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Lovers 1: Bondmates

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A World of Dragonhope Novel

Lovers 1: Bondmates

By Auburnimp and Michael Barnette

Chapter One

Battles

Tall crags of rock rose into a lavender sky clear of even the barest trace of clouds. An unseasonable blackstorm had rolled through the canyon, leaving behind a cold wind as out of season as the storm itself. The wind ruffled the collar of the man's jacket and kicked up swirls of dust that swept down the canyon where their clan had set up camp. They'd stopped to allow the hunters to gather food for the next part of their journey toward the annual Gathering of Clans.

Windspinner's blond hair whipped in the wind as he sat astride his idling huntcycle. The hum of the machine's sunstone powered engine created a soothing vibration through his body that made everything seem right when nothing was right.

Lakesinger was gone and with him had gone any hope he had of gaining a swordbrother, and of marrying the woman he loved. His dreams

of happiness and a family to call his own were gone.

Every hope and dream he'd nurtured for his future—and the future of the woman he loved—had been swept away like tracks in the sand.

Life went on despite the death of his dreams.

He sighed, picked his feet up and set the cycle into motion, heading into camp with the spoils of his hunt. Broad wheeled wagons mixed with the smaller tents of a camp on the move had been formed into a rough double circle. Unmarried swordbrothers' tents and wagons formed the outside ring as a protection to the families and elders in the inner ring.

Children watched him ride in, their wide, innocent smiles greeting him, a few pointing at the goat and many icehares adorning the rack on the back of his cycle.

The calm tranquility of the scene was torn asunder by the roar of numerous warcycles echoing off the rock walls of the canyon. Women screamed and grabbed frightened children while the warriors grabbed their weapons.

Windspinner slewed his cycle to a stop, cut the

goat and rabbit carcasses free with a quick slice from his boot knife and turned his huntcycle toward the incoming attackers. A strong wind borne of his magic lifted the dust cloud kicked up by his cycle and carried it toward the nearest invaders. Ribbons of magical energy spun lazily around him, drifting from his body in a display of raw power few men of their clan could match.

There were at least fifty raiders. Ragged, desperate looking men who could be either bandits or warriors from a poor clan making their living by theft. Either way it didn't matter. They wouldn't leave until they'd got whatever they'd come for or died in the effort to take what they wanted.

Windspinner, used to hunting animals for food, had little experience in battle. Though he had the tattoos of a warrior adorning his cheek—the result of one small skirmish between his clan and a few bandits who'd grabbed a sack of dried meat and run the instant they'd seen warriors coming for them—he'd never killed anyone in defense of his clan.

This time would be different. He would be fighting for his life in defense of his clan because

the incoming raiders had greater numbers on their side. They'd planned their attack for an opportune moment when most of the warriors from Brightsand Clan were out hunting.

Windspinner hurled his power into the faces of the men, though he couldn't blind any of the raiders. They all wore dust goggles to protect their eyes. Still, his dust and sand could conceal his clan's warriors as they gathered to meet the incoming raiders. He built a whirlwind, the sand it picked up would slow the raiders down and give the warriors of his clan more time to ready themselves for the battle.

The powering up of warcycles told him the men of his clan who were still in camp were ready to face the intruders but he got a real shock when he chanced a quick glance at the figure on the warcycle that had fallen into line at his left. It was Starshine Greenhand, the woman he loved, and she had a sword in her hand.

A momentary sense of panic screamed through him. *What in all the hells is she doing? She could be killed!* He wanted to go to her, pull her off the cycle and shove her into a wagon where she would be safer. Instead he clamped down on the

instinct to protect her and focused his attention where it belonged: on the fight.

The raiders arrived in the camp, the ragged men on their old cycles weaving between the tents and wagons, intent on meeting the camp's defenders rather than grabbing whatever they could and running.

He reached deep inside himself and called up a stronger wind which picked up more sand. Windspinner sent it hurtling toward the men as he drew his own light bladed sword and met a raider, blocking his incoming sword. The impact as they passed one another sent a jolt along his arm and shoulder, his cycle wobbling as he turned it to chase the man.

The man rode right for a woman who stood her ground in front of a tent. She held a skillet gripped in her fists as her defense. A pack of young children clung to her, the group of them wailing in abject terror.

Wind shoved his sword into the carrier and raced after the man, overtaking the raider's heavier cycle. A sword flashed for him and he ducked under it, drawing his own weapon and swinging it for the raider.

The man swerved his cycle to avoid Windspinner's sword, the change of direction taking him away from the woman and children.

"Get inside!" Windspinner shouted as the raider turned his cycle, coming around and throttling the cycle to greater speed, the raider charged toward the woman and her cluster of children.

Windspinner put himself and his cycle between the raider and his target, his sword drawn as he sped toward the attacker, a whirlwind of sand and dust rising ahead of him.

In the distance he could see Star facing off against another raider, fighting like a true warrior. He felt a moment's pride in her before he turned his full attention on his own fight.

The raider and he met in a shower of sand, a scream of angry wind, and the clash of steel meeting steel that knocked Windspinner off his cycle. The raider sped past, streaming blood to collide with a fang of rock. Dazed, the raider slipped off his ruined cycle, sword gripped in his fist he turned, staggered a few steps toward Windspinner, and sank unmoving to the sand.

Shaken from the collision, Windspinner got up, glanced at his damaged huntcycle, and abandoned it to join the fight on foot. He saw a raider about to run one of the clan's warriors through and he sent a blast of wind to knock the man off his feet. The Brightsand warrior regained his feet and made short work of the raider. He waived his hand in thanks to Windspinner and ran toward another cluster of warriors who were battling a group of the raiders on foot.

Wind searched the camp looking for other raiders who might be unopposed. A few raiders lay unmoving in the dirt, along with a couple of the younger warriors of the clan. He turned to face a raider as the man came flying from between a pair of tents, the big cycle he rode ripping down the stakes holding the tents upright, collapsing both dwellings.

Windspinner launched a blast of wind at the man an instant before the ground beneath his own feet erupted into a vertical avalanche of rock and sand that threw him off his feet and almost buried him in the dirt.

The man was almost upon him when a tendril from a plant in a pot whipped around the raider

and dragged him back whilst effectively pinning his arms to his sides.

Struggling out of the entrapping dirt, Windspinner regained his feet and ran toward the man snared in the plant. He jabbed his sword into the sand, grabbed the ensnared man and rolled him face down. Pulling a binding cord from the bunch hanging off his belt, Windspinner pinned the man to the ground. The man struggled, but with the plant holding him and Windspinner's weight pressing him to the dirt, it was short work trussing him up.

Sure of his captive, Windspinner gripped the hilt of his sword and lifted his gaze to find another raider about to run him down. He dove for safety, shocked when the man ran over his own companion without the slightest hesitation. Had Windspinner been kneeling by the captive raider he'd have been run over and badly injured or killed. As it was the bound man lay groaning, blood oozing from his gaping mouth.

The plant left the wounded man and wrapped itself round the raider on the warcycle, pulling him off the machine and into the dirt, but this

man wasn't as tightly bound, and he slashed through the plant with his sword.

Windspinner met him sword to sword, the larger man forcing the slender windmage to retreat. His heel hit something that grunted and he went over backward, the edge of the bigger man's sword whistling through the air where he'd just stood.

Laughing the man came for him. Windspinner got his blade into a defensive position in time to block the descent of the raider's blade. He twisted, rolling aside from the next attack, coming to his feet to meet the raider sword to sword.

Steel rang, Windspinner retreating a second time, hurling a gust of sand laden wind at his opponent. A gust the other man contemptuously stopped with a countering wind of his own.

Cries and screams, the sounds of fierce battle, surrounded them as the pair of windmages circled one another. Windspinner kept his attention focused on his opponent, though his heart urged him to find Starshine to make sure she was all right.

A powerful blast of wind roared at him, his

own power diminishing the attack to a gentle puff of air that barely ruffled the furs he wore.

“You’re good,” the man remarked as he circled Windspinner who turned in place to keep his gaze on the man.

He didn’t reply, his old teacher’s words coming to him, keeping him from letting the other man distract him with a conversation. He couldn’t afford to be distracted. His skill as a swordsman was inferior when compared with the other men of his clan. Aware of his own shortcomings he moved with the circling raider, not letting him get the upper hand, biding his own time and watching for an opening in the larger warrior’s defenses.

A twitch of the man’s mouth, a narrowing of his eyes was the only warning Windspinner got. The man lunged, a screaming blast of wind arriving in tandem with the flash of his sword.

Windspinner twisted aside, but not fast enough. Blood spattered the sand and he grunted, his own blade darting in fast as a dustdelver’s strike. The blade, wreathed with twisting ribbons of light, the power of his wind magic arcing along, struck with the blade. The

steel drove deep, the arrow of wind sinking even farther into yielding tissues.

The raider stumbled, went to his knees, dark eyes wide with shock. He touched his wounded chest, looked up at Windspinner in surprise. “Never seen that done...” blood dribbled from his lips, “before... amazing technique...”

The man pitched face forward in the sand and didn’t move.

A small shower of dirt and the hum of an engine announced the arrival of another vehicle and Windspinner braced himself for the end. Instead of a sword coming to pluck his life from him, the warcycle came to a stop and its slender rider jumped off and ran to him. “Wind! You’re hurt! Let me see.”

Hurt? He glanced at himself and saw a bright spill of red across his jacket. The red didn’t concern him nearly as much as the damage his new jacket had sustained. “I’m sorry, Star, I didn’t mean to let the jacket get ruined.”

He felt strange though. A bit dizzy, the edges of his vision wrapped in darkness despite the

light of day that surrounded them. He lifted his gaze to her. “I feel odd,” he admitted.

His gaze fell on the man sprawled face down in the sand. A man who’d been alive and breathing a moment ago. Alive and trying to kill him.

“Oh gods, oh gods,” he groaned and covered his mouth with his hand as the full realization of what he’d done sank in past the adrenaline screaming through his veins.

He turned and vomited into the sand. His entire body shook as the full horror of what had happened—of a battle that had seen men dead, and him almost one of them—filled his mind with the bleakness of a murder committed in the name of survival.

Star knelt beside Wind and soothed him as best she could by running a gentle hand down his back. “Wind, are you all right? Let me tend to that gash before you bleed to death. Can you hear me, Wind?”

She eased him into a sitting position after he’d finished throwing up and held him close, stroking his hair. *I need to get him warm, he’s*

obviously in shock. “Can you stand, Wind? Lean on me if you need to.”

For a moment he sat there unresponsive, as if he couldn't hear her. When he turned to look at her his normally bright green eyes were dull, glassy with shock. Wounded and emotionally shaken, he finally nodded.

She got to her feet and turned to help him scramble up until he was leaning heavily on her shoulder. She drew one of his arms round her shoulders and placed her own around his waist to support him. “Let's get you to your camp.”

“I'm all right,” Windspinner mumbled, but the way he stumbled as they walked proved he was far from being ‘all right’. He probably needed some attention from the healers who were already coming out of hiding to tend to the clan's wounded.

Star caught the eye of one of them, a trustworthy healer with strong control of his soul ball, and motioned towards Wind and the blood running down his side. *I think the main problem he has right now is whatever is going on inside his head. Damn it! Lakesinger did so much damage with his rejection and now this has to happen.*

The healer gave Star a reassuring smile as he reached them. "Let's get him somewhere quiet and I'll take a look at his wound," he said, lending his strength to the effort of getting Wind to his camp.

Her lover's face was ashen, eyes staring vacantly as they eased him through the door of his tent and down onto a pile of soft pillows.

"Heat some water. He's in shock and I'll need to give him some medicine to help him recover," the healer instructed as he began to open Wind's torn jacket, looking for the source of the bleeding.

Star poured some water into a pot which she set on the firestones before returning to the healer's side. There was a gash running the length of Windspinner's side showing ribs which had luckily deflected the blade from piercing too deeply. As the healer ran his soul ball over the area the sluggish bleeding stopped and the wound closed up.

Done treating the wound, the man lifted one of Wind's drooping eyelids and frowned. "He's not hurt enough to warrant the shock he's in," the healer explained. "Then again he's always been

overly sensitive about things. Look at how he reacted over that bratty Lakesinger's departure. Good riddance I say."

Wind blinked, gaze coming to focus on the healer. "You're being rude," he mumbled. "Get out of my camp, you're not welcome."

"You're the one being rude to the healer, Wind," Star admonished quietly. Secretly she was in full agreement with the man over Lakesinger. She had only ever agreed to take him as a second husband because Wind was so set on him as a swordbrother. She knew they'd been lovers and would never forgive the watermage for hurting Wind the way he had with his rejection. How could someone whisper words of love in the night and utter words of scorn during the day?

Wind sat up. His eyes alight with anger he pushed the healer away. "He's in my camp, speaking ill of someone I love. I won't stand for it, Star, I won't," he muttered. Her lover turned away from both of them. "Fool or not, I do still love him. I... I miss him."

The healer sighed. "Forgive me, warrior mage Windspinner. I spoke out of turn," the man said, a faint trace of an embarrassed blush coloring

his cheeks. "I was the one being rude, Starshine, Windspinner, and I'm sorry for the offense."

Wind snorted. "Sorry until you go spread tales among the rest of the gossips! And don't try to deny it. I've heard you talking about me when none of you knew I was nearby. I said get out and I meant it!"

Turning an apologetic look Star's way the healer got to his feet to leave. "Come by my camp later and I'll give you some remedies for lost blood. He appears to have recovered otherwise."

Star nodded and bowed her head respectfully. "Thank you, healer, I will do just that." She lifted the tent flap for the man to leave then let it fall behind him before turning to face Wind. "You were incredibly rude to the healer, Wind. What's gotten into you?"

"He insulted me in my own tent, Star! What else could I do? Swallow my pride yet again and accept it?" He had a hard, angry expression on his handsome face, one she'd never seen before. It made him look older as if he'd aged a decade in moments. "I bear my warrior's marks on my face, and I've..." his voice caught, and his eyes dulled

slightly, “more than proved they’re deserved today.”

Yes, that was true enough and Star suddenly had an inkling of what was really bothering her lover. Even in this he was still basically gentle and kind, hating the fact that he’d had to kill. She sighed, not knowing what she could say to comfort him.

She too had killed one of the raiders today but she didn’t think that admission would help him. “I’m sorry, Wind, but it wasn’t you he insulted, it was Lakesinger.”

Wind sat there silent for a few heartbeats then he met her gaze. “I’m tired of people demeaning me that way, Star. I’m not ‘overly emotional’ over Lakesinger. I loved him and I thought he at least cared about me. To find out I was wrong about him...” he shook his head, and stared into the shadows of the tent. “It hurts, Star. It hurts in ways I can’t explain. Not even to you. And what happened when he left me? Did anyone offer their sympathy? No. I get shit from everybody. Yeah, I was a fool, I get it. No one has to explain it to me.”

He reached out and took her hand. “I never

set out to love Lakesinger, it just happened. I fell in love with you, too, don't forget. I didn't wake up one morning and tell myself it was a good day to fall in love with the most beautiful woman in the clan, it just happened. And I'm glad you still love me, even after I made a fool of myself over Lake."

Star hugged him close. "I know, Wind, and I think it's because most people are appalled at the way he treated you, his equal in power and standing, that they say the things they do about him."

It was the reason she despised Lakesinger after all.

He turned his gaze away, let her hand go. "I understand a lot more about him now than I did before he went off with that outlaw. I was nothing to him but a convenient means to enjoy pleasure without making a bond. I won't make that sort of a mistake again, Star. Not with anyone."

Windspinner reached for the basket that held his clean clothes. "When I think how I very nearly gave you up in a bid to win his love, my blood turns to ice. You've been the best part of my life since we were both kids. Maybe that's

why everyone treats me like trash. They know I offered to give you up if he'd take me. That was stupid, both because I'd sooner cut my hands off than give you up, and because any man who would show such scorn for women isn't a man I should want as a swordbrother in the first place."

Star shrugged. "Lakesinger never did like women, but then when you consider the mother he has it's hardly surprising. He might well have taken you if I hadn't been part of the deal."

Wind shook his head. "I don't think he would have."

He laced up the shirt he'd put on and cast a rueful glance at his slashed and bloody jacket. "I'm sorry all your hard work was ruined, Star," he said. "I'm sorry for a lot of things."

He stood up. "I better get my cycle and clean my sword. Pointless as it will be, I plan to talk to your father about letting me marry you without a swordbrother. There's no one in the clan who's strong enough to pair with me, and in four years of Gatherings I've never found anyone who interested me."

Star felt her temper rise at his words. “You never really looked, did you Wind? It was all Lake, Lake, Lake until I was sick of hearing his name on your lips. And, if you’re not prepared to try again at this year’s Gathering, then you may as well say goodbye to me now. My father won’t let me go to a single man and you know it!”

Bitterness filled Windspinner’s words as he replied, “Yes, I know it. He’s made it quite plain on many occasions. He was especially pointed on the subject when Lake left with that outlaw of his.”

He pulled an older jacket from the basket and pulled it on, his motions fierce, anger heating his gaze, their usually vivid green color darkening. “And what about you, Star? Will you obey his wishes and marry whomever he says you must, or will you defy him if I can’t find a swordbrother? Men with power equal to my own are few. My chance of finding someone who’s my match, even at a Gather, isn’t good.”

Star stamped one shapely foot in anger. “If you would at least try, you might find someone! But you didn’t try. You were so sure that Lake would

take you. And he let you believe it, until I made you confront him!”

Suddenly all the anger drained out of her and she covered her face with her hands. “I’m sorry, Wind. I should never have made you do that. If we could have let my father believe what everyone believed, that it was only a matter of time before the bond formed, we would be married by now. It was my stupid desire to do it all correctly that got us into this mess. But I will not marry anyone but you.”

He turned, pulled her into his arms. “Don’t blame yourself, Star. He would never have formed a bond with me. I was fooling myself,” Wind admitted as he cupped a hand under her chin and gently forced her to look at him. “He never wanted me, Star. I can see that with the clarity of hindsight. Plus he made it pretty clear when he said it was ‘just sex’ to him.” He touched her lips with the pad of his thumb, the caress gentle, the tender touch of a lover. “I don’t know what he saw in that outlaw, but I suspect it was something I couldn’t give him.”

Star smiled. “Men are so blind when it comes to emotional things,” she said. “What he saw in

Darksky was a master. It was what he was looking for and what you, with your idealism and desire for equality, could never have been for him.”

She was silent for a moment or two, lost in her own thoughts of how human Lake had seemed around his new swordbrother. Darksky might be an outlaw but he was precisely what Lake had needed. Another thought occurred to her and her eyes widened at its novelty. *Is a one way bond possible? Is that what happened to Wind?*

She touched Wind’s cheek. “But I love you the way you are, Wind, and there’s a man out there somewhere who will feel the same way. We need to find him, that’s all.”

Her lover kissed her gently then pulled away. “Let’s hope there are a lot of clans at the Gathering this year. I’ll have a better chance to find a swordbrother if there are, otherwise,” he spread his hands in a gesture of hopelessness, “we’ll have to wait even longer.”

Star held him, clinging onto his sleeves. “You’re worth waiting for Windspinner Bearbane Windcaller and don’t you ever forget it!”

Why couldn’t she make him see his own

worth? Even before Lake took him as a lover and he had looked for someone to form the bond with he had sold himself short, looking amongst the untried, newly marked warriors rather than the more mature ones.

Yes, she had to admit that she would prefer them to find someone close to their own age but at the same time she wanted it to be someone they could both respect and count on.

Strong arms wound around her. In a savage hug unlike Wind's usual gentleness, he pulled her close, the scent of leather and the lingering tang of battle part of him, this man she knew so well. Yet, for the moment, he'd become a stranger. "I won't let your father take this from me! I love you. Swordbrother or not you're mine, Star. Mine!"

He kissed her and it left her breathless and shaking, wanting him. He ended the kiss, a bit breathless himself and said, "I won't let your father tear us apart Star. You *are* mine and that's all there is to it."

Entranced by this passionate display, Star clung to him all the more. "Yes," she whispered, "all yours, Wind, forever and always."

Chapter Two

Decisions

Love warmed the coldness that filled his heart, driving out the remorse he'd felt over killing the men. They'd come as raiders into the Brightsand camp, arriving with the intention to do harm, take lives, steal their possessions and perhaps their women. The deaths were justified under the harsh laws that governed their world. The strong survived. The weak often perished. Brutal truths, yet Windspinner felt a keen ache over what he'd done.

This isn't the way people should have to live. Fighting and killing one another.

Yet it was had been way of the Clans as long as clans existed.

Some clans lived peacefully, harming none, like Brightsand. While others sent out raiders to steal whatever they could, including women and sometimes even children. They kept captives as slaves or sold them in the City for things that could only be gotten from the City. New

bikes and cycles the clanspeople could not manufacture, but which their very way of life depended on. Flour from the grain only City people had enough water to grow. Fine fabrics rather than the coarse cloth woven from the wool of wild sheep. Metal pots and pans that were far superior to the pottery and stone crocks made by their best potters and stonemages. So many things, all of them costly, often purchased with the freedom of clanspeople taken as slaves by the type of warriors who attacked them.

“The Chief calls a meeting of Clan Brightsand! All adults are required to attend!” a resonant masculine voice called.

Wind moved away from Star. “I guess we should go,” he murmured.

Star sighed, a frustrated sound that made Wind smile. “The Chief’s timing sucks as usual. We know what happened, we were there!”

She sighed again but moved towards the opening of Wind’s tent. Nobody kept a Chief waiting if they knew what was good for them and, much as Wind would have liked to stay alone with Star, they had no real choice in the matter.

Every person, man and woman, who could be considered an adult by clan standards was assembling at the center of the camp. Wind hated coming to things like this, self-conscious about the swordbrothers who stared at him with contempt or glanced at him with expressions of pity plain on their faces.

He did his best to ignore it the way he always did.

Star was right. Somewhere out there was the man who would be his swordbrother, he just had to find him: somehow.

Star took hold of his hand as they approached the gathering and held her head like a young queen, regal and proud. Warmth flooded Wind's chest, her beauty and assured calm soothing his wounded pride. Yes, Lakesinger had left him, but there were other men out there. Men who might appreciate him for who he was and what he had to offer; something he now understood Lakesinger had never done.

They reached the gathering and found places. Some of the warriors glanced appreciatively at Star until肘ed in the ribs by jealous wives.

Star ignored them all and squatted down next to Wind to hear whatever the Chief wanted to say.

Chief Redsand raised his hand for silence. "As everyone knows we were the victims of an unprovoked attack. Our brave warriors drove off the raiders and many of them lost their lives. We too suffered painful losses. Greensky and his swordbrother, Stoneheart have both passed into the lands of the ancestors. Their wife, Sunglow and her three children are without kin, so I ask you, my people, to see to their welfare."

The words were faint, almost lost in the general outcry of anger over the announcement of the mens' deaths, but they reached Wind to inflict the sharp hurt they were meant to give. "Too bad it wasn't Windspinner that died. He's of no use to the clan, especially since he contributed to Lakesinger leaving us."

Lakesinger hadn't left their Clan because of him, nor had the powerful watermage stayed with the Clan to be with him. Lakesinger had left to be with an outlaw, and that too had wounded their Clan.

He wasn't to blame. Yet many of the warriors did blame him for the loss of the watermage.

Wind slipped an arm around Star, holding her close. The loss of anyone in such a small clan had far reaching repercussions. The loss of two of the clan's most skilled warriors, coupled with Lakesinger's desertion, would be keenly felt in the days to come.

Star glared at the speakers as she leaned against him. "I never wanted that stupid, arrogant brat as a husband anyway," she said far more clear and concise than the mutterings had been. "He would never do anything unless paid well for it so I fail to see what use Lakesinger was to the clan. Windspinner killed today to protect his clan so why don't you stop muttering and listen to the words of Chief Redsand?"

The warrior who'd spoken met her gaze. "And how many times exactly did you have to save him from his own inept bungs? We'd have all been better off if he'd run and hid with the rest of the women."

Anger blazed inside Windspinner. A faint breeze tugged at his clothes and fluttered through his hair as the power of the wind magic awakened with his anger. Windspinner held his emotions in check, willing the magic to dissipate.

“I don’t recall seeing you anywhere near the fight, Dustrain. Perhaps it was hard to see what really happened from inside your tent.”

Several people sniggered at that remark but it was obvious to Wind that he was never going to be accepted within the clan now that Lakesinger had gone.

Beside him Star sneered at Dustrain but kept her peace for once. She wasn’t a nag but she was outspoken and very protective of him.

“That will be enough, all of you!” Chief Redsand shouted to end the argument. His brows drawn into an angry scowl the Chief glared at the man who’d spoken against Windspinner. “He’s right, Dustrain, I didn’t see you once during the battle. Perhaps in the next battle you’ll remember those are warrior’s marks on your cheeks and find your way to the fight before it ends.”

This time the laughter flowed freely, Dustrain’s cheeks burning red with embarrassed anger. When the sounds of amusement finally died down, Redsand spoke again. “We have lost two of our best warriors, men who will be missed, this is true. Nothing can make up for their loss, or ease the pain felt by Sunglow and her children

who have lost their fathers.” He gave a polite nod to the grieving woman. “We have, however, gained something for our pain. The dead raiders came to us on fine warcycles. Machines which are in short supply among this Clan. I will see they are passed out among the warriors who are most deserving.”

Please don't mention my name. Please don't mention me at all, Wind thought, wanting nothing more than to have his participation in the battle overlooked. He wanted no attention called to himself. Not when he would lay odds that such attention would lead to more trouble for both he and Star.

He didn't have a swordbrother, yet he'd prevailed against other men in a battle, partly because Star had come to his rescue the same way a swordbrother would.

The same way. The thought sent a cold chill through him. What if that's the answer. She's powerful, what if she's my match? It would explain so much about why I love her the way I do.

But no, that can't be it. Can it? He glanced sideways out of the corner of his eye to regard

Star. *No it can't be. We've never shown any of the signs of such a bond. No magic spinning around us when we make love, no tingling or anything.*

“...and because of this Windspinner is to have first choice of the spoils of this battle.”

Chief Redsand's words sank through his stunned mind. He blinked, looked up at the older warrior. “I what?” he asked, sounding as stupid as many of the clan believed him to be.

Star poked him hard in the ribs and hissed. “Pay attention, Wind.”

Snickers of derisive amusement surrounded him as Chief Redsand repeated his words, “I said because you played such a pivotal role in the fight you have first choice of the things gained from the raiders.”

Windspinner shook his head. He was already quite wealthy by the standards of any Clan. “I thank you my Chief, but I would rather give first choice to Sunglow and her children.”

The Chief smiled. “Ever generous. It's why I like you, Windspinner. There are men and women in this clan that could learn a lot from

you, if they'd stop finding fault and actually look at you with unbiased eyes."

The snickers turned to embarrassed and irritable mutterings and Star glared around the circle before nodding in apparent satisfaction.

"Well what do you say to that, Sunglow?" the Chief asked.

"I lost both of my men. First choice should have been my due, Chief Redsand. He's simply returned what was my right to start with."

The Chief's scowl returned. "Perhaps all of you should try and recall Clan Laws. Many of you seem to forget that first spoils of anything go to the warrior who proved himself most useful to the Clan in battle. In this case, whether you like it or not, that happened to be Windspinner."

The man's dark gaze swept the assembled clanspeople. "In fact I suggest all of you take a little time over the course of the next few days to re-familiarize yourselves with the Laws of this Clan. This isn't a suggestion, it's an order," he added and turned away from the gathering, his every motion as he left showing anger.

Windspinner sighed and got to his feet, ready

to make a fast retreat to his own camp to avoid any further conflict if he could.

“She’s too good for you, Windspinner,” Dustrain said as he stepped into Wind’s path.

“He’s right and you know it,” Dustrain’s swordbrother, Swiftfoot, agreed. His dark gaze openly undressed Star, a lust-heated smile and an evident stiffness under his pants leaving no question of how he felt about the woman at Wind’s side.

Windspinner met their gazes, his own face a bland mask. Inside he seethed with anger, but Clan Law discouraged such confrontations between warriors, and for very good reason. If the men of a Clan fought amongst themselves they might not fight as well when facing a common enemy. Not that these two ever paid attention to Clan Law.

“I think the reason Lakesinger left you for that outlaw was he didn’t want to saddle himself with two women,” Dustrain stated, loudly. Beside him Swiftfoot smirked.

The crowd already present for the Chief’s

meeting, formed a circle around the four, and no one looked ready to side with Windspinner.

Except one. Star looked the two men up and down with open contempt. "I'd rather let a crag boar have me than either of you two fossilized cowards!" She glanced around at the circle. "Every last one of you pisses me off. The clan is slowly dying but you're all too busy bickering to notice it. Sunglow's men and Windspinner, they're the only true warriors you've ever had apart from Lakesinger. I wonder why he thought he'd do better with a bandit than with you hypocrites and that grasping mother of his? Somehow I don't think Windspinner caused his departure. I think I did. Lakesinger didn't want *me*."

Dustrain took a step closer toward Starshine, his hand lifting as though he intended to strike her.

Windspinner stepped into his path. "I'm done being polite," he warned, voice gone hard-edged, the threat evident. "Clan Law or no Clan Law, if you try to strike her, I'll show you why I'm considered one of the most powerful mages ever born to this Clan."

Dustrain lowered his hand, stepped back, eyeing the two of them nervously.

“I’m through being the dog everyone kicks,” he added, taking a step toward Dustrain and Swiftfoot. “I’m through being insulted.”

His eyes swept over the men, and the assembled onlookers. “You denigrated my skills as a warrior because I chose not to kill. Well now I’ve killed to defend you, and what did that action get me? Nothing but the same poor treatment. I know not everyone hates me, or dislikes me, but, by the same token, none of you lend your aid when others speak out against me.”

A few people lowered their heads in shame, a couple of people turned aside, ready to leave.

“Exactly. Run back to your camps. Go on. Leave Star and I to defend ourselves alone. We’re used to that by now.”

Sunglow glowered and threw terrible words after Wind. “It should have been you that died Windspinner, not my brave men!”

Starshine turned sharply at those hateful

words and, without stopping to think about it, punched the other woman in the stomach. When Sunglow was sprawled on the ground glaring up at her she sneered. "Don't worry, Sunglow, you can stop complaining about all the work they let you do while they go off to hunt for days on end. Hadn't you ever wondered why they preferred to be away from you? And just think of the nice big pile of spoils you'll get as compensation for their loss!"

She glanced up and around at those still left watching. "Like I said before, you all piss me off. And no matter what negotiations my father may enter into, I'll take leave to tell you now that there is only one man of this clan that I consider worthy to call husband and that man is Windspinner. Now why don't you do what you all do best and run off to tell my father just that?"

Her man's green eyes, alight with anger, swept the crowd in silent challenge. "Yes, run off like a bunch of children and tell her father what she's said. I'll be waiting in my camp if he wants to know where I am!"

Wind's arm slipped around her waist. "I'm hungry, let's go make something to eat."

Star smiled up at him. "That sounds like an excellent plan, beloved." She walked proudly towards his camp without even a backward glance at the rest of the clan.

Once inside the tent she busied herself with pots, pans and food, concentrating on the cooking rather than come to terms with what she'd just done. But the tension couldn't remain inside her without finding some outlet. She sighed, shook her head and said, "Even if you find a swordbrother at the Gathering, they'll treat him no better than they treat you, you know that, don't you, Wind?"

"I know that. I'm hoping my parents are at the Gathering so I can let them know I won't be staying with Brightsand. They never fit in here, and I'm no different." He sighed and dropped onto one of the thick pillows that lay scattered around the tent. "I'll happily move to whatever clan my swordbrother belongs to, if you don't mind Star."

Star smiled in relief. "It was exactly what I was going to suggest, Wind. I wasn't sure if you'd

agree or not. The only thing obvious to me is we can't stay here. I don't care what my father says. I'll run away if I have to."

She sighed, realizing how like a child she sounded just then and fiddled with the cooking meal in order to calm herself. Tomorrow the clan would break camp and head for the Gathering. News would be exchanged, goods traded and swordbrothers would form bonds. Wives would be sought and the bloodlines strengthened for the generations to come. It was the perfect opportunity for them, as long as her father didn't oppose it.

