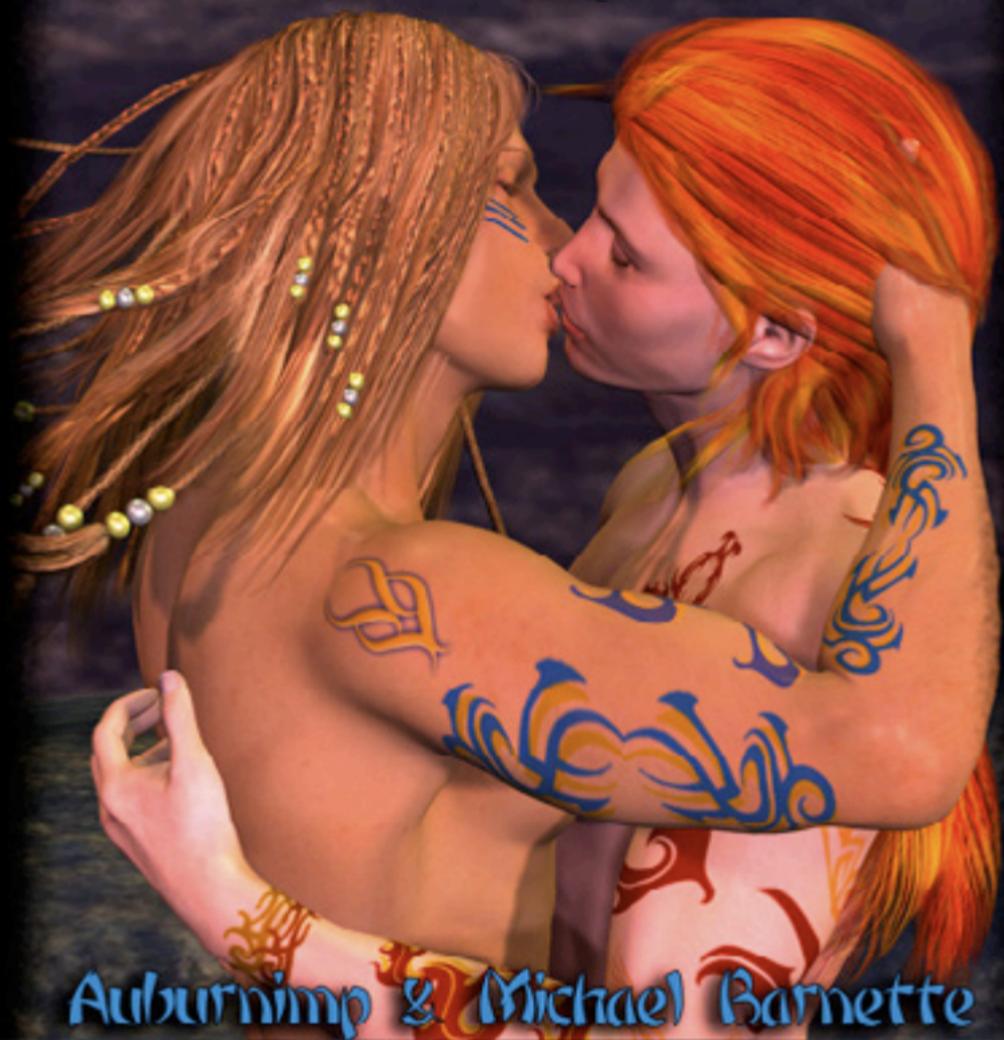


Dragon & Fenyx 1

Called by Power



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A Swordbrothers / Immortal Heroes

Crossover Series Novella

World of Dragonhope

Dragon and Fenyx 1: Called by Power

By Auburnimp and Michael Barnette

Chapter One

Chance Meeting

Wind whipped around the towering spires of rock, howling around the sharp stone fangs. Dust and grit whirled in the strengthening gale, turning the normally aqua sky a grey that darkened by the minute.

Flamespirit brought his workbike, to a halt, throwing up a flurry of sand that was carried away as he came to a complete stop. The machine was a slow cumbersome bike with only a small sword compartment and a large towing frame, but it served its purpose getting him around the chill barrens.

The blackstorm was getting worse and he needed to get under cover before it became too much for his mask and goggles to deal with but something had caught his attention. A warcycle, sleek and fast with large sword compartments and gleaming armor, the machine was half buried already, which meant there had to be a rider somewhere in the shifting pile.

Gritting his teeth against the sting of blowing dirt and sand he headed for the warcycle searching the ground for any sign of a rider.

There, almost as buried as his transport, lay a man. Flamespirit skidded to a stop, fighting the wind that battered him to clear the dirt off the man, frowning as he spotted braided and decorated hair the color of the sun. An important man then, if the decorations in his hair were any indication. Only high status warriors wore their hair in so many braids and with such elaborate ornamentation. The rich furs over soft leather added to the impression of the unknown man's high position. Closer inspection of beads in the man's braids showed they were silver and gold, not cheap glass. With that as confirmation, Flamespirit had all the proof he needed to guess the man was of high status in his clan. But he was not of the Stone Clan.

He sighed, part of him thinking he should just leave the fool out here to die while another part wouldn't let him do that. Without thinking about it he drew out his soul ball, a spherical

and magically charged quartz crystal about the size of a man's fist that flickered like living flame in red, gold and orange when he called forth its energy. Flamespirit ran it over the unconscious man, noting the tattoos as he did so. Blue and gold whorls, not ones he recognized, adorned what he could glimpse of the man's face and arms.

"I don't know who you are, my friend, but I think you're going to be trouble."

A slight stir told him his soul ball was working.

When the stranger moved it was with mind dazzling speed, the blond jumping out of Flamespirit's grasp. A wind blowing counter to the blackstorm hit Flamespirit hard enough to shove him backward a few steps.

Twin swords glimmered with dangerous light, cobalt and gold flickers whirling around both blades. "Who are you!" The demand was a raw throated growl. The eyes watching him through the sand goggles were a brilliant shade of aqua rimmed in gold.

Flamespirit's lips draw back from his

teeth in a snarl and his eyes narrowed at the attitude. “Nobody important, just the man who saw your warcycle and saved your miserable hide.”

His temper, always quick was telling him to draw his own blade and heat this cold bastard up with some of his fire, but he’d just expended energy on healing the man and his sword might do little more than sputter sparks.

The blue radiance remained steady as the taller man took a step toward him. A tangle of long braids fluttered in the strengthening wind which the man seemed to notice for the first time. He turned his head upward to the darkening sky. The wind already blowing was just a prelude to the real fury of the blackstorm that was coming.

Though the wind battered and pulled at Flamespirit, around the unnamed man it turned into a gentle breeze that sifted sand down around his feet. The man shifted his stance to step out of the deepening pile, the glossy leather of his boots dulled by the brown dust.

The stranger seemed to be considering something. The swords were returned to their scabbards across his back, first the left then the right. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave a nod of his head, indicating he had no current intention of attacking Flamespirit. "I know of a cave near here," the man told him, deep voice carrying over the increasing howl of the wind.

"Windmage? A useful skill if you are." He went to his workbike and mounted, hoping there was enough energy left in the old machine to get him to shelter. "Is your warcycle up to the journey?"

The man didn't answer. He got on his cycle and gripped the handholds. The machine purred to life and an instant later he was speeding away toward a rocky outcrop that Flamespirit could just make out through the building blackstorm.

"I guess so," he muttered and brought his own machine to life following the other man as best he could through the thickening murk.

Pale lights appeared on the warcycle,

giving Flamespirit something more visible than the black shape of the vehicle itself to follow.

The wind rose, gusting harder, threatening to knock both men to the ground with its power. Dirt filled the air and drifted into the entrance to the cave in a thick cloud that would have choked them to death if they hadn't had their masks on.

