ragged, Kade's thrusts speeding, pushing them both harder and faster.

"Oh, yes, my lion. Kadras!" Surial shouted out as his body convulsed, shuddering as he came.

Kade sobbed against his neck, seed-slick hand moving up his belly to anoint his throat. Hungry lips fastened upon his flesh, feeding even as Surial was filled with Kade's heat.

Tremors continued to move through him as Kade fed from him.

"Love," he gasped.

He felt Kade's response whispered upon his skin.

Surial would have collapsed, but for Kade's arms around him, the warmth and strength of his lover holding him tight.

Kade brushed soft lips over the bruise on Surial's neck, making the nerves jangle. "My One."

Surial whimpered happily, melting against Kade.

Carefully, Kade moved them until they were settled side by side upon the blankets. They lay together for a long moment, staring into the fire, Kade's fingers stroking lazily. Then Kade rolled onto his back and hauled Surial onto his chest. "Mmm... that's where you belong."

Surial settled in more comfortably, he'd missed the warmth and comfort of his lover's body, as well as the companionship and love they shared.

He placed a soft kiss on Kade's chest and then rubbed his cheek against the warm skin. "Home."

Kade rumbled softly, pulling a blanket over them both before stroking the dark spot on Surial's throat with his thumb. "Home."

"Have the screams eased, Kade? Do they still haunt you?" Surial shivered and moved into the caress.

"They ease, my One, with every child that runs free and every slaver that falls, they ease." Kade wrapped his arms around Surial, warming and holding. "I am here, my heart, and I will be here when you wake, you have my word."

"I know." Joy filled him and he curled tighter against Kade; tonight he would sleep.

Tonight they would sleep together.

Tomorrow they would live to follow the winds.