It's not as if he cares about me so why is he so insistent that I stay in this clan?

As though her very thoughts had summoned him, a loud masculine voice hailed them from outside. "Starshine Greenhand if you're in there I expect you to come out right this instant!"

Star exchanged a glance with Wind then called as calmly as she could. "We're just about to eat, father, why don't you join us?"

Wind gave her a fierce grin and went to open the doorway of the tent. "Yes, please, come in

Breezekeeper,” he said to the man. Noticing that her father’s swordbrother was also present he extended the invitation. “You are also welcome to enter, Clayshaper.”

Star hid her smirk by bending over the firestones and fussing some more with the cooking food. There was easily enough for four people as long as her father didn’t decide to be an ass.

The pair of men stayed where they were. Breezekeeper folded his arms over his broad chest and regarded Windspinner with a dour expression.

“That isn’t necessary. We’re here to get Star and then we’ll be leaving,” Clayshaper informed sternly.

“Oh, I see. Well then I’m afraid you’ll be leaving alone. She’s a guest in my camp and I don’t think she’s ready to leave. You can ask her if you like, but I’ve invited her to eat with me and she accepted. You *are* welcome to join us as I said, but I don’t think she’s ready to go at the moment.”

“Star, let’s go,” her father commanded.

Star's smirk vanished instantly to be replaced by a frown as she turned to stare disdainfully at the two men. She could feel her anger build at their arrogant assumption that she would follow orders like some disobedient child. She rose gracefully to her feet and approached her father, coming to a halt a few feet away from him. Her hand rose to her cheeks and the warrior stripes there.

"I am a warrior of the Brightsand Clan, not an errant child. I am your equal in status and your superior in magic so where in any of that do you have the right to order me out of Wind's camp?"

She stood, feet planted on the tent's groundsheet and stared her father and his swordbrother down. "Also, where exactly *were* you two heroes when the Clan was attacked?"

"Hunting so the people of this clan wouldn't go hungry," Clayshaper replied.

Her father ignored her outburst. "Girl you aren't my equal in anything, and neither is this mewling whelp you want for a husband. He's not man enough for a harridan like you. Now

get back to our camp and remember your place, woman.”

Windspinner took a step forward. “And you remember your place when speaking to a guest in my camp, Breezekeeper.”

“Yapping little dog, keep silent or I’ll shut your mouth for you!” Breezekeeper snapped. “I’m done with this between the two of you! Done! Do you hear me? It’s over. Go find some worthless slut to sniff around!” He reached for Star’s arm.

Star took a step back and drew two daggers from her belt. “Don’t you speak to me like that! While you were ‘hunting’ Wind and I were killing men who came to steal from the Clan and to kill. When you prove to me that you’re a man then, and only then, can you refer to me as ‘woman.’ You need to speak to Chief Redsand I think. He gave us all a short and to the point lecture about Clan Law earlier while you were busy ‘hunting’.

“Now I will tell you that I’m done also, I’m done with being your slave, I’m done with being your daughter and I’m done with your swordbrother trying to paw me in the night. My

place is by my man's side and if you want to fight about it, I'll fight."

She held her daggers steadily, surprised that her hands weren't shaking with the anger she felt. She'd bottled it up and endured for so long now.

Her father's lips tightened into a harsh, disapproving line. "Your mother would be very disappointed in you, Starshine." He turned a menacing stare on Wind, "I blame you for this. She was such a good girl as a child, but now, she's turned into a willful hellion." He turned away, motioning Clayshaper to follow. "Come along, love of mine. It would seem I no longer have a daughter named Star." He glanced back at her. "She's become dead to me. I'll cherish the memories of the child she was, rather than the bitch she's become."

Star kept the daggers in her hands until the two men had left the tent. Once she was sure they'd gone she resheathed the weapons and frowned. "Why is it when men tell each other the truth it's fine but when they get told by a woman, she's a bitch and a harridan or a hellion?"

I honestly believe my mother would be proud of me, not disappointed.”

She sighed unhappily and returned to the firestones to resume cooking. “That’s one less problem, at least.”

“Is it really?” he asked from the doorway. She could see he was watching her father and his swordbrother as they stalked away from camp. “I think it’s going to be the beginning of a whole host of new, even worse problems. Your father isn’t going to give up the bride price he wanted for you. You’ve got to realize that Star.”

Star stared morosely at the food, deciding she wasn’t hungry after all. “No, I don’t suppose he will. You didn’t answer my question, Wind. It wasn’t rhetorical, I really want to know.”

“I don’t know the answer, Star, because I would never call a woman any of those things,” he replied, then frowned. “No, wait, that’s not exactly true. I’ve called Lakesinger’s mother all of those things, but it has nothing to do with her telling the ‘truth’ because I don’t think she’d know what that was if it jumped up and bit her on the nose.”

Star chuckled at that. "In Lakesinger's mother's case they are correct descriptions." She pouted at the food. "Am I a bitch, Wind?"

He let the door flap fall closed and came to kneel beside her, lifting her chin with one hand he met her gaze, his green eyes filled with warmth and love. "No Star, you aren't a bitch." He smiled, mischief glittering in his gaze. "And even if you *were*, you're my bitch and I love you just the way you are." He kissed her, the touch of his lips gentle.

Star threw her arms around his neck and hugged him close as she returned his kiss. She never wanted this moment to end but she was practical enough to realize that reality would intrude on them all too soon. "Did I do the wrong thing there, Wind?"

He shrugged, and gave her a wry smile. "It's a bit late to worry about it now isn't it?"

She grimaced. "To be honest, I feel like a great weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I've had to endure slights and taunts from my father ever since my mother died and as for his swordbrother..." She couldn't finish, instead she shuddered at the memories.

He pressed his lips to hers in another tender kiss.

Star returned the kiss but his words about new problems were troubling her and she pulled away after a moment. "What did you mean by more problems? You could still offer bride price for me."

Wind sat back, expression gone bleak. "Do you honestly think your father is going to let this go? He was looking forward to what you'd gain in marriage, to someone other than me. Much as I love you, Star, no woman is worth what he's asking as brideprice for you. Other than a swordbrother, he wanted a warcycle, five darbear furs and meat delivered to him every night for two years. Ancestors alone know what he's asked of other warriors."

Star took a deep breath. "Someone like Dustrain, you mean, don't you? My father is crazy if he thinks I will ever marry to suit him and that lecher he's bonded to!"

She gazed unseeingly at the hide walls of the camp while she thought things through. "We move to the Gathering tomorrow so he can do nothing before we reach it. And, once there..."

She trailed off leaving her hopes of Wind's finding someone worthy of him left unspoken.

Wind gave her a fierce smile. "I'm going to actually *look* for a swordbrother this time. Failing making a bond, we'll change clans. I'm a good hunter, and a fine windmage, plus I've had my warrior's marks for a few years. Besides, name any clan that doesn't want a warrior who's unafraid of taking on darbears."

Star smiled back at him and nodded frantically in agreement. "That's right! Too many people in this clan have forgotten that." She placed a hand on his knee. "We can do this, Wind."

Chapter Three

Love and Hope

Wind belched softly as he set his empty plate aside, giving Star a sheepish smile. “The food was good, and as usual I ate too much,” he admitted, his expression a tad rueful. *I like her cooking a lot better than my own, but I’d be the first to admit my cooking isn’t cooking, it’s a way to ruin good food.*

He winked and added, “If I wind up fat and lazy in my old age you’ll be to blame. I certainly couldn’t get fat trying to eat the food I wreck on an almost daily basis.”

Star chuckled and shook her head. “You’ll never be fat. You keep yourself too busy to get fat. Besides you were born to be slim, I’m the one likely to spread with age.”

He grinned. “I like a woman with some meat on her bones, otherwise I’d be chasing after that skinny little Thornflower.”

Wind smirked, and reached for her. “I know something we can do to work a bit of that meal off of me.”

She mock fought him off. “Oh do you now? Perhaps you should go chasing after the stick insect after all. Thornflower indeed! Humph!”

“Yes I do.” His cock hardened at her struggles. The resistance, though token, excited him the way it always did.

“You know I’ve never wanted another girl. It’s you I want, Star. I’ve always wanted you.” Wind stood, grabbing her around the waist and swinging her onto his shoulder. He intended to carry her to the furs and pillows where they slept, and did other, much more memorable things.

Star giggled and kicked her legs hard as she pummeled Wind’s back. “Oh, oh, you evil beast! Put me down at once!”

“That sounds like excellent advice,” Wind remarked as he lowered her to the pillows and furs and pinned her there with his weight. His erection pressed to her thigh as he held her down.

She was flushed, her hair in wild disarray, eyes bright with amusement. Everything about her made his body ache for her touch, and his heart race with desire tempered with love. “You’re so

beautiful,” he told her, then lowered his head to kiss her soft lips.

How could I have been so stupid say I would give this up for Lakesinger. I had to be out of my mind. With us it's not 'just sex' with us it's love. She loves me, and I love her and that's what matters. Swordbrother or no swordbrother, I've got Star.

Star's arms wound round his neck and she pulled him closer as she returned his kiss, her mouth opening to allow his tongue in to explore her mouth as he wished.

Wind's tongue sparred gently with hers, the touch intimate, tender. His heart raced, body responding to the rising passion. He touched her breast, felt the hard pebble of the peaked nipple beneath his palm, her desire for him clear. He groaned and thumbed the hardened flesh as he kissed his way toward the line of her jaw.

“Wind,” she murmured against his chest, “I love you so much.” Her hands began to pull at his clothes as she tried to get them off him.

Her words blazed a trail right to his heart and he lowered his head to kiss along the line of her jaw, down to her throat, murmuring, “I love you,

Star. Without you my life would not be worth living. No matter what anyone says or your father tries to do, I'll never let you go. Never," he told her, a fierce, defiant edge sharpening the soft tones of his voice.

Star's hold on him tightened and her eyes filled with unshed tears. "They're all such colossal fools. Don't let me go Wind, I couldn't bear it."

Wind wrapped his arms around her and held her close, fighting the ache in his chest, the sting of tears that tried to fill his eyes. He couldn't stand to see her cry. It hurt him worse than any physical blow. "Don't think about them, Star. Soon nothing they do or say will matter. Whether I find a swordbrother or not, we're leaving the clan at the Gathering. I know we'll find another clan willing to take us. I know it," he reassured, wishing he could really be so certain.

It doesn't matter. We're not staying with Brightsand. We can't. Her father will make our lives into pure hell if we stay. Better to strike out alone than stay near him, though Chief Redsand might be sorry to see me go, no one else will be.

If my parents are there we can join up with them and become traders too. Star might even

enjoy wandering around without being tied to a clan. My parents enjoy that kind of life, so why can't we?

Star smiled through her tears. "Yes, you're right. I'm sorry, Wind, I ruined the moment, didn't I?"

"Shhhh, You've ruined nothing, Star," he murmured as he kissed her, working his way down her neck to her shoulder, from there to her breasts, kissing, forcing his warm breath through her clothing, raising goosebumps on her skin.

Star writhed beneath him, alternating between getting even closer and attempting to escape when his ministrations tickled her.

Wind reached for the ties holding her shirt together, wanting nothing between his kisses and her skin. With it open he set his lips to a tight nipple and suckled gently, enjoying how she wiggled and gasped under him.

She's beautiful and sexy and for some reason I still don't fully understand she wants me. Of all the men she could have, it's me she wants. It's strange I guess, but I don't even look at other women. Why

bother when I've got Star and she's everything I could ever want in a wife and lover?

Star let out a soft moan of pure pleasure at his touch and tried even harder to get rid of their clothes.

The sound drove a sharp spike of lust through Wind and he redoubled his efforts, gently pinching her other nipple between finger and thumb. His tongue flicked over the nipple in his mouth, sucked it, and began flicking it again in an effort to drive her wild with need.

The thought of her naked and crying out in pleasure beneath him, of sinking his hard cock into her made him want to shed his clothes and take her, but he held himself in check.

Just a while longer and then you can have her.

Star struggled to free herself of the last of her clothing. Wind let her shed the shirt taking the opportunity to make the best of her willing exposure. He sucked and kissed her breasts, flicking the tip of his tongue over the nipples, making her squirm.

Her hands fumbled with the fastenings of his

pants before she managed to get them open and around his knees.

Wind moaned in response to Star's eagerness. Her desire for him more than he could resist, he threw his shirt and pants aside and pulled her to him, his kisses hungry, demanding as he moved between her thighs. His cock was hard, aching to be encased in her wet heat. He reached between her thighs and found her entrance slick with her own need.

Star clung to him like a limpet as he kissed her, moaning and arching into the caresses, and letting him know with the bump and grind of her hips just how much she wanted him inside her.

His efforts to resist her desire vanished in a blaze of need that threatened to overcome every bit of his rational mind. He plunged into her welcoming heat, groaning at the sensation of being clasped and surrounded by her slick channel.

She pulled him even closer, latching her mouth to his as her hips moved in a slow undulation.

"By all the gods..." he gasped, the rolling of her

hips forcing him toward orgasm faster than he wanted, but he couldn't make himself tell her to stop

Wind's thrusting sped up, his mind unable to control his body. He captured her mouth with his in a hot, passion-filled kiss that muffled both their cries of pleasure.

Star gasped into the kiss, her flesh tightening around him, eliciting a sharp cry of pleasure from Wind that their kiss did little to silence.

She broke away from his kiss and screamed out his name, her body thrashing in orgasm.

Wind's hips sped up, his own orgasm drawing nearer with each thrust. Star's cries tearing an impassioned groan from him that echoed her joyous shout.

"Star, my beloved Star," he gasped out, his body gone tense, his own release imminent.

Not yet, not yet. I want her to... but his body didn't listen and his mind blanked out in a flash of white. "Star!" he groaned, the pleasure taking him as his body spilled his seed into her.

Star held him close as he collapsed against her,

murmuring nonsense words of endearment into his ear.

Wind stayed where he was, his softening cock slipping free of her wonderful heat. He groaned at the loss and buried his face in her hair, breathing in her scent, enjoying the feel of her body against his. “Love you,” he murmured. He kissed the hinge of her jaw, and gently tongued the curve of her ear.

One of Star’s hands stroked his hair while the other still held him close and she smiled her contentment. “Love you, too.”

He lifted himself enough to set his lips to hers in a tender kiss before he rolled off of her with a relaxed and contented sigh. He didn’t want to leave their bed though he had things he *should* be doing. Things like clearing up the mess from dinner or checking over his cycle and her bike for damage from the fight, or any of a dozen little day to day things he didn’t dare let go for fear that something might break or wear out at a critical moment.

Life would be so much easier with a swordbrother to help me with the camp duties.

Star snuggled against him. “We can do the chores later, get everything packed away ready to move tomorrow.”

“We’ll arrive at the Gather tomorrow. I wonder if we should make a clean break with the Clan when we arrive, or if we should wait until they’re ready to leave and just not go with them? What do you think, Star?” He caressed her belly, hand running along her soft skin. It felt good lying there beside her, knowing she was his. A thrill of possessiveness filled him and he put an arm around her, holding her close. She was *his* and her father be damned.

Star lifted her head to gaze thoughtfully at him. “It would be easy enough to lose ourselves in that many camps. Is a break really what you want, Wind?”

“Yes. I think the only way I’ll ever be able to truly forget Lakesinger is to make a break with the clan. We’re being blamed for him leaving despite the fact it was his choice. And then there’s his mother. You can be certain his she won’t let either of us forget what she feels she’s lost.” he replied. Sighing he added, “I don’t want the reminders.”

He turned to her. "I'll understand if you don't want to go, it's just that I thought you might want to get away from your father."

Star smiled and ran a hand through his hair. "I *do* want to get away from both my father and Lakesinger's bitch of a mother." She paused for a moment, gazing deep into his eyes. "I know it's a big step into an uncertain future, but as long as we're together, I'll be happy."

"Even if I never find a swordbrother?"

The fear he'd never find a swordbrother had clouded his life from the day he fell in love with Star.

Then he'd fallen in love with Lakesinger and thought his worries were over. Seeing Lake with the big darbear of an outlaw had driven home the fact Lakesinger had never given a damn about him. *Star's right, I wasn't what he needed in a lover, and he really wasn't what I needed either. Our relationship was convenient for him, and a disaster for me.*

And, swordbrother or not, I'm not going to let her father ruin our lives with his demands. If she wants to be with me, then we'll leave the clan. She's

old enough to make her own decisions and there's not a damn thing he can say about it.

Star frowned at him, her eyes flashing. "I may not be your swordbrother, Wind, but I stood shoulder to shoulder with you earlier and I will stand with you in the future. Even if we don't find you a swordbrother, it doesn't matter. I'll still be at your side."

"I love you, Star." He turned onto his side and pulled her close. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Too bad the sword bond doesn't seem to work between men and women. If we'd bonded the way swordbrothers do there would be nothing her father or anyone else could say.

He sighed. "Much as I'd like to stay right where we are, I can't. I've got to check our vehicles and make sure they weren't damaged in the fight. Then there are dishes to clean, a few packing straps to cut as replacements for some that are getting too old. A man's work is never done, something else always breaks or needs tending."

He patted her bottom. "Plus there's this female who seems to like me and keeps coming around

all the time. Pretty thing, lush curves and a nice butt. I'm starting to think she likes me."

Star batted her eyelashes at him. "Now whatever gave you that idea?" She kissed him and then sat up. "Don't worry about the dishes, I'll deal with them while you check the bikes and the straps. I'll also need to fetch my sled and belongings. I don't see why my father and his swordbrother should keep everything."

"When you go to get your things just bring your best camp goods, and your clothes. I've got more than enough bedding and enough tent canvas already." He sat up, stretched and yawned. "Ancestors but I wish I could take a nap."

Star reached for her clothing. "The sooner we get all this done, the sooner we can sleep. I don't intend to be working all night."

"Nor do I," he stated. "So long as our cycles are all right, I won't need to." He reached for his own clothes and started to dress. "Do we have enough food for tomorrow or should I try and barter for some?"

"With the meat you brought in today and the vegetables I have, we have plenty to get us to

the Gathering at least. We can barter when we're there if we need to."

"Good enough. I'll come back as soon as I'm done to help you start packing the stuff we won't need tonight," Wind said as the tent flap fell shut.

I hope to hell we're not making a mistake by leaving Brightsand, but there has to be something better for both of us somewhere. We just have to find it.



They arrived at the Gather by mid-afternoon, the two of them getting their camp set up amid the bustling throng. Tents lay in every direction as far along the canyon as they could see. Already some of the older warriors and women said there were clans present they hadn't seen in years.

More clans were gathered in one place than Star had ever seen.

With their camp set up Wind had gone to barter for a new rear tire for his cycle which he wanted to replace because of battle damage.

That left Star alone in camp, which wasn't all that unusual. When she looked around there were several women tending to camp duties alone, a few of them with small children clinging to their skirts.

A trio of very young men were watching Star from a what they probably thought was a discreet distance. Their warrior marks fresh and bright on their cheeks, their eyes alight with desire, they watched her as worked within the bounds of Wind's camp. They were whispering among themselves, nudging one another with their elbows, evidently trying to work up the courage to come and talk to her.

She eyed them warily as she began setting up the fire pit in front of the tent, wondering if any of them could be considered suitable swordbrother material for Wind. Somehow she doubted it. They were very young and as yet untried, despite their marks and she couldn't feel as much power coming off the three of them together as she knew Wind possessed.

"You're wasting your time, boys," she said aloud.

A flurry of whispers showed her words hadn't

caused them to entirely give up. The tallest of the three stepped forward, his warrior's tattoos so new she could see the red puffiness surrounding them. Like most clansmen he was dressed in leather, but his had been faded to near white, and the surface of the vest under his open jacket had been worked with small stone beads into attractive geometric patterns.

"Admiring a beautiful woman is never a waste of time," he began. He had a pleasant voice, deep and mellow. "And when a woman is as beautiful as you are, such admiration is easy."

She nodded her head and smiled in acknowledgement of the compliment. He wasn't a bad looking boy, with dark brown hair and green eyes that tended towards the hazel, and she might have been tempted to introduce him to Wind if he had the slightest whiff of power.

No, that's not entirely fair. He's an adequate stone mage, probably a good battle mage, just not powerful enough to form a bond with Wind.

There was also something telling her that only a watermage would do and she wondered, not for the first time, if the bond with Lake had actually tried to form at least on Wind's side.

“I’m Stonelion. Over there’s my swordbrother Lightsong and his blood-brother Bluestone. I’d be willing to speak to your parents and make an offer for you.” He smiled, expression hopeful. “We’re not the most powerful of mages, but we’re wealthy. Lightsong makes firestones and,” he patted his vest, “I’m a shaper of stones for beadwork.”

Star chuckled but kindly. “I doubt very much if my powerful windmage husband would be interested in your offers. Now, if you boys will excuse me, I have some gathering to do before the evening meal.”

“Husband?” Stonelion frowned. “How can you be married to a man with no swordbrother? I know there’s only one man in this camp, so he can’t be your husband. Not by the Laws of a Clan anyway.”

“Amazing what happens in different clans, isn’t it?” Star said with a smile that did not quite reach her eyes. She picked up her gathering bag and closed the tent flap before nodding politely at Stonelion and his friends and striding purposefully towards her scoutcycle.

“Why is it the prettiest ones are always taken?” Stonelion remarked bitterly.

There are probably three very pretty little girls somewhere in the Gathering that are just waiting for you three idiots to come along.

She started the cycle and headed out into the surrounding wilderness, trusting her power to find anything growing. The first patch she came across was being picked clean by other women from the Gathering so she kept going.

She knew she would probably have to travel some considerable distance with such a big Gathering this year. All the greenery within easy distance would be stripped bare within a few days. Luckily the plants were hardy enough to revive after the storm season.

She continued on until she found a large, as yet untouched, supply of varied plant life round a small oasis. There were berries and tubers as well as herbs and leafy vegetables. She brought her cycle to a halt and grabbed her gathering bag and harvesting knife before setting off towards the nearest patch of vegetation.

A slight sound made her stop and listen. It came again, a soft moan.

Grasping her knife as a weapon, she dropped the bag and moved forward to investigate.

A very slender man sat at the water's edge. He was dressed in tatters of rag that concealed almost nothing. His feet were bleeding from traveling over the rough terrain without benefit of footwear. She could see him using a tiny bit of rag to clean his wounded feet.

She gasped as he looked up at her before flinching away. He had eyes the color of the purple gems some clan chiefs' wives prized and his hair, although matted and filthy, was the color of a well made sword blade. But it wasn't his looks that had made her gasp, it was the power coming off him in waves. *He's a watermage, one just as strong as Lakesinger.*

She noticed the collar round his neck then and realized what must have happened.

Star hissed in sympathy at the trail of blood he left as he scurried away. "It's all right," she called, "I've no intent to harm you. I came to gather plants for food."

She went back to where she'd dropped her gathering bag and began to cut some leaves and berries while she spoke soothingly to the man who was obviously an escaped slave. "Do you have a name? I'm Starshine Greenhand."

Those wide eyes peered at her from the tangle of shrubs. "I... I'm called Riverspring." His voice was a soft tenor, with a quavering note she put down to his evident fear. Whatever had happened to the young warrior had left him deeply afraid of people.

Star continued her gathering, wary of getting too close to him and frightening him even more. "That's a very nice name. You're a watermage aren't you? Did you escape from the City?"

"Yes," the young man answered in a tense whisper. "Please don't send me back there. I can't... I can't take anymore."

Star smiled at him in what she hoped was a reassuring manner. "Don't worry. I would never send a warrior of the clans to be a slave in the City." She dug up some tubers and root vegetables as she spoke, letting him see that she meant him no harm.

“Your timing was shaky,” she continued. “I’m at the last Gathering before the blackstorm season hits us all.” And she and Wind would have to find somewhere to ride that out, she realized. They would have no clan to support them now.

“I don’t want to be anyone’s slave,” he told her. “But I can’t get this collar off, and with it all anyone will see *is* a slave.”

Her gathering bag now full, Star eyed the collar round the watermage’s neck. She stood up and brushed some soil off her clothes. “You know there are very likely smiths at the Gathering. One of them should be able to remove that collar.”

“If I walk into the Gathering wearing this collar, I’ll be marked as a slave. Even if a smith agrees to take the collar off, how long do you think it will stay off?” He shook his head. “I’m not going in there with this thing around my neck.”

Star frowned. She couldn’t leave him here. “What will you do then? You can’t stay out here alone. It’s not that many weeks till blackstorm season is upon us. And I promise you, once that thing is off, it will stay off.

“My man and I are camped close to the edge of the Gathering as we no longer have a clan, so I can sneak you into our camp and we’ll get a smith to come to you.”

The young warrior’s expression showed that he didn’t trust her, but something in his gaze hinted he wanted to believe Star. Wariness kept him where he was, well out of her reach.

She held out a hand to him. “I promise,” she said again.

He hobbled out of the brush, each step leaving spots of blood dotting the sand. “Do I have far to walk?” he asked, voice tense from pain.

Star winced in sympathy. “I’ll also get your feet tended to properly. Then we’ll find you some boots and proper clothes. My scoutcycle will carry both of us.”

Teeth gritted, muscles in his jaw working as he fought the pain, Riverspring nodded and staggered toward her cycle, the man nearly falling when his foot encountered a rock. He muttered something under his breath she couldn’t quite catch, though it sounded very much like a curse.

Star didn’t often wish that she was a man, but

this was one of those times. If she were a man she could carry Riverspring and save his abused feet from even more pain. She sighed at her helplessness and walked by his side, ready to offer a steadying hand if he should need it.

Riverspring made it to her cycle, face drawn and damp with sweat. "You're sure your men won't mind me being in your camp?" he questioned, his voice strained from the effort to walk.

Star smiled at him as she put on her goggles and dustmask. "It's just one man and I think the two of you should get along just fine."

She climbed on the cycle and started it, patting the pillion seat in invitation.

He got on behind her, and gripped the frame of the cycle rather than putting his arms around her.

She smiled to herself as she pulled away from the oasis and headed back to the Gathering. She just hoped Wind was back at their camp so she didn't have to deal with the three baby warriors on her own.

Curious gazes followed them as they rode

through the Gather, though no one called out comments on the collar her charge wore.

Luckily the camp she shared with Wind was close to the outskirts. Even luckier was the fact Wind had already returned from his bartering session. “Welcome to our camp, Riverspring,” she said softly.

“Thank you,” he murmured, as he got off the cycle, wincing as his feet touched the ground.

Wind put down the tools he’d been using to refit the tire to his cycle and hurried to Star and their guest. “Greetings, I’m Windspinner Bearbane Windcaller. Welcome to our camp.” His green eyes dropped to the Riverspring’s feet. “I’ll go find a healer once we get you settled inside.”

Star smiled as Riverspring’s eyes widened in surprise at the friendliness of Wind’s greeting. “You see, I told you it would be all right.” She turned her attention to Wind. “This is Riverspring, he escaped from the City and has walked here. I need to dress his feet and find a smith somewhere who is prepared to remove that awful collar.”

“Do you need my help getting him inside?” Wind asked Star before he turned his gaze on Riverspring. “I could carry you if you can’t walk anymore.”

Riverspring shook his head. “I can manage.”

“You tend his feet, Star. I know where a smith is since I was talking to him not an hour ago.” Wind smiled. “Welcome to our camp, Riverspring. You can stay as long as you want.” Wind turned, paused a second, glanced over his shoulder at them. “I have the strangest feeling we’ve met before, Riverspring, but I’m sure that’s not so.” Shaking his head, puzzled, Wind said, “I’ll go find that smith and see if I can find a healer to look at your feet. Be back soon.” He gave Star a quick kiss on the cheek and hurried off, moving at a fast walk toward the north side of the Gather.

From a short distance away Star noticed the same three boys with the fresh warrior’s marks watching them.

Or rather her.

She helped Riverspring into the tent and sat him down on some furs before she set water on

the firestones to boil. Then she went to a small box that held strips of linen and some salve. “If we need to we can get a healer to look at your feet later. For now we need to clean those wounds and dress them so you’ll be more comfortable.”

“Thank you Starshine Greenhand.” Once he was seated on the furs his exhaustion caught up with him and he fought to stay awake. He didn’t dare sleep until he knew he was safe.

To keep himself awake he watched Star work, her movements neat and methodical. She was attractive, as well as kind, with her auburn hair and eyes like captured sunlight. He thought about the young man, Windspinner, and wondered why he’d seemed to recognize him. Seemingly he wasn’t alone in that feeling.

He hissed as Star lifted one of his feet and began to bathe the raw blisters, cuts and abrasions on it. Their world was not kind to bare feet. *At least the sting is keeping me awake.*

The flap of the tent opened and Wind entered, closing it behind him. “You seem to

have attracted some rather persistent admirers Star,” he remarked as he came inside.

To Riverspring he said, “The smith will be along soon. He has a customer that insists on haggling over the price of one of the finest swords I’ve ever seen. If I had the sort of barter goods a sword like that was worth I’d be making a better offer to buy it myself.”

Star shook her head, aggravated by some of the behavior displayed. “There are always cheapskates at the Gathers. As for my admirers, I’d rather raise my own children than some other woman’s.”

Wind chuckled at that. “They do look young,” he agreed.

Riverspring frowned. The young warriors outside had been watching her every move and he found he didn’t like it. He gave himself a mental whap. She was part of Windspinner’s camp and it would fall to him to protect her from unwanted admirers.

He looks as if he can take care of them both, but there’s a sad feel to him. I wonder if he’s lost a swordbrother. But then if that had happened they

would both be dead which would be a shame as he's very handsome.

"How about some tea?" the handsome blond man asked Riverspring. "We've got some that kills pain. It will help you sleep."

The man smiled at him. "I'll make up a bed for you and I'll even hang a privacy screen if that will make you more comfortable. I know you're a bit wary of strangers, but I'd sooner cut off my good right hand than sell anyone into slavery. It's a truly barbaric practice."

"I... I'd rather sleep after the smith's taken this off," Riverspring said as he fingered the metal band round his neck. "I don't think I'll need any help falling asleep. I'm exhausted."

He gazed at Wind, wondering at his kindness to an unknown slave. "Why would you do so much for me? Both of you have been so kind."

"I don't believe in slavery, therefore I don't recognize anyone's right to make another person their slave." The blond man smiled warmly at him. "Also, my parents taught me that sharing what you have with those who aren't so fortunate is what it is to be a clansman."

Windspinner opened a large basket near the wall of the tent and pulled out a deep red darbear pelt, the color unusual for the large animals. He offered it to Riverspring. "So you won't get cold. I'll barter for clothes for you while you rest. I don't have anything that will fit you properly."

Spring backed away from the fur, not willing to touch such a rare and beautiful thing. "I'm not cold," he said. "Please, I'd rather not get your fur dirty."

The handsome face twisted into a slight frown. "I can heat some water for you so you can wash up if you like. I even have some soap." The frown fell away to be replaced by an easy smile. "It'll make you smell a little flowery, but it's good stuff."

Riverspring smiled at the idea of getting clean again. "Thank you," he murmured. Star had finished cleaning and binding one foot and now she reached for the other and began to clean it. He hissed at the sting but his bound foot was already feeling better thanks to the salve, so he bore it stoically.

"I'll go put our biggest pots over the firestones." Wind grabbed a large kettle and a big

pot. “Whatever he needs, Star, let him have it. I have to go fill these, I won’t be gone long.”

He bent to kiss the pretty woman, then the man was gone in a flutter of the door flap.

Riverspring stared after him. “Is his kindness why you love him?”

Star sat back on her heels and gazed up at him her expression inscrutable. “Some see his kindness as weakness, don’t make that mistake.”

She acts like his swordbrother rather than his wife. Does the bond form across the genders?

“Hello the camp. I was told you had need of a smith!”

Riverspring’s heart began to thud in his chest. Would this smith betray him or try to claim him for his own?

“Come in,” Star called as she applied salve to his foot.

The tent flap was pushed aside and a young man entered. Riverspring eyed the stranger warily while one hand unconsciously went to the collar round his neck. “Take it off, please.”

A friendly smile brightened the smith’s dark

blue eyes. "I'm Sword Dancer," the man said in greeting. "Thank you for welcoming me into your camp. Your man, Windspinner came by and said someone needed help getting out of a slave collar. He didn't tell me it was one of the City made ones. They're harder to get off, but not impossible," he told them as he sat down near Riverspring, putting a bag of tools down between them.