Fortunately the cave was deep, with a curve that the man led him around. The bend kept the worst of the wind and dust away from them.

The blond man stopped his bike and dismounted, stumbling and going to one knee, proof to Flamespirit that, even though he'd healed the man, the stranger still suffered from the lingering effects of whatever had laid him low in the middle of a storm.

"Rest up," he said, "I'll use my soul ball on you again later once I've recovered some of my own strength. I think a snake or stinger must have got you." He retrieved some of his belongings from his workbike, including a worn fur which he spread on the cave's floor

before tipping a little pile of red stones from a pouch into a heap. A small concentration of his power and they were soon glowing like hot coals and putting out enough heat to take some of the chill out of the air.

The man took his mask off, revealing a firm jaw line and a frowning mouth. He removed his goggles and shook himself, sand coming free of his braids and hair. He knocked his mask against the side of his warcycle and a fall of dust dropped out of the filter to the rock floor of the cave.

If he'd heard a word Flamespirit said he didn't show it. The man ignored his very presence.

Shrugging slightly at his companion's silence, he stretched out on his old fur after shaking the dust from his hair. If the man didn't want to talk it didn't really matter. They'd only have to put up with each other for the duration of the storm.

Something hissed and Flamespirit found a knife embedded in the sand and something just under the surface writhing in its death throes.

The stranger came over and pulled a dustdelver out of concealment. The thing was almost as long as the blond was tall, with a myriad of short stubby legs and glossy brown scales and a potentially lethal bite. He used the blade to cut off its head which he kicked into the darkness beyond the lights of his cycle. The knife flashed again and half of the still twitching delver fell beside his bedroll.

Done the man returned to his side of the cave, sat down and started to skin the beast, cutting bits of its flesh away and eating them raw.

Flamespirit sat up and pulled a knife from his boot, quickly skinning and cutting pieces off his half of the delver. He nodded to his companion in thanks before a thought occurred. "Do you have a name?"

A cold stare was turned in his direction. The man didn't say anything as he chewed the meat in his mouth, then swallowed. "Stormdragon." The man turned back to his impromptu meal. He ate a few more bites then set the remains aside before lying back on the bare rock. The pale light from his cycle

painted his face in stark areas of shadow and light that served to highlight his handsome features.

He sighed and finished his meal, used to being virtually ignored. “I’m Flamespirit.”

The man didn’t even grunt in reply.

Flamespirit stretched back out before turning on his side ready to sleep. There was only one thing to do when holed up in a storm and that was sleep until it was over and hope the landscape hadn’t changed enough to be unrecognizable.

Outside the wind rose to a shriek, the storm so furious even if the man had wanted to talk they wouldn’t have heard one another over the sound of the gale.

Thanking all the spirits of flame for this warm sheltered cave, Flamespirit fell asleep. When he awoke, the wind had died down to a dull howling sign that the storm was finally passing.

Still lit by the dim luminescence of his cycle, Stormdragon rested with his back to the rocks his legs bent upward at the knees.

He appeared to be asleep, his eyes closed, body relaxed.

Flamespirit took the opportunity presented to study the man. This Stormdragon had the circular tattoo of a chief's son on his forehead and the stripes of a warrior on his cheeks, rendered in gold and blue. Flamespirit also had the warrior stripes although his were red and a series of red and gold tattoos the approximate shape of flames ran up both arms, so apart from rank and different powers they were equals

He snorted humorlessly, well aware their relative status as warriors would only be decided by a contest of arms between them.

He sniffed at the air detecting something strange about the other man. He smelled of despair.

As if to confirm his thoughts the blond's visage contorted with something close to pain, the expression vanishing as he came awake. Rising to his feet, Stormdragon turned toward the entrance to the cave. There was an expectant look in his eyes, on his face, almost as if he waited for someone else to enter the

cave. He took a step forward but stopped, sank down to the stone where he'd been sitting and stared at the ground, his eyes vacant as the stare of a dead man.

Whatever had happened to this man it had attacked his very spirit, that much was obvious in the dead-eyed stare. Not wanting to upset him further or call attention to himself if it was going to start a fight, Flamespirit kept as still as possible, no easy feat for one of his nature.

He lowered his own eyes, not wishing to intrude on the other's pain.

The man put on goggles and mask, rose to his feet, swung himself into the seat of his warcycle. He dug armored gloves out of a compartment in the cycle and pulled them on. A touch started the warcycle, the low rumbling sound of the sunstone driven mechanism almost lost in the roaring of the blackstorm outside.

The gale was dying, but it still carried enough power to tear unprotected skin and flesh from a man's bones.

The blond eased the machine forward, turned it for the entrance. Paused, staring into the darkness beyond the wan light emitted by the cycle. As if waiting for something, he sat there balanced on the warcycle, neither of his feet touching the ground. Either the cycle had gravity compensation or the warrior possessed perfect balance as the vehicle remained motionless. “You coming?” he asked, without turning to look at Flamespirit.

“In that gale? No. And if you have any sense you’ll wait a while too.” He was beginning to wonder if the man did have any sense.

However, he gathered up his small pile of red rocks and stuffed them back in their pouch before turning to roll up his bedding.

“We have to leave. The cave isn’t safe anymore,” the blond informed him in a calm, reasonable voice. “Stay close to me and the wind won’t cut you to pieces.”

Dubious but willing, he packed his things away and climbed onto his workbike, starting it and turning it so he was just behind Stormdragon. Then he remembered the man’s

apparent death wish and had to hope it didn't extend to him.

“Which direction should we go to reach your people?” the man asked him. “I'll take you to them and we'll part ways. No blood debts owed, no payments needed.”

“To the southwest about three miles as the bird flies.”

“Follow me and stay close. I'll pace my cycle to your bike,” the man told him. His gaze went to Flamespirit's hands. “Do you have gloves?”

As if the Stone Clan would gift him with expensive gear like gloves. “No.”

The man frowned at him. “Even with my protection the sand will tear the skin of your hands.” The blond opened a compartment in his warcycle and rummaged around inside, pulling out a pair of dark brown gloves. He sat staring at them for a moment before taking his own off and putting the brown ones on. He held out the black gloves he'd just removed offering them to Flamespirit without looking at him or speaking.

Not sure what to say or do apart from accept the proffered gloves Flamespirit took them and put them on. So warm. But he didn't have time to revel in that right now.

Accelerating rapidly they exited the cave, the ground shaking beneath them, their cycles jolting, the ground bucking. Chunks of stone were falling around them, forcing them to alter direction as the front face of the outcrop of rock sheared off to fill the space they'd just vacated.

Clear of the falling stone, the man Flamespirit followed slowed their breakneck speed by a small margin, the man seeming not to be concerned that they could plunge off a cliff to their deaths or collide with fingers of stone in such poor visibility.

He trailed the warcycle as closely as he possibly could, realizing Stormdragon was using his magic to keep them safe and to avoid objects. What puzzled him as they rode along was how he'd known about the rockfall. Surely it was the earth spirits and their favored ones who would know that, not a man whose power lay within the wind.

He slowed his cycle because the man following him couldn't possibly keep up on the wreck of a workbike he rode. Nor did they share the connection of a bond like he'd shared with Sandrunner who'd known his every move, his very emotions as well as he'd known them himself.

Dead and gone, his lover, his swordbrother. But even now a fragment of Sandrunner's spirit, his magic clung to him, protecting him. Keeping Stormdragon safe.

Keeping the wound of his loss fresh as the day he'd lost the man he'd loved more than he'd ever loved anyone: including himself.

But he'd known the price he would pay the day they'd agreed to bind themselves, not just with the bond of blood, but with the bond of magic, their souls forever entwined.

Their secret, that forbidden bit of sorcery, the power of their magic joined.

A bond forever severed by death.

He should have died with Sandrunner. Had wanted to die there with his lover. And he should have died there on the battlefield where Sandrunner had fallen

He had intended to die. Had lain down with his dead lover in his embrace and sought the blackness of death, letting his own wounds bleed. Willing himself to die.

But his brother, Dragonwind, had carried him home, dishonoring him by denying the death he craved. His wounds were serious, those to body and soul grave enough that their best healers had been unable to say whether he would live or die. For weeks he'd lain as one dead. But the legacy of the Dragon, the ancient progenitor of their line, flowed strongly in his veins, beat in his heart. His body recovered. He survived.

And by then the damage was done. The lies were told and none refuted their truth.

People had heard how he'd begged to be saved. Pleaded to be rescued from death when his brother found him, not lying with his lover in his arms, but crawling, pitiful and broken toward their clan's camp.

And the worst of the lies, the one that left him in an agony of unending sorrow was his brother telling the whole of their Clan that he'd not cared his lover's body had been left behind for the scavengers.

Lies. Cruel hateful lies.

He'd cried tears of shame and grief inside his soul. Still did. Not a moment passing when he didn't mourn his lost lover. Didn't weep in silent grief that everything he'd valued-- his swordbrother's love and his father's respect-- were gone.

His brother had damaged his honor beyond repair in the eyes of their Clan. No other man would look at him as a potential swordbrother, not that he would have sought one, his love for Sandrunner was too strong. What hurt even more was that his father's eyes would no longer fall on him with pride.

And almost everyone in the Clan had refused to believe him when he'd called his brother a liar.

There were no witnesses to his accusations, but there were three warriors, older and wiser,

who backed his brother's claims. His brother's swordbrother and two of their friends all stood in front of the Clan council turning lies to truth with their perjured avowals of things that had not happened. Of Stormdragon the coward.

As an oathbreaker, he'd been allowed to live among his people in shame. He could still return to the Clan and exist in a state of near exile among his own people. Forced to live at the edges of the Clan, shunned and ignored with no one to call him friend. And there was no point in it. None. Better for him to die, which he would have accomplished finally but for the unwanted kindness of a total stranger.

A man named Flamespirit who showed his power in the outrageous flame color of his hair and the power of the soul he showed in his compassionate brown gaze. Young. Slender and strong, but not a match for his own lost swordbrother who'd been taller than he was and strong as the stone his magic could shape.

He slowed his warcycle, stopping in the lee

of a large stone leading to a ledge that slanted downward. He leaned closer to Flamespirit. “We have to go down here. You ride on the inside of the wall and go slow. I’ll ride on the outside so the wind can’t hurt you.” The conversations he kept having with the stranger were more words than he’d spoken in months.

Flamespirit nodded and followed the instructions faithfully, riding close to the rock to take what little shelter could be gotten from it.

Stormdragon took the outside position. As they headed down the rock face, the angle remained relatively shallow at first. About a third of the way down it grew steep and not long after that they were forced to slow to a crawl, knee to knee on a narrow span. The broad wheels of Stormdragon’s warcycle clung to the path. A section of stone broke free, tumbling down into the windswept darkness below them.

A fall from the heights where they rode would be fatal.

And still the wind moaned around them,

not as strong as before but strong enough to tear them free of the ledge if it weren't for Stormdragon's wind magic.

They reached the bottom without incident and headed to the southwest, making better speed through the canyon at the foot of the ledge. The canyon let out on a boulder-strewn plain with a gentle downward slope. The wind whipped at their clothing, the air thick with dust that made seeing more than a few cycle lengths ahead of them impossible. Finally Stormdragon saw the dim outline of something ahead that wasn't a boulder.

A sentry outpost. A pair of men-- or women-- who'd ridden out the storm at the edge of the camp under a protective canopy anchored by their cycles.

Not a moment too soon. Using the power of his magic for so long was draining him, leaving him tired and weaker than he'd been when they'd started. The dreadcat's claws had nearly been enough to send him to join Sandrunner where he would be now if this red-haired man hadn't interfered. The lingering effect of the cat's poison combined

with the drain on his magical powers left him exhausted.

It would seem I am not fated to die so easily. I'd thought this time I would die for sure. Too bad he came along and saved me.

He stopped his cycle hard and turned his head to Flamespirit rather than go any closer. "This is where we part ways."

The other man frowned under his goggles. "You're still not fully healed. How will you go on by yourself if you're so weak? Or is your desire for death too strong for you to care?"

"I've brought you to your people. Thank your gods that I bothered." Storm turned his cycle intending to force himself onward out of the reach of any warriors in the camp that might be near. Few clan camps lacked proper protection, even during such a terrible storm, and there had to be warriors ready and willing to defend their clan from attack.

Weariness had begun to wrap its numbing arms around him and he reached into his jacket to wrap his gloved hand around the

stone inside his pocket, a stone he'd once worn on a chain around his neck.

He debated. He could tap the power of the sunstone, and pay a price for the foolishness or he could risk going into the camp of another clan, alone and weak as a newborn babe.

A fierce grin twisted his lips. If he were lucky they'd kill him and he would walk in the realm of death with Sandrunner. If he were unlucky they might force him to live as a slave to their people.

That wasn't worth the risk.

"Thank you for that then," Flamespirit said quietly, "and I hope you find whatever peace it is that you're searching for." He turned his workbike towards the outpost.

Stormdragon sped away from the camp of the Stone Clan, heading toward the open plain. He hadn't gone far when the world wavered in his vision and he lost control of the heavy warcycle. The machine caromed off a rock and he went down, sliding through the sand to come up hard against a wide finger of red and brown banded stone.

Gasping he lay there as the wind showered him with sand. He could see the warcycle had come to a stop not too far away. He lay there unmoving as he tried to assess the damage he'd taken in the spill. Other than having the air knocked from his body-- and probably an impressive mass of bruises that would appear along his ribs and hip later-- he felt all right.

The wind tore at him, his magical energy depleted to the extent he couldn't protect himself as well as normal, but the storm's fury had abated a lot by now and his gear kept him safe enough from the blowing grit.

His mind wandered to Flamespirit.

Why did I even save him? It's not as if he's of any Clan allied to my own people, and it's not as if he's of any importance to me.

But he did save your life, worthless as it is. I owed him for that.

And repaid him by killing the dustdelver.

He gave up arguing with himself and rested in the sand, a wry smile twisting his lips. He might manage to die yet.

The wind abated slightly as something sheltered him from it. Flamespirit and his damned workbike. “I told you, you’re not fully healed and you must have used a lot of power getting us here.”

There was the subdued roar of another more powerful cycle and a man joined Flamespirit mounted on a warcycle. “He’s not clan!”

Flamespirit turned on the newcomer. “I owe life debt. He will not be harmed unless you wish to face my fire.”

The other man sighed. “Best get him to the camp then.”

Storm wanted to tell them to leave him be. To let him lie there and die. But he just didn’t have the energy to talk, much less argue. If this Flamespirit was determined to save him, then arguing wasn’t going to accomplish anything and he was too tired for a struggle. He just didn’t have the strength left to put up a meaningful fight.

The two men got him onto Flamespirit’s workbike and tied him down so he couldn’t fall off. His mind must have wandered because

the next thing he was fully aware of was being stopped at the edge of a camp about the size Stormdragon expected. From the number of warriors tents he counted they numbered around one hundred people including women and children if their clan structure followed the usual style of swordbrothers with a wife, or wives in common.

Flamespirit and his companion took him towards a section at the fringe of the encampment and, after freeing him from the workbike, carried him into a small hide tent. He was placed on a raised sleeping area covered in thick furs, a lighter pelt spread over him.

“I’ll bring his warcycle back later,” the guard said. “Do you want me to tell the chief?”

Flamespirit sighed. “He’ll have to know, so yes. Do that.”