"Is it all right if I touch it? I don't want to do anything but get a feel of the metal, I swear it," the smith told Riverspring. "I'm not in favor of keeping slaves. Terrible practice."

The smith's words and the bright, breezy manner in which they were uttered made Riverspring relax again and he nodded before lifting his chin so Sword Dancer could touch the metal. "Can you get it off?" he asked.

The man gently turned the collar on Riverspring's neck, until he could see the welded points holding it on. "Hmm... that's a pretty solid weld. Made by a metalmage was it?" he asked, though the question seemed more rhetorical as he picked up a small tool and pushed it beneath the visible edge of the weld.

“Hold very still,” Sword Dancer urged as a tiny puff of wind pulled at their hair and clothes.

Riverspring kept perfectly motionless as he wondered how a windmage came to be a smith.

The windmage tapped his finger to the tool. A loud pop sound issued from the collar and Sword Dancer put the tool down, gripped the collar and bent it open, freeing Riverspring.

“There, that wasn’t too bad was it?”

Riverspring stared at the handsome young smith, amazed at how easy he made that seem. His hand crept to his neck as he felt flesh instead of steel for the first time in over half a year. Emotion overcame him and the tears trickled down his cheeks. “Thank you, oh, thank you!”

“My pleasure.” The man patted his shoulder and picked up the collar. “I’m going to save this for you. When you’re ready to have a sword made come on over to my camp. I’ll be glad to melt this down and turn this into a symbol of a clansman’s freedom, rather than an object of servitude.”

A smile came then, the first since he’d been forcibly captured and sold to the City. “I’ll do that, Sword Dancer. Again, my thanks, and if

there is any way in which a watermage can repay you, let me know.”

“I could use an assistant while we’re at the Gather. Someone to fill buckets of water, if you feel up to it in a few days. It’s tiring carrying all that water from the pond for cooking, bathing and tempering blades.” He winked at Riverspring. “And you’re quite cute, which to an unbonded lecher like me is as an added bonus.”

Riverspring raised an eyebrow. Carry buckets of water? I can do better than that for him as long as I do it without anyone noticing.

His mind caught up with the rest of what had been said and he eyed Sword Dancer warily.

The dark-haired man grinned, the blue eyes glittering with amusement. “I won’t do anything you don’t have an interest in. But a guy as good looking as you are, well, don’t blame me if my eyes enjoy the view.”

He put his tools into the bag along with the slave collar. “I’ll make sure no one sees this. No sense in giving the usual bevy of gossips something to talk about.”

Good looking? Me? That’s not what he said. To

him I was an ugly little toad. Didn't stop him from taking what he wanted though.

He nodded his thanks to Storm Dancer. "I'll sort something out for the water as soon as my feet heal up."

"Good enough," the man replied and stood. He towered over Riverspring, the man well over his own five feet eleven inches in height.

"Tell that man of yours I'll have his new sword done in three days. He can come by and pick it up then," Sword said to Star as he headed for the exit. "I'll be looking forward to the two darbear pelts he promised. He's a braver man than I for willingly hunting those beasts. I'd not try it alone, and that's a fact."

Star chuckled. "He's not called Bearbane for nothing." Her tone was proud and without any fear for her man's safety. Riverspring found he liked her more and more and he really wanted to get to know Windspinner better. His thoughts made him blush and hang his head so his hair hid his face.

"Come by sometime, Star. I've have a nice selection of cooking knives any woman would

be happy to own. You too, Riverspring. Having a good looking man in my camp makes me happy.”

Sword went out and they heard him say, “You’re a lucky man, Windspinner. A beautiful woman and an attractive guest. Very lucky.”

Wind’s laugh reached them from outside. “Yes I suppose I am very lucky. Now if I could only find my swordbrother, I’d be totally content with life.”

“You and me both. Ah well, maybe next year, right?”

“I just got here, so I’m still hopeful this will be my year,” Wind said as he shoved the door open. “See you later, Sword.”

“Come by anytime,” Sword replied.

Wind entered the tent with a smile on his face. He went to Star and gave her a kiss. “I like Sword, he’s a good man,” he told her.

She returned both the kiss and the smile. “Yes, he does seem to be. Did you manage to find any clean clothes for Riverspring?”

Riverspring kept his head down in shame.

These two people were doing so much for him at possible risk to themselves and he had nothing to offer them in return except his power. "I can make water collecting a thing of the past if you wish. It's the least I can do for all your aid and kindness towards me."

"I didn't find anything yet. I was more concerned with getting the water on to heat," the blond informed him. He crossed the tent and sat down near Riverspring, pulling a small ball of striped string from his pocket. "Is it all right if I get your measurements? It will make finding clothes that are a reasonable fit easier."

Riverspring nodded his agreement and raised his arms above his head so that Wind could get the string around his body. As he did so Wind leaned forward with the string and put his arm round Riverspring's waist to unwind the string behind him. The bare skin left by the rags he was wearing came into contact with Wind's arm and he felt a tingle of something run through his body. He jerked away in shocked confusion.

Green eyes were staring at him with equal puzzlement. The blond's lips parted in a soft gasp

and he blinked. His gaze locked with his, the blond pressed his palm to Riverspring's belly.

The tingle grew even stronger and Riverspring gasped as soft tendrils of pale green curled around Wind's hand. He heard his gasp echoed by Star as she came closer to see what was happening. "Wind, it's the bond. You've found him. You've found your swordbrother."

Windspinner looked up at Star, tears glittering in his eyes. "No, my love, you found him. You found him and brought him to me."

The man pulled Riverspring into his embrace, hugging him, tears pattering onto his shoulder. "My swordbrother, I've looked for you for so long."

Riverspring returned the embrace even though he doubted the evidence of his own eyes. "But... I have nothing to bring to the bond, to the camp."

Chapter Four

Unexpected Realization

Wind gazed at Riverspring with a sense of awe. Of wonderment.

This beautiful stranger is my swordbrother.

“No, Riverspring. That’s not true. You bring the one thing I don’t have to the bond, and that’s yourself. That’s the only thing we didn’t have in our lives. *My swordbrother*. A man to share our lives. You’ve brought that to me, Riverspring. You’ve brought yourself, what more could any unbonded man desire?”

He took his hand off Riverspring’s belly, clasped the smaller hand in his own. Riverspring had the hands of an artisan, slim yet strong. He lifted it to his lips and kissed the fingers one by one. Tendrils of power, green and blue, drifted away from the place where their skin touched.

Star started to cry softly as she saw the power between the two young men build. Tears also ran unchecked down Riverspring’s cheeks and he clung to Wind.

Taking Riverspring's chin in his free hand Windspinner set a gentle kiss on the other man's lips. "And that is enough," Wind stated as he let Riverspring go. "You're hurt and in need of rest and care. The bond can wait until you're stronger and your feet have a chance to heal."

Wind smiled up at Star, wiping tears from his eyes. "This has been the best Gathering ever, wouldn't you agree?"

She smiled through her tears. "Yes, we're complete now and I couldn't have asked for a better swordbrother for you."

"Not quite complete. Not until the bond is formed." Wind turned his gaze to Riverspring, and touched the other man's cheek in a lingering caress that sent threads of blue and green light twining around his fingers. "My swordbrother to be is beautiful."

Riverspring blushed at the compliment and rubbed his cheek against the caress like a cat. "I still can't quite believe it," he whispered.

"Perhaps you'll believe this," Wind said and set his mouth to Riverspring's in a tender kiss.

One of Riverspring's arms wound round his

neck and the watermage deepened the kiss. His exhaustion was apparent, however, and it wasn't long before he drooped. "I'm sorry, I need to sleep."

"I'm sorry. Here I say we can wait for the bond until you're well, and I start kissing you," Wind murmured, his body tingling, cock stiff and aching. He moved away from Riverspring. "Let me get the water so you can clean up. It's probably warm enough."

The bond is drawing me to him with such power it's hard to resist the pull.

Heart racing, body trembling with reaction from the kiss, the touch of his swordbrother's magic as it mingled with his, Wind scurried from the tent before he did anything else inconsiderate. Like grab Riverspring for another soul branding kiss.

You've got to keep in control. He's hurt, weak, and tired. The bond can wait. It has to wait.

He dipped his fingertip into the water in the big kettle over the firestones. Warm, but not particularly hot which was fine. He wrapped a cloth around his hand and took the kettle off

of the tripod where it hung over the glowing stones. He waved the stones off so they wouldn't continue to heat nothing and carried the kettle inside.

"It's not very hot, but the chill has been taken off," he told Riverspring.

Riverspring smiled and stripped off the last of the rags still clinging to his torso. Star handed him a washcloth and some soap and he got himself as clean as he could.

Wind wanted to touch him, wanted to help him wash but he refrained knowing he wouldn't be able to control the desire the feel of his swordbrother's body under his hands would cause.

His mouth went dry as he watched, and, as much as he wanted to, he couldn't look away from the motion of the man's hands over his body.

I want to touch him, to hold him, make love with him, and I can't. Not until he's in better health. I want to run my fingers through his hair and kiss him. I want to suck his cock and pleasure

him until he begs to take me. I want us to make love with Star and be a family.

And we have to wait. He sighed.

Finally clean, Riverspring let the washcloth fall into the water and leaned back his eyes closed in weariness.

Wind pulled the red darbear pelt out of the basket and handed it to Star before scooping the other man up and carrying him to bed. He lay Riverspring down, smoothing his hair from his face, watching the magic awaken.

“Sleep well, my swordbrother. You’re safe with us.” He gave the man a quick kiss on the cheek, feeling the surge of power rise, the tendrils of power drifting around them. He shivered, goosebumps rising on his skin at the sensation of Riverspring’s power sliding sensually across his face and shoulder in a caress of magic.

He took the warm fur and placed it over Riverspring, turned to Star and took her into his arms. “We won’t have to worry about what anyone thinks anymore, Star. I’ve got my swordbrother.”

Star glanced at the sleeping figure on the bed and smiled. "And he's such a beautiful one too."

Wind pulled her close, resting his cheek against her hair. "Yes, very." He gave her a squeeze. "Now I have two beauties, and I've got to be the luckiest man alive."

Star blinked. "And Spring and I aren't lucky? You're beautiful too, my Wind. Don't you ever forget it."

He kissed her, aware of her body, aware of the lingering tingle of magic dancing through him, magic he felt reaching out to encompass her. *I wonder if we do have some type of bond?*

"I love you, Star." He gave her another kiss and hugged her closer.

"I love you too." She let go of him and went to sort through the items in her gathering bag. "Luckily we have enough meat for tonight but you'll need to do some hunting tomorrow."

"I'll go out at first light and see what I can find. With so many hunters out and such a large Gather taking place, I might decide on going out farther to find a darbear. It isn't as if the meat would be wasted." He sat down near Riverspring.

He felt good. At peace for the first time in a long while.

I'm grinning like a fool and I don't care.

Star smiled as she sorted through the fruits and vegetables. "If you go southeast for about five miles you'll come to the oasis where I found Riverspring and this haul. I guess animals drink there and nobody from here seems to have found it yet."

Wind pulled a bundled fur out and shoved it behind him as a backrest. Sighing he stretched his legs out glad he could take it easy and sit with his sleeping swordbrother and chat with Star.

How quickly life can change. Yesterday we worried that I'd never find a swordbrother, and today he's sleeping in our bed. He almost giggled, giddy and filled with an overwhelming sense of wellbeing he wanted to shout his happiness to the entire Gather. Instead he sat there admiring the exotic beauty of his swordbrother.

Star put some roots on to boil before sitting back also. She bit her bottom lip before saying, "Much as I hate to bring this up when we're all so happy, we do have to remember that Riverspring

is an escaped slave. While I would happily kill anyone who tried to take him back to the City, we have to consider the possibility of the City people looking for him.”

“I doubt any City people will come into a Gather looking for an escaped slave. Not when chances are good they’ll wind up taken as slaves themselves.” Wind rubbed his chin. “I’d be more concerned about clansmen trying to make fast profit by grabbing him and taking him to the City as an escapee. I’ve heard there’s a standing reward for the return of runaway slaves.”

Star reached out and took one of his hands in hers. “We can’t let that happen to him, Wind. He has warrior stripes and the marks of a strong watermage, which means he’s a clansman. He doesn’t belong in the City. And whatever happened to him there must have been terrible to make him walk so far as to injure his feet while escaping.”

“I can’t imagine crossing the Barrens on foot, much less doing it barefooted. And alone.” Wind shook his head. “He’s got courage, no question about it.”

He glanced at Star, squeezed her hand gently.

“I’ve heard terrible stories about what happens to clansmen in the City.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “He’s probably been beaten, deprived of food, and maybe even raped. I’ve heard some men of the City use their slaves like that.”

Star shot a look at the bed, her eyes wide. “That’s horrible, Wind. For a warrior to be abused so...”

“It’s horrible for anyone to be used like that. Unfortunately it happens, though most of it seems to happen in the City from what I hear.” He pulled his hand from hers, reached up and ran his fingers through her dark red hair, letting the cool strands slip through his fingers.

“I don’t know if he’s been hurt like that, but I’m going to err on the side of caution and go slow with him.”

Star turned the meat on the rack. “He didn’t flinch from your touch at all. In fact he returned your kiss.” She grinned. “You might not need to go as slow and careful as you think.”

“A kiss isn’t the same thing as what we’d be doing during the bond, but then again, you don’t top as a slave so, we might just be all right.” He

sat up a bit to peer at the roasting meat. “Smells good. I wonder if the smell of cooking food will wake him up?”

Star glanced at the bed again. “There doesn’t seem to be any movement yet, but then he was exhausted, poor man. If he doesn’t wake up in time, I’ll keep some warm for him. I just hope it doesn’t spoil.”

“Maybe we should have held off eating until later.” Wind rose up on an elbow and gave Star a quick kiss. “If he doesn’t wake up I’ll go barter for some meat. I’m sure someone around here is bound to have some they can spare for a few icehare pelts.”

Star frowned. “Those pelts would be better served in making your swordbrother some clothes.”

“He does need clothes. He can’t wander around in those rags, which *should* be thrown away,” he remarked thoughtfully. “I think after we eat I’ll see what I can do about finding him something to wear. I’m no good with a needle, and it will take you days to turn those pelts of ours into clothing he can wear.”

“That’s true enough,” Star said with a sigh, “I’m just not sure if we can afford to keep bartering if we’re striking out on our own. Riverspring doesn’t have a cycle or bike, any clothes or anything. Although Sword Dancer did say he would make him a sword out of his collar.”

“Sword Dancer won’t do it for free, you can bet on that. His swords are high quality, he’ll want something in trade. And you’re right, we can’t afford to barter much more away.” He sat up, lips twisting into an expression of unhappiness. “He’ll need a cycle, weapons and boots none of which we know how to make in addition to the clothes he doesn’t have.”

He shook his head. “I finally get my swordbrother but he’s an escaped slave with no possessions. Nothing’s ever easy for us is it?”

“Actually, the way Sword Dancer spoke, I think he’ll be getting the sword in exchange for help with his water supply.”

“He’ll want more than that. Sword Dancer is a master weaponsmith, not the usual type of smith common among the clans. He makes us seem like paupers by comparison. You wouldn’t believe his camp.” He shook his head in an awed gesture. “It

must take an entire wagon and two sleds to carry all his camp goods and smith's tools."

"I can only go by what the man said, Wind."

"Maybe that's part of it then. I've heard he has a generous heart. He's so wealthy he can afford to help out those who aren't as fortunate the same as we do," he remarked.

"How's the food doing? Can we eat yet or do I have time to go find him some clothes?" He chuckled. "Not that I don't enjoy looking at him, he's beautiful, but Riverspring will get awfully cold if he has to run around naked all the time."

"The food's nearly ready, so go after you've eaten. It won't get dark for another hour or two yet."

"I'm not worried about going out into the dark so much as I'm worried about him getting cold. If he has to go out to take care of nature's call I don't want him going out bare-footed and wrapped in a fur."

"Well, you still have time to eat before you go. The meat is cooked and the roots are tender."

“Good, let’s eat and then I can go find some clothes for him.”

Star divided the food onto three dishes and Riverspring proved there was nothing wrong with his sense of smell by sitting up and rubbing his eyes. “Food?” he asked.

“Yes, food. As much as you want to eat,” Wind replied as he passed the first plate Star filled to Riverspring. “Roasted goat and tubers. Star’s a good cook. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

Her lover got to his feet. “I’m going to go and find my swordbrother-to-be some clothes. Have a nice meal together. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Wind leaned down and whispered in her ear. “Let him eat my share, he needs it more than I do.”

Wind paused by the bed, caressing Riverspring’s shoulder. A tendril of power rose from both men, a faint breath of wind ruffling Star’s hair, whispering of power and masculinity across her skin. “I’ll be back, you rest and keep watch over our camp.” He was looking at Star

when he spoke, his words directed to her more than to the young man in their bed.

Star nodded her understanding even though she was annoyed with Wind for leaving just as the food was served. "Don't be too long."

"I'll do my best," Wind replied as he left.

Somehow she felt uneasy about Wind being away from the camp at this time but she could protect it if were needed.

She turned to smile at Riverspring, who was eating as if it was the first food he'd had in a month, which it might well be. "Let your stomach adjust, Riverspring," she advised. "It'll cramp if you don't."

Riverspring put the eating knife he'd been given down on his plate. "Sorry," he muttered, "but it's been a long time since I ate much more than berries."

She wanted to ask if he'd been fed while in the City, but didn't want to offend or upset him. "It's okay," she said soothingly, "just take it slower is all."

She picked up her own plate and began to

eat and for a few minutes they were silent until Riverspring asked, "Is your name shortened at all?"

She smiled. "Yes, to Star. Do you shorten yours?"

He returned the smile and she found herself wishing that Wind was still there to see the expression and just how beautiful it made his future swordbrother.

All too soon the smile died and there was a look of intense sadness on his face. "In my old clan I was called Spring," he told her.

"Hello the camp!" a deep voice bellowed from just outside the tent.

Star exchanged a look with Spring. The voice was that of a stranger and she reached for one of her hunting knives. Spring put his plate aside and looked around the tent obviously searching for something he could use as a weapon. Star handed him a knife and stood up to pull back the tent flap.

"We're in the middle of eating here, what do you want?"

Four big men, all of them well over six feet in height, and muscular as darbears stood at the edge of their camp. Every one of them had well aged warrior's marks and the tattoos of stone or wind mages. They were dressed in the usual furs and leathers of clansmen, and all of them wore swords at their belts.

"Your father hired us to bring you home to his camp," the man who'd shouted said. You have one of two choices. You can go quietly like a woman should, or we can drag you kicking and screaming to where you belong. Your choice."

Star gave the man a glare that could have cut glass from ten paces. "I have no father so go away, you're not welcome here."

"I see this is going to be done the hard way then," the warrior told her. He shook his head. "Let's try explaining this again in simpler terms. Your father didn't hire us to talk, he hired us to bring you back. You don't get any choice beyond walking or being tied up and carried. Your choice on which of those options you take." He gave her a leering grin. "Personally I like it when a girl resists. It's a lot more fun, isn't it boys?"

The men with him gave murmurs of agreement and edged closer to the boundary of the camp.

Star smiled at them, the expression brittle. “You’re the one doing all the talking. Now I’ll give you a choice. Leave on your feet or have your friends carry you back to whatever hole you crawled out of.”

The four men started laughing at her threat, and their leader said, “And who’s going to keep us from taking you? We know you’re alone.”

Spring appeared at her side. “That’s where you’re so wrong my friend.”

The men exchanged confused glances.

“Who in hell are you?” their leader asked, gaze on Wind’s swordbrother-to-be.

“Mind your own damned business,” Spring replied. “Now I believe you were asked to leave our camp.”

Star gazed at him in admiration. Bound feet, hunger and tiredness were not going to stop Spring doing the job of a good swordbrother. She turned her attention back to the men. “Tell the

man that call himself my father that Windspinner Bearbane now has a swordbrother.”

“That scrawny bit of nothing?” one of the other men asked, incredulous.

“Look little girl, I don’t give a flying dog turd if your man has a swordbrother or not. I was told to bring you back and that’s what we’re going to do.” He motioned to the men with him. “Bonebreaker, you get her, we’ll take care of the boy.”

“My pleasure,” the biggest man said as the four of them entered their camp without invitation.

Two things happened in quick succession. First the man, Bonebreaker, screamed like a stuck pig, pulling his wet and steaming clothing away from his scalded skin. Then the big mouthed leader clutched a bleeding knife wound to the side of his gut.

“You were asked to leave and you ignored us,” Star said in a voice that could have frozen the lake in the canyon, “so now I’m telling you, get the fuck out of our camp.”

“You bitch!” their leader shouted, looking

aghast at the blood on his hand. Snarling he drove a wave of sand and gravel at Star.

Bonebreaker threw his steaming jacket and vest to the ground. "You miserable little bastard!" he shrieked as he ripped at the rest of his clothes, trying to shed them while they continued to scald his flesh.

A blast of wind slammed into Riverspring and their home, several stakes and ropes coming loose, the tent leaning wildly as the blast of air tore at it. The windmage in the group reached for his sword. "I'll take care of this little shit."

The fourth man turned to confront a bystander who looked as if he might want to get involved.

The plant in the pot by the tent flap threw out tendrils of green to contain the sand and gravel while the water in the pot took on a life of its own and sprayed the windmage with boiling droplets.

The bystander grinned at the fourth man and awaited developments.

Bonebreaker had bright reddened places on his exposed skin, but his windmage companion wasn't as lucky. The water hit him in the face,

instantly raising blisters, the man screaming and clutching at his face which sent Bonebreaker to the man's side.

Their leader, also burned by the hot water, crumpled to the sand, moaning in pain, but it didn't keep him from lashing out in fury, another blast of sand and stones leaping free of the ground going for Star.

The last man turned from the bystander, drawing his sword as he approached Star and Riverspring.

"Uh, uh, I wouldn't do that if I were you," the bystander said, his deep voice pleasant. The fourth man looked round to see a short bow in the man's hands, the arrow in place and the string pulled back ready to let it fly.

Star's plant dealt with the last of the sand and stones and she stared at their attackers in contempt.

"That old son of a bitch! He didn't mention you were a damn greenmage," their leader groaned.

Star chuckled mirthlessly. "He always was a liar. Now think yourselves lucky you're all still

alive and tell him to leave me alone unless he wants his Chief to hear about this.”

She turned her attention to the bystander and smiled. “Thank you for your help. If there is anyway we can repay you please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Springhad moved to secure the tent, tightening ropes and driving the loosened pegs back in as best he could considering his weakened state.

Hurt, grumbling, the four men got to their feet.

“When I get my hands on that dustdelver leavings he’ll wish he’d never been born,” their leader said.

With a final glare at Star and the young man beside her, along with the bystander, the four stumbled away from their camp.

“If anyone goes carrying tales to a Chief and you need a witness, I’ll gladly oblige,” the man with the bow said. “I saw them wait until one of your men had gone before making their approach. I am Trueflight Woodbender and can be found with the Clan of the Mountain Lion

over yonder.” He pointed to a spot closer to one of the canyon’s several lakes.

A pair of young warriors about Star’s age joined them from a nearby camp. They were respectful of the implied perimeter of the camp and stayed outside it as strangers should. “We saw what happened too, but,” the speaker sighed, “we were told to stay out of the way or risk dying.

He put his arm around the other man’s waist. “We know those guys, and they’d kick our butts so we didn’t get involved.”

His swordbrother said, “I feel like a coward.”

“I’m Sandstone, this is my swordbrother, Littlepuddle,” the taller of the two men said.

“Greetings Trueflight, Sandstone and Littlepuddle,” Star said politely, “I am Starshine and this is Riverspring.”

Finished with setting the tent to rights, Riverspring rose to his feet and favored the assembled warriors with a shy smile. “Greetings,” he echoed. “If you will excuse me, those morons interrupted us eating what was a very good meal.”

He turned and went back into the tent and Star had to smile. He knew exactly how to act around other clansmen and he was quite capable of standing his ground in a fight. She turned that smile on the young warriors. "Don't feel bad," she said, "part of being a good warrior is knowing when not to fight."

"It still cuts my pride to back away from a fight like that, especially when we knew they were in the wrong," Littlepuddle remarked in a sour tone. "Those guys don't deserve their warrior's marks, they're nothing but loudmouthed bullies."

His swordbrother, Sandstone hugged him. "Well they got what they deserved this time. They were treated as any intruders into another man's camp should expect to be treated."

Littlepuddle grinned, his expression a bit vicious. "Yes they certainly did!"

Trueflight chuckled. "They were the cowards here, deliberately waiting until the man of the camp left to attack. As well he has a good swordbrother." There was a wistful look in his turquoise eyes as he spoke the last words.

Star nodded her agreement. She dreaded to

think what would have happened had Spring not been there. “Just the sort of men my father would have chosen to do his dirty work.”

Sandstone nodded. “They’re notorious at Gatherings. They do the dirty work for anyone that will pay their price, though, to be honest most of the time the people that hire them have good cause. They’ve actually rescued a few girls who’d been grabbed and enslaved, so they aren’t completely bad men for the most part.”

“They aren’t very choosy with their jobs, so once in a while they take a bad one,” Littlepuddle added. “Those are the ones that piss me off most, like today. Last Gather they took a girl from the camp of the man she’d been married to for a year because he lost his swordbrother. As if that wasn’t hard enough on him, he had to lose his wife too. It wasn’t right for them to get involved.”

“Well, my father is plausible enough to have made them think I was here against my will,” Star said fairly. “When the truth is, he simply doesn’t like my man.” She stopped. “He hasn’t met Spring yet but I doubt if he’d like him either.”

“I stopped trying to figure my parents out a long time ago. They have their lives and we have

ours, right Littlepuddle?” Sandstone asked, smiling at his swordbrother.

“Yes. And I’m very happy too, despite what my fathers and mother thought about you.” Littlepuddle shrugged. “The bond wanted made, so who were they to question the magic’s choice?”

Trueflight smiled. “I imagine in Starshine’s case it was more to do with bride price, am I right?”

Star grinned at him. “You’re a very astute man, Trueflight. My father did want to sell me to the highest bidders but I’m nobody’s slave and the sooner he realizes that the better!”

“Too many clansmen have it in their heads that women can be bought and sold like a warcycle or traded like furs. It’s a dismaying trend,” Littlepuddle remarked.

“As much as I’m enjoying the conversation, we’re supposed to meet some friends for a meal, so we’d better get going,” Sandstone commented as he pulled gently on his lover’s arm.

“You and your men should come visit us for dinner sometime,” Littlepuddle said. “We’ve

always got more food than we know what to do with.” He hugged Sandstone to him, “My swordbrother here’s a wonderful provider.”

“And *my* swordbrother is a great cook!” Sandstone told them. “He can even bake hearthbread, and that’s saying a lot.”

“Yes it is,” Star agreed with a smile. “I think my men and I will be happy to come to dinner one evening. Thank you for the invitation.”

It was lovely to see just how much the two young warriors felt so deeply for each other and she hoped that Wind and Spring would be as loving to each other once they’d formed the bond.

Spring poked his head out of the tent. “Star, your food is getting cold. I’d hate it to go to waste.”

Trueflight nodded to them and said his farewells. “I’d invite you for dinner too but my camp is rather crowded.”

Star grinned at him. “That’s easily solved. You come to us for dinner one evening. It’s the least I can do after your help this evening.”

“Ask your man when will be a good day for you to come eat with us.” He smiled at Trueflight. “You can come too of course. Anytime you feel like dropping by. Have a good night everyone,” Sandstone said.

“Good night, see you soon,” Littlepuddle told them as the pair headed off to their tent which was a stone’s throw from the camp Star shared with her lover.

Star smiled after the departing warriors. It was nice that they’d made a few friends at the Gather. She turned and re-entered the tent. Her food was still warm enough to eat so she finished it up before asking Spring if he’d had enough.

He smiled at her. “I’m fine, thanks. You’re a good cook.”

Spring picked up the empty dishes and headed to what remained of the hot water on the outside fire. As he cleaned the dishes he considered the events since Windspinner had left the camp.

At least I was able to protect her for him. I’m not totally useless as a swordbrother.

People came and went past their camp, most of them not giving the nearly naked man a second glance, though a few older warriors did pause to leer at him with very evident lust before continuing on their way.

He had just finished cleaning the dishes when Windspinner, his future swordbrother, came into view a few camp distances away. He carried two bundles tied with cord in one hand, and a fine looking lance in the other. He moved toward their camp with the grace of a sleek mountain panther. Wind was smiling and happy, the expression adding to the blond's handsomeness.

Spring felt a jolt of pure lust run through his body at the sight. After his experiences in the City and at the hands of his 'master' he had wondered if he would ever be able to form the bond with a swordbrother. Windspinner was different, though, and he knew they would never hurt each other.

He smiled in welcome as he dried his hands.

"Hello, Riverspring," Wind said the smile transforming to a happy grin which brightened his already intense green eyes. "I brought you some clothes and this lance as a start on the

things you need to have.” He set them down beside Spring, leaned down and gave him a gentle kiss on the mouth.

When he straightened up he frowned at the loosened tent stakes and ropes. “What happened here?” he asked. Before Spring had a chance to answer Wind went to tighten the lines and stakes. “Did some kids get a bit wild and go rampaging through the camp?”

“Sorry, I was just about to fix that,” Spring said. “We had some visitors while you were gone. Starshine’s father hired some warriors to take her back.”

“He did what?” Wind’s gaze filled with alarm. “Are you hurt? What about Star? Is she all right? Did they take her?”

The blond turned and flung the door of the tent open, “Star are you all right?” he called as he stepped inside, staying in the doorway, his gaze going from Spring by the fire to the woman Spring couldn’t see inside their tent.

“I’m fine, thanks to Spring’s quick thinking,” Star’s voice called, “and we had help from some neighbors.”

Wind stepped outside and finished tightening up the lines, his mouth tight, expression showing his anger. "Who were they? Did you get any names?"

Spring thought for a moment, his mind running the whole incident through again. "One was called Bonebreaker, although he wasn't their leader. Two young men from a camp just across the way told us they're notorious at Gatherings."

"I know the name Bonebreaker. He and his swordbrother and two friends of theirs have a reputation as people who rescue women from kidnappers. I've heard that sometimes the women don't want to be rescued." He turned to Spring. "I should have realized Star's father might do something like this. It was foolish of me to leave the two of you alone, though," he grinned at Spring, "I guess you did well enough without me."

Spring shook his head. "Had things been as they were before you rescued me, they might have succeeded in taking her." His lips quirked upwards in a vicious grin. "Then again she's feisty and an excellent greenmage so they'd have still had a fight on their hands. As it was, I came as a

rather nasty shock and a man called Trueflight came to our aid also. What I'm trying to say is that I doubt you could have planned for it. They deliberately waited until you left the camp."

Wind knelt beside him, put his arm around Spring and gave him a hug, the contact sending a tingle through Spring. "Thank you for protecting her, my swordbrother-to-be. I will be pleased to forge the bond with you, when you are recovered and ready, and if that's what you want."

Spring hugged Wind in return, not even having to think about his answer. "It's what I want, Wind. I would be honored to be your swordbrother."

He was pulled into a lover's embrace and Wind whispered, "Thank you for protecting Star."

Spring smiled as he hugged Wind in return. "You don't need to thank me, she means as much to me as you do."

The handsome blond sat back and gazed into Spring's eyes. "Does she?" he asked, running a hand through Spring's hair, thumb brushing across his cheek. Tendrils of blue magical energy

drifted on a trace of breeze awakening around them.

Spring eyed Wind, not sure if he should tell him what was on his mind. *If she'd been born a man, they would be swordbrothers.* Aloud he said, "She fights as well as any warrior. She deserves those warrior marks she bears."

Wind smiled, his pride in Star evident. "Yes she does and that makes me cherish her all the more. A wife is easy for swordbrothers to find, but what she and I have is special. We've loved one another since we were kids. She's more than a wife, she's my best friend."

Spring could say it now he'd been given that opening. "If she were a man the bond would have formed between you."