Stormdragon’s eyes didn’t want to stay open. He fought to stay awake though, trying to keep his mind on what was being said. Why, he wasn’t sure, but he didn’t want to sleep. Not here in this strange place surrounded by

another clan.

“Don’t be surprised if the chief sends men to come and get him. He’s not from any of the clans I’ve ever seen. He could even be a spy from the City. They’ll want to question him.” Stormdragon opened his eyes to find the man gone.

He resented being handled but hadn’t found enough energy to give token resistance, not even when they placed him on the bed. Storm could smell the scent of another person in the bed. One man, which told him that the tent belonged to an unpaired and unwed male.

Flamespirit. The tent and bed are his.

How he knew that he wasn’t sure, but he was as certain of that fact as he was of his own name. He could be in danger, his life at stake, or at the very least his freedom taken away. But he just didn’t care.

His eyes closed and the darkness of sleep claimed him but someone moving nearby pulled him out of the soothing depths, and he found himself staring at soft brown eyes set in an attractive face. A face framed not by

braids black as night, but by loose waves of hair the color of flame.

He licked dry lips with a tongue just as devoid of moisture and discovered his goggles and mask were gone.

Flamespirit held out a water skin. “Drink,” he urged. Dark amusement crossed his features. “I’m sorry but it’s not poisoned.”

Storm met the other man’s amused gaze his own expression turning dark with the anger that rose inside him. He turned his head aside, annoyed at the man’s comment. “I’ll not take water from you and create that kind of obligation between us or with your clan and your chief.”

Flamespirit shook his head. “We are camped by an oasis so there is no obligation on either side.” There was a flicker of acute pain in his eyes as he said the word oasis.

“But you have carried the water to me,” he stated, being stubborn about it. He wanted nothing more from this man. Every kindness created a debt and he wanted no part of being indebted to anyone.

He tried to sit up, determined to get his own water, and to leave if he could. But his body would not support the desires of his mind. It refused to obey and he sank down on the bed, too dizzy to do more than let the darkness close around his mind.

Chapter Two

Consequences

Flamespirit watched with a sigh of relief as Stormdragon slid into sleep. The man was an uptight pain in the ass but he couldn't let him die. It went against everything he was.

He wet a piece of soft leather and dampened Stormdragon's mouth with it before sitting back on his haunches to watch over his charge. He needed sleep to recharge his energy more than anything although, when his own reserves built up again, he would use the soul ball once more.

He wondered why a chief's son with such skills and resources would be trying so hard to let go of life. Then again, didn't he have his own pain? It was just that the loss of his sister made him long for revenge rather than death.

The sound of approaching footsteps made him rise to his feet and face the opening. His chief and the man's swordbrother entered his

tent.

They were both taller than Flamespirit and his guest, topping the red-haired man by half a head the way most clansmen did. The chief had a long beard that fell in twin braids down his chest, while his greying black hair was pulled back in a single tail set high on his head. A series of hoops adorned his left ear, while bands of gold encircled his upper arms covering some of the black and brown tattoos that identified him as a worker of stone magic, though not a very powerful one or the tattoos would be in brown and gold.

Slightly behind him stood his swordbrother, Jagged, his broad shoulders and thick arms showing him to be a smith, though he didn't have the tattoos of a man of power since he lacked the magical abilities of men like his chief and Flamespirit. His scowling face was focused on the man in the bed, his expression hostile.

“Sowhathaveyoubroughtus,Flamespirit?” his chief asked, the man coming in to peer at the sleeping man in his bed. “He looks to be the son of a chief. Do you know his clan?”

The chief's swordbrother entered and also studied the stranger, a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth. "He's a wind warrior from the tattoos, but I don't see any clan marks." He bent over the younger man and reached for him.

A hand shot up from beneath the covers, intercepting the man's wrist. "If I am of no clan it is by my own choosing," the blond bit out sharply and gave the man's hand a shove. "But not all clans mark their people do they?"

Both the chief and his swordbrother frowned.

"Very well, man of no clan, under the laws of our clan we can either claim you as a slave or kill you as we choose," Stonefist stated.

Flamespirit spoke up then, just one word. "No."

Stonefist turned to stare at him, brows raised. "No?"

"I owe life debt. He used too much of his power to get me here and now he needs healing. He's more than a mere wind warrior,

he's wind mage.”

The chief's swordbrother looked from the man on the bed to Flamespirit. “And if he's a spy sent here by the City dwellers will you be so inclined to protect him, Flamespirit?”

“I'm no spy!”

“That remains to be seen!” the chief retorted. “I'm sure if you are a spy we'll find the evidence on your cycle or on your person.” He motioned to Flamespirit, “He owes you a debt for bringing him here. Search him.”

The man on the bed moved with the same startling speed he'd demonstrated to Flamespirit before, coming to his feet, obviously intending to fight, his hands tightening into fists.

Fast as he moved, Stonefist's swordbrother got between the blond and the chief, his own fists striking the younger man twice.

Reeling, Stormdragon collapsed to his knees at Stonefist's feet, dazed, blood running from a split lip. He had paled considerably. The chief's swordbrother shoved him flat on the floor and pinned him there.

“Get some rope, Flamespirit. This spy needs to be secured,” Stonefist ordered.

Stormdragon struggled, fighting for his freedom but unable to escape. He quickly gave up and lay there, his odd gold rimmed aqua eyes gone dull, lifeless as those of someone dead.

Finally losing the hold he’d kept on his temper, Flamespirit yelled, “I will not bind a guest in my tent and nor will you. I owe life debt no matter whom or what he is. If you cannot abide by the healing tent’s rules then you’ve one healer less!”

He wasn’t sure how potent a threat it was. There were other healers in the clan but as far as he knew he was the only fire mage.

When the chief’s swordbrother refused to let go of Storm, sparks appeared at his fingertips and he raised his hands, ready to cast them if he had to.

“A spy would have been more eager to come here. Storm tried to go away from the camp. He was brought here almost unconscious. This is not a spy.”

“And maybe that was because he’d already seen what he wanted to see, our location! The water we are camped by is valuable knowledge to any clan!” the chief’s swordbrother countered angrily.

Stonefist sighed. “Stop it both of you. Yes, you are within your right as a healer to refuse to help us bind him, but as clan chief I am within my right to take him out of here as I feel he poses a danger.”

“Had I been a danger to you, I’d not be here on the floor, I’d have killed Flamespirit the instant I knew where your camp was located. Instead I protected him from the storm.” The blond replied in a tone sharp as a well honed blade.

“Then who are you?”

“I told you, I’m no one.”

“Bring him, Jagged,” the chief told his swordbrother.

“If you have any value for your swordbrother you will retract that order, Stonefist,” Flamespirit’s voice was calm and cold like the stones all around them. “I

have deferred to you as chief since I was a child. You stood in place of father to me yet you neither conferred clan marks on me nor looked for a suitable swordbrother for me. When my sister was taken by the city in her need to be near water you did nothing, therefore that is my whole debt to you and your clan. Nothing.”

He could have said much more, told how being made to feel like he was there on sufferance had both wounded him and sapped his confidence in his skills and powers, but that was something he didn't think Stonefist would understand.

“When my patient is strong enough to stand we will both leave, unless you have other thoughts.”

Stonefist took a step closer to Flamespirit. “I did try to find you a swordbrother, but no one wanted you. I even asked among other clans. And now you are a man it is for you to ask, not me. My sons found their own swordbrothers, why can you not do so?”

Jagged still held the stranger to the ground but it seemed as if there was little reason

for his grip, the man's eyes were closed, his breathing that of someone no longer aware of his surroundings.

The chief motioned to Jagged and the man let his captive go. "I do not wish you to go, Flamespirit. And I promise to you the next clan ceremony will see you marked as one of our own." He glanced down at the unconscious man on the floor. "You are responsible for him for the time being. But when he is well I want him brought to me so we may speak to him and learn of him and what business he has here.

"Until then, should he do anything to harm you, or this clan, it will be for you to make recompense for any injury or damage he causes. Do you understand and accept this?"

Jagged gave Flamespirit a sour look. "Think it over carefully, boy. If he is a spy you'll suffer his fate."

He sighed, wondering why he was fighting so hard for a man who was determined to die. "I accept your terms, Stonefist."

Flame let his power die down and the sparks

disappeared from his fingertips. “Might I trouble you to put him back on the bed, Jagged?” His tone was icy with contempt.

He watched as the chief’s swordbrother deposited Storm back on the bed as if handling a sack of tubers, without the care one normally showed an injured human being. Then the two men left his tent and he was able to relax again.

He squatted down and gave life to the firestones, musing over what his chief had said. He now understood why nobody had wanted him as swordbrother. It wasn’t because he was weak it was because of his power. There were other fire warriors among the clan but as far as he knew, no other firemage. They were all afraid of him. Even Stonefist had backed down enough to leave Storm time to heal, had put off making him clan.

The realizations startled him somewhat. He’d always been led to believe he was an adequate warrior but no more, that he was weak. Now he knew he was not. It was a thing to be thought on long and carefully.

While he watched the man on the bed,

Storm's head started to turn from side to side as if he were held in the grip of a nightmare, the rest of his body had gone rigid. A few tears dampened his lashes as an almost inaudible moan slid between the blond's gritted teeth.

He came awake, sitting up with a gasp, a wild, disoriented look in his eyes, face pale as that of a corpse. "No, gods no!" he groaned, looking around in evident confusion. He blinked, every trace of emotion vanishing under a blankness that looked more like the frozen face of a ceremonial mask than that of a human being.

"Why didn't they take me?"

He was startled out of his thoughts by the question. "I wouldn't let them. And as neither of them wanted to end up as ash on the wind they let me have my way, for now."

He rose to his feet and approached the bed. Stormdragon was still suffering from the effects of poison, dehydration and the depletion of his energy. Well he was rested enough now to be able to use the soul ball.

"I'm going to help you to heal. Please

don't fight me on this. I've already pledged myself for you so you owe me the chance to heal you."

"No." The denial was firm, delivered in a harsh tone. "I want nothing more from you."

"Oh do shut up!" He removed the soul ball from its pouch at his waist and held it just above Storm's body. It began to glow with a bright fiery light but as he moved it over certain areas the light dimmed to a dusky red. One area was over Storm's head, the seat of his power, the other over his left leg, the site of the poisoning.

He concentrated on those areas until the soul ball turned from dusky red to dull gold. Then he took a deep breath and put the ball back in its pouch. "Now all you need to do is eat and drink properly for a day or two."

The man turned his head away, but not before he saw the flicker of pain in his eyes. He got to his feet as if testing Flamespirit's abilities. He picked up his swords, his movements careful, showing he was at least aware his limitations.

“I won’t trouble you anymore.”

“You are one stubborn bastard, Storm! You set foot outside this tent and they’ll take you to the chief for questioning which might not be too much fun, as he thinks you’re a spy. Not only that but he’s probably claimed your warcycle by now.”

“And who are you to judge me!” the man snarled, stepping closer to Flame, his stance, his very gaze challenging and unafraid. “You know nothing about me! Nothing!”

Storm stalked toward the doorflap of the tent. “And your chief can return my warcycle or I can kill him. That will be his choice!”

“I know you’re in so much pain that you want to die. So much so that even my soul ball couldn’t completely cure you.” He didn’t add that if Storm attacked Stonefist his life would also be forfeit as he didn’t think the man would care.

Storm’s head lowered, shoulders sagging. Everything about his posture spoke of soul wrenching hurt. “Yes, pain and I are constant companions. But that’s what life is like when

your heart has been torn out. I don't care if I die, it's living that torments me."

He slipped his swords over his shoulders and pushed his way out of the tent, the flap closing behind him.

Flame sighed and followed him out of the tent, knowing he had to stop him from killing Stonefist. He would also have to accept his own punishment and he wondered again why he'd bothered - except that if he hadn't found Storm he would probably have died out in the wind.

Storm halted right outside. There were four men-- two pairs of swordbrothers-- watching him, their faces full of hostility.

"Flamespirit have you realized what a mistake you've made yet?"

"Yes, are you ready to turn him over to Stonefist, or are you going to wait until you have to die with him?" another of the men asked.

They all had the tattoos of warriors on their faces but only one had the tattoos of a swordmage up his arms, and his were in brown and gold to show his power was that of stone, just as Sandrunner's had been.

He doubted the man was the equal of his deceased lover. He'd never met any stone working swordmage who'd had power to match Sandrunner.

Glancing around at the people watching them-- which included other warriors who didn't appear inclined to get involved-- he noticed very few of the warriors bore the patterns of swordmages on their arms. And other than Flamespirit, none had the swirling patterns of a true mage of an element.

Their clan is dying and they don't even realize it. Once the magic is gone they'll be just like the City people, helpless against the elements.

"I want no trouble," Stormdragon said. "I just want my cycle and leave of this place."

"What you want means nothing to us."

He glanced at Flamespirit. "If we ever

meet again, be kind enough to leave me in the sand to die.”

Flamespirit chuckled without humor. “I think it’s too late for that now, don’t you?” He raised his arms, letting all present see the sparks at his fingertips. “Let him go or get burned. You make the choice.”

“Don’t be a fool. Why risk your life for me?” Stormdragon asked. “Let them take me if they think they can.”

Storm stood there waiting for them, ready to draw his swords. He didn’t plan to survive the fight. Finally he could have an honorable death and join Sandrunner in death as he should have months ago. The pain would be gone.

That’s all I want is for the pain to end. Please gods, let it end.

He watched the four men, and instead of courage and determination he saw fear and anxiety in their eyes. They were afraid of Flamespirit, and their nervous glances told Storm that they feared him too.

It’s our magic. That’s what they fear.

“Listen to him Flamespirit. What is he to you? Besides, haven’t you heard that our chief is asking around for a swordbrother for you?” the first man who’d spoken questioned.

“Your chief, not mine,” the fool said, “I’m not clan, remember? As for a swordbrother, well they’re hardly queuing up for me are they? Which tells me that either nobody wants me or they’re all afraid of me, which is it, Rocktwister?”

Still trying to defend and protect me, even if it costs him his place among these people. Such as it is, Storm thought wryly. Yes he’s a fool, but a courageous one. I’d bet none of these men would stand against their chief over a blood debt.

Honorless bunch. They’ve made a pariah out of one of their most magically gifted people because they’re afraid of the very thing that makes a clan strong. Too bad I’m clanless or I’d take him to my own people. They’d welcome such a powerful mage with joy.

“No one fears you, Flamespirit. And if you wonder why you’re not clan and have no

swordbrother maybe you should look to your behavior,” Rocktwister retorted. “Defiance of the clan chief isn’t a good recommendation and you’ve never been able to follow the laws.”

Storm could see the lie in the man’s eyes. He was terrified of Flamespirit. Feared him the way no true warrior should fear one of their own clanspeople. If they feared his power so much, what would they do in a war with a powerful clan? Run and hide like frightened children the instant someone displayed their power?

The man who’d rescued him was living on the edge of these people much as he’d been existing at the fringes of his own people for most of the past year. He was caught between more than his own problems, and this Stone clan. By being the one to bring him here, Flamespirit had put his own life in jeopardy.

He really is a fool. But an admirable one.

“Whatever quarrels you have, leave me out of them. He saved my life, I saved his. And now I just want to leave. That’s it.”

“And whether you leave or not is up to our chief,” Rocktwister stated. “You can come with us peacefully or we can kill you and drag your bloody remains to him.”