The blond's mouth dropped open, his shock apparent, as if the thought of a bond between him and Star had never crossed his mind. From the look on his face, Spring didn't think it had. "But, that only happens in stories. At least, I've never seen a woman paired with a man as swordbonded mates."

Spring shrugged. "There are all female clans

out there and the women have sword sisters. But it's hardly surprising it wouldn't occur to you with the way most clans treat their women. They've been reduced to the status of goods and chattels, sold to swordbrother pairings purely to breed children. But if the old legends and stories are to be believed, they once stood shoulder to shoulder with their men."

"Like my Star," Wind replied absently, the man obviously lost in thought. "But if that was true, it would have formed between us already and I've never noticed anything like this happening between us." He brushed fingertips over Spring's arm, a shimmer of magical energy drifting away from the contact.

Spring shuddered at the gentle stroke and a ribbon of green rose from his skin where Wind had touched it. "Were you actually looking for it, or were you more concerned with finding a swordbrother?"

He knew nothing of Wind's history and was appalled when he realized he'd hurt the man. Wind's face was ashen, his eyes sparkling with unshed tears and Spring made a quantum leap of

connection. “Your magic tried to form the bond with someone else, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” Wind’s voice had gone tight, evidence of the hurt Spring had unwittingly caused. The blond visibly withdrew, then did so physically. He stood and turned to adjust one of the lines for the tent which didn’t really appear to be in need of attention.

“Oh gods, Wind, I’m sorry. I never intended to hurt you.” He’d always been good at letting his mouth run on ahead of his brain and now he would pay the price for it. Wind would want nothing more to do with him after hurting the man so badly.

He had to wonder who the other man had been but, too late it seemed, he had more sense than to ask.

Wind didn’t move, didn’t speak, he simply stood with his back to Spring.

Spring bowed his head and went back into the tent. Star looked up from her sewing and frowned at him. “Are you all right, Spring?”

He shook his head. “I’ve just upset Wind. I didn’t mean to but I mentioned him trying to

form the bond with someone and now he's really unhappy with me."

"Lakesinger," Star almost spat out the word. "They were lovers but the bastard wouldn't form the bond. I think if it would have changed Lake's mind, Wind would have dumped me for him."

Spring bowed his head. *That close to another, yet a one-sided bond. What kind of man was this Lakesinger that he could throw Wind aside after being his lover?*

Wind entered the tent, paused inside the door. "Which only proves what sort of fool I've been. You've been right there with me sharing everything since we were children, Star." He crossed the tent to kneel in front of her. He reached out, touched her cheek. "I never realized it, never even noticed it. Not until Spring set me straight."

He leaned in, kissed her and threads of blue drifted away to twine with tendrils of green.

The blond man sat back on his heels. "It explains so much. All this time when I've been with you I held my magic in check, afraid I

might hurt you as if your power were somehow more fragile than a man's magic."

Star smiled although there were tears in her eyes. "Stoopid," she murmured.

Spring watched eyes wide as the deep green tendrils of her magic embraced the blue of Wind's. As he observed this and wondered if he should be here at all, a ribbon of lighter green rose from him to intertwine with the other energies.

"Yes, stupid," he agreed. "Blind too. I should have realized we were bonded, but... I guess we were so young when it happened that it didn't register as a bond in what I have that vaguely passes for a mind." He laughed and held his hand out to Spring. "I hope you don't mind a three way bond, Spring."

A revelation lit Wind's eyes. "Oh, now this development changes a great many things." He turned a fierce grin on Star. "Let's see your father argue about us now. You're my *swordsister* and he can't hope to break that bond with money."

Star laughed and also reached out to Spring.

Still amazed that he had a *swordsister* as well as

a swordbrother, Spring moved forward and took both their hands. There could be no denying the way the energies swirled around them, made up of two shades of green and Wind's bright blue.

"That solves it then. We're a swordbond, not a pair of brothers, but a full swordbond." Wind leaned closer and kissed Spring. "That means we're equals in power." His gaze went to Star. "I really should have realized this on my own. We've been together like two seeds in a fruit since we were little. I'd wager the bond formed before our powers were matured."

Spring smiled his gaze riveted on their magical energies before it turned to take in the beautiful couple that he was now inextricably linked with. "Swordbond," he repeated, trying to come to terms with the almost unheard of phenomenon.

"It's going to take me a few days for this to sink in," Wind explained. His hand slipped from Spring's to caress his arm.

Ribbons of power spun together, blue and pale green, the deeper green of Star's magic winding round the paired energies, the colors blending to a rich, green-blue. A breath of air fluttered around them, ruffling their hair.

“I think it’s going to take me a lot more than a few days,” Star said but there was a smile on her face. “Phew! Two beautiful men all to myself!” She fanned her face with her hand.

Spring blushed at her words, still not entirely sure that he was part of the bond. Wind and Star were so close, shared so much history, while he was completely new to them and, even worse, came with nothing to offer.

And yet he couldn’t deny what he was seeing. His power was a part of the magical energies which were growing stronger as he watched.

“Why, yes, that’s true isn’t it?” Wind asked, winking at Spring. “Of course what she forgot to mention is those two men she’s so thrilled about get to have a very beautiful woman for themselves.”

Spring felt even worse on hearing Wind’s words. “Umm, much as I love the idea, I’ve never actually had a woman.”

Wind chuckled. “Well I’d never had one either until Star was kind enough to drag me into the bushes and encourage me to figure things out.”

Star knocked an elbow into Wind’s ribs. “Way

to go, idiot,” but she was smiling as she said it, a smile that was also directed at Spring. “Definitely not a problem, Spring, I promise.”

Spring smiled back, feeling more at ease. “Should we form the bond now?”

Wind leaned in close to Spring, the magical energies spinning around them. “Do you think you’re strong enough for that? I thought you might want to let your feet heal.”

Spring frowned. He did feel stronger for the meal he’d eaten but he’d also had to help fight off four battlemages which had weakened him more than he liked to admit.

Star, however, had other ideas. “What does he need his feet for?”

“I’m worrying about bumping them. I don’t want to hurt him accidentally Star.”

Star frowned then. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking. Spring’s been in a battle too. Perhaps for tonight we should just curl up together and keep each other warm.”

“I think that’s a very good idea,” Wind agreed. “I’ll remake the bed for three.” He gave them

both quick kisses on the cheek and got up. “I’d better unpack some more furs. It’s gotten colder since we arrived. Why don’t you help Spring see if those clothes I traded are a good fit for him, Star?”

Star opened one of the packages and withdrew soft leather pants in tan and a matching vest. When she opened the second package and drew out its contents both she and Spring gasped. The jacket was beautiful, finer than anything he’d ever owned, even before being caught by that terrifying man and sold to the City.

He gazed at the fur-lined leather almost reverently, determined that he would repay these two wonderful people in whatever way he could.

Chapter Five

Trouble

Wind had gone out hunting an hour ahead of the sunrise so he could get done and get back to camp. He wanted to make sure he was in camp in case Star's father got it in his head to send another bunch of idiots around to cause trouble. Going so early had proved a good idea. He'd gotten a half dozen rabbits and one of the shaggy cliff dwelling sheep which was more than enough food to sustain them for several days, and have some to give away to those who needed it.

He rolled to the edge of a rather ratty camp and left three rabbits hanging from a cooking tripod because the people there needed them more than he and his swordbrother and swordsisiter did.

Bondmates. He and Star were no longer alone and it felt good. Exciting. Wonderful.

He couldn't stop grinning. He brought his cycle to a stop beside their tent. *Our tent. Our home. The three of us.*

He got off the cycle and peered into the tent. "Anyone awake yet?"

Star put a finger to her lips as she finished dressing. "Let Spring sleep. It's the first time he's been safe enough to really sleep since he left the City."

"I've got three icehares and a sheep. Why don't you make him a nice hot breakfast? Thin as he is, he could certainly use a few big meals."

Star cocked her head to one side, a sure sign she was considering her options. "I think I'll let the icehares stew for the evening meal. I can grill some of the sheep as steaks for breakfast."

"Good plan," he agreed. "I'm going to check with people at the nearby camps and see if I can buy some flour. I'd love some hot pan bread. Or do we have some flour left?"

"We've got enough for breakfast so be still for a few moments!"

Wind smiled and kissed her cheek. "Of course my beautiful, precious, adorable dove. Your every wish is mine to obey." Laughing, he sat down on a camp stool by the door and opened the basket next to it. He studied the pieces of bone inside

and picked out a slender piece from an icehare's leg. "So what do you think we should do today? I'd like to go where they've got the trade market set up and see what we can find. Spring's going to need a good cycle."

Star nodded as she eyed the sheep. "You got a really good one. I can take its wool before I skin it." She started to shear the wool from the sheep. "Have we got enough to trade for a bike without making the three of us short on goods for the Storm Season?"

"Save as much from it as you can," Wind told her as he started to shape the bone into a child's whistle. "We're going to be doing some hard bargaining to get a cycle for Spring and every little bit will help."

He didn't voice his worries about the upcoming Storm Season. *We're going to be very low on lamp oil and food unless we can barter for more. We certainly can't go to the City to buy anything. There's too much of a chance Riverspring would be recognized.*

Star continued what she was doing, her face pensive. "We've got that rug I wove. Keep

bringing me sheep like this one and I can soon make another while we're holed up."

"Yes I've been considering that too. What will we do, just the three of us to keep busy during blackstorm season? We'll need something to occupy our time or we'll all go cave-crazy."

"Well you have your bone carving and I'm almost certain Spring will have some skill or other that he likes to occupy himself with." She opened her mouth to say more when the sound of heavy footfalls stopped her.

Wind looked up from the whistle to see Star's father and his swordbrother approaching. He sighed. "Well there's a pleasant morning ruined," he muttered as he put the unfinished whistle away.

Star finished shearing the sheep and set the wool aside before starting to skin the animal. She didn't even glance at the two men. "Didn't the bully boys you sent yesterday convince you that I'm staying here?" she asked without looking up from her task.

"Star, you you're coming home," her father said as they walked into Wind's camp uninvited.

“Breezekeeper Windsman I’ll not tolerate rudeness. Step out of *our* camp and request entry like a proper guest, or—” Wind began only to be cut off by Clayshaper.

“Or what you wet-eared pup?” Clayshaper demanded. He reached down to take hold of Star’s arm but didn’t get that far. Wind grabbed his wrist and prevented it.

“I mean this, both of you! I won’t tolerate this disrespect any more!” he warned. His tone was calm, unruffled. “I’m done being insulted, and I’m done with the two of you trying to treat Star like something you own.”

Star dropped the sheep and rose to her feet, the skinning knife now a weapon in her hand. “And I’m done hearing my swordbrother be ignored.”

Breezekeeper’s mouth dropped open and he sputtered wordlessly while his swordbrother, Clayshaper, started to laugh.

“That’s a good story, that one is. Him your *swordbrother*? Girl you’ve lost what little sense you had.”

Wind shoved the man away, but he continued

to laugh. "That's where you're wrong. Star is my bonded *swordsister* and if you don't believe it, that's too damn bad."

"And if you don't believe either of us, perhaps you'd like to ask our swordbrother," Star suggested sweetly, "though I doubt he'll take kindly to being woken up by you two."

"You mean that boy I've heard is hanging around here?" Clayshaper scoffed. "What is he, about sixteen? Seventeen? A mere child."

"I don't know who you're talking about, but my swordbrother is the same age Star is, and he's hardly a child." He pushed Clayshaper forcefully out of the boundaries of his camp and turned to do the same thing to her father. "Leave or suffer the consequences of your rudeness."

Spring poked his head out of the tent flap. "Is everything all right, Wind, Star?" he asked. "I heard raised voices." He glanced at Breezekeeper and Clayshaper and stiffened, his eyes narrowing. With a yell he was out of the tent his lance in his hand. "You bastards!"

Wind turned a puzzled look on Spring. "What's wrong? Do you know these two?"

he asked, casting an frown in the direction of Breezekeeper and Clayshaper.

“Only by sight,” Spring said, his voice dripping with disdain. “They stood and watched when I was captured. I called to them for help but they did nothing. They just laughed and turned away.”

“They... *What!*” Wind had always known Star’s father wasn’t the nicest person, but that he’d stand by and watch a clansman be carried off to slavery and laugh about it stunned even him.

“You sorry assholes!” he snarled. Blue energy swirled around him in answer to his rising anger. He motioned at the pair of men and a powerful gust of wind knocked them off their feet, dust and sand blinding them.

“GET OUT OF MY CAMP! DON’T YOU *EVER* COME BACK!” he roared, voice loud as the scream of a blackstorm. He took a step toward the men, the wind pulling at his clothes, whipping his hair back and forth. Magical light danced around his arms and hands, crawled across his shoulders forming a mantle of power only windimages of immense power displayed.

Two shades of green, one light like water under sunlight, the second shade darker like leaves, joined with the blue, the swordbond adding strength to Wind in his determination to rid their camp of the older men.

Breezekeeper and Clayshaper were staring at the three of them in abject disbelief.

Wind stepped forward. "I mean this, I never want to see or hear from either of you. Not ever."

A crowd of bystanders, drawn by the commotion, were forming around the camp. People were staring, and Wind felt a moment of embarrassment, but he forced himself not to care what anyone might think. Star's father had done some low things in his life, but letting Spring be carried off was reprehensible.

His mind went still, the wind around him falling to a bare zephyr of motion, though the energies brightened as a new thought entered his mind.

"You son of a dustdelver!" he snarled striding toward the pair of older men. "You fucking KNEW! YOU KNEW!"

He grabbed Breezekeeper by the front of his jacket and yanked him to his feet. "YOU STINKING PIECE OF OFFAL!" He let Breezekeeper go, only to slam his fist into the man's mouth.

Clayshaper took a step towards Wind only to be brought up short by both Spring's lance and Star's skinning knife. "Don't even think about getting involved," the watermage warned in a voice that could have frozen blood.

Breezekeeper swung at Wind, but he blocked it with his forearm. The magical glow flowing along Wind arm slammed into the older windmage, taking him off his feet, knocking him backward to the feet of the nearest spectators.

An astonished murmur passed through the crowd, but none of them came close to the shocked outcry that Breezekeeper gave when he discovered his arm was broken.

Clayshaper ran to his swordbrother's side, effectively leaving Wind's camp.

Wind glared angrily at the two men. "Don't you *ever* set foot in our camp again!"

Breezekeeper gazed at Wind in astonishment. “You... broke my arm... how could you do that?”

Star shook her head and rolled her eyes. “He’s a powerful windmage with the name Bearbane, father. Didn’t any of that ever tell you anything?” Her eyes narrowed. “I believe I already made my choice to live with my swordbrother and not you and that pervert, but, in case you try anything like this again, I’ll say it in front of all these people.” She took a step forward.

“I want it known in front of these witnesses that I disown you as my father for the crimes of trying to break a swordbond and of allowing a clansman to be taken as a slave.”

“He’s not from our clan! What difference does that make!” her father retorted. “We’ve been selling people of other clans to the City for generations!”

A mutter of agreement mingled with some angry remarks about some clans forgetting the difference of right and wrong rose from the crowd.

“I’ll stand witness to this woman’s disownment of her father,” Sword said as he came forward

from amid the crowd. “I’ve been witness to things this man has done that would make him kin-shunned or an outlaw in some clans.”

Star ignored him and stared at her father. “You knew *who* and *what* Spring was, that’s why you let him be taken and laughed while it happened.”

Instead of trying to deny it, her father glared at them sullenly.

“Yes that’s what I thought. You misbegotten dustdelver! You carrion worm! You’re beneath contempt! You make the provision that I cannot marry Star until I have a swordbrother, then you sell him to the City as a slave knowing I might never find him!”

Wind took a step forward, the air around him beginning to scream. He released more of the power he carried within him, more than he’d let anyone, even Star witness. Bright light swirled around him in shades of intense blues, tinged with the green of Star’s plant magic. Threads of Spring’s water magic blended into the shrieking gale. The wind grabbed both men and lifted them high over head, tearing at their clothing.

Breezekeeper screamed in terror, Clayshaper echoing the sound.

“You said I wasn’t capable of being a warrior!” Wind stated, his gaze turned up to the men well over head. “You said I wasn’t worthy of Star.” He gestured and they moved higher into the air, terrified cries coming from them.

The gathered crowd watched, silently, eyes wide, awed by the sight of such powerful wind magic. A blackstorm wind raged around the pair of men, but not even a wisp of air touched the spectators.

“Do you want to see how I kill a darbear?” he asked the frightened men.

“Wind, don’t do this. Please.” The soft voice was Spring’s not Star’s and he laid a hand on Wind’s arm. “We found each other eventually so what good does killing these two fools do?”

Wind didn’t let the men go. “What good does it do? It keeps them from selling anyone else. It proves to them that I *can* and *will* protect what is mine! It proves to them that they *are* fools.”

Star nodded but Spring was shaking his head. “It doesn’t prove a thing to them if they’re dead.

Let them live, Wind. Let them live with the knowledge that the three of us won.”

I should crush them like bugs. I should rid the world of them the way you'd rid the world of vermin. But is killing them right?

He frowned, staring at the two men who'd done everything possible to keep Star and him apart. *Did they really think I was wrong for her, or were they trying to use her as a bargaining piece to gain wealth? I don't know. I may never know.*

But do they deserve to die?

“Star, what should I do?” he asked softly.

“Windspinner Bearbane Windcaller, put those men down *right now!*” Chief Redsand of their clan ordered. “Boy what has gotten into that head of yours? Attacking clansmen, what in hell are you thinking?”

Star laid a hand on Wind's arm. “Let them down, Wind. It's time to tell a few truths.”

The two men hit the ground none too gently, the pair falling from ten feet up to land in the sand. “Better than they deserve,” Wind remarked

as all traces of his magical power winked out of existence as if a tap had been turned off.

Star turned to face Redsand. “My father and his swordbrother allowed our swordbrother to be captured and taken to the City as a slave while they laughed, even though he called to them for help. They did this knowing who and what he was.

“Not content with that they sent four battlemages here last night to ‘bring me home’ whether I was willing or not. These ‘warriors’ deliberately waited until Wind had left our camp and it was only due to Spring being here and the intervention of a man called Trueflight that I wasn’t carried back to their camp like a possession.

“So you can understand why we’re a little pissed off with them right now.”

Redsand nodded. “Yes, I do. Taking into consideration some of the things I found out today from another clan chief, I’m not even going to question you on what you’ve told me.”

Wind frowned. “So they’ve been acting like this with other people?”

Redsand nodded again. "Yes they have."

Wind shook his head in disbelief and glanced at Star. He felt bad for her, but in the end things would be easier now that everyone knew what sort of men her fathers were.

Star gazed at her father with contempt. "No wonder my mother came to hate you both so much."

Clayshaper glowered at her as he helped Breezekeeper to stand. "She was an ungrateful bitch!" he snarled. "Nothing we did was ever good enough for her or you!"

Breezekeeper elbowed Clayshaper in the ribs. "Let it go. They're both gone and it doesn't matter. I still have you, and that's all I care about anymore."

"Which is a very good thing," Redsand stated, "since you no longer have a clan. Move your camp away from my people."

"What did we do?" Breezekeeper questioned, face going ashen.

"You sold two clansmen and their wife into

slavery with another clan. You sold this young man here into slavery and he wound up in the City. You've stolen goods from other clans and cheated another man out of goods that you refused to pay for afterward. Any one of those things is grounds to eject you from Brightsand. Taken together they mean no clan here at this Gather is willing to take you," Chief Redsand explained. "Go back to your camp, pack and move away from my people. You are not welcome among Clan Brightsand."

Star felt strong arms encircle her. "I knew her father sometimes shorted people in trades, but I never suspected the man and his swordbrother had sunk to the level of thieves and slavers."

"I wouldn't be too long about packing either. There are people here who've mentioned bloodprice and I don't think they're going to seek it in trade goods," Redsand warned.

Angry glares and muttering from the crowd showed how precarious the men's lives would be if they remained in the proximity of the Gathering as the two men hurried away to do as their former chief ordered.

The weaponsmith, Sword Dancer made

shooing motions at the crowd. "It's all over everyone. Let's leave this camp and let the people get some well deserved peace."

The crowd began to disperse.

Star watched her father and his swordbrother scuttle away, not certain how she should feel. *With such a man as my father, what does that make me? Will Wind and Spring come to hate me as much as I came to hate him?*

She turned to Chief Redsand. "So it wasn't just about me and the bride price they thought they could get?"

The Chief shook his head. "No, they were trying to sell you off to the highest bidder. I spoke to some of the men you'd been offered to, and they were very honest with me. The top bidders agreed to take you for the high price your father offered because they thought any man who'd sell his daughter into what amounted as a slave trade agreement didn't deserve to have her."

He nodded to Sword. "Thank you for sending those boys to tell me what was happening here."

"I thought their Chief should know what they

were doing in this man's camp," Sword replied. "It seemed the right thing to do."

"It was, thank you," Redsand remarked. "Good day to the three of you," he added to Star and her men.

Spring waited until he had gone before wrapping his arms around Star. "You are not your father, Star. You're nothing like him."

She turned into his embrace, burying her face against his shoulder. "Thank you, Spring. I keep thinking of what my mother must have endured in her time with them."

She reached out blindly to Wind. "Though I'm glad you didn't actually kill them. You're a very scary man Windspinner Bearbane but I still love you." She glanced up at Spring. "I love you too, Riverspring, you always know the right thing to say or do."

Wind joined the two of them in an embrace, giving both of them gentle kisses before he sank onto one of the stools by their door. Star could tell he was tired. Very tired from the expenditure of his windmage power.

"I would have killed them," he stated. "Which

is very much not like me. Though they've been pushing at me for years as if they wanted me to do it, I would have hated myself if I had killed them." He sighed, the sound conveying exhaustion. Star noticed he'd gone a bit pale.

"Breakfast!" she said with conviction. "Spring could you finish skinning that sheep while I get some food cooking?"

"I'd really like something hot to drink too. I'm feeling chilled," Wind remarked, and picked up one of the camp rugs to put around his shoulders. "Serves me right for going out hunting so early in the morning without eating first."

"I'll put some water on to boil before I finish off the skinning," Spring said and picked up the smaller kettle. He filled it from their water container and set it on the firestones to boil.

Star shot a look at Wind. *Hunting my ass! You got cold and tired from using so much of your magic in one go.*

She kept her thoughts to herself, however and dug some ready made hearth cakes out of the clay pot that kept things cool for them.

"I thought after breakfast we could go down

to the trade market and find a cycle for you, Spring. I know your feet hurt, so we could take our cycles to avoid walking,” Wind suggested. He had an odd little smile on his face, and his green eyes were on Spring as he spoke.

Spring glanced up from the skinning to smile at them both. “My feet feel a lot better now they’ve been dressed and I’ve had a good night’s sleep.”

Star caught his eye then deliberately looked at Wind. “I think the cycles are a good idea.”

Her lover still appeared too pale, and she could see he kept shivering more than the cool morning air warranted.

“When I was getting the clothes for Spring yesterday I ran into a pair of swordsmen who filled me in on some of the latest gossip going around the camps. It seems that Stormdragon Dragonson of Dragon Clan has been removed from his position as Heir to the Chief of their clan. His older brother, Dragonwind has taken over. Word has it that he’s going to name Stormdragon an outlaw. The odd thing is no one is sure why.”

Star set the hearthcakes by the firestones to cook and cut three thick slices of meat from the sheep's flank which she placed on a grill over the fire pit. She cleaned the sheep and the icehares and frowned as she was working. "Then it's a sad day for the Dragon Clan," she said. "Dragonwind was always a bully and I never felt comfortable when he was around. There's just something - inhuman about him."

Spring was rolling the new sheepskin ready for tanning but he looked up at their conversation and Star realized he was shivering.

"What's wrong, Spring?" she asked.

"Dragonwind was the name of the man who sold me to the City."

Star stared at him. "Are you sure? Dragon Clan was always against selling clanspeople to the City."

Spring nodded. "I'll never forget his name or how he felt. You're right Star, there's something inhuman there."

"They were against slavery when Stormdragon was Heir, but it isn't true anymore. Apparently Dragonwind sells anyone that opposes his rule

of Dragon Clan, and he's not adverse to making war with other clans to gain slaves to sell." Wind lowered his voice. "And the gossip only gets worse. The sword sisters said there's even a rumor going around that Dragonwind arranged to have Stormdragon's swordbrother, Sandrunner, murdered during a skirmish with raiders."

Star shook her head. Things didn't quite add up in her mind. "That doesn't make sense, Wind, if Sandrunner was murdered, Stormdragon would have died too. Why kill one and not the other only to declare him outlaw?"

Spring spoke up again. "There is something about this Dragonwind that makes craziness seem logical while logic appears mad. It's as if he twists feelings for his own purposes."

"I've heard other things too, but I don't know what to make of the whispered remarks. And Star, not all swordbrothers die together. Remember that old man we met when we were kids? His swordbrother died but he didn't let the bond take him because he didn't want to leave his grandkids to be raised as orphans. That took a lot of strength and courage, but he did it for

them. If he could survive who's to say someone else couldn't?"

Star frowned. "I'm not saying he *couldn't* survive. What I'm saying is, if one was murdered why not the other? Why name him outlaw instead of simply killing him at the same time?"

Spring looked up as he took the offal and wrapped it ready for disposal outside the Gather. "As a scapegoat?" he suggested.

"But for what? That's what I've been wondering," Wind remarked. "Dragonwind's a powerful mage, but there's something *wrong* with him. Even when we were kids there was something about him that made the hair on the nape of my neck rise anytime he came near. Not with fear but with a sort of wariness that warned me to stay clear of him. Like you said, Star, he feels wrong, as if he's something not quite human."

Her husband scooted the stool closer to the fire and regarded Star for a moment. "You remember how we used to go the other way when we'd see him coming, don't you? He gave me a bad feeling the first time I saw him at that Gather." He rubbed his chin. "I guess that was almost ten years ago now wasn't it?"

Star turned the meat over and checked the hearthcakes. "Yeah, it must be. We were about eight or nine summers I think. Dragonwind was very different to his brother. I *liked* Storm. He was caring and intelligent and would have made a superb clan chief."

She sighed, unhappy at the thought of a boy they'd considered a friend being named outlaw. "So does anyone know what happened to him after Sandrunner was killed?"

"Someone said he was seen crossing the barrens alone before that off season blackstorm a couple weeks ago. He might have died, though he's a damn powerful windmage. Even as kids he could do stuff I didn't even dream of attempting, like lifting Breezekeeper and Clayshaper. Storm could do things ten years ago I wouldn't have dared try at that age."

Star nodded and grinned at some of the memories. "Yes he is very powerful and he taught you a few good tricks."

"He did. And I'm thankful for them or I'd have never accomplished gaining the addition of Bearbane to my name. Chief Redsand's bestowal of that name was the proudest day of my life."

Wind stated. He grinned and added, "Except for meeting Spring and finding out you're my bondmate Star."

Springspoke up in his quiet way. "Stormdragon sounds like he's very different to his brother."

Star winced as she remembered being chased by Dragonwind as a child just so he could hurt her when he caught her. "As different as rock and water even though they're both windmages."

"More like the difference between a dustdelver and a man. Dragonwind is pure poison," Wind said as he pulled the fur tighter around himself. "Is the water hot enough for a poor frozen warrior to have some tea?"

Spring checked the kettle. "Very nearly," he said as he measured some leaves into a clay pot with a lip.

Star fetched their dishes. "Food's nearly ready too. We'll need to barter for flour before the storm season."

Thoughts of the storm season made her wonder where they would hole up for it and whether they could risk a trip to the City now

Spring was their swordbrother. “I don’t know if anyone here will have any left.”

“We’re going to have to join another clan if we want to get through the Storm Season alive. I can’t see any way to get around it. We’d need weeks to prepare, maybe longer since Spring came to us destitute.” Wind rubbed his face and sighed. “I don’t want us to end up dead.”

Spring finished making the tea, his heart heavy with the thought of what his lack of goods would mean to these two wonderful people. He’d put their very lives in danger by arriving so close to the storm season. But he couldn’t have stayed in the City any longer either.

Some of the watermages there were treated well, as useful members of the City, but others, like himself, were less fortunate and were owned by masters or mistresses that abused their bodies and not just their magic.

He sighed as he poured out three clay bowls of tea. “I’m sorry, I’ve caused you far too many problems.”

Wind turned a scowl on him. “It’s hardly your

fault. You were enslaved. By rights I should find who took your things and demand they return every last item to us doubled for the bloodprice they owe us.”

Spring recoiled from the scowl as if he'd been slapped. “Don't do that, Wind. The Dragon Clan will have taken my things and with all that we know about them I'd rather you stayed away from this Dragonwind.

“I can help by offering a water supply to camps or clan groups in exchange for trade goods.”

He bowed his head, hating to feel like such a burden on his swordbrother and sister.

Star handed him a plate of meat and hearthcakes without comment but she did shoot Wind a look of reproach.

“You're right of course. There's no possible way we'll be able to get anything but grief from Dragonwind. From what I've heard he'd simply sell us to the highest bidder if we even spoke to him about it. The man's gone from a bully of smaller children to a man who tries to rule his clan with fear and intimidation.”

Wind pulled his eating knife from his belt and offered it to Spring. "I have another one."

Spring took the knife with some reluctance but when Wind produced its mate he felt a little better. "Well at least that damned collar is being turned into a sword for me. I promised Sword I'd work for that so it's one less worry."

But how in all the hells am I going to help them pay for a cycle? No matter how many camps I supply water to, it won't come close to providing that.

Wind must have realized what he'd said had hurt Spring because he reached over and touched his arm. "I'm not mad at you, Spring. I'm just furious with the people who sold you into slavery, or allowed it to happen. It pisses me off to know they profited from taking you away from me."

Wind cut a piece of meat and lifted it to his mouth on the tip of his knife. "Star, how many darbear furs do we have left other than the two on our bed? Is it two or three?"

"Three," Star said, "and one of them is a red. Plus there are the two rugs I made last storm season that we didn't really like. I also have many

seedlings of those red vegetables that everyone likes to use in stews.”

She smiled at Spring. “If you can earn some trade goods or things you need by supplying water to camps we should still be ahead.”

“I’ll ask around as soon as I’ve eaten.” He felt a lot better having heard her tally up the trade goods they had to spare.

“That red hide is worth a great deal in trade, red darbears are uncommon. Your rugs always barter well, even if we don’t like how they came out, someone will. We should be able to get a cycle, providing someone has an extra they’re looking to sell,” Wind commented in reply to Star.

He turned his attention on Spring. “You’ll come with us to find a cycle, then you’ll be returning here to rest and let your feet heal. I won’t have you walking around so you can injure your feet permanently,” Wind informed sternly as he popped more of the meat into his mouth.

“I might ask Chief Redsand about those cycles from the outlaws. Technically one of them is mine if I want it, though I’m sure by now

they've been given to people who needed them in Brightsand Clan. Still, it won't hurt to ask."

Spring cut and speared a piece of meat before saying, "I'll be fine if I can get a pair of boots that fit. I can feel how much better they are, the swelling has gone right down and all that is left to heal is a few cuts and bruises."

He chewed on the meat before taking a sip of tea. "And I will *not* live in your camp without contributing."

"Contribute by getting well," Wind replied. He smiled warmly at Spring. "Your feet might feel better right now, but if you go walking around too much they might start to hurt again. Plus you're too thin from your ordeal. I want you rested so we can make the bond between us. More to the point I want you fully recovered from what you've been through before it's time for us to leave the Gather."

Spring took a deep breath to calm his temper. Much as he appreciated Wind's concern for him he had to make the man realize he was not a child and didn't take kindly to being treated like one. "I've always been thin," he almost snarled, "and

I gave my word to Sword that I would help him with water.”

Star reached across and laid a hand on Wind’s knee. “You won’t convalesce properly either, so let Spring do what he can.”

“I’m all right, Star. I just don’t want Spring winding up like my father. He didn’t listen to mom and his knee never healed right. Ten years later he still favors that leg.” Wind gave Spring a sad little smile. “I worry too much about stuff, just ask Star. I’m a bit of a nag.”