“Very sure of yourself, aren’t you?” Storm asked, his gaze taking in the loudmouth and his silent cronies.

“Well which is it, do we kill you or will you come with us?” Rocktwister questioned, his courage bolstered by the group of warriors closing in to watch the confrontation. “Of course we’re going to need those swords.”

Well this is no less than I expected with strangers. Not really. Now do I fight, or do I let them take my swords and torture me to death while they try to make me confess to being a spy for someone? Idiots. They think themselves worth spying on but they look to be too poor to bother raiding if their tents and clothing are any indication. Our clan’s slaves were better dressed than these warriors.

Storm considered his limited options. If he fought it would mean killing at least one of them. The thought of being taken without a fight was abhorrent because he couldn’t help

thinking how disgusted with him Sandrunner would be if he surrendered to death at their hands.

“You seem to think you’ll be the winner in this conflict. Odd really since I can see the fear in your eyes.”

“Rocktwister’s a rock swordmage which is why he’s such a loudmouth and a bully,” Flame told him before turning to Rocktwister. “Just let him go. He’ll go to Stonefist for his warcycle anyway.”

The man called Rocktwister smiled, the expression nasty. “You’ve always chosen your friends from among the wrong people, Flamespirit. Don’t concern yourself over him. He won’t live much longer.”

Tired of the conversation Storm looked around and chose a direction, heading toward the center of the camp where-- if the usual layout held true-- he’d find their chief’s dwelling.

He hadn’t taken three steps before the quartet of men rushed at him. He spun, drawing both his swords. He wasn’t at his

best, but he thought even with his magic at less than full power and his body weakened he had a good chance to take down at least three of them, if not the whole group.

The sparks flew from Flamespirit's fingers and created a wall of fire between him and the four warriors. Nobody looked more surprised than the fire mage himself.

Stormdragon didn't know why the other man was so intent on getting in his good graces-- if that was what he was trying to do-- not that it was working. He took the offered opportunity, spun on his toes and hurried in the direction he hoped the chief's tent had been set up.

Behind him he heard the clash of blades and spun around, stopping to see that the entire foursome had attacked the red-haired man rather than coming after him as he'd expected. More proof that they had little use for the man who was probably the most powerful mage in their clan.

But Flamespirit had given them an excuse to kill him and rid their people of the man who'd never been part of the clan.

The firemage had chosen to save his life when he hadn't wanted to be saved. And now he'd chosen to fight for him when only a fool would have gotten involved.

Storm sighed. The blood debt remained whether he wanted it or not, it was there.

He turned around and raced back, swords drawn, arriving in time to block the sword from Rocktwister as it sought to kill Flamespirit, the firemage barely able to hold off all four men.

“You wanted a fight, well now you have one,” he snarled at Rocktwister as blue the mist of the wind wreathed both his swords.

Stormdragon met Rocktwister's blade with the whirling twin blades he carried, the rock talent swordmage forced backward under the ferocity of his attack.

More spectators were gathering, women and children joining the warriors already present. Drawn by the sound of the fighting, they surrounded the conflict, some calling jeers at Flamespirit, others cheering on Rocktwister and his friends.

Stormdragon met every one of Rocktwister's attacks easily enough, sparks and magical energies erupting around them in showers of sand, chips of stone and gusts of wind that battered Rocktwister and his swordbrother with the power of striking fists. They'd both been knocked off their feet more than once, the fear that had driven their sword arms turning to anger.

Neither emotion was good for a swordsman's concentration.

Stormdragon, mind blank, calm and unemotional, moved with the two men seeking to kill him. He bled from a few shallow gashes from exploding rock bits that erupted from Rocktwister's sword, but other than that the man had done him no harm.

The two men, Rocktwister and his swordbrother, circled him, wary of his power and his swords. They were both bleeding from cuts on their arms and chests. Rocktwister's swordbrother limped from a gash in his thigh.

Flamespirit was fighting two other men, one of the original four and a new contender

who'd joined when one of the original two dropped to the ground clutching a badly burned hand and whimpering quietly.

His sword wreathed in the red energy of his power, he thrust and parried the two older men's blows like one born to the art of war. There was no anger or desperation that Storm could see, just an implacable will.

Stormdragon drove Rocktwister into retreat with a flurry of sword blows and strong gusts of wind, his swordbrother retreating with him. Rocktwister used his power to armor himself, the sand beneath their feet flowing up to cover his body. But Storm's paired swords struck Rocktwister, knocking him down and shattering the magic protecting him. The shell of armor he'd formed shattered, falling away as nothing but sand.

He raised his blades for the killing blow, but a shouted, "Halt!" stopped him. He recognized the voice as that of the Stone Clan chief. Gasping for breath, Storm found he was swaying on his feet, the power surrounding his swords so dim it could hardly be seen. Body ready to give out, he turned to face the

new threat.

The older man was approaching at a fast walk, the man named Jagged right on his heels.

He saw motion from the corner of his eye and dodged, both his blades moving, blue flame rising on the blades to spin off his swords. They stopped Rocktwister's blade, shattering it with a sharp crack like thunder.

Flamespirit's sword had disarmed and burned a second opponent and the third was backing away as the chief arrived.

Stonefist approached and scowled at the three disarmed men on the ground. "Who told you to draw blade?"

Storm turned his gaze from Flamespirit to their chief and noted the anger clearly visible on the man's face.

So they didn't have his order to attack me. Interesting. I wonder why they took it upon themselves to try and kill me if that wasn't his command to them?

All three men looked toward Rocktwister

just as that man drew a blade and hurled it at Storm. Faster than the wind itself he caught the blade between his fingers, his eyes narrowing. “You attack me from behind twice? You’re not worthy of the warrior’s marks on your face.” He kicked dust toward the man to show his contempt. “Honorless cur!”

Stonefist snarled at the four men. “Your orders were to report to me when our - guest was fit enough to answer my questions. As for you Rocktwister, he’s right, you’re not worthy. You have brought disgrace upon your clan this day.”

Storm’s magic failed and he swayed on his feet, almost falling. Weariness like the weight of a rock fall descended on his shoulders. The fight might not be over, but his magic was at an end. He took a few wary steps away from Rocktwister. His legs failed him and he dropped to one knee. Worse than the weakness was the wave of dizzy nausea that swept over him, cold sweat bursting out on his skin.

Up. Get up. Don’t let them see you this

way. They'll make a slave of you. Get up.

But his body refused to respond to his mind's desperate urgings.

He felt hands on him, lifted his head and saw the chief's swordbrother. He was hauled roughly to his feet, fingers digging into his flesh. Deliberately causing pain. Somehow he managed to break away, bring his swords up, ready to fight, but his legs were shaking, threatening to dump him to the ground.

Something sharp rammed home in his back and a soft gasp of shock slipped from his parted lips. He went down, gasping, spitting blood, his swords washed in dust. He coughed, blinked and stared at the drops of blood that spattered the sand. A smile curled his lips. "Looks like I won after all," he said as more blood dripped from his mouth.

There was an inarticulate cry from the fire mage just as the chief said, "Flame, get rid of that cowardly pile of offal for me."

Intense heat bloomed and Rocktwister screamed, just once, before he was reduced to a pile of sticky ashes.

The other three men had the good sense to keep still and silent although his swordbrother began to sob.

The sound of bitter grief brought a moan of echoing pain from Storm as he sagged to the dirt, blood running from his mouth, his arms no longer able to support him. “Sandrunner... be with you... soon...”

He coughed, struggling to draw a breath, blood pouring from his lips as the swordbrother of the chief knelt down beside him. He gasped in pain as the knife was yanked from between his shoulders, the blade twisting as it came free, the damage made worse.

“Such... kindness...” Storm gasped.

The man rolled him over onto his back, and he stared up at the sky which was turning the soft blue of mid-afternoon, the dust of the blackstorm already clearing.

Such a beautiful sky. The same color it was when Sandrunner died. How appropriate.

“Who are you?”

“Stormdragon Dragonson...” he replied,

blood running from his mouth down his chin. “Swordbrother to Sandrunner Stonedance who I will join now.” His breaths were coming in harsh gasps, bloody froth forming on his lips. He grinned. This was how he should have died there beside his swordbrother. His lover. It felt right, this dying.

The chief’s eyes widened. “You are of the Dragon Clan?” He turned to the fire mage. “Keep him alive, Flame, that’s the last clan we want to offend!”

“No...” Storm gurgled. Everything was going dark at the edge of his vision. He lost his ability to speak, only dimly aware of hands on him.

Flame’s voice said, “Turn him over, and let me close the wound.” There was the soft warm touch of the soul ball again.

“Can you save him?” The chief sounded nervous.

“I make no promises.” There was a frigid coldness in the fire mage’s voice that Storm had never heard in it before.

His awareness of things happening to

him faded in and out. He felt the healing flow of magic into him, but it didn't matter. Storm knew he was dying because this time Sandrunner had come for him.

He smiled, reaching for the man he loved who stood over him. His physical arms didn't move, but the arms of his spirit body reached out to the dead man. I knew you'd come for me, his mind said because his body would no longer respond. I've missed you, Sandrunner.

The larger man crouched down until he could see his face. It was sad. What are you trying to do to yourself, Storm? There's no place for you here yet, perhaps not ever and I want you to live.

He shook his head, at least he thought he did. No, not without you. I... can't... I can't... Tears flooded his eyes. Please Sandrunner, please take me with you. He reached for his lover, spirit arms winding round the dead man. He wasn't even aware he'd stopped breathing, or that a slow trickle of blood oozed from his slack mouth.

There was the lightest of touches to his

cheek, cold as the grave. I'm sorry, Storm. I have to move on to my next life and you have to find your happiness here in the one you have. I promise you will find it and never regret it. You have a long and interesting future. There was a tender smile on Sandrunner's dark features as he added, And you have already met the one you will share it with.

No... I don't want anyone else... I... I love you Sandrunner. I love you. He'd said it. Said it to a dead man just as he'd whispered to the man before he'd kissed his bloody lips that day Sandrunner had died. Kissed lips that hadn't kissed in return. And now he was saying it to a ghost.

Storm grabbed Sandrunner, his hands closing on soft leather and furs. He pressed his lips to the ghost's, desperate, pleading. Please... take me with you. Gods don't do this, don't leave me. Don't leave me! When he blinked it wasn't Sandrunner he had hold of, it was the fire mage.

Blood smeared Flamespirit's mouth.

Chapter Three

Cautious Promises

Flame watched over Storm as he tossed and moaned in fever. He'd healed the wound and cleaned off the blood but had been unable to stop the infection completely thanks to Jagged's unnecessary cruelty. Even so, Storm was out of real danger now.

He huddled over the firestones and tried to come to terms with what had happened when the blond had been wounded. Storm had obviously seen him as the ghost of a lost love when he had kissed him so desperately.

And he couldn't get the memory or the taste of that bloodstained kiss out of his mind.

You're a fool! You think he's going to look twice at you? Why should he want you when nobody else does?

No he had to remember that Storm had been seeing someone else, not him, when he'd set his mouth to Flame's in that frantic kiss.

A kiss he could still feel tingling on his

lips.

He stood up and crossed the tent to the bed to check on his charge. He was the son of the Dragonclan's chief and Flame just had to feel this way about him. And to make matters even worse the man had a death wish.

He turned away not prepared to punish himself more than he had too with the sight of naked skin, the tawny gold of a lion's pelt, and that handsome face.

Fool!

A soft moan came from his patient followed by the susurrations of warm furs sliding to the ground.

Sighing quietly he turned towards the bed again. He picked the furs up off the floor and covered Storm once more, biting his lip at the sight of the long, lean body spread out on the bed.

The man's aqua and gold eyes opened and he pushed at the covers. "Too hot," he mumbled, which was followed by, "hot and thirsty."

Flame sat on the bed and eased Storm into a sitting position before holding the water skin to his lips. “Drink,” he commanded gruffly, trying not to think about the sensual curve of those lips and how they felt on his mouth.

Storm drank, finally pushing at the waterskin when he’d had enough. His gaze focused on Flamespirit and for the first time in many hours he appeared aware of his surroundings. “You saved me again.”

The blond looked away, eyes on the furs covering him he said, “Sandrunner didn’t want me to join him, and I now owe you my life once more. I pay my debts, so name your price. Whatever you want of me is yours.”

Flame removed the water skin, placing it back on its stand. “All I want is for you to be well and strong again, nothing more. Your warcycle and all your belongings are safe now so just rest and recover.”

And he really should lower the other man again, not sit here holding him like a love struck idiot.

“You fight well, and your magic is powerful,

Flamespirit. Men in my clan would fight to be your swordbrother.” Storm was losing his battle to remain lucid if the abrupt dulling of his startling eyes was any indication. His blond head lolled, falling against Flame’s shoulder as the sickness reasserted its hold on the windmage. “So tired,” he murmured sounding half asleep. He made an odd sound, a strangled noise that might have been a chuckle of macabre humor. “Sandrunner must be right. Feels good to be held by you. I missed that after he died.”

What is that all about? He wants me to hold him? Why this sudden change?

“Flame, just call me Flame.” He chuckled softly. “Here they fight not to be my swordbrother. For so long I couldn’t understand why. Now I do.”

But he was talking to a man who needed rest more than words although he didn’t move away. A small voice was telling him to hold on while he could, until the inevitable day when Stormdragon would push him away.

“They’re idiots for not wanting someone of power.” Storm murmured, words slurred

as his mind floated toward the greyness of sleep. His body relaxed in Flame's hold. "Dragonclan values power, and healers... and a swordbrother's love."

Flame cursed fate for having let him be born into the wrong clan before he realised that it wouldn't help him. Once he'd got the blond man well again and safely away from the camp he would leave himself. He had no clue where he would go or what he would do but he wouldn't stay among people who feared him so much they'd refused to mark him as theirs.

"Must be a good clan to be part of," he murmured, not wanting to stop Storm from sleeping if that's what he needed to do.

Storm laughed the sound rife with bitterness as was his voice when he spoke, "My brother's an ass, but most of the people are good."

The blond squirmed, made an annoyed noise, pushing at Flame with one hand. "Want to lie down."

"All right, let me help you." Flame moved

position so he was still supporting Storm but could lower him back to the bed. “Keep the covers on, it’s cold today.” He pulled the furs back over his charge.

“I’ll be just over there if you need anything.” He pointed to the fire pit with its pile of glowing stones. “I’m making some soup which should be easy for you to eat when you’re ready.”

And I’m babbling like a little girl!

A strong hand closed around his wrist, keeping him from moving away. “Stay.” The tone wasn’t a gentle request, it came out with the sharp crack of an order given by a man used to being obeyed.

He stayed perforce sitting on the edge of the raised bed and trying not to disturb the other man too much by doing so.

Storm turned onto his side, his body curling around Flame where he sat on the bed, one arm draped over Flame’s thighs. “It’s cold,” the man complained, words thick with encroaching sleep.

Flame adjusted the furs on the bed so they

were covering Storm once again. He was smiling to himself as he wondered just how long it would be before they were pushed off yet again.

It had been almost like a game between them these last three days. Storm would push the furs off as the fever made him too hot then shiver until Flame covered him again.

Storm's breathing slowed as he fell into a deep sleep.

Once assured Storm was asleep, he gently removed the arm from his thighs and went to stand up so he could return to his soup making.

The arm slipped around him, held him there. "Stay."