Spring’s temper dissipated like morning mist and he smiled. “Believe me, Wind, after some good meals, a full night’s sleep and with my feet properly dressed, I’m near to being as strong as a darbear.” He gave Wind a sly little smile. “And I don’t intend to weaken myself to the point where I can’t form a bond with you both!”

Wind put his food aside. “I never asked you formally, Riverspring, so I’ll do it now.”

He moved to kneel beside Spring, taking the man’s hand in his own. “This camp and everything in it I promise to share with you if you will you agree to be my swordbrother.” As

a token of his vow he took the fur from around his shoulders and draped it around Spring. “Will you content to join in equal bond as my swordbrother, Riverspring...” He frowned. “What *is* your family name? You never told us.”

Spring smiled at Wind. “It’s Watercaller.”

Wind smiled, and glanced at Star. “Riverspring Watercaller, will you be my swordbrother?”

Spring spoke the formal words of acceptance. “I accept your offer of the bond of swordbrothers and all that comes with it. In return I will add my power and magics to yours in peace or battle.”

He then put his meal aside and knelt at Star’s feet. “All that I am and all that I own I pledge to you Starshine Greenhand. Will you consent to having me as swordbrother?”

Star chuckled. “You’re both so formal! Spring I will gladly take you as my second swordbrother.”

“Good,” Wind remarked as he returned to his seat and picked up what remained of his meal. “So our first order of business is a warcycle for Spring. After that we can come back here and get to know one another a little better.”

Spring laughed as he resumed his breakfast. "I guess Sword could wait for one more day. Seriously, though, I think you might be right, Wind. The sooner the bond is formed properly the sooner we can find a place in the clans and get ready for the storm season. Just expect me to make a few decisions for myself though."

"Make all the decisions you like. I'm happy to let someone else think. I'll be the first to admit I'm not suited to lead," Wind remarked as he put the last piece of meat from his plate into his mouth.

Spring finished his meal and put his plate aside before reaching out to touch Wind's shoulder. "There should be no leaders or followers between the three of us. From what I understand of the bond, once it's formed none of us will be able to make a decision that adversely affects the others." He shrugged. "But I would also be the first to admit I don't know very much."

Wind laughed a bit. "Give it time, Star will have us obeying her every whim. Once she's going to have a child we'll be at her mercy."

Spring chuckled as he remembered how his mother had ruled his father and his father's

swordbrother with a rock fist inside a soft hide glove. “The really tragic part is we’ll enjoy every minute of it.”

Star looked from one to the other of them before snorting in derision. “As if.”

Wind started laughing. “As if you already don’t tell me what to do around here.” He pitched his voice slightly higher, “Wind go get some water or I can’t make dinner. Wind could you shake these rugs out? Wind, what are you doing! You’re getting bone chips all over the floor! Go outside with that mess!”

Star made a sound like an enraged kitten. “Oh! Of all the...! What about you? Star, I’ll get the water, I don’t want you carrying anything that heavy. You shouldn’t be shaking the rugs, Star you might hurt yourself.” She winked at Spring. “Though he’s right about the bone chips.”

Spring was laughing so hard it hurt. “Please, both of you, stop!”

“Just wait, you’ll get your turn,” Wind warned Spring. “You’ll see. It’ll be, ‘Spring, call up some water’ or ‘Is that all you bought us for dinner?’

or—” his future swordbrother ducked as a pillow flew for his head.

Spring had to admit Wind had pushed his luck. “I think we’d better clean up the dishes before you get killed!”

“She won’t kill me. She’s smart. She’ll just make me a dinner of water, uncooked tubers and the bones of an icehare. Or she’ll refuse to do the laundering and we’ll both be stuck wearing stuff that stinks. She’s very vengeful.” Wind laughed. “Just be warned.”

Spring thought for a moment or two. “Actually, perhaps I should clean the clothes. Water is my specialty after all.”

“Well I’m no good at it. I tried when I was a kid and ruined a pair of my pants. No one told me you shouldn’t wash suede in water,” Wind told him.

Spring shook his head, grinning at Wind as he did so. “Only wool gets washed in water. Everything else is wiped or brushed.”

He collected the dishes together and cleaned them with the last of the hot water from the kettle.

“Linen can be washed too,” Star said as she put out the firestones. Her eyes widened. “Of course! I still have a whole bale of woven linen to spare for trade. I can spin and weave more flax into linen during the storm season.”

“That’s a good idea, it will give you enough work to keep you occupied during the Storm Season. Maybe we can make you a better loom while we’re cooped up. That way you can weave wider sections of cloth.” Wind said, then frowned. “If we’re going to be alone during Storm Season we’d better get more firestones. We’ll have to light the cave where we stay and we’ve just barely got enough right now for cooking.”

He shook his head. “Maybe leaving our clan was a bad idea.”

Spring was thinking hard. “You know, if we can find a cave with some water, I can use it to reflect light. That way one firestone becomes as good as two.”

“Any cave we stay at during Storm Season would need to have water,” Wind agreed. “We can’t go out during a blow to refill waterskins. But we *will* still need more firestones. These aren’t the newest stones, and I’d planned to trade

for more while we were here at the Gather. There are always people with firestones to trade during a Gather.”

Spring finished cleaning the dishes in silence wondering if he'd doomed the two people he'd come to love most in the world. *Am I the reason they left? No, wait a moment, they left because of Star's father and perhaps this Lakesinger business.*

Wind got up and stretched. “I'll get our trade goods from inside. It shouldn't take long for me to get it ready, but I am going to need help carrying the stuff we're taking. Those darbear pelts are pretty bulky.”

Spring nodded. “I can carry whatever needs moving. But it might be easier for you both if I simply moved myself right out of your lives.”

Wind spun around and gripped Spring's upper arms, giving him a little shake. “Have you lost your mind! You're my swordbrother! Why would I want you to leave? Don't you understand how much Star and I need you?”

Spring hung his head. “I need you too, but I'm costing you so much and there is no way I'll be able to repay you before the Storm Season. I'm

frightened for you both, Wind. I'm afraid I've doomed us all."

"Repay me! Why in all the hells ever dreamed up would you think you had to *repay* me at all? You're my *swordbrother*, Spring. Or you will be soon. There are no debts between bonded men," he glanced at Star and added, "or women."

Spring sighed in frustration. Neither of them was seeing what he was trying to say. He gave up on trying to convince them. "I just don't want to be the cause of your deaths."

Wind hugged him tight, his lips closing on Spring's in a kiss full of desperation. They were both panting, the magical energies spinning around them when the kiss ended.

"You won't be. Don't ever think that. Star and I decided to split with Brightsand long before we found you." A kiss was pressed to his forehead. "And we aren't going to die. We'll be taken in by a clan before we even leave the Gather. Our lives are already better than they were before we met you. And I know yours got better the instant Star set her eyes on you."

Spring nodded, his heart heavy. "All right, I won't argue with you."

Chapter Six

Bonded

Wind set the bundle of darbear furs down in the back corner of their dwelling. "I can't believe it, not a single warcycle offered in trade." He crossed the tent to start up the firestones in the brazier used to warm the place. "And that huntcycle wasn't worth half what they wanted for it."

He sank down by the fire and watched Star and Spring as they moved around inside. He was chilled again and just wanted to get warm.

There's no way I'm going to let anyone ride that old beat up antique we've been toting along all year.

He pulled a fur around himself and reached for a small basket near the brazier. He wanted some tea and his wife and husband were busy so he'd try making it himself.

"I keep telling you, I don't need a cycle yet," Spring said as he set the kettle on to boil.

"I worry, Spring. If the three of us are off in

the Barrens with only two reliable vehicles will keep me awake at night worrying what we'll do if one breaks down," Wind told him, laying out his honest concerns.

He rummaged through the basket looking for the tins of tea which he found at the bottom. "Which tea do we want? The sweetroot or the redfruit vine leaves?"

Star shot Wind a look. "Spring, would you mind fetching some more tubers for me. They're in the storage tent at the back of the camp."

Spring nodded and headed out of the tent. When he had gone, Star glowered at Wind. "You've got Spring thinking that we're destitute and he's the one putting us in danger."

Wind stared at her. "What? You're not serious? We've got darbear furs draped over half the tent, why would he think that?"

Star rolled her eyes. "Because you're going on about only having two reliable vehicles, how much Sword will charge for weapons and how we need to get Spring this and that. He's lived in the City for some time and came to us with

nothing but rags and a slave collar. How do you think he feels?”

“I don’t know how he feels,” Wind replied. “I on the other hand feel like a complete idiot.”

He got up, pulling one of the darbear pelts around himself. “No wonder he keeps saying we’d be better off without him. I’m going to go talk to him and explain a few things, or make a worse mess of it all, one or the other.”

He sighed. “I’m really regretting the damage done to that new jacket you made for me. I’m just not saying warm in this old one.”

Wind gave her a quick kiss and went out to the canvas shelter behind their tent where the excess gear and other supplies they owned were stored.

He found Spring staring at their four bikes, Star’s profusion of growing things and masses of wool and flax sorted into bundles ready for carding, spinning and weaving. He turned as Wind approached. “Why the fuck would we need yet another bike or cycle?” he demanded, his hands clenched into fists. “I thought I was

a real drain on the two of you and you have all this!”

Keep calm. Don't shout at him. Explain this to him in a reasonable tone.

“Because that old ragged scoutbike belonged to my grandfather, and we usually let children ride it when our former clan was traveling. It's no good for anything but use as a training bike,” he replied to Spring's angered outburst. “And I wanted you to have a warcycle which befits a warrior, not some broken down child's bike, or a workbike. I won't have anyone call you a *woman* because you've got to ride a workbike.”

Spring bent to pick up the tubers Star had asked for. “I'm not used to a warcycle. I had a huntcycle before. It was enough for me. I *liked* it. And I don't give a shit what anyone calls me.”

He straightened up and looked Wind in the eye. “I was a slave, Wind. I was called all sorts of vile and nasty things. After being ‘hey bitch’ for six months you think I'm going to worry about being likened to a woman? As I see it that's several steps up.”

Wind stepped closer to Spring, gazed into his

eyes. He noticed a tiny scar on Spring's bottom lip. The kind which came from being slapped or punched in the mouth. He brushed his thumb over Spring's bottom lip. "You were hurt and abused. I can't imagine what you went through, but it's over. I swear Spring, won't ever let anyone hurt you, or insult you. Never again. I've endured enough insults to last a lifetime, and so has Star."

He kissed Spring, noticing two younger men watching them from a few tents down. They were cuddling, kissing, as if they liked seeing others happily doing the same thing.

Spring returned the kiss but pulled away after a moment. "Just as long as you remember I'm not some delicate Barrens flower that needs protecting from everyone and everything we'll be fine. And I don't need a warcycle. The workbike will be perfectly acceptable until I can provide enough trade goods to get a huntcycle of my own."

Wind snorted, and started to chuckle at the analogy. "The last delicate barrens flower I went near shot a barb into my thigh, so I doubt they need protecting any more than you do." He

brushed a stray lock of hair from Spring's eyes. "And if you want a huntcycle, two whole darbear pelts usually pays for one of those."

Spring chuckled. "Ah but I don't *have* two darbear pelts—yet."

"We're swordbrothers. What's mine is yours," Wind grinned, "and what's yours is mine, and right now I want to borrow that lovely mouth of yours for this." Wind kissed Spring, his arms tightening around the slender man.

Wind's cock hardened. *I want to make love with him so bad, and he's not up to it yet.*

Spring kissed him back with far more passion this time, the green of his magic swirling through and round the blue of Wind's.

Wind ended the kiss. "Let's take this inside. I want to do this properly."

What I want is your cock inside me. That's what I really want.

Spring smiled. "If that's what you want, then who am I to argue."

Wind took Spring by the hand and led him

toward the front of their tent. "Come on, we can figure out what to do about a bike for you later."

Spring shook his head. "You're still going on about a cycle for me? Sheesh!" But he did allow himself to be dragged into the tent.

"Unless you're planning to walk, then we need a vehicle for you. As it stands we're all going to need sleds if we hope to carry enough supplies for the Storm Season." Wind smiled. "But we can worry about that later."

He pushed the tent flap open and smiled at Star. "I think you should get undressed," he told her. "We're forming the bond now so we can truly say we're bondmates."

Star rolled her eyes. "How very romantic, Wind. Get undressed we're doing it! Argh!"

Spring chuckled. "I think it might be more fun to undress each other."

Oh, I must be thinking with my libido. Better stop that, Star hates it when I act this way.

He gave them a sheepish smile. "Sorry. I'm just a little excited I guess."

Star shook her head, took both men by the

hand and led them to the bed. "Calm down, love," she whispered to Wind on the way. "We're all nervous."

"I'm excited, Star, not nervous. I want this, with both of you."

I'm happy, and excited and it's because, I want something I haven't had for a while, a stiff cock inside me, he thought but refrained from saying it because he didn't want to cause Spring any anxiety. *I missed being fucked. Oh, this will be the first time I've been taken in front of Star too.*

And added an edge of nervousness.

Wind tripped over the edge of a rug and fell to his knees on the bed. He looked up at Star, smiling in embarrassment.

"All right, I admit it, I'm nervous."

"That makes two of us then," Spring said quietly.

Wind held his hands out to them. "Come sit with me. We can take as long as we want, there's no rush. Well, not much of one anyway. I've been waiting for this since I was old enough to daydream about having a swordbrother and

making Star our wife. But this isn't a child's daydream, it's real, and I want it to be something we'll all remember fondly."

Spring opened his mouth, closed it again, and then buried his face in his hands. Muffled words came from between them. "I was raped, repeatedly, in the City. I'm not sure I can make this the loving bond you both want."

Wind turned a worried look on Star, but his words were for Spring. "It's okay, Spring. If you can accept being kissed and touched, we should be able to work this out. I wasn't planning on topping you anyway, I've always been on the receiving end."

Spring's tear-streaked face appeared from behind his hands and he laughed, the sound brittle, bitter. "You think I've ever topped anyone?"

"It won't matter. Besides, I've only penetrated Star, not another man." Wind took Spring's hands in his and kissed them, tasting the other man's tears. "Don't cry. Please," he pleaded, an ache growing in his own chest, a few dim tendrils of magical energy drifting up from the three of them.

Spring stopped crying and sniffed a couple of times. He even managed a watery smile. "Then you should be the one to do it," he said. "You've had some experience at least and, if it's you, I won't mind the pain too much."

"Pain?" Wind gave him a blank stare. "I've been penetrated a lot and the only time it ever hurt was the first time, and it wasn't bad."

He glanced at Star. "It doesn't hurt you anymore does it?"

Star smiled. "You never did hurt me. Not even the first time."

Spring looked from one to the other of them frowning. "Maybe that man in the City wanted to hurt me," he said uncertainly.

"Well I don't want to hurt you, and I won't do anything you don't want me to do, Spring. You set the pace, you decide what you want to do, all right?"

Sadistic bastard, he probably didn't use enough lubrication. Speaking of which... he scooted closer to the place Star had some of their cooking supplies stored and searched for the bottle of oil. He got it out and set it down by the bed.

“Did he oil you or himself first?” Wind questioned. “Because without oil, it’s going to hurt.”

Spring looked baffled. “Oil? There was never any oil was involved. He just thrust straight in.”

“Without proper lubricant and some stretching of the muscles, it’s bound to hurt, Spring,” Wind explained. “Right Star?”

Star giggled. “How would I know? But, seriously, that man needs castrating for what he’s done.”

“Well you make your own slick stuff, don’t you? Much easier with girls, and no oily stuff to get on the furs.” Wind smiled and held out the bottle. “You just pour a little into your hand and coat your erection with it. That way everything slides and nothing gets torn or sore. La...” he hesitated over the name, then said, “my former lover taught me that.”

Spring blushed. “I never had a girl in my life.”

Wind laughed quietly at that. “Well neither had I until Star had her way with me,” he brushed at the drying tears on Spring’s cheeks. “Now

you're the one worrying too much. That's my job around here, remember?"

Spring nodded and managed another smile. "Sorry to be such an idiot."

"You aren't an idiot," Wind stated and leaned in to give him a gentle, encouraging kiss. "We'll go nice and slow until you're ready for more."

He nudged Star. "Give him a kiss."

"Well if you'd actually get out of the way for a moment I could," Star said with a wink for Spring. She leaned in and kissed their new swordbrother, tendrils of green, both light and dark, entwining above them.

"Hmm... I'm feeling neglected already," Wind joked as he scooted closer to kiss along the nape of Spring's neck. "And we really do have too many clothes on."

"It feels so good," Spring sounded surprised.

"We've kissed you before. Did it hurt then?" Wind asked, as he pushed at Spring's jacket, trying to get to more skin.

"You haven't kissed me there before," Spring told him as he helped to shrug his jacket off.

Wind shook his head. "Kissing isn't likely to hurt," he explained as he started on Spring's vest.

"Hello the camp of Windspinner Bearbane!" a voice called out.

Wind sighed. "Great timing," he muttered, "I wonder why Sword Dancer is here."

Star shook her head as she mentally cursed the man but Spring actually looked a little relieved. They would have to take things slowly and carefully with their swordbrother until he realized they would never hurt him. "I'll go and see what he wants."

She climbed off the bed and pulled aside the tent flap. "Greetings, Sword Dancer, what brings you here?"

The man stood at the edge of their camp, his handsome face turning a smile bright as the summer sun on her. He had a long bundle of hide tucked under one arm, and the hilt of a sword rose over his left shoulder. "I came to bring a gift to your camp, or rather to one member of

it. Is Riverspring home?" he asked in a pleasant, friendly tone.

Star smiled in return before looking over her shoulder at Spring. "Sword Dancer has something for you."

She was pleased to see his jacket was back in place and he climbed swiftly to his still bandaged feet to join her at the entrance. "For me?" he echoed.

The tall weaponsmith nodded. "Yes. I got bored and needed a project, so I made something for you." He took the bundle from beneath his arm and held it out to them. Star noticed he was being careful not to hold it past the boundary their camp.

"Sword Dancer, please be welcome," she said. "You are an honored guest. Would you like some tea or something to eat?"

The man stepped into their camp. "Thank you for the offer, but no, I won't bother you with my presence long enough for tea or food. I hope the balance is right for you, if not come by my camp and I'll fix it to your liking."

“The balance? Is this the sword you made from my collar?” Spring asked, his purple eyes wide.

“Yes. Take a few practice swings and tell me what you think,” Sword urged.

Star watched as Spring unwrapped the sword almost reverently. He drew out a stunningly wrought sword. The only part recognizable as his old collar was the cross guard.

As he touched the hilt green fire suffused the blade. Spring smiled and lifted the weapon. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“Go on, give it a couple of practice swings,” Sword advised. “I guessed on the balance, so it might not be perfect.”

“Can I?” Spring swung the sword with an expertise that startled Star. It was now obvious why he had his warrior marks as well as his watermage tattoos.

He gave it a second swing and smiled. “Your guess was correct. It is a wonderful, perfectly balanced blade.”

“Good. I’m usually pretty close with my

guesses, but it never hurts to be sure,” Sword said.

The smith turned to Star. “I saw you riding that workbike of yours. I was thinking I could modify the front a bit to hold a sword. I’ve heard you know how to use one.” He tipped his head, and studied her. “You’re more powerful than most people give you credit for. I’m sure they tend to over look the fact you’ve got warrior’s marks.”

Star gave him a somewhat bitter smile. “You met my father so you know he would ignore warrior tattoos on a mere woman as a waste of time. My mother got them done for me before she died. I have the normal greenmage tattoos though.” She pushed back the sleeve of her jacket to reveal the tattooed band of green that sent out a tendril of leaves up her forearm.

“Yes, I’ve met your father. He’s waste of water.”

He bent closer to examine the fine tracery of vines, but made no attempt to touch her which was proper since she wasn’t a single woman. “Beautiful,” Sword remarked, “but to match your skill they should be much more ornate.”

He glanced over to Spring before he turned a warm smile on Star. "You're a very lucky woman to have two handsome men as swordbrothers."

"Yes, I know it," Star said with a smile for both Sword and Spring, who was still admiring his new sword. "I take it you're still looking, Sword Dancer."

"I've given up looking for a swordbrother. I figure if I stop looking maybe one will find me," Sword explained. "And, while I admire women and their beauty, I'm afraid none have awakened my libido the way a firm male body does."

Star grinned. "No reason to be afraid, Sword Dancer, to each his own. I hope a really beautiful young man finds you at this Gather. You deserve no less."

"I've been all over the Gather and so far no luck, but another clan arrived late this afternoon and I haven't gone over there to have a look yet. I'm letting them get settled in before I ride by and have a look," he told her.

Wind came out of the tent to slip an arm around Star, his gaze going from Spring, who still moved the sword through slow practice arcs,

to the smith. “That’s a wonderful blade. What do we owe you for it?”

Sword’s gaze went from Wind to Spring, the man scratching at his chin as if he were thinking it over.

Spring stopped swinging the weapon and waited, his eyes full of concern. “I did say I’d do some work for Sword.”

The smith gave him a wry smile. “Don’t worry about it. I didn’t really need you to get water for me, I was trying to make an excuse to have a handsome man in my camp. Besides, the payment I really want isn’t going to happen. Not since you’re already swordbonded to someone else.”

“Unless, of course, Windspinner isn’t the jealous type and he’ll let you come play with a lonely weaponsmith.”

Spring flushed to the roots of his hair. “I... I...”

Star saw his confusion and came to his rescue. “You really want an angry greenmage and windmage after your hide, Sword Dancer?” She smiled as she said the words, fully understanding

why the smith would find their beautiful Spring so attractive.

The man held up both hands, palms facing her as he took a step back as if fearful of her, but he kept on smiling. "Oh no, certainly not. I think sword to sword I could hold my own with both of you, but magic to magic you'd have me in a heartbeat. I'm not stupid enough to fight with either of you, I'd get my ass kicked, then where would I be? Assless at the Gather, that's where. But I thought I'd ask. I could do worse than to be seen in the company of any of the three of you." He chuckled, "Or all three of you for that matter. I'm happy to try most anything," he admitted.

Star shook with laughter. "I like you, Sword Dancer, just not that much. But it's certainly a pleasure to be thought that attractive by a man who obviously knows what he's looking for and is determined to find it."

"I had to ask, Star. You've got two of the best looking men at the entire gather to yourself. You're a very lucky woman," Sword remarked.

"I wish you all the best of luck finding a swordbrother, Weaponsmith Sword," Wind told

him. "But I saw these two first and I'm keeping them," her lover said and gave her a hug.

"I just had to make the offer," Sword told them. "Like I said, the three of you are all quite attractive, and I'm pretty lonely most of the time."

Star frowned at that admission. For all his friendly banter there was a melancholy to Sword. Deeper emotions men might miss but women noticed. "You are welcome in our camp anytime you wish to stop by," she said then smiled. "And when you find your swordbrother, bring him too. That is if you're not too busy doing *other* things." She winked at the smith.

"Thanks, Star. And as far as finding a swordbrother, I'm always hopeful but I'm also always disappointed." He gave them a farewell wave, "I'm sure you've got other things to do besides talk to me, and I've got a sword to make for a chief's younger son so I'd better get to work.

"Thanks for the invitation, I'll drop by next time I'm in the area."

“What about the sword?” Spring called after him. “We must owe you *something*.”

“Dinner will be fine. I’m a lousy cook. I can make water undrinkable just by trying to heat it,” Sword said as he headed away from their camp with another friendly wave.

Wind spoke very softly, “I know how he feels. You see all these other men at the Gather and they’re with their swordbrothers, kissing and holding hands or working around their camps. You get a hollow ache in your chest. It hurts, and it doesn’t go away.”

Star was about to send a mental curse at Lakesinger when Spring caught her eye. He was still admiring his new sword and she had to admit that she liked him a lot better than she’d ever liked Lake. “You have both of us now,” she said to Wind, “so the hollow ache should disappear.”

“Yes I do. And I’m the luckiest man who ever called himself a clansman to have two such bondmates.” Wind eyed Spring. “Speaking of which, we were in the middle of something when Sword arrived. I’d like to get back to it, if neither of you minds.”

Star draped an arm around Wind's waist. "I don't mind at all but you might need to drag Spring away from his new toy."

"Spring, do you want to make the bond with Star and I? If so, you need to put that down and come inside with us," Wind explained as he shoved the door of their tent open.

Spring flushed fiery red and came towards the tent opening. "I'm sorry, Wind. I've never owned a sword as fine as this before." He entered the tent and put the sword down near the fire pit.

Star chuckled and dragged Wind in after him. "I have to be the luckiest woman at the whole gather."

"You might just be right about that, Star. You've got two handsome men to share, and enough camp goods to make packing it a real challenge. Yes, I'd say you're quite lucky," he teased.

Teasing Wind in return, Star said, "Well one handsome man and you."

Wind gave a dramatic sigh. "Women! The things you have to put up with to have one. Next

thing she'll want are expensive darbear furs for her bed"

Star giggled as she nailed Wind in the ribs with an elbow. Spring chuckled as he eyed the pile of darbear furs on the bed. "Quite right too," he said. "We should look after our swordsisster!"

Rubbing his ribs, Wind backed away from Star. "Spring she's being mean to me!" he said, whining like a young boy, unable to keep the laughter under control.

Spring shot Star a look and she winked as she realized he wouldn't be used to the fooling around she and Wind often got into. "Someone has to keep you in line," she said to Wind.

Spring looked from one to the other of them then laughed. "Don't look at me! I'm staying out of this one!"

"Wise man, our Riverspring," Wind commented as he pulled Spring into his arms. "Very smart too. Staying out of an argument with Star is the sign of a man with far more brains than I've got," he added as he gave Spring a kiss.

Star watched as Spring visibly relaxed, wound his arms round Wind's neck and kissed him back.

She smiled, happy that he was finally relaxing. The silliness had helped and she hoped that they could make him realize that sex didn't have to be about pain and degradation.

Wind broke the kiss and twisted his body to lower Spring to the bed. "You wait right here, I have to go catch us a girl."

"No you don't," Star said quietly as she approached the bed. She was stripping off her clothing as she came and Spring's mouth went dry at the beauty she was unveiling for them. He felt himself grow hard but was still concerned that he wouldn't be able to respond to Wind in the same way.

"Hey look, it's a girl!" Wind exclaimed as he put his arms around Star, gave her a quick kiss then put her on the bed. "I caught her, Spring. What do you think, should we keep her?"

"Oh, yes, definitely," Spring said as Star snuggled against him and licked his ear. "Umm, you said something about oil. I guess 'he' didn't care enough to use it."

“It’s in that bottle right there,” Wind pointed to the stone container as he took off his jacket.

Spring nodded, swallowed hard and began removing his clothes. *Sweet gods, please don’t make it hurt like before. I so want to make this good for my bondmates.*

“So how do we go about this?”

Wind grinned. “Nice and slow, that’s how.” He took off his vest and tossed it aside, then pulled off his boots. Grinning he sat down near Spring and shimmied out of his pants, his stiff cock showing his eagerness for what they were going to do.

He reached out and caressed Star’s right breast, his free hand moving to caress across Spring’s shoulders. “We’re not going to hurt you, Spring, I promise.”

Spring almost jumped at the touch until he felt how gentle and soothing it was. He smiled and kissed Star as a lazy tendril of bluish-green spiraled above him. The magic was never wrong, especially about bonds, so he relaxed even more.

Blue ribbons of Wind’s power entwined with Spring’s as he continued to stroke along Spring’s

back and shoulders. "I could never do anything to hurt you, Spring. You're my bondmate."

Star's darker green energies rose to twirl around and entwine with theirs and Spring smiled again. "I know," he said. "You've both been so good to me already. I just wish I had more experience to offer."

"Don't worry about experience. Star and I know what we're doing, and we'll make sure you don't feel anything but how good this is supposed to be," Wind assured him as he picked up Spring's right hand and guided it to Star's left breast. "You can touch her Spring. She's swordsisiter to us both."

Spring hesitated for a moment but when Star smiled her encouragement at him, he plucked up the courage to fondle her breast and rub its nipple between his thumb and index finger.

Star's hand traced a path across his chest and he gasped at how good it felt. Deciding he was being an immature idiot, Spring started to explore, his hand moving from Star's breast and trailing across her belly.

Wind moved and knelt behind him. His

lover's hands ran over Spring's chest and back in soothing caresses. Wind leaned down and murmured into his ear, "If I do anything that makes you uneasy, say so." He bent lower to lave the juncture of Spring's neck and shoulder with his tongue.

Spring tensed for a second before sternly reminding himself that Wind was his swordbrother and would never hurt him. Besides, his tongue felt good. He leaned forward, taking Wind with him, to kiss Star.

Star returned his tentative kiss with passion, making him feel better about his efforts. Then the magical energies caught his eye as they wove in and out their own dance of blue, viridian and forest green. "Look," he whispered.

"Beautiful," Wind remarked, his breath flowing over Spring's damp skin, making him shiver. "Beautiful like you, my swordbrother."

Star's brows rose as she gazed at their swirling energies then the most beautiful smile Spring had ever seen transformed her from lovely to breathtaking. "Finally we're whole," she murmured.

Spring realized she was right, they were three pieces of a whole, and the realization made him more confident in his ability to please them both.

“Whole,” Wind agreed. “That which magic has created, nothing but death can sever.”

Strong arms wrapped around Spring, soft kisses moved along his neck, each exhalation tickling, adding to the sensations, the excitement. A hand slid down his stomach, fingers teasing along the top of his shaft.

Spring gasped out his pleasure at the gentle touches from both his lovers, his bondmates. His hands strayed down to the moist heat between Star’s legs and they both groaned out their bliss.

Wind’s hand closed on Spring’s cock, stroking the hardened flesh, the man’s lips moving over his shoulders. “I think you should lie down, Spring.”

Spring was confused. “What? Why? How are we going to do this then?”

Wind grinned, his green eyes sparking with amusement and quite a bit of desire. “I’ve got some ideas, actually. Now lie down.”

Spring did as he was told, still feeling confused. Star chuckled and leaned over to kiss him before she said, "You worry too much."

"See if you can find something to do with him, Star." Grinning, Wind changed positions and leaned down to lick one of Spring's nipples.

Spring gasped and arched into the touch of Wind's tongue. His owner in the City had never cared about anyone's pleasure but his own. Wind and Star were so very different.

Star meanwhile snuggled against his side, one hand reaching down to cup his balls. He couldn't help but cry out at the intensity of the sensations coursing through his body. "Oh Gods, feels so good."

"Which is how it should feel, Spring," Wind murmured as he teased the hardened pebble of flesh that added so much to the pleasure Spring felt. His lover started kissing his way down Spring's body, continuing the teasing touches of lips and tongue.

Spring closed his eyes and concentrated on the sensations until a little gasp from Star made him snap them open again. The magical energies were

much brighter than before and were dispersing throughout the tent. He marveled at the sight until Wind's mouth reaching his erection snapped him back to what was happening.

For a couple of heartbeats the only thing Wind did was blow gently on his hot flesh. He glanced at Spring, gave a wicked grin, and took the entire length of Spring's cock into his mouth, and sucked, his head bobbing in a slow tempo.

The energies swirling around the tent intensified, brightening, the color's blending into a deep greenish blue that flowed over the three of them. The touch soothed Spring's fears, driving them completely from his mind. They were bondmates, his lovers and the magic spoke to him of loyalty and trust. It whispered to him without need for words. Telling him of the love and the protectiveness Wind felt for both him and Star.

He raised his arms, letting the energies flow round them for a moment, before lowering them, one to rest on Wind's head the other to draw Star closer for a searing kiss.

Spring felt Wind shudder at the touch of the powerful magic flowing through them, and the

suction on his erection clasped the hardness of his cock tighter, Wind's head bobbing faster. A soft vibration added another level of sensation for Spring as Wind groaned in reaction to the flow of power that moved over his shoulders.

Star was a warm presence at Spring's side, rubbing her body against his as they kissed. It was all too intense for his heightened senses and he wanted to come. "Wind, stop, it's too much."

Wind gave his cock one last slow stroke then stopped. "I think he might be ready, Star."

Star giggled. "Well, I know I am! How do you want to do this, Wind?"

"A very good question," he remarked, as he sat back on his heels to regard Spring. "What do you want? Do you want to penetrate me, or Star? It's up to you, Spring."

Spring gazed from one to the other of them as he thought about it. On one hand he would very much like sink deep into Wind's body but at the same time he felt the desire to be inside Star too. He glanced at the bright power swirling around them and it seemed to almost speak to him, making him realize something.

“I need to make a connection to both of you, so it would probably be best if Wind takes me while I take Star this time.” He smiled. “Although next time I’d like it to be the other way round.”

Wind nodded, and gave a chuckle. “You know I’ve never taken a man before,” he remarked. “My former lover wouldn’t allow it.” He grinned. “I think I’m going to really enjoy what the three of us can do together.”

He leaned closer to Spring and kissed him, reaching out to fondle one of Star’s breasts.

Spring wound one arm round Wind and the other round Star, hugging them both close. “I still can’t quite believe how lucky I am.”

Wind laughed. “I was thinking the same thing,” he admitted.

“Neither of you are as lucky as me,” Star said, “as I have both of you.”

“I don’t know about that. Spring and I get the best of both worlds. A nice hard cock, and the soft sheathe of female flesh,” Wind countered, his green eyes hot with desire. “And if I don’t get some attention soon, I’m going to be forced to take matters into my own hands.”

Spring let go of Wind and moved his hand to Wind's cock. Star's free hand joined it their fingers entwined. "Happy now?" she asked.

"Oh very much so," Wind agreed, laughing, one hand grasping Spring's cock, his other hand still on Star's breast, fingers pinching the nipple gently.

"So, where does the oil you mentioned come into this?" Spring asked.

"It's for that pretty behind of yours, so you won't be hurt when my cock slides into you to show you a whole new kind of pleasure," Wind whispered into his ear. A damp tongue slid along the rim of his ear. "And I promise you, Spring, it is very pleasurable."

Any lingering misgivings disappeared from Spring's mind at the low, sexy purr in his ear and the tongue tracing its outline. When Star started to suck at the junction of his neck and shoulder, he stopped thinking at all.

"You want to take Star, don't you, Spring? You want to take her as I take you. Isn't that what you want?" Wind asked, in the same sexy tone.

"Yes," Spring gasped.

Star chuckled, the sound bringing Spring back from the edge of the precipice. “You might want to let go of Wind,” she said. Her hand moved away from his where it was round Wind’s cock and she fell back on the bed, her arms stretched out in welcome.

Spring let go of Wind and leaned over her, kissing her passionately. He could see Wind taking the cap off of the stone bottle he’d said contained oil. Something slick and faintly cool dripped into the crack of his behind, followed by the touch of a fingertip on his anus.

The magical energy spun and swayed around them, an ephemeral forest of slender tendrils composed of light, blown gently amid swirls of damp wind.

Spring bucked under the first touch, unwanted memories making him freeze for a second. Then he pulled himself together as he remembered that this was Wind, his swordbrother and not the man from the City.

He held Star close, hands running down her sides and back again and cupping her firm breasts.

The finger pressed through the tight ring, slipping deep, twisting. “Relax, Spring. I’m not going to hurt you, I swear I’m not,” Wind murmured and he felt his lover kissing his back as the finger moved inside him.

It felt good rather than painful and Spring relaxed even more, enough to push his ass back wanting more.

Which is what he got, a second finger slipping inside him, adding more pressure, stretching the muscles. He gasped and squirmed, trying to impale himself on the gentle digits.

Chapter Seven

Bondmates

Wind wanted nothing more than to slick his cock and sink it into Spring. He wanted it more than he'd ever wanted anything from Lakesinger. Truthfully, he could no longer comprehend why he'd been attracted to Lakesinger who'd been selfish, self-absorbed and not in the least attracted to women.

Guilt washed through him at the remembrance of how he begged Lake to take him, even offering to leave Star if that's what it would gain Lake's bond.

And it no longer mattered. He and Star had Riverspring, and he *was* the right man. He could feel it in the way their combined magic sang through his flesh and bones, the way it resonated through the very depths of his soul. A sweet melody of love composed of their magical energies.

He caressed Spring's behind, adding a third finger, preparing Spring to be penetrated. He

wanted to have Spring, to take him and make the watermage his own.

But he had to let Spring get farther along with Star than a few impassioned kisses. He had to wait until Spring penetrated Star. The pleasure Spring felt from being inside Star's welcoming channel would make entering Spring easier.

He didn't have long to wait. Spring's hands were all over Star, exploring her breasts and the mound between her legs. She gasped, her face showing her pleasure at Spring's touches. "Are you ready?" Spring asked and she nodded, smiling.

Roiling energies swept across the three of them as Spring's cock slid into Star. Wind groaned at the blaze of need that ignited through his entire being. Pulling his fingers free he waited until Spring drew back for a thrust and guided his erection into Spring's entrance.

The heat, the slickness of the oil brought a sharp cry from Wind, his cock wrapped in the wonder of his swordbrother's body. "This is so much better than I expected," he gasped.

Beneath him Spring cried out as he was

penetrated but it was a cry of pleasure, not of pain, obvious from the way he was still moving in and out of Star.

Wind matched his pace to Spring, his cock sinking into his swordbrother as Spring withdrew from Star.

Around them the green-blue of their magic spun and twisted, playing across the canvas walls and the entire contents of their dwelling. Gusts of air made the tent seem a giant beast, the sides moving in and out as if the tent breathed. The plants outside in their shed burst through the back wall, verdant growth invading their home, the smell of flowers and berries, and dampness filling the place.

Star clung to Spring as he thrust into her, face mirroring her amazement at what was happening.

Wind trembled as another powerful mass of energy flowed through him, the bond taking him, binding him in an unbreakable linking of their souls. He gripped Spring's hips and drove into him, their bodies writhing in an ageless, timeless dance of passion.

Spring cried out, the sound redolent of both pleasure and some fear.

“Am I hurting you?” Wind asked as he, stroking along Spring’s hip and thigh with one hand, the other hand hanging onto Spring’s hip to keep them in rhythm. “Tell me if I am and I’ll stop.”

Wind didn’t want to stop, but if Spring felt enough pain that he was becoming afraid, he would stop.

Spring shook his head. “Not hurting me. It’s just all the power. I never realized I was this powerful before.”

“To bond with Star and me, you’d have to be powerful, Spring,” Wind remarked. He’d slowed his thrusts to match Spring’s decreased pace.

His words seemed to reassure Spring and his rhythm speeded up again, causing Star to moan beneath him.

Wind resumed the pace, his cock driving into Spring, body approaching the apogee of ecstasy that would signal impending release.

His two beautiful lovers moaned and writhed

beneath him, breath gasping from open mouths as they reached for completion.

Wind groaned, his balls tightening, the pressure, the need to come building, exceeding anything he'd ever felt alone with Star. The bond sealing their lives, their souls.

The wind roared to sudden power around them, and he cried out as his body erupted in orgasm, hands clenching Spring's hips, body gone tense, hips bucking.

Star cried out and all the plants started to writhe then Spring spasmed and water poured down the walls of their tent, the cascade having burst from the ground somewhere outside.

Wind collapsed against Spring for a moment, but he didn't want to hurt Star with their combined weight. Reluctantly he pulled free Spring's tight heat and sank to the bed beside Star. "That was.... I don't even have words for what that was," he sighed.

"Incredible," Spring suggested as he pulled out of Star.

Star glanced around at all the plants and the water still beating down on the tent and grinned.

“Messy.” Her smile died. “Umm, our neighbors aren’t going to be too happy.”

Wind stared at the water spattering the roof and walls. He frowned when a drop spattered his nose. “I’ve got a feeling we’re not going to be too happy when we go out either. I left one of our good furs outside by the door, and our firestones and other outdoor things are probably soaked.

Spring grimaced. “Oh gods, I’m sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it. I suspect that I’ve played my own part in a mess. The tent’s leaning again. And there are plants that have come up through the floor over there,” he informed them and gestured to the back of the tent where a vine had burst through.

“Oh damn,” Star said. Then she grinned again. “Ah, never mind. It was worth it.”

Wind grinned too and leaned closer to give Star a kiss. “Yes it was,” he agreed then kissed Spring.

“Hello the damned camp!” a decidedly irritable voice called from outside.

“Uh oh,” Spring murmured. He kissed both Wind and Star then started to dress.

Wind grabbed for his clothes. “We’ll be right out!” he called.

Star groaned and tried to burrow under the furs on their bed but Spring pulled her back out. “We all have to face them and that includes you.”

Star widened her eyes at him. “Oh, I see how it is. One bonding and you get all bossy.” Then she ruined it by giggling and reaching for her clothing.

“And here *I* was worried about *you* bossing us, Star,” Wind commented. He shook his head, a sorrowful expression on his face, though his lips kept twitching as he struggled not to smile. “I can tell I’m going to end up being bossed from both sides.”

Spring gazed at him and grinned. “You’ll love every minute of it.”

“Are you coming out or what?” the irritable voice yelled.

“Unless you *really* want us to come out naked

you'll let us get dressed," Wind said loudly as he laced his pants.

They dressed quickly and peered out of the tent to survey the damage and just how many upset people were waiting for them.

The vicinity around their tent was covered in a riot of green growing things, water dripped from tents and people alike, and not a few support lines had been torn from the ground, some tents leaning at crazy angles.

Better than a dozen angry people had gathered outside the perimeter of their camp, all of them dripping, wet sand clinging to them.

Wind turned to his bondmates and whispered, "What a mess we've made. I say we're in for some angry words."

"Really, you think?" Star asked as she tried to look apologetic.

Spring cleared his throat. "We're very sorry. We never dreamed we'd make that much mess."

"Why in all the tormented hells ever dreamed of do you people think those with power leave the camp they're at to forge a bond?" a woman

angrily demanded, as she wrung water from her dripping skirt.

“All the food I’d cooked for my family’s dinner is ruined!” a younger woman complained, her face showing she was close to tears. “My husbands are going to be so upset!”

“The leather warcycle seat I was making to trade for a dagger is ruined!” a man complained. “The dye got wet before it dried.”

Wind sighed. “We’re sorry for the damage.”

“That doesn’t fix the problems you three have caused!” another man snapped. “The entire interior of my tent is soaked through. Where are my children going to sleep?”

While all the complaints were going on, Spring quietly stopped the water pouring out of the ground. He glanced around at the gathered throng and dried all wet clothing. “If you take me to any wet tents I can dry them for you. I’m not sure about the warcycle seat but I’ll do what I can.”

The man who’d complained about his wet home patted his clothing in surprise. “You’re

good,” he remarked. “I’d appreciate it if you could dry my place. I’ve got really young children.”

The woman whose food had been ruined looked at Star. “What am I going to do about my dinner though? My husbands will be furious if they come back and I have no food.”

“You’re going to have to do more than dry things out, young man,” the first woman who’d spoken to them said. “There are ruined meals, over turned tents and firestones that cracked when all that cold water hit them.” She motioned to their own pile of stones. “I think you’ve lost a few too.”

Spring glanced at Wind. “Overturned tents is your department. I can dry everything out but I’ll need some help putting tents back up.” He scratched his head. “I’ve no idea what we can do about ruined meals and cracked firestones though.”

Wind sighed. “Unfortunately the only way to compensate for those kinds of damages is to pay them back in kind. I’ll have to try and buy firestones to make good on the damages. And if that warcycle seat can’t be salvaged we’ll be buying a dagger to make up for it.” He turned to

Star, “Do we have any spare firestones anywhere? I don’t recall any but,” he shrugged, “we’ll have to do something.”

Star frowned. “We don’t have any spares so we need to find a firemage if we can. There’s sure to be at least one at the Gather that can make firestones.”

“Considering how rare firemages are in most clans, we’ll be lucky to find one, even as big as this gather has gotten,” Wind remarked.

“What about my ruined dinner?” the young woman asked anxiously. “My husbands will be back soon, and I’ve got nothing to give them. They’re going to be furious.”

The older woman frowned. “It’s hardly your fault, child. You can explain what happened and lay blame where it belongs.”

“We’ve got plenty of goat meat,” Wind commented, turning to Star. “We can spare some food for her can’t we, Star?”

“Of course we can. Go and help Spring fix the tents and dry them out while I find meat and vegetables for these ladies.”

Wind nodded. "Come on Spring, let's clean up the mess we've made." He took a step toward the edge of their camp and stopped. "After we put our boots. The last thing I want to do is step on any thorns, and Spring doesn't need to get his feet wet and covered with sand."

"We'll be right back," Wind promised the gathered people as he ushered Spring into their tent.

Star smiled wanly at the crowd as she took meat and vegetables from her larder and handed it to those women whose meals had been spoiled. Wind and Spring emerged from their tent with their boots on and headed towards the nearest tents, all of them leaning at drunken angles and soaking wet.

Once everyone who felt they'd lost material goods were taken care of, and the men fixed the wet mess and leaning tents, the remainder of the afternoon settled into quiet routine, Wind working on repair projects with Spring at this side.

Her Wind seemed much more at ease, less

tense with the other man at his side, and his sunshine warm smile and laughter were more in evidence.

One side benefit of the rampant blast of power that had swept through their immediate vicinity had been the riotous growth of numerous plants, some of which yielded edibles like berries and tasty roots that everyone around them had taken time to harvest, including her men.

Wind presented Star with a heaping basket of berries they'd gathered while Spring had a large bowl of tubers for their depleted larder.

She chuckled. "Well, if we go out hunting tomorrow, we'll be fine again." Her chuckle became low and sexy. "And we'll be keeping the neighbors happy if we take a few furs and find a nice quiet spot."

Spring colored up as she'd known he would and she reached up to give him a kiss.

"Excellent plan," Wind agreed. Star had no more than released Spring when Wind swung an arm around their swordbrother and pressed his mouth to Spring's kissing him deeply enough that a brisk little breeze rose around them.

Star watched the kiss, hot enough to put an ache in her groin as well as start a breeze up. “Um, guys, we don’t want to upset the neighbors again. We’ve only just finished calming them down!”

Her men pulled away from each other with some reluctance. “You’re right,” Spring said. “It’s taken us most of the day to repair the damage.”

“I think we should go hunting right after a bit of breakfast. That’s if we have anything left to eat besides berries and roots,” Wind remarked as he took a seat on his stool by the door. “And until our powers settle down, there won’t be any making love in camp, not even when it’s just us and our own tent. Too much risk of damage. Both of those potted plants of yours, Star, burst out of their pots. They’re so big we’re going to be forced to leave them behind.”

Star nodded. “I had a look while you were mending and drying tents. If I can find a potter that wants one of my woven rugs, I can get some pots and collect the seeds at least. It’ll be easier to tend seedlings during the storm season anyway.”

Spring followed her back into the tent where a

stew was bubbling over the fire pit ready for their dinner. “Why are seedlings easier?” he asked.

Star smiled at him as she checked the meal. “Two reasons. One, a blocked off cave is dark so established plants tend to bolt then die. Two, seedlings don’t need as much water. As you know, after a month or so in the same cave, water starts to become an issue.”

Spring nodded but he was smiling. “I can keep the seedlings moist without using any of the available water supply.”

Star’s eyes widened before she leaned across to kiss Spring’s cheek. “Thank you! I usually become rather unpopular with other people in the same cave.” Her smile died as she remembered it would only be the three of them this Storm Season.

“We really need to talk that over,” Wind remarked. “I’m a bit uneasy about us being totally alone during the Storm Season. If one of us is badly hurt there will be no healer to turn to for assistance. And if something happens to our food supplies in the middle of a bad blackstorm, what will we do?”

Star sighed unhappily. “Well I was going to

ask around our neighbors but, after today, I can't see them wanting to be holed up in a cave with the three of us."

Spring sat Indian fashion on the tent's floor. "We could always ask people further away from our camp."

Wind frowned, the expression full of regret. "By now word of our," he sighed, "*exploits* will have gone around the entire Gather. You know what gossips most clanspeople are."

Star wilted, like a neglected plant. "Yeah, that's the truth and no mistake. It's worth a try asking further out though, especially as the bond has been forged now."

Spring nodded. "There are always those who are dissatisfied with their current clan for one reason or another."

Wind's frown hadn't changed. "Yes, but whether they'll want *us* with them is the big question isn't it? I'd say, in view of the total mess we've made of this, we should plan on going it alone."

Star nodded, a furrow appearing between her brows. "We'll just have to be extra vigilant

and find a really good cave is all. Now I suggest we turn in so we can get an early start with our hunting in the morning.”

Spring was thoughtful. “I still think we should approach those left after the actual clans pack up and go.”

“That might work,” Wind agreed, brows furrowed in thought. “But we’ll need to be careful not to fall in with anyone that got dumped for bad behavior.” He covered his face with his hand. “What am I thinking? We’d have been dumped for what *we* just did.”

Star giggled. “There’s bad behavior and then there’s silly mistakes like we made. Come on, boys, I want some sleep.”

She felt the strong desire to be curled around her swordbrothers right now, the only certain things in a suddenly uncertain world.

Wind nodded. “Tomorrow’s another day. If we’re lucky we’ll manage not to cause more trouble for ourselves.”

Star undressed and crawled under the furs on their bed. She chuckled when she saw them both

watching her. “Are you two going to stand there all night or are you going to join me?”

Spring cleared his throat and hurried to remove his clothing.

Wind started to undress, his eyes averted from both Star and Spring. “This isn’t going to be easy, getting in bed with both of you and trying to sleep. It’s not what I want to do when I’m with either of you.”

Star huffed a bit at that. “I agree, Wind, but until we’ve got the magical side of the bond under control, we need to be good.”

Spring climbed into the bed and settled on her left side.

Wind got in, and leaned across Star to give Spring a quick kiss, then he kissed Star and lay down beside her. He threw an arm across Star, his hand wrapping around Spring’s hand. “I love you both.”

Star kissed both her men then settled between them to sleep. She was surprised when sleep came quickly and she had a strange dream. In it they had joined a new clan with two powerful mages as co-chiefs. The odd part was that Lakesinger

was there as were both Sword and Trueflight. Other faces she also recognized like the two young men who had invited them for dinner.

Star woke the next morning feeling oddly calm about the future.

Wind wasn't beside her, but she could hear someone outside the door of their tent. From the smell coming through the partly open door he was trying to make breakfast for the three of them. Trying being the operative word if the slightly burnt meat smell was any indication of his efforts.

Star sighed irritably and dressed in a hurry. She exited the tent just in time to save the meat from being inedible. "Go and wake Spring."

Wind smiled at her. "I'm trying to make breakfast, but the firestones are too hot for some reason." He stood, gave her a quick kiss. "I think I can wake him up without making a mess out of the task."

He vanished into the tent leaving Star to deal with the food he'd come close to ruining.

Star muttered impatiently as she turned the steaks over. She raised the grill they were on

slightly so they would cook through without burning, then added some hearth bread to heat up. Having saved breakfast she glanced around, wondering if they were still universally hated.

Judging by a few glares in her direction and a couple of waves, the reaction was mixed. She shrugged and placed their breakfast on wooden plates just as the men came out of the tent.

Wind sat on the low stool by the door and took his plate, digging in with his eating knife. "I promise not to try and do anything nice, like trying to cook breakfast for you, if you'll stop being mad."

Star grinned at him. "All you needed to do was raise the grill. How the heck did you manage before I moved in?"

She smiled at Spring and patted the place beside her in invitation.

"You know the answer to that. I went to widows and unmarried women with meat they could cook if they'd let me have a meal with them. But I thought all this time watching you I might be able to manage it. I was wrong." He

shrugged, his unhappy expression showing he was upset. "I promise I won't do it again."

Star shook her head and reached out a hand to touch his knee. "Don't worry about it, Wind, at least you tried."

"How are the neighbors, this morning?" Spring asked. Star could have kissed him for changing the subject.

"Mixed reception, but I think they'll get over it as long as we don't do it again. I think getting a lot of free fruit and veggies helped our cause plus the fact that you both helped to straighten things out."

Wind frowned. "I got some nasty remarks from a pair of swordbrothers before the two of you got up. I think they're married to that girl who was so worried about the meal we ruined."

Spring glanced up from his food. "I wondered why she seemed so afraid."

Star glared into the fire pit. "Men like that don't deserve to have wives. What's the bet she's just there to cook and have babies? Rather like my father regarded my mother and me."

“I don’t know them, but I suspect it’s one of those ‘bought bride’ arrangements like your father tried to force you into,” Wind remarked as he cut a piece of meat. He put it in his mouth and chewed.

Star got over her temper and shrugged. “None of our business, anyway, but it always seems such a shame.”

Spring nodded. “I think all women should have the chance to be warriors and hunters like their men.”

Wind tipped his head in Star’s direction. “I know you’ve heard the story of the Great Chief of all Clans, Neekkee who was wife to the Great Dragon. She was more than the Great Dragon’s equal, she ruled a dozen clans.”

Star snorted. “I don’t need to rule a dozen clans or even one. Looking after you two is more than enough for me to do!”

Spring finished the last of his breakfast and smiled at her. “Ah, but you do it so well.”

Wind chuckled. “Admit it, you’d love bossing that many people around.”

Star sighed in mock disgust. "I have no idea where you got this idea that I'm bossy from."

"I think we've had this discussion," Wind replied, smiling and handing her his empty plate. "Are we still going to pack up and head off to," he grinned, "*hunt*?"

Star nodded. "As soon as we've cleaned up we can go."

Spring chuckled and used his power to heat the water in the kettle over the pit. "I'll clean up while you collect the weapons."

Wind stood. "I'll check the vehicles too, and hitch up a sled to Star's," Wind replied. Leaning down he gave Star a quick kiss then set his lips to Spring's and headed to their storage tent.

Star grinned at his retreating back. "He's got such a nice ass."

Spring almost choked he was laughing so hard. "Yes he does." He cleaned off the plates and put out the firestones. He was looking forward to going hunting with his bondmates. He would actually be able to earn his keep on a hunt.

They got the camp put in order and went around back to find Wind finishing up hitching the sled to Star's workbike.

"Did you pack us some lunch or are we going to find a meal out there?" he asked. He'd already loaded a thick fur rug onto the sled, along with a basket. "I packed us some extra clothes. We can take baths while we're out, if it's not too cold for the two of you."

I packed us some dried meat and fruit," Star said.

Spring grinned. "I can always heat up any water we find so we won't be cold." As they headed for the bikes he noticed three very young warriors staring at them.

Wind sighed. "Them again." He tipped his head and looked at Star. "I can't imagine why they hang around here, can you?"

Star shook her head. "Especially as I told them I already had a man."

Spring was frowning. "I may be wrong, but I've got the distinct impression they mean mischief of some kind.

“Unfortunately, I think you’re right,” Wind remarked, his gaze on the trio of younger warriors. “I think they’re after Star.”

Spring glared at the trio. “Well they can’t damned well have her.” It should have surprised him just how possessive he was but somehow it felt right.

Star put a hand on his arm. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Kids,” Wind muttered and mounted up on his warcycle. “If you want you can ride double with Star or me, or you can ride that old bike, your call, Spring.”

“As long as it doesn’t slow us down too much I’ll ride the old bike,” Spring decided.

“We’ll see how it does. Maybe we can trade it and some furs or something for a huntcycle for you,” Wind said as he started his cycle up.

A few moments later they were roaring out of the Gather and into the wilderness beyond. They kept going, leaving the canyon where the Gather was being held, Wind leading them, searching for a place the hunters and their wives hadn’t stripped of available food.

They went at the best speed the old bike Spring rode could manage, Wind taking them from canyon to canyon searching for a good place to hunt and gather food. The sun had cleared the top of the canyons when he came to a stop near a pool of water where tuber plants narrow leaves waved above the clear surface.

“I think we’ll find food here.”

Star nodded and climbed off her work bike. She crossed to where the tubers were growing and sniffed the air. “There are berries and fruits nearby too.”

Spring was examining the tracks and spore that led towards the pool. “It’s a popular watering hole for several different animals.”

“I can smell sheep, goats and...” Wind frowned and scanned along the walls of the canyon, “darbear. Maybe this wasn’t the best place to stop.”

“Are you trying to tell me the three of us can’t bring down a darbear?” Star asked sweetly.

Spring smiled at her tone of voice. “If it helps at all, Wind, bringing home a darbear pelt was the rite of initiation in my clan.”

“It is in our clan too, but they always send a group of would be warriors out together. And I’m worried about you being alone, while Spring and I are off hunting, Star. They can come up on you damn fast and take even experienced hunters unaware. And you’ve never fought a darbear, Star.”

Star placed her hands on her hips and glared at Wind. “I’m a warrior too, remember, so we’ll hunt together then gather together, unless of course you want a black eye?”

Spring couldn’t help himself, he burst out laughing. “She does have a point, Wind. She’s our swordsisiter not our wife.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Wind allowed. “And I told you she’s bossy too, didn’t I Spring?”

Spring shook his head a slight smile on his face. “Can’t say I blame her on this one. You *are* very protective.”

“And why wouldn’t I be? Her father keeps trying to carry her off or marry her to other men, I’ve got three boys acting like they’re planning to *steal* her, and she goes off alone where dangerous animals can wound or kill her, or raiders are

riding into camp intent on killing or kidnapping people. So yeah, I'm a *bit* protective."

Spring's smile grew and he clapped Wind on the back. "No, just in love."

Wind's glum expression reversed, the man giving one of his usual bright smiles. "Yes, very much so," he agreed as he took Spring into his arms and gave him a kiss.

Spring returned the kiss, holding Wind tight before pulling away far enough to give him a stern look. "Don't ever get that way over me or we are going to have some spectacular fights."

A golden eyebrow rose skyward. "*Really?*" Wind's eyes glittered, amusement shining in their expressive green depths. "You know I might consider that some sort of challenge and take you up on it."

Star rolled her eyes. "When you boys have finished the pissing contest, could we please get some hunting done?"

"I'll be happy to hunt. You pretend you're a deer and Spring and I will chase you. Whichever one of us catches you, gets to eat you," Wind

replied. A lusty grin spread across his face as he headed for Star with his arms outstretched.

She walked into his arms but whapped him on the back of the head. "So we can all run into the darbear separately? Great plan there, Wind."

Wind grinned at her. "I wasn't planning on letting you get far." He held her close. "See, I caught you." He lowered his head and started nibbling her neck. "Very tasty," he remarked, laughing. "You should give this a try, Spring."

An enraged roar from the top of one of the canyons cliffs had Wind and Star pulling apart while Spring clutched at his spear.

He gazed up at the darbear, relieved to see that it was only half grown. "What do you think?" He asked his bondmates. "It's little more than a cub but the black pelt is nice."

"My guess is his mother is around somewhere," Wind remarked. "But I agree. He's young enough that most of the meat can be eaten, and he's more than big enough that we can share it with others."

Spring shook his head. "I have to disagree, Wind. He's old enough to have left his mother's

side. But, if she is around, we'll need to deal with her too."

The darbear was lumbering along the cliff top, obviously trying to find a way to get to them. It found a shallower slope and hurtled toward them.

"We'll soon find out if mama bear is around," Star remarked.

"I'll watch for her, you to take care of him," Wind said as he stepped aside.

Spring stepped into the path of the charging darbear, spear at the ready. He wasn't entirely sure he could still do this and the bear looked bigger the closer it got. He stood his ground and felt the jolt through his arm when his spear sunk into the creature's body.

Star was immediately by his side, using the vines in the vicinity to bind the enraged beast so he could finish it off, the bear bellowing its rage and pain.

He pulled his spear out and used it to slit the bear's throat as another, much louder roar tore through the quiet.

“And that,” Wind stated, “will be momma.”

Star grinned, the expression a mix of vicious and excited. “Your turn to show off then, Wind.”

Spring cleaned the blood off his spear and waited, looking around for the adult darbear.

She came galloping at full speed up the canyon toward them, the beast a full four times larger than the cub.

“Weren’t we saying we needed more pelts to trade?” Wind remarked as drew his sword from the rack on his cycle. He took a few steps away, and stood, waiting for the animal to arrive.

When she was within twenty feet of him Wind’s power rose, flowing down his arms to surround the blade of his sword. The bear reared up on her hind legs, roaring a challenge.

Wind leapt, a gale carrying him up and over the bear, his blade whipping downward as he soared upside down over the bear’s head. The blade and the magic around it hit the animal’s neck, just below the angle of the jaw.

Wind landed lightly on his feet and stood

ready for a second attack. But it wasn't needed. The darbear sagged to the ground, eyes glazing.

Spring nodded his approval. "Excellent use of your magic, Wind." He was completely in awe of the feat, knowing his command of water wasn't so useful when hunting as Wind's control over air.

"Darbear are too dangerous to fool with," Wind commented as he cleaned his sword with a scrap of cloth from his pocket.

Spring nodded, part of him feeling totally inadequate. What could he have done against such a creature? Even with the oasis nearby, he could hardly have drowned the darbear. He sighed unhappily wanting to offer more to his bondmates.

Wind returned his sword to the rack on his cycle. "What's bothering you, Spring? And don't tell me nothing, you're my bondmate, I can feel you're upset about something."

Spring took a deep, shuddery breath. "If I'd never been captured, never spent all those months in the city, I'd have learned more about my abilities, more ways to use them offensively. As

it is all I ever really became good at was pumping the stuff up from the ground and heating my master's bath." There was a wealth of bitterness in the last few words.

Wind glanced at Star then went to grip Spring's upper arms. "Listen to me, Spring. I want you to understand that what happened there is in the past. Put it behind you. You're with us now, and whatever happened in the City is over with."

He let go of Spring's arms, his hand moving to Spring's cheek. The touch was gentle, meant to soothe, to show love. "There isn't anything stopping you from learning how to be a better watermage. I'll even help you. Lake could do some amazing things, and I don't see any reason you can't do the things he could, you're as powerful as is."

Spring stared into Wind's earnest green eyes and felt something shift inside him. "You really believe I could be that powerful?"

Star stepped forward then, putting her arms round both their waists. "You already are, Spring. If you weren't we could never have formed the bond with you. Have faith in yourself, love."

Spring nodded slowly. Their words made perfect sense. Why hadn't he seen it before? Had his time in the City destroyed so much of his self esteem, of his confidence?

Chapter Eight

Fighting for Love

Wind gave Spring a sly smile. The time had come for a real talk, a dose of truth Riverspring needed to hear. “I think with a little practice you’re every bit as powerful as Lakesinger. Perhaps, in your way, you’ll turn out to be more skilled. He likes to show off, but he seldom practices, or tries to expand what he can do.”

He turned to Star, met her gaze. “I loved Lake, I really did, but now,” he shrugged, “there’s no feeling for him. Nothing. When the bond formed I realized what I felt for Lake was a pallid shadow of what I feel for the two of you.”

Spring looked confused. “Lakesinger? I’ve heard you talk about him. You both seem to have mixed feelings where he’s concerned.”

Star sniffed. “I always thought of him of an arrogant fool, I’ll be the first to admit that, but I saw him after he found his swordbrother.” She smiled wanly at Wind. “I watched him argue with Chief Redsand, his swordbrother and wife

without once having one of his tantrums. I saw him use a mix of his power and his swordbrother's to half bury his mother in wet sand. Much as I hate to acknowledge it, his bond had made him grow, both in power and in temperament. When I saw him with the man, I knew he'd found what he'd been looking for."

"And I've got everything I'll ever want or need right here," Wind stated, then rethought it and added, "well everything but one thing I've always wanted."

Both Spring and Star shot him questioning looks.

"I'd like to have some children to raise," he told them. "But right now, we've got a couple of bears to take care of before the lions come."

They headed towards the carcasses ready to skin them and take the meat before any scavengers arrived. Star had a secret little smile on her face as they worked.

With the three of them working they quickly had the animals skinned and the usable meat prepared.

The sun passed zenith, and Wind sat back on

his haunches, done wrapping the hide around the large pieces of bear meat they'd be taking back to the Gather with them. "I say we gather some fruit and tubers, clean up and return to camp. I'm getting hungry. After lunch we can go find a place to bathe and," he grinned, "play naughty games in the water."

Star nodded and grinned at him. "Sounds like a plan."

The three of them packed the meat and hides onto the sled and mounted up to return to the Gather and their own camp. They had to go much slower because of the weight of the meat.

The sound of their vehicles was joined by the noise from other cycles before they were even halfway back to camp. Wind, wondering who else might be out hunting, turned to see six warriors, all of them mounted on warcycles following in their wake.

He frowned. There were a lot of people at the Gather, but most didn't come out this far.

He turned to make sure he wasn't going to run into anything and discovered there were another

six men in front of them blocking the canyon ahead.

“This can’t be good,” he muttered and slowed his cycle.

Spring brought the old cycle he was riding abreast of Wind. “I’m guessing they want either Star or me.”

“Both of you, I suspect,” Wind replied grimly. “And they’re not letting us run, which means we fight.” As he spoke the power he was named for came to life, blue ribbons of power rising from his arms and shoulders, flowing from him, a breeze ruffling his hair.

Star was looking around as she rode and headed her bike to a small patch of green.

Wind motioned to Spring. “I want you to stand by her, she’ll need water to make the plants grow faster,” he explained.

The men were closing in on them from both sides.

“You two focus on the guys behind us, I’ll deal with the idiots blocking the canyon.”

Spring nodded and veered off to join Star.

Wind got off his cycle and faced the men racing toward them. He lifted his arms above his head. The tattoos on his arms seemed to writhe and dance. A whirlwind formed around him, lifting sand, dust and small bits of gravel from the ground.

He spread his arms outward as a wave of sand rose upward in a chest high wave and came hurtling toward them.

A grim smile twisting his mouth, Wind released the whirlwind, the spiraling air flattening out into a horizontal blast that hit the moving wave of sand, tearing it apart and carrying it along in the screaming blast that slammed into the approaching men.

Several tendrils of green stretched across the canyon floor to snap taut like stretched ropes, knocking the following warriors from their cycles. Before they could recover a jet of water spewed out of the ground and covered them in boiling hot water.

Screams came from the scalded men, and a few scrambled to get their steaming clothing off of their bodies before the hot water could do more harm.

The men up the canyon regained their feet, picking themselves up out of the dirt. They didn't get much chance to do more than that, a second blast of wind sent them tumbling to the ground.

"Leave us alone! We won't give you another warning!" Wind informed as he readied a third attack.

"Surrender!" one of the men behind them commanded as shards of stone roared upward out of the ground, buffeting the three of them.

Spring put his honed water pumping abilities to good use and produced a stream fast enough to carry the debris back towards the men and their cycles. Two cycles were swept away by the minor lahars.

The sand under Spring's feet shifted, flowing upward, trying to hinder his movements, more of it seethed around Star, gripping her legs.

Wind, bleeding from a few cuts caused by the shards of stone, sent a whirlwind screaming down the canyon, the tornado lifting one of the men and throwing him into the wall of the canyon. He fell in a broken heap to the sand an instant later.

“KILL THE DAMN WINDMAGE!” one of the men behind him shouted.

More tendrils of green reached the attackers and two of them twined round one of the warriors. A quick motion of Star’s hands and the tendrils tore the man apart.

A few of the men tried to rush them, slogging through mud, fighting the shrieking wind. Sand and stone hurled from the ground to batter the bondmates.

Reaching deep, Wind summoned up his dwindling energy, finding the green of Spring’s water magic and Star’s greenmage power reaching out to him.

Shuddering, he groaned at the strain his efforts to protect his lovers put on his flesh, and sent a blast of power at the stonemage who was hurting them.

A gale of wind, carrying boiling water within its heart hammered at the man, plants burst forth from the ground to clutch him.

Trembling, Wind sank to his knees, his power almost fully expended. He had great power, but he had never learned to pace himself, and he was

paying for that lack of control. He couldn't let the men hurt his swordbonded lovers.

One of the warriors approached Wind, sword upraised for a killing blow. Star screamed his name but no blow fell. When he was able to raise his head enough he gasped. The warrior turned to dust before his eyes.

Two men from the rear group and another from front ran toward them.

Teeth gritted, Wind rose to his feet and grabbed his sword from the rack on his cycle, the barest zephyr of breeze wafting around him as he met one of the men sword to sword.

Spring lifted his sword from the weapon rack of his cycle and stood in front of Star.

More of the men joined their companions, circling the bondmates.

I can't let them take Star and Spring. I can't, Wind told himself as he crossed swords with one of their attackers. The other man stood a hand taller than Wind, and had the advantage of weight behind his sword stroke. The jolt almost took the sword from Wind's hand, and he was forced to retreat a few steps, giving ground up.

He clutched at the dregs of his magic and threw grit and dust at the other man, but the dustgoggles he wore protected him, Wind's ploy having no effect.

A fist full of sword hilt struck his jaw, knocking him to the ground, bright pinpoints of light dancing through his vision.

"WIND!" Star screamed.

Star! He couldn't let her down. Didn't want to die when he'd finally gotten what he'd always wanted from life. The love of a good woman, the bond with a swordbrother.

Two feet came closer, he looked up through the dancing flickers of starlight, saw a flash of lightning coming toward him. He got his own sword up, stopped the death coming for him, lashed out with his feet and hit something solid that grunted.

Wind scrambled to his feet the dizziness filling his head making him stumble. He shook his head trying to clear his vision, moved his sword where it needed to be to stop the whistling blade coming for his face. The blow sent him

staggering backward so that he collided with the seat of a bike which kept him from falling.

To his left he saw Spring take a man in the throat with his sword but another was creeping up behind his swordbrother. Star had knives in her hands ready to stab any that came near her but they seemed to be leaving her until they'd dealt with Spring and himself.

The man he fought lunged for him and he let himself fall over the bike's seat, his attacker's sword coming down where he'd been. Awkward angle or not, Wind thrust his own blade up, and took the man through the chest. He scrambled to his feet, turning to try and deal with the second man trying for Spring. He leapt, striking the man about to stab Spring in the back, both of them fell, the man hitting Wind in the stomach with his fist.

The roar of approaching cycles stopped their attackers before they ran for their warcycles.

The man Wind struggled with got free and ran. Wind let him go. His whole body shaking, breaths coming in ragged gasps, he got to his feet and turned to Spring and Star. "You two all right?"

Spring nodded as he put a supportive arm around Star. "Exhausted but unharmed."

"I could sleep for a week," Wind agreed as he stumbled closer to put his arms around them. He still bled sluggishly from a few cuts, and a bruise had begun to darken his jaw on the left side.

"You're sure neither of you is hurt?" he questioned, worried that the pounding stones might have injured them.

Star managed a weak chuckle. "You worry too much. We have a few minor cuts and we'll all probably be black and blue for a few days but nothing serious."

The sounds of a fierce battle filled echoed through the canyon, followed by a hush as the screaming and shouting, the clash of blades came to an end.

"I wonder who they ran into," Wind remarked as he stepped away from his lovers and turned to peer down the canyon. The day had worn on enough to partially obscure the distant end of the canyon in the shadows of late afternoon.

Spring smiled. "Well, one thing's certain, I can take my pick of warcycles."

Wind patted Spring on the shoulder. "I would have preferred to buy one, to getting it this way."

Spring nodded, his expression serious. "Perhaps I'm not as honorable as you, Wind, but we won those cycles fair and square."

"I hate killing," Wind remarked, turned from the two of them, walked a few feet away and crumpled to the sand, his belly heaving.

And Spring thinks of himself as useless, he thought miserable and sick from the things he'd done to protect the people he loved.

Spring gazed at Star, obviously confused by Wind's reaction. "Is this normal?"

Star nodded and squeezed Spring's shoulder. "He hates killing people so much it makes him physically sick."

She turned to face the approaching cycles, body tense. None of them were in any fit state to defend themselves further. The lead cycle came to a halt and its rider removed his goggles and dustmask. She relaxed when she saw Sword.

Wind scrambled to his feet, wiping his mouth with a piece of cloth from his pocket.

If Sword disapproved of their bondmate's display of unmanly behavior, he didn't say anything. "Are you three all right?"

Behind him the other riders were taking off their goggles and dustmasks to reveal more people they knew, and one they didn't. Their neighbors from the Gather, Littlepuddle and Sandstone gave them hesitant smiles, as if they were worried they might have offended the three of them.

The last young warrior they didn't know. Sword gestured to him, "This is my swordbrother Summerbreeze Warmwind. We ah, recently bonded." He grinned at them. "From what I hear it happened the same day the three of you formed your bond."

Star nodded to the young warrior with the pretty blue hair and golden eyes. "Pleased to meet you, Summerbreeze Warmwind," she said before smiling at Littlepuddle and Sandstone. "I imagine you heard what a mess we made and how unpopular we became with our neighbors."

Sword smiled. “Oh yes, we heard quite a bit about it. We came by your camp, Breeze and I, to see if you wanted to go darbear hunting with us. Littlepuddle said you’d left to go hunting so we decided to see if we could find the three of you. Good thing we came to find you too, I guess. I think those guys were slave hunters. Someone I talked to at the Gather said they’d seen a band of slave hunters hanging around. That was another reason we came looking for you.”

He motioned to the loaded sled. “I see you already found your own darbears.”

While he talked Sandstone dismounted and started checking the bodies of the men they’d fought, making sure they were dead.

Star shared a quick smile with her bondmates. “Yes we did. We were bringing them back to share the meat when we were attacked.”

Spring was soon frowning again. “Slavers, you say? No wonder they tried to keep Star and I alive while attacking Wind.”

The metalmage nodded. “They wanted the pair of you, but not Wind. Windimages aren’t a valuable to the people in the City, and mages

of his power are too dangerous to sell to other clans,” Sword explained. “So they wanted him dead. My guess is they expected it to shatter the bond of swordbrothers. What I don’t think they knew is that you’re a battlemage too, Star. But if they’d killed Wind it would have shattered the bond with the pair of you and turned you both into easy prey.”

He glanced at Wind who still looked very pale. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Wind shrugged but didn’t say anything. He went and sat on his cycle, looking as if he hadn’t he might have wound up sitting in the sand.

Star wasn’t sure if she should divulge the truth to Sword, about how killing people made Wind physically sick. Instead she said, “We were all using a lot of our energy. I think Wind drained himself.”

“That’s bound to make anyone ill,” Sword remarked as the sound of more cycles and bikes coming their way echoed through the canyon.

Star sighed inwardly. Now who? So much for the three of them finding a nice quiet spot to dally in. She spared a vicious thought for

meddling slavers and turned to see who was arriving this time.

A group of seven people arrived, coming to a stop near them. They all looked young under their leathers. One of new arrivals jumped off his cycle and hurried over to them, the warrior taking off his dustmask to reveal who he was.

Stonelion looked Star over, eyes full of worry. "Are you all right? We got here as soon as we could."

Star chuckled. "Considering I had my swordbrothers to aid me and some men from the Gather to help finish the job, I'm fine thank you."

Spring moved closer to her and placed a possessive arm over her shoulders as he glared at the boy.

Star dug an elbow into his ribs even though her mouth was twitching with the desire to laugh. Stonelion looked to be the oldest of their latest batch of 'rescuers.'

"See, I told you," a sweet soprano voice said from under one of the helmets. "Boys are so

stupid, they never listen to anything anyone else says.”

Stonelion turned, “I’m a warrior, not a boy!” he retorted, annoyed.

“We’d better go,” Wind remarked as he started up his cycle. “This meat’s not getting divided up with us sitting here.”

Star chuckled at the girl’s plaintive tone. “They get better once they grow into men,” she said soothingly as she headed for her workbike.

Spring frowned as he looked at the abandoned warcycles. “So, are we coming back for one of these or what?”

Wind shook his head. “No you’re going to leave that trash bike here and take your pick of any warcycle or huntcycle you like.”

The smith smiled at them. “My swordbrother and I will be happy to make sure you get your claim on the worth of these cycles. Most of them appear to be fairly well maintained.”

Spring grinned at his new friend. “Thank you.” He did a quick inspection of the warcycles and found one with a large weapons compartment

and sleek lines. "I think I'll keep this one." He dropped both his sword and spear into the weapons compartment and started the cycle. Its low purr assured everyone close by that he'd picked a good cycle.

Star waved to the assembled warriors and teenagers before climbing onto her workbike. She was pleased to see that the cargo of darbear meat and hides had not moved during the fight and started the bike up. "Let's go guys," she called to her men.

Wind led them out of the canyon, returning to the Gather at a faster speed since they weren't forced to the slow pace of the old workbike. He parked his cycle at the front of their camp and went inside the tent without saying a word to either of them.

Star gazed after him for a minute or two before sighing and dismounting. "Let's get this meat distributed and the hides stretched ready for tanning," she called to Spring.

He switched off his cycle and went to the sled to help unload the darbears. Once the meat was off the sled and portioned into family sized packages, Spring took them around their

neighbors while Star stretched the hides. Once she had finished that task she entered the tent. "You okay, Wind?"

Wind was sitting at the edge of their bed, face streaked with drying tears. He looked up at her and shrugged.

Star squatted down by his side and took one of his hands in hers. "Spring's nearly done distributing the meat now so I think the three of us should go find a nice quiet spot for a few hours. We daren't stay here while our energies are still so volatile."

Wind nodded and got to his feet, wiping the tears from his face on his sleeve.

Star hugged him close. "It's okay, Wind, really it is."

"I... don't like killing. I know they left us no choice, but..." He pressed his face into her hair and held her. "I'm not much of a man so I guess your father *was* right about me."

She held him close for a while before saying, "That's not true, Wind. When you stop and think about it, how many warriors have actually been forced to kill other warriors? Not that many, in

actual fact, and certainly not my dear father and his swordbrother. And on both occasions, you had no real choice. Now come on, let's go and have some fun and forget all this."

"I love you," he murmured against her cheek. "You've been the most important person in my world since we were kids, and you're why I never gave up hope we'd have a good life. I want a good life for us, Star. All three of us. But I don't know how to make it happen. I just don't."

"You're such a worrier," she said tenderly as she ran her fingers through his hair. "If it helps at all, I have the feeling that things are going to turn out just fine for the three of us."

Spring entered the tent then. "Meat's all delivered apart from our own which is in the cold box." He appeared to pick up on their mood and stepped closer, enfolding both of them in strong arms. "It'll all be okay. Apparently, Sword's new swordbrother isn't being accepted by his clan so he's talking about leaving and them throwing in their lot with us."

"Really?" Wind asked. He gave Star a kiss, followed it up with a kiss for Spring.

Spring nodded. "They don't like Breeze's lack of background and clan status apparently. Fools."

Star considered that for a moment. There was no doubt Breeze's strange hair color and golden eyes hinted at a somewhat exotic bloodline but it shouldn't be held against him like that. She shrugged as she glanced at her own men, her mind on more pleasurable pursuits. "Let's go somewhere quiet and make love."

Wind gave her a wan smile. "I like how you think."

She headed out of the tent and, having picked up her goggles and dustmask, stood by Wind's warcycle. "It'll be quicker if we don't take the workbike and sled, though you might want to bring bags for some fruit and vegetables."

Wind got the bags from the storage basket and brought them out, tucking them into the flat saddlebags at the back of his own cycle he mounted up. "Do we have a blanket?"

Spring grinned and held up a couple of large furs before stuffing them into the weapons compartment of his own cycle.

Star waited for Wind to mount his warcycle before climbing onto the pillion. “Okay, let’s go!”

Wind chose a different direction, following a seldom used path away from the Gather they soon arrived at a secluded spot in the narrow gorge where a shallow pool of water supported a diversity of plants, most of which had ripe fruit or edible parts.

“How about here?” Wind asked as he brought his cycle to a stop.

Star glanced around and smiled. “Perfect.”

Spring was gazing at the pool. “And afterwards a nice hot bath,” he murmured.

Star climbed off Wind’s cycle and retrieved the furs from Spring’s weapons compartment. She took a look around and found a patch of moss near the pool that would do nicely.

Wind hung his helmet and dustmask on his cycle and went to the water’s edge to wash his face and hands.

Spring chuckled as he joined Star. “If you wait a while the water will be hot.”

“Don’t make it too hot, or the plants will die,” Wind remarked as he stepped away from the water.

Spring chuckled again. “I was thinking of a nice soak not boiling crayfish.”

Wind stripped out of his clothes. “I’m waiting.”

Star grinned up at him from her place on the furs. “What for, an invitation?”

Spring chuckled as he threw off his clothes and joined them on the furs.

Wind regarded the pair of them. “Nothing, apparently,” he answered and joined them on the thick furs.

Star smiled, thoroughly content. “Two lovely men and a warm bath to look forward to, what more could a girl want?”

Wind finally smiled. “Sex with two lovely men? Or perhaps sex in a warm bath with two lovely men?”

Spring chuckled as Star appeared to think about it. "Sex in a warm bath sounds good."

He had to agree with her and was wondering if Wind would let him be in charge this time. "The water should be warm enough in a couple more minutes."

"You going to heat the water, or did you plan to let us freeze standing around in nothing but our skins?" Wind gave Star a practiced, rather comical leer, "not that I mind the view, you understand, but I don't want anything important to fall off anyone."

Spring smiled. "It shouldn't be much longer. I'm doing it slowly so as not to overheat the pool and kill off the vegetation."

He dipped a toe into the now slightly steaming pool. "It's just about ready."

"Good. The sooner I get the two of you where you want me the better." Wind winked at Spring and held his hand out to Star. "Something about that didn't sound right did it?"

Spring turned to gaze at his bondmates as he waded backwards into the pool. "Oh I don't know. It sounded logical enough to me."

Star chuckled as she tugged on Wind's hand and led him into the warm water. "To me too," she agreed.

Wind paused where he stood, pulling his hand free of his Star's grip. "Are you forgetting anything Spring?"

Spring frowned, not sure what Wind was talking about until he remembered the little earthenware flask from the tent. He clapped a hand to his forehead. "Oil, I forgot the oil."

Wind went to his cycle and took the bottle from his saddlebag. "I packed it before we went hunting. I wanted to make sure we had it in case the mood struck us to engage in some serious lovemaking."

Spring let out his breath in a gusty sigh of relief. For all his months being abused in the City he still felt he knew very little about love making as opposed to sex. Hopefully his wonderful bondmates would help him remedy that. "Thank you."

Wind joined them in the water, setting the bottle of oil on a rock at the water's edge, he sat

down on a mossy stone and gave a contented sigh. "It's not very deep, but it feels good."

Star nodded. "Yes it does. Just the right temperature. Thank you, Spring."

Spring flushed at her thanks, unused to having his talent appreciated anymore. "You're very welcome."

Wind scooted closer to Star and whispered something to her that Spring couldn't hear.

Spring frowned. He supposed as they'd been together for years that he would feel like an interloper for quite some time to come, but hopefully not forever. When the first splash of water hit his face he glanced up to find both of them splashing water at him and laughing.

Growling softly he lifted the water in a wave and drenched them both.

"That would be cheating," Wind remarked as he slapped water at Spring with both hands and shouted to Star, "Get him will you?"

Star was still spluttering from the mini tsunami he'd sent at them when she wasn't laughing.

“Cheating am I? Okay, try this he sent another wave at Wind.

Wind took the wave full in the face and came out sputtering and choking, laughing so hard they could see he was having trouble breathing.

Concerned that he might have taken the game too far, Spring waded over to him and took him in his arms. “Are you all right, Wind?”

Wind nodded, coughing hard. “Tried to... breathe water... didn’t work,” he joked.

Spring slapped him on the back, forcing out the last of the water. “No, not a good idea,” he agreed.

He kept Wind in his arms while he sat against a warm rock, drawing Wind onto his lap and nibbling at the back of his neck.

Star had recovered enough to join them and settled between Wind’s thighs. “You and your clever ideas,” she said and kissed Wind.

Wind’s coughing quieted. He leaned into Spring, a contented sigh coming from him. “What you’re doing feels nice, Spring.”

Spring smiled. “I’m glad you approve,” he

murmured against Wind's neck before resuming where he'd left off.

"Something really warm and hard is poking me in the back, Spring. Do you know what it might be?" Wind asked, his hands on Star's breasts, caressing her.

Spring shifted position so his cock was lined up with the crack of Wind's ass. "You mean this hard and warm thing?" he asked with a grin.

"Yes, that would be what I was talking about," Wind agreed. "Now I wonder what it is? More to the point, I wonder what can be done with it?"

Star raised her eyes to the sky as if beseeching some deity or other to give her strength. "You two are like a couple of children!"

Spring chuckled. "Ah, but you like playing with us, Star."

"I seem to recall you were splashing water too, so there's lots of childishness going around between all three of us," Wind remarked.

"And whose idea was that in the first place?" Star asked sweetly as she pressed against Wind.

“Umm... I ah... don’t remember,” Wind murmured as he melted into Spring’s embrace.

Spring let go of Wind with one arm and reached for the little jar on the rock behind him. “Er. . . does this stuff work in water?”

“Yes. The water helps too so long as we’re immersed.” Wind made a soft sound deep in his throat that coiled around Spring’s awareness, a wordless urging for him to do more than tease.

“Do you trust me to take you this time?” he asked. He knew he was probably annoying Wind but he had to be sure. He would not take any liberties with the trust he’d been given by both Wind and Star.

“I’d like that very much,” Wind replied, twisting around to brush his lips over Spring’s in a quick kiss.

Spring smiled. He might not have had any experience at this but his body knew what it wanted, his cock hard and needy.

Star had grabbed Wind’s cock by this time and was maneuvering herself into position for him to take her.

Spring opened the flask and poured some of the oil onto his fingers. He replaced the stopper in the jar and rubbed his slick fingers round Wind's entrance, easing the tight muscles until he was able to slip one finger inside.

Wind groaned, but shook his head. "Spring, I've done this before. You don't have to worry about me being ready. I'm more than ready for you to fuck me."

Spring stopped moving. "Gods Wind, I'm sorry, I just remember you preparing me and how good that felt and then I remember how painful this was in the City. I didn't want to hurt you, is all."

His lover chuckled. "I'll be perfectly fine, Spring. You're using lube and I've been thinking about you fucking me since the moment I realized you were my swordbrother. I'm more than ready, I promise."

Not needing any more encouragement, Spring smeared the rest of the oil on his fingers over his cock and positioned himself against Wind. Gently he sank into willing flesh.

"Spring, it feels good. So good. Promise me

you won't let me drown, because the way being between the two of you is going to make me feel I might forget to stay above water," Wind joked.

Star chuckled. "Don't worry, Wind, we won't let you drown -at least not in the water."

Spring put an arm round Wind's chest. It served two purposes, he could keep Wind from going under and was able to play with a nipple at the same time. Around them, the magic began to build again and he wondered how long it would be before that stopped happening.

"Oh great, she's going to let me drown in mud," Wind muttered, his words ending with a groan as Spring thrust into him.

Gauzy ribbons of green rose from the water, drifted upward from the plants surrounding them.

"Umm.... you know maybe this isn't such a good idea," Wind commented suddenly. "We're surrounded by water and plants and what happens when the magic peaks?"

Star pressed against him, his cock buried deep within her body. "We'll find out won't we?"

It shouldn't be nearly as bad as the first time though."

Spring thought about that as he pushed into Wind once more. "Three days of volatility is what I was told."

Wind answered with gasp and a shudder as the power continued to rise around them, blue flickers and ribbons of his magic rippling across the surface of the water.

But this time the green of Spring's power entwined with the blue, soothing and calming it. The plants around the pool danced in a gentle, water-filled breeze but made no move to encroach upon the pool.

Star glanced around at the tendrils of magic dancing so gently this time. "Looks like it's calmed down."

"I'm still tired from the fight, that might be the reason," Wind said.

Spring chuckled softly against his ear. "Then we'll need to keep you tired until tomorrow."

"Hmm... if you plan on doing this until I fall unconscious then you've got a deal," his lover

quipped, as he leaned closer to Star and kissed her.

Star glanced over Wind's shoulder at Spring and winked. "That sounds like a challenge to me."

Spring grinned at her. "Are you up for it?"

"Definitely."

"Dear gods what have I gotten myself into?" Wind asked, looking skyward as if seeking help from a divine source.

Star giggled as she rocked her hips against Wind's. "You and your big mouth, you know it always gets you into trouble."

Spring pushed into Wind's body again with a slight grunt. "You do seem to have the knack of inserting your foot in it with astonishing regularity." He got a face full of water from Star's hand for his comments.

"If you're going to start using big words..." she began but was cut off by Wind kissing her.

Wind didn't end the kiss until they were both gasping for breath. "Well that's shut both of

you up,” he said, sounding all too pleased with himself.

Spring nodded to Star and they attacked in unison, Spring pounding into Wind’s body and Star meeting his thrusts from the front until they’d set up a remorseless rhythm between the three of them.

Wind’s cries echoed the tempo, the blond a willing captive of their sexual onslaught.

Spring was quite surprised when the magical energies didn’t get out of hand despite the fast and furious pace they were setting with their love-making. The breeze was still gentle, the water calm and the plants waving gently. The tendrils of blue and two shades of green curled lazily around each other and Spring suddenly realized why. Although their physical movements were powerful and almost rough, their feelings were calmer than when they’d first come together like this. There was no fear, no desperation, just love.

He smiled and nuzzled at Wind’s neck while his free hand reached out to cup one of Star’s breasts. Explanations could wait. Right now he simply wanted to enjoy their bond.

Chapter Nine

A Problem Solved

Pleasure blanked out his ability to speak, to do anything but feel, and let the power of the bond wash through him. Magical energies, a gentle flow of power from both of his lovers soaked through his skin and took root in his soul.

Love. This was real, genuine love. What he'd had with Lakesinger had been a pallid shadow of love by comparison. Hardly worth noting now that he knew, actually *knew* the touch of real, genuine love.

Life was about this: loving and being loved. Being accepted as he was, flawed and imperfect, and loved anyway despite his mistakes and shortcomings.

Tears dampened his eyelashes. Tears of joy for the love he had for Star and Spring, and for the love they gave him freely.

He held Star while Spring held him, the three of them together as lovers, as bondmates.

They were his entire world and nothing else

mattered. Not the fighting. Not the killing. Not their unhappy neighbors at the Gather. Not even the fact they had no clan and no prospects of attaining one. He wasn't even worried about the Season of Storms anymore because they would be together.

Things would work out. He felt that in his soul and heart the same way he felt their love.

Moving together, he let the pleasure take him, let it wash away the pain and sorrow he'd carried since the day Star's father had first denied him permission to wed her.

"I love you both!" he cried out as a powerful orgasm blazed through him, his seed spilling into Star's wet heat.

He felt Spring's climax spurt into his body a second or two later while Star cried out her own pleasure.

Spring's arm tightened around him, keeping his tired body from slipping under the water.

Wind's body felt boneless. He melted into Spring's embrace with a sigh of contentment. "Thank you," he gasped out, still breathless from the intensity of their lovemaking.

Spring nuzzled at his neck. "You're very welcome."

Star clung to his front like a bur, smiling at all the extra fruit on the surrounding plants. "And we don't go back empty handed."

Wind leaned into Spring's touch, content and happy in a way he'd never known was possible. "Well don't expect me to go back for quite a while," he told them, "I'm too tired to ride. In fact getting out of this water is going to be a challenge."

He chuckled softly. "Not that either of you seem inclined to let me go, much less get out. And no, I'm not complaining. I like it where I am, other than the fact I'm starting to get water wrinkles."

Star giggled. "Water wrinkles? I thought the prune look was due to old age!"

Using the most indignant tone he could manage without laughing, Wind said, "Old age? Did you hear her Spring? *She's* calling *me* old!"

Spring's chuckle sounded from behind him. "You're both what? Nineteen, twenty summers?"

So that makes me the only one who can call either of you old.”

Wind laughed. “Yes this is true, but I’m still Star’s *old man* since she’s a year younger than I am. Well almost two years as I have a birthday coming up during the Storm Season and hers is in midsummer.”

Spring became serious suddenly. “Mine’s late spring, but this year it was spent pumping water.”

“We’ll have to give you a big party next spring to make up for it. Maybe a few hours of sex followed by a nap followed by a few more hours of sex.” He winked at Star. “I’ll even wrap up this girl I know as a present for you, how about that?”

Spring nuzzled at his neck again. “Sounds good to me as long as the ‘present’ doesn’t mind.”

Star smiled. “You can wrap me for Wind during the Storm Season.” Her smile died. “As long as we can find suitable shelter by then.”

“We’ll figure something out before Storm Season, Star. I still haven’t asked around among the other clans yet, so don’t worry about it.”

Wind grinned. "And I plan on holding you to the promise to be my present," he warned. "And for your birthday you'll get your choice of a totally hot guy with silver hair and violet eyes or, this old, wrinkled up windmage I know."

"Talking of wrinkles," Spring said, "I guess we ought to get out of the water and go back to the Gather. Some of the clans will be moving on very soon so if you wanted to approach them, we shouldn't waste any time. Well, we can gather from the plants before we go."

"Good idea. No sense letting so much ripe fruit go to waste." Wind smiled. "Speaking of ripe fruit," he gave Star a kiss.

I love both of them so much. Please, if there are any gods, let our lives be happy. Spring's had enough suffering in his life and so has Star.

They left the pool, Star and Spring gathering enough fruit to fill their saddlebags while Wind checked their cycles and poked around the pool of water, looking for edible tubers and digging them up with an old work knife.

When they were done they mounted up and

returned to camp. Some of their neighbors were already starting to pack up, preparing to move out the next day.

Wind turned to his bondmates. "Maybe I should go ask around and see if anyone's interested in having us as part of their Clan before too many of them are ready to go."

Spring nodded. "Good idea."

Star glanced around their camp. "I think Spring and I should start packing what we don't need for the next day or two."

"We need to be ready to go quickly," Wind agreed, "in case the Clan that agrees to let us join them is planning to leave. I might be gone for a while," he warned. "I want to make sure we're with a good clan that won't try to take advantage of us."

He helped them offload the fruit and tubers, kissed them both and headed off into the Gather on his warcycle.

Wind spoke to a few Clan Chiefs close to their camp, but they showed little interest in having them, probably because of their inconsiderate

display of the day before, so he moved on to a few clans a bit farther away.

He stopped at the beautifully painted tent of a Clan Chief, not sure what clan it might be, but willing to try any clan rather than risk the three of them being alone during Storm Season.

He approached the Clan Chief's camp, noting the wealth of camp goods and the three women who were cooking a large meal over two cooking fires.

He didn't see any men present, but they could be inside.

"Greetings to the camp," he said, keeping a polite distance.

One of the women glanced up and sniffed. "Greetings stranger, what do you want with my husbands?"

Not terribly happy with her tone of voice, Wind did his best to ignore it. *Maybe she's just had a rough day.* "I'd like to speak to the Chief of your Clan and his swordbrother about joining your clan. If he's not here I can come back."

The woman turned to one of her younger

companions. "Raindance go tell your fathers that some young warrior wishes to speak to them."

The young woman pouted but did as she was told, disappearing into the tent. A few moments later she was back. "They'll be out when they've finished what they're doing," she told Wind.

"Thank you," he replied. He frowned when he wasn't invited into the camp to wait which would have been the polite way of having a guest wait for someone.

He hadn't even met the Chief and he'd started to have second thoughts about joining the clan when he saw two tall men approaching the tent. One was Sword Dancer, the smith, the other man he thought was named Trueflight.

Both of the men had very stern, unhappy looks on their faces.

The Chief and his swordbrother chose that moment to step out of the tent. They were both stocky men, but it was the stockiness of muscle turning to fat rather than honed bodies. They stood glaring at Wind until the Chief spoke up. "What do you want?"

Wind didn't get a chance to speak before

Trueflight spoke. "I'm not sure what he wants but I know what I want. The money and goods that you owe our swordbrother, both for the work on your camp and the beating you gave him."

Wind's frown deepened and he stepped away from the edge of the camp. "I'd come here to petition to be allowed to join their Clan, but I don't think I'm going to ask about that if what you said is true." He glanced at Sword. "Is it?"

The smith nodded, anger darkening the deep blue of his eyes so they looked almost black. "Those bastard sons of offal refused to pay Zephyr what they promised, then beat him almost senseless when he objected."

"We paid him what we agreed on," the Chief snapped.

"That's right," the man at his side added.

"But he got greedy and demanded twice the agreed upon price," the Chief stated.

"And then he attacked us," his swordbrother continued.

"So the whore's son got what he asked for, a good beating for attacking his betters. Besides

that we paid twice as much as his shoddy work deserves.”

Wind stepped farther away from the camp, showing he had no intention of embroiling himself in the dispute.

“Shoddy! You call that art on your tent shoddy?” Sword demanded, his face full of disbelief.

From where Wind stood the art covering the tent was far from shoddy, it showed an amazing gift for form and color. The animals and plants painted on the canvas of the tent appeared as close to life-like as he’d ever seen, unlike the usual stylized designs most artists employed.

Trueflight stood motionless as the Chief and Sword argued, his eyes narrowed to slits. “Shoddy you say,” he said his voice quiet yet everyone’s gaze turned on him. “If it’s so shoddy and you refuse to pay for it, it would be best to start again, don’t you think?”

Without asking permission to enter the camp, he strode over to the fires and picked up two of the large pots that were hanging over them. He threw the contents, food and all at the side of the

Chief's tent, destroying both the artwork and their dinner.

"Yes, I think my swordbrother is right," Sword added as he stepped uninvited into their camp. He drew his sword and slashed through the dripping canvas, cutting fabric and one support line.

Wind backed away as the Chief and his swordbrother drew their weapons. "You sons of bitches!" the Chief snarled as he swept his blade toward Sword.

The women scattered out of the way, eyes wide and excited. "Show him how you deal with dog's droppings, my love," the oldest woman shouted her encouragement.

"Get them father!" the girl named Raindance urged. "Make them pay for what they've done!"

The smith blocked the attack easily and lunged for the Chief, striking the man with his body and taking him off his feet, twisting to catch the thrust of the swordbrother's sword with the side of his own. A flick of his wrist disarmed the man, a backhanded blow sent him sprawling to the ground beside his Chief.

Wind, awed by Sword's demonstration of swordplay, frowned as a few of the Clan's warriors drew closer. They were armed, and some of them appeared angry.

"Don't stand around staring, you men, help my husbands against the enemies of our Clan!" the oldest woman urged.

"Oh shut up, you old hag," Trueflight said with a sneer of derision. He turned to Wind. "I'd think twice about joining this bunch of moneygrubbers of I were you."

"How did you know that's why I came here?" Wind questioned. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. You're right, though, I want nothing to do with a clan who would let a deal breaking thief be their leader."

The warrior's surrounding them grumbled angrily, but none of them moved to help their Chief.

The Chief and his swordbrother got to their feet, eyeing Sword warily, obviously reluctant to face the handsome younger warrior. Wind could well understand their hesitation. Sword had taken them both on and beaten them with ease.

Only a fool or a man with a death wish would risk his life crossing blades with Sword.

Wind certainly wouldn't want to be on the sharp end of Sword's anger.

The older woman's mouth twisted in a scowl and she charged at Sword, a knife in her hand.

Wind, not wanting to hurt her, but also not wanting to see her stab the man from behind, leapt for her, grabbing her wrist and forcing the knife from her hand.

"Don't be a fool!" he snapped at her. "Hurt him and he'll cut you in half, and if he doesn't his swordbrother certainly will."

Trueflight actually smiled at that. "If only to rid the world of her incessant yapping." He turned to face the Chief. "We're done here but if either of you so much as lay a finger on our swordbrother again, you will die."

The Chief and his swordbrother seemed to take the warning seriously, neither one of them making any effort to either resume their physical attack or begin another verbal confrontation.

Wind let the woman go. "There's no point

in me speaking with the Chief of this Clan. I've gotten an answer to my question already," he stated and turned to walk away.

Trueflight nodded at him. "I think you've made a wise decision, my friend. Will you be at your camp in about an hour? Sword and I have a proposition for you and your bondmates."

"I'll probably be there. I was looking for a clan we could join, but so far I've come up with nothing." Wind glanced at the Chief, his swordbrother and their wives who were beginning to straighten up the mess the two men had made of their camp. "At least you saved me from wasting more time with them."

Wind realized that Sword and Trueflight kept referring to *each other* as swordbrothers, but last time he'd seen Sword there'd been that pretty blue haired man he'd called his swordbrother. "I'm confused, Sword. Didn't you say that guy with the blue hair was your swordbrother? I could have sworn you and Trueflight said something about the two of you being swordbrothers. I'm tired, but I'm not so tired I'd be hearing things."

Trueflight smiled, his turquoise eyes sparkling. "No, you're not hearing things. We each of us

have three swordbrothers. Breeze, you've met. He's the one with the blue hair. We came here on behalf of our other swordbrother, Zephyr, who dared to ask those bastards for what he was owed and got beaten to a bloody pulp for it."

It took a few heartbeats for Trueflight's words to sink in. "You mean you've got a four way bond the way I'm in a three way with Star and Spring?"

"That's right," Sword agreed, smiling at Wind and clapping him on the shoulder. "I have to admit it's rather unsettling and exciting at the same time. Here I thought I'd spend my life unbonded and in the span of a few days I go from a single guy looking for love to being in a relationship with three other men." He glanced at Trueflight and added, "It's going to take some getting used to."

The redhead seemed amused by something. "For all of us, I think. Anyway, I want to check on Zephyr so we'll see you back at your camp."

"Zephyr? That name seems familiar." Wind frowned as he realized why he knew the name, hoping it was someone else entirely. "You don't mean Songbird Northwind's son, do you?"

Trueflight's amusement disappeared to be replaced by a frown. "What if I do?"

Wind took a step back, holding his hands out in a gesture meant to appease Trueflight. "Star and I know Zephyr. Songbird spent a few months with our clan when we were both kids. Our former Chief Redsand forced her to leave and go with another clan after a couple of warriors got into a fight over who got to have her that night. He refused to see it wasn't really her fault. Those two idiots had been fighting for years, she just became the excuse for their quarrels to turn into bloodshed."

Shaking his head Wind went on to say, "Star and I felt sorry for him. A boy with no fathers, and a mother who didn't pay much attention to him. He always looked so, sad. Anyway, I'll see you at my camp."

Trueflight's frown disappeared and he nodded to Wind again before turning to follow Sword.

Zephyr is in a relationship with Sword and Trueflight? Who would have ever thought one of the most abused guys around would find a swordbrother like either one of them? Proves it's not who you are but the magic in your soul that

counts. Wind hurried toward his camp wondering exactly what sort of proposition Trueflight and Sword had in mind.



Star stretched out her aching back and looked around. “I think that’s all we can do for now, Spring. We’ll need to cook and sleep so the rest will have to wait.”

Spring finished rolling up the spare pelts and turned to smile at her. “I wonder how Wind got on.”

“Not good I’m afraid,” Wind said as he came around the side of the tent to sit down on a fur near the door of their tent. “I’ll try tomorrow. I came home because Trueflight and Sword said they’d be coming by. Apparently their part of a four way bond and they want to talk to us about something.” His green gaze turned up to Star, “Is there any tea?”

“Not yet. We’ve been too busy packing to make any. Spring could you speed up the water please?” She went over to sit by Wind as Spring made them all some tea. She took Wind’s hand

in hers. "I like them both," she said. "They've helped us a lot during this Gather. I wonder what they want to talk to us about."

His lips brushed hers in a quick kiss. "I have no idea. I do know they've got a four way bond with Breeze the guy with the blue hair and, of all people, Zephyr Northwind."

Star frowned. "Zephyr Northwind? Wasn't he the boy whose mother wouldn't settle with any swordbrothers but moved from man to man?"

"Yes that's them," Wind agreed. "Trueflight and Sword showed up at the tent of a clan chief I was waiting to speak with. The Chief apparently reneged on a deal he made with Zephyr and then he and his swordbrother beat Zephyr up. Trueflight and Sword took understandable offense at that and showed up to settle their differences."

Star patted his hand. "I'm glad he's found such good swordbrothers. He was a really nice boy under all the bravado. I guess he had to be that way with the way he was treated."

It occurred to her that if Sword and Trueflight were coming to see them that she'd better add

some more tea to the pot. Serious talk always went over better with a warm drink in hand.

“Do we have anything to eat?” Wind questioned. He pulled a fur over his folded legs and rubbed his face. “I feel completely drained.”

Star shook her head. “Only fruit until the stew on the firestones is cooked.” She stood up and rummaged in one of their crocks, coming back to Wind with a couple of ripe fruits in her hand. “Once we’ve eaten the evening meal, I think you need to get some sleep.”

Wind nodded in agreement, took the fruit and glanced around. “Looks like most of our neighbors are moving on in the morning.”

Star refused to let her worry show. There had been a lot of talk about a heavier than usual Storm Season amongst the people around them and she knew they had to find shelter very soon.

Luckily they had enough food to last them but she could do with trading something for some flour before everyone vanished.

“Does seem that way,” Spring said. “We’re as ready to go as we can be.”

“First thing in the morning I want to head over to the market and see if we can trade some of the over abundance of fruit we’ve got for flour and cooking oil. We’re going to need both before the Storm Season has us trapped in a cave somewhere.” He bit into a piece of the fruit and chewed, his expression turning thoughtful. “Too bad we don’t know anyone else looking for a new clan. We could just band together until we found a suitable one that would take us all.”

Wind sighed and gazed at Spring. “It would be nice to even find a clan that needed a powerful water mage, but other than Brightsand which we just left, I don’t know of any who might be looking for someone of Spring’s talent. Windmages are almost as common as stonemages, no one much cares about my kind. Star’s talent isn’t common, but most people don’t even count women as mages. They’re nothing but babymakers and I don’t want to be part of a clan that thinks of women that way either. If I did we could have stayed with Brightsand .”

Star lowered her head. *This is all my fault. We wouldn’t be in this predicament if it weren’t for me being a mage in my own right.*

The sound of warcycles approaching made her look up. Trueflight and Sword came to a halt just outside the camp.

“Well I guess we’ll find out what they want to talk about,” Wind commented.

“Greetings to the camp,” Sword called out as he dismounted.

Star rose to her feet, a smile of welcome for both men on her face. “Greetings to Sword and Trueflight. Welcome to the camp. Please be comfortable. Spring has just made us all some tea.”

“Thank you,” Sword replied as he entered the camp with Trueflight beside him. “I’d really welcome some tea. It isn’t even full dark yet and it’s getting cold.”

“I thought it was me,” Wind remarked, as he offered a fur wrap to Sword who took it with a wide, friendly smile.

Spring handed bowls of hot tea round to everyone as Star offered a wrap to Trueflight. He accepted it with a smile. “No, it’s not you. Storm Season is likely to be a bitch this year.”

Star moved over so they could all sit round the firestones. She was really curious about what they might have to say.

“I’ve never been good at skirting issues, so I’m going to come right out and tell you about the problem we’ve got,” Sword said.

He took a sip of tea and continued. “Trueflight bonded to Zephyr. I’m sure you know what all too many people think about him so we don’t need to discuss that. The problem we’re having is that, while my clan chief is more than happy to accept Breeze as my swordbrother, and would welcome True happily into the Clan, he wants nothing to do with Zephyr. I’ve asked around at every clan that’s worth talking to, and we’ve gotten the same reaction. His mother’s loose ways are what everyone judges him by. Unfair as it is, not one clan here will accept us so long as he’s with us. That being the case we’re planning to strike out on our own.”

Trueflight winced as Sword spoke but quite why, Star couldn’t work out. She frowned at their news. *Every clan judges Zephyr by his mother. It’s so unfair.*

Spring put into words what she wanted to ask.

“You said you had a proposition for us. After all you’ve done for us, me especially, I’m prepared to listen.”

Star nodded her agreement.

Sword glanced at Trueflight. “My swordbrothers and I want to offer you a place with us if you can’t find a clan willing to give the three of you a place.” He almost seemed embarrassed as he made the offer. “We were talking about it and, well, the seven of us would be a lot safer together than either group of us would be alone.”

Star glanced at Wind and Spring, trying to gauge their reactions. It would solve a lot of their problems but her bondmates might not wish to have four other men around, two of them almost complete strangers.

Spring took a sip of his tea. “My clan were from the other side of the City, so as far as I’m aware, we never came across anyone called Zephyr. I know and trust both of you and Breeze also seems like someone I could get along with. I have no objections to teaming up. What say you, Wind?”

Wind gave a non-committal shrug. "I'd like to think about it, maybe talk to a couple of Clan Chiefs first. If you're planning to leave tomorrow we're not exactly ready to go. We're short on a lot of supplies and, in all the excitement, we haven't had a chance to get any."

He stared at the firestones for a moment, "We haven't had a chance to do anything with the warcycles from the slavers yet either. We were hoping to have time to do some trading for them, but with clans already pulling out and heading for their Storm Season homes, I don't even know what, if anything, we'll be able to get for them."

Trueflight smiled. "Among his many other talents, all of which he denies, apart from cooking, Breeze turned out to be a very good trader. I hope you don't mind but we collected all the warcycles and got what we thought you might need for them."

Star frowned at Wind for his indecision. "What did you get?" She couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice.

"One of the clans had made a trip to the City. We were able to get you several pounds of flour and sugar, five gallons of cooking oil, a lot of those

green leafy vegetables the City grows, thirty bars of soap, some soft linens, and several pots of that stuff you dye wool with.” He grinned. “That was just for two of the cycles. You’ve still got nine of them on display at the market and there’s a lot of interest.”

Wind nodded, his mouth pulled into a flat, none too happy line. He appeared distracted, as if he only half heard what was being discussed.

Sword was watching him, his dark brows pulled together in a look that could be worry or unhappiness, perhaps both. “Well I’m sure you don’t want to spend the night chattering with the two of us.”

Star saw him nudge Trueflight in the ribs with his elbow.

Trueflight nodded and finished his tea. “We’re not going tomorrow and we’ll bring the goods we got over in the morning if that’s okay.”

He said no more about them joining up and rose to his feet. “Thank you for your hospitality. Perhaps we can return the favor some time.”

Star nodded but her attention was on Wind. It was left to Spring to say, “You’re very welcome.”

When the men had gone she leaned forward to grab one of Wind's hands. "What's wrong, Wind?"

A trace of anger darkened Wind's green eyes as met her gaze. "I can't believe they're holding his mother's behavior against him to the point where none of the clans here will offer them a place. You've seen the blades Sword forges, and word here at the Gather is that Trueflight is one of the best bowyers among the clans. Yet, with both of them as part of the deal, no one will have them because of Zephyr?" he shook his head. "I actually liked Zephyr when we were kids, didn't you?"

Star nodded. "Yes, I did, but my parents didn't like me to play with him. It's so unfair. Wind, I don't want to leave here with any clan that will behave like that. I'd rather team up with Sword and Trueflight and maybe we can find a good clan after the Storm Season, when we have more time. A clan that will accept Zephyr no matter who his mother is and will admit that I'm a battlemage."

Spring sighed. "We might never find that, but

between the seven of us we could make a good life. We have plenty of skills to trade.”

“I agree with both of you. Judging Zephyr by his mother’s behavior isn’t fair. But we’ve all dealt with things that weren’t fair to us. It wasn’t fair for Star’s father to keep us apart, and it sure as hell wasn’t fair for you to be sold as a slave, Spring.”

He refilled his bowl of tea and sat staring at it before he went on to say, “You know my fathers and mother used to give Zephyr food. And there were several times when they brought him into tent so he could sleep in a bed when his mother and the warrior she was with were too busy fucking to let him come inside. Bad as your fathers were, Star, they were a lot better than that mother of his. At least you never went hungry or got left outside in the cold.”

Star nodded. “Yes, that much is true, but there were other problems after my mother died as you know.”

Spring ladled stew into three bowls and handed one to Wind. “Eat, you’re still drained

from the fight earlier.” He settled with his own bowl and took several mouthfuls. “You told Sword you were going to talk to more Chiefs. Why would you want to do that when you know exactly how any of them would treat Zephyr?”

“I’m not asking for them, Spring. I’m trying to find the best place for us. Yes I know it’s cold, but the truth I’m going to worry about us, not them. And if we *do* go with them have either of you considered how our association with Zephyr might damage our own changes with another clan?” Wind explained.

Spring stared at him wondering if he knew him after all. “You got angry about how he was treated and yet now you turn your back on him?”

“Because I don’t want our lives ruined by what other people think, Spring. Yes, it makes me mad, but I have to protect *our* future and I have to think about the future of any children we have. I don’t want their lives affected by something we decide on a moment’s notice. Do you understand?” Wind asked, his voice carrying a plaintive note. His face had fallen into the lines

of worry that all too often marred his handsome features.

“I understand you wanting to do the best for us but both Star and I have a say in our future too and she doesn’t want to belong to a clan where she’ll be considered nothing more than a baby making machine.”

He lapsed into silence, knowing he wasn’t that good with soothing Wind’s concerns.

Star finished her stew and put her bowl aside. “Cleaning up can wait till morning. I’m going to bed. And I’m sorry, Wind, but I agree with Spring. I’m not prepared to join any of the clans at this Gather.”

Wind hadn’t even picked his stew up, much less taken a bite. “And I’m not *asking* Star to join a clan like that, but you aren’t even letting me think it over. You’re determined to have us leave here with them so I guess me worrying about our future or how our children will be treated by other clans doesn’t count for anything.”

He got up and walked out of their camp.

Spring glanced at Star. “Should I go after him?”

Star shook her head. “No. He needs to work things out for himself when he gets like this. Best to give him space.” She stripped off her clothes and crawled into bed, pulling the furs around her like a nest.

Spring sighed and decided he might as well clean the remains of their meal up as he wouldn’t be able to sleep until Wind returned.

Wind returned while Spring was still cleaning up the dishes. He didn’t say anything to Spring as he picked up the clean bowls and packed them into a basket.

He picked up the fur wraps one by one, shook the dust out of them and piled them by the door.

“From now on, you and Star make the decisions,” Wind told him. “I’ll abide by whatever the two of you choose to do.”

Spring sighed, wanting to hit his swordbrother but knowing that would solve nothing. “I think you’re thinking too hard. We’ve been asked to team up for the Storm Season. Nothing was said about after that. It may be that they don’t want to join a clan while we do. Who knows? All I know

is if I'm to be trapped in a cave with people for the duration, I'd rather it be with people I like and trust."

Wind stepped closer to Spring. To Spring he looked pale and worn, as if the cares of the entire world rested on him. "I'm tired, Spring. I don't even want to think right now. I'm sorry you find me so irritating, but it's going to take me a while to adjust to the changes you've made in our lives." Wind put his arms him and leaned against Spring. "I love you, I don't want anything to happen to either you or Star. I couldn't take losing either of you, and I know I'm being stupid but, I'm just sick of worrying about everything. I've been doing it since I was a kid and I can't make myself stop."

Spring pulled the tired windmage into his arms and held him close, trying to provide as much comfort as he could. "I can't stop you worrying, but just remember I'm here to share the burdens from now on." He smiled into Wind's hair. "And you're neither stupid nor irritating. We all have to adjust. I don't want to make all the decisions and neither does Star at a guess. We just need to

work out a way to compromise between us so we can be equals.”

Wind pulled back, set his lips to Spring’s in a gentle kiss followed by a murmured, “I love you.”

Spring returned the kiss just as tenderly before leading Wind towards the bed. “Get some sleep, Wind. It’s been a long and eventful day and I’m tired even if you’re not.”

“You’re right, we both need sleep. I’m sure when I wake up I’ll be ready to help you and Star make a decision on what to do about Sword’s offer.” Wind took off his clothes and sat down on the edge of their bed. “You want the end or the middle?”

Spring smiled. “I think you should take the middle so you realise how much we really love you.”

Wind slipped into bed and held the covers up for him. “Come to bed, pretty boy.”

Spring didn’t hesitate. He stripped off his clothes and joined his bondmates in the bed, his arm falling across them both.

It seemed only seconds later that light was streaming into the tent and he could hear people moving about outside as they went about their morning routines.

Beside him Wind murmured something in his sleep and threw his arm over Spring's chest as a deep voice outside said, "The firestones aren't lit, I don't think anyone's awake yet, True."

Spring groaned and slipped from the bed. He pulled on his clothes and headed outside. "You're early birds. Wind and Star are still asleep."

"I wanted to let you know all but one of the cycles sold this morning," Sword began. "We've got the trade goods at our camp, so anytime you want to get them this morning is fine. We've had a slight change in our plans, we're leaving early this afternoon."

Spring's eyes widened. "So early? Is there any particular reason for that?" If they didn't make a decision very soon it would be too late.

"We had a conflict yesterday that's turning uglier as the hours pass," Sword replied. "We had a disagreement with a Clan Chief and now the

warriors of the clan are working themselves up for a fight we'd rather avoid."

Spring frowned. "The Chief you told us about? Wait one moment, please, let me wake Wind and Star."

He went back into the tent and gently shook Wind's shoulder. "Sword and Trueflight are here. There have been developments with that Clan Chief."

"I was afraid of that," Wind replied as he sat up and reached for his clothes, dressing as he talked. "The warriors didn't seem very happy with what happened, but they also didn't seem ready to do anything about it when it happened. Now they've had time to work themselves up over it, things could turn nasty for Sword, Trueflight and their swordbrothers."

Wind pulled on his boots. "Do they want our help fending the trouble off or are they leaving the Gather?"

Spring caught his gaze. "They're leaving the Gather early this afternoon to avoid the trouble. And they sold all those warcycles bar one for us."

I think we should let them keep that if they have room for it. I doubt if Zephyr has a cycle.”

“If he has one it’s probably not worth anything. I agree, let him have the unsold one.” Wind nudged Star. “Wake up beloved. We’ve got a decision to make.”

Star peeped over the furs. “So I heard. Go greet our guests while I dress.”

Spring shook his head at her. “I think we need to make the decision without an audience.”

“You’re right, we do. So, what do the two of you think we should do?” Wind questioned in a hushed tone. “The Gather is breaking up, I saw quite a few Clans getting ready to leave yesterday. Chances are, with the rumors of a bad Storm Season ahead of us, a lot of Clans are going to be gone by midday which will further limit our already limited options.”

Spring nodded. “All you say is true, Wind, and we haven’t exactly made the best impression this Gather either. My thoughts are that we team up for the Storm Season at least and consider our options after that.”

Star nodded. “If you’re concerned about a clan

taking them because of Zephyr, then it would be right to reconsider after we get through the Season. Though strangely enough I have the feeling something will happen to make the decision for us.”

Spring stared at Star. “You too? I have seen portents and signs in the water that make me think something huge is going to happen. It was one of the reasons I escaped from the City.”

Wind frowned. “Portents and signs of what?” he asked, and he had that worried look back on his face.

Spring glanced at Wind, wondering how much he could believe in what he was going to say. “It doesn’t really affect our current choices, but you must have heard of the legendary animals, the dragon, unicorn and so on. The portents show that they are amongst us once again. For that to have happened, something amazing is going on.”

“You mean those old legends they tell around campfires during the Storm Season?” Wind shook his head. “Those are nothing but stories told to pass the time. Even as a kid I’ve never

believed they were real, and I sure haven't seen anything to change my mind."

Spring decided that now was not the time to pursue the subject. "Well, as I said, none of this matters when it comes to what we intend to do. Personally, I'd rather be holed up with people I like than with a strange Clan. We can join a Clan after if you wish, Wind."

"The longer I think about it the more reasonable it sounds," Wind stated, speaking slowly as if he were weighing his choice of words carefully. "I didn't find a clan I'd want to join at this Gather, yet, on the other hand I'll be the first to admit that the three of us alone for a Storm Season outright gives me nightmares."

Star nodded. "Then let us spend the Season with Sword and his swordbrothers. That would be my choice."

Spring pushed a stray lock of hair out of his face. "It certainly beats going it alone."

"All right, let's tell them and get our camp struck as fast as we can so we're ready to leave." Wind gave a melodramatic sigh. "I wonder if we've got time for breakfast?"

Star chuckled. "I've got some thin slices of meat I can grill quickly. Most of the heavy packing was done yesterday so you have time to eat."

Spring rose to his feet. "I'll go and let Sword know our decision. We've kept them waiting long enough."

"And while you're doing that, I'll check our cycles. Don't forget to let them know we're giving that extra cycle to Zephyr. Tell them it's for taking care of the sale of the other cycles. That way they can't object over it being a gift," Wind said as he pulled on his riding jacket.

Spring exchanged a look with Star. He was beginning to understand Wind better now, how he would hide away with the bikes rather than flaunt his generosity.

He crossed the tent and opened the flap. "Sorry to have kept you both waiting so long. We will be coming with you, if you'll have us along. And we want you to keep the last warcycle for your work in selling all the others for us."

"No need for that, really. We've got cycles and we'll manage." Sword grinned and patted Spring

on the shoulder, the gesture friendly, the man's expression showing relief. "By all the gods that ever were, we'll be happy to have you with us! Actually when we decided to do it, you were the first people we thought of. We were a little uneasy just the four of us setting out on our own, and we know Wind wasn't looking forward to the idea of the three of you striking out right at the edge of Storm Season either." He laughed, eyes warmed with joy. "The seven of just about equal some of the smaller clans I've seen."

Trueflight put a hand on Sword's arm. "Actually we'd be very grateful for the warcycle. Breeze has a reasonable bike but Zephyr does not."

Spring smiled. "Well, it's Zephyr's cycle then. And we are very glad you asked us. We didn't really like the idea of joining any of the Clans at this Gather. And three of us alone doesn't really bear thinking about."

Star bustled out of the tent, grinned at their guests and lit the firestones. "We're almost packed apart from what you got for the cycles so we're going to have some breakfast."

Spring leaned over and gave her a kiss. "Save mine while I go and collect our goodies."

Wind came out, waved a polite hello to their guests, and vanished around the back of their tent.

“We’ve still got our tents to pack and my forge and smithing gear to deal with. We’ll come by here when we’re done and see if you need any help,” Sword told them as he mounted his cycle.

Sword glanced at the sun. “We should be done packing things up before noon. Oh, and anything you can’t pack on your cycles, can go in the wagon I bought last night. Breeze is going to wind up driving it, and he’s not too happy about it either.”

Spring couldn’t help it, he gaped. Wagons were expensive. Sword must be extremely well off by clan standards. “Okay, shove all the stuff you got for the bikes into the wagon. Everything here fits on the sleds I think.”

Star nodded as she grilled their breakfast. “Yes it does and with some room left over.”

“We’ll be by in a few hours. If you find anything you can’t get on your bikes just pile it up and we’ll get it in the wagon,” Sword told them.

Wind joined them as Trueflight mounted up

on his cycle and the two men rode off. “Cycles are checked and everything looks good. I’ve got most of the stuff that we had stored back there ready to pack, but the plants have to stay. They shattered their pots and they’re just too huge to move.”

Star grinned at him. “At least they gave us a good crop and plenty of seeds.”

They ate a quick breakfast and packed, getting everything ready for departure. Spring and Wind made quick work of dismantling the empty tent and all was packed on the sled when Sword’s party arrived.

“You’re ready to go?” Sword asked.

They nodded and climbed on their bikes. As they rode out of the Gather, Spring didn’t glance back. No more slavery, no more City, no more collar. His mind was on the future and the whispers in the water. Though uncertain, he felt the times to come would be very interesting.

END

Auburnimp

The pen name of Tracy Boyall. She is the author of two successful series *Fallen Angels* and *Sweepers* and the co-author of the *Dragonhope* books.

She has been writing since she was fifteen but it is only in recent years that she decided to see what publishers thought of her work. Her characters are always strong, feisty and often impetuous enough to get into dangerous situations rather like their creator.

She has recently become a partner in a e-publishing house, *Shadowfire Press*, where she is responsible for finances and customer service.

She has been a knife-thrower's target, an exotic dancer, a drummer, a homeless wanderer and many other things due to a desire to go wherever life takes her.

She now lives in a small house in a large English city with four resident cats and one frequent visitor.

She is female and has blue eyes; anything else is often subject to change without notice.

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Michael Barnette

Michael Barnette grew up in the wilds of Miami, Florida where he enjoyed the nightlife and wide variety of cultures, but not the late night driveby shootings. Deciding on a change of pace, Michael moved to Athens, Georgia where he lived for several years before migrating west. He misses the ethnic food in Miami, he doesn't miss the driveby shootings.

The last two years he was in Miami, Michael went from being a poet to writing short stories. One of the short stories he wrote, *Zoner*, was also the first gay erotica he'd ever written. Set in his cyberpunk world setting--which takes place in a future variant of Miami--and using characters established from an unfinished novel he was working on, he submitted the story to Circlet Press. The story was published and has been well received in the gay community, garnering a Gaylactic Spectrum Award nomination in 2003, while the anthology, *Wired Hard #3*, was a finalist for the Lambda Literary award that same year. He has since been nominated for the Gaylactic Spectrum Award five more times, both for novels and short stories.

About the Author

Seeing the popularity of erotica-- and finding it much easier to sell than poetry-- Michael changed his writing focus in 2003 and started researching the types of erotica popular with readers.

The rest, as they say, is history.

You can visit Michael and find out about his worlds at the following places on the net.

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<http://mbarnettemuse.blogspot.com/>

Book Excerpts

Following are some excerpts of other hot erotic romance titles from Shadowfire Press.

If you enjoyed *Lovers 1: Bondmates* by Auburnimp and Michael Barnette, you might also like *Apocalypse Dance* by Michael Barnette.

For Nikki salvation is just a Dragon away.

With the world population decimated by a mutated strain of Ebola civilization as we know it has gone down in ruin. Warlords rampage across what was once the United States of America, killing, raping and adding to the misery and horror that has swept the once proud nation.

Nikki, once on her way to becoming a brilliant doctor, is being sought as a concubine by Roderik, self-styled King of the Lone Star Empire.

Here is a short excerpt from *Apocalypse Dance* by Michael Barnette

Book Excerpts

Her breath caught, and she shuddered under the onslaught of sensation. Her nipples peaked so tightly it looked like it should hurt. He drew the tip of his tongue around the areola, one hand pressed at the small of her back, holding her still for his exploration.

She tensed slightly and he eased his hold, sensitive to her reactions, both positive and negative, learning what she liked and what sent a dampening of desire through her on the wings of fear. He didn't want her to be afraid of him. He wanted her to know nothing but pleasure from his every touch, his every whispered breath across the silken expanse of her flawless skin.

"Bells...." She almost screamed his name as he closed his mouth around the stiffened nub, sucking, teasing it with the edges of his teeth. His cock throbbed with want for her, his own desire heightened by her cry. She wanted him, and even if it came down to nothing but the heat of the moment, her need for comfort, he didn't care. He'd take this, savor it, use it as a balm to the nightmare memories that haunted him in the small hours of the night.

Pulling away, he met her gaze. Awakened

Book Excerpts

passion warmed her sable eyes. “Do you want this from me?”

“Yes!” There was no reservation or hesitation in her reply, nor in the way she kissed him afterward, her entire being seeking what he offered with the same intensity he had sought her. Her answer was as immediate as her need, and just as heated as his own.

Or you might like *Supernatural Alliances 1: FE959* by Michael Barnette.

Can a former vampire regain his dignity and find love?

Frontier Explorer 959 is out at the edge of known space when he receives a distress call that will change his miserable existence forever.

Korrine Dubouis is the last of her kind with no hope of finding her truemate. Or so she thinks until she meets the handsome creature known as FE959.

Book Excerpts

Here is a short excerpt from *Supernatural Alliance 1: FE959* by Michael Barnette

His eyes were drawn to the motion of her full lips. The line of her jaw, the graceful form of her lovely throat. Saliva filled his mouth and his fangs ached; dull pang of need, a faint remembrance of what he'd been rising up to torment him.

So beautiful. No, more than just beautiful, she is perfect.

A tumult of hair, dark as the space between the stars, and eyes a vibrant green unlike anything he'd ever seen. FE959 wanted to take her into his arms and tell her it would be all right, that he'd get help, that her adopted family would be safe. But help was a long way off and he didn't dare make a promise he couldn't keep. Not when the very stability of the ruined ship was in question.

Not when his own masters would put an end to every life on this ship if they had the chance.

He couldn't give them that opportunity.

“What's your name?”

Book Excerpts

“Korrine Dubouis,” she replied through her tears.

He shook his head, dared to touch one mahogany dark cheek and brush away the tears, the dampness tingling on his fingertip like something alive. His breath caught, her eyes widened and they both drew away from one another as if stung.

He looked at his fingers. Wiggled them. But the tingling vibration that reached to his very soul—if such as he had one—didn’t fade. It continued to resonate through his flesh.

You can purchase *Apocalypse Dance* and *Supernatural Alliance 1: FE959* by Michael Barnette, or along with other fine erotic romance titles from:

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