"I'm not some damned cur," Flame said sharply before a lifetime of obeying reasserted itself and sighing slightly he did as he was told. If the soup started to cook too quickly he could control the heat from here.

He found he needed to know something. "Why?"

The drowsiness faded from Storm's eyes which went icy with anger. "If you were a cur I'd not be speaking to you at all," he snarled out and withdrew his arm. "Forget I asked for you to stay here and I'll forget what Sandrunner told me. He was obviously wrong about you!"

Fighting the impulse to punch the stubborn man, Flame made himself stay, missing the feel of the other man's arm. He closed his eyes, reminding himself that Storm was a guest in his tent and still suffering from fever. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I'll stay if you still want me to."

Storm grunted, but whether it was an acknowledgement of his apology or an acceptance of his offer to stay Flame didn't know. The arm did slip back around him, and the blond curled around him the way a lonely child or a puppy might.

"Sandrunner was never wrong. Never."

"Is Sandrunner who you were seeing when - when you collapsed?" He couldn't blurt out when you kissed me, he just couldn't.

“He told me there was no place for me in death with him, that...” the man’s voice broke, and he held tighter to Flame. “I miss him. Gods I miss him so much...” the words were sobbed out, Storm’s face pressed into the furs muffling the sound of his misery.

Flame felt the pain cut across his empathic abilities like a sharp blade but he wasn’t certain how to proceed. The man hurting so badly had been cold and aloof towards him, offering nothing and wanting nothing in return. And yet hadn’t he shared the dustdelver and protected Flame from the wind?

Such an enigma and he had no way of solving it, so he did what he did best, he healed, or tried to. This time instead of physical injury he attempted to ease the emotional pain by running his hand over the man’s braids. He wasn’t sure if this would be effective or if he could do it at all.

After a short time the man’s crying stopped, his breathing returned to the gentle rhythm of exhausted slumber. A muscular arm still encircled Flame’s waist.

Flame shifted about without disturbing

Storm until he got into a more comfortable position. He was still tired from all the healing he'd given the other man and the battle magic he'd used against Rocktwister and his friends. Finally he closed his eyes relaxing into slumber.

The man beside him moved in his sleep, the arm around him pulling Flame closer, the blond nestling against him. Something very hard was pressed to his hip, Storm making faint sounds that could have been cries of pain, but weren't.

Flame's eyes shot open in shocked surprise. He knew enough about the mysteries of sex to know vaguely what was happening. Storm was probably dreaming about his dead lover and it had gotten him - excited.

So what should I do now? Should I keep still and pretend it isn't happening? Should I respond in some way? Should I be angry, disgusted, what?

The arm around him tightened, the man snuggling close, that hardness throbbing against his hip, a soft, breathy sigh tickling through Flame's hair. Storm murmured

something Flame couldn't quite understand, but he did catch his own name amid the mumbled sounds.

And to his horror his body responded.

Now what do I do?

Storm made another soft sound in his ear.

He turned his head slightly, trying to stop the distracting warm breath across the sensitive part of his ear and was immediately faced with that sensual mouth. Wondering if he was going to die in the very near future he gave into impulse and pressed his lips to it.

Aqua eyes flew open, a soft gasp filling Flame's mouth. Storm froze under the touch of Flame's lips, neither responding to nor fighting the kiss.

Flame pulled away in a hurry. "I'm sorry I . . ."

Storm just lay there staring at him for what felt like a lifetime then he caressed Flame's face with the back of his fingers, brushing along the line of his cheek, running his thumb over his lips. "Don't be sorry if you

meant to do it. And never apologize for doing something that you wanted to do.”

The blond appeared to be thinking something over, then he rose up to press his mouth to Flame’s in a gentle kiss.

“I suppose I could do worse than you, but I don’t think I could do better.”

The man had to be delirious, Flame decided, certain he couldn’t be lucid if he thought he couldn’t do better than him. He was nothing, not even clan. But he did love the feel of those lips on his own so he didn’t argue at all. Instead he kissed Storm again, hoping it was pleasing, but knowing he had no experience of such things, even as old as he was.

Storm’s arms slid around him, pulling him down, laying him on his back, the blond kissing him, tongue tip touching his lips, thrusting gently, the other man half on top of him, his weight pressing Flame into the soft furs.

Flame was perplexed and yet deeply excited at the same time. Perplexed as he didn’t know what was expected of him and

excited because he wanted something to happen between them. He just wished he knew what it was.

Finally realising what it was that Storm's tongue was demanding of him he parted his lips allowing entry. And oh, but it was a delicious taste that he received as Storm's tongue delved into his mouth, the blond's arms tightening, a soft moan vibrating in his throat as Storm vocalized his enjoyment.

Storm broke the kiss, gasping for breath, his eyes warmed by emotion, the hardness of his erect cock throbbing against Flame's thigh. "Why does this feel right with you?" he asked softly, his expression full of confusion.

But he couldn't give Storm any answers, being so new to all of this. One thing he did know instinctively though. "I think I've been waiting for you." And there was wonder in that and he felt his power respond.

"Maybe you have been," Storm murmured as he kissed Flame again, his lips touching Flame's gently. Storm kissed his way along the line of Flame's jaw, following it to the curve of his ear, warm breath heating the

firemage's skin.

He gasped aloud at the erotic sensations of moist, soft lips on his skin, the added pleasure of warm breath heightening the feelings, making them almost unbearably good. His loins ached, his cock pressing against the leather of his pants, his balls tight. Almost pain and unspeakable pleasure, and he craved more.

Hands sought and undid the fastenings of Flame's garments, found the bare skin underneath, the feverish warmth of Storm's fingers as they touched his body a reminder of how close to death the man had come, and how ill he still was.

Flame knew he should stop this, knew that Storm was still weak but the gods help him he wanted this too badly to be able stop anything now. Reminding himself that he could mend any damage after the event he let Storm continue to do as he pleased with his body. A body that suddenly felt restricted by his clothing.

Desire burned inside him for the first time since Sandrunner had died. Desire for the wild firemage lying beneath him on the piled furs of the man's own bed. A bed that smelled of Flame, a spicy musk that he'd been breathing in for several days if his guess at how long he'd lain weak and near death was correct.

He still felt shaky. Weak from blood loss and illness. But he didn't care. Not when his body had awakened, become alive because of the nearness of this strange man. He touched Flame's cheek, marveling at the creamy perfection of his skin. So pale, unlike anyone he'd ever seen. By contrast he looked much darker. With Sandrunner he'd been the light one, his warm honey-gold skin paler than his swordbrother's by many shades.

Just the way Flamespirit was so much lighter than him.

He pressed his face into the fire-colored hair, breathing in the man's distinctive scent, tasting the skin of his neck, savoring the salty flavor of his flesh. Kissing him the way he'd once kissed Sandrunner, the only lover he'd

ever known.

Alive. He felt alive for the first time in many long, lonely months. Months bound by the hurt of a wounded heart, a life hollow and empty of meaning, a soul crying for the missing part of itself. A part that would never come back.

Sandrunner, did you bring me here to this man? Was it you that led me into the wasteland to find life instead of the death I sought?

He recalled the ghost of his lover speaking to him and it gave him a sense of peace to know that the man he'd called swordbrother wanted him to live and had led him to his new lover as if blessing the new bond they would form.

He kissed the soft skin of Flame's throat, pushing furs and leather aside to reveal flawless skin of his upper chest, kissing his way down, finding a pale nipple and suckling on it.

Flame groaned out his pleasure at the touches, his slender body arching into them.

Storm paused, rising up to gaze at Flame. Some of the things Flame had said drifted through his mind like a dust fall after a blackstorm. “You’ve never had a lover have you?”

The pale skin on Flames cheeks glowed to the color of fire. “No,” he whispered, “I have no experience, no skill to offer you.”

Storm sat up, caressed the heated cheek, the touch gentle. “You have the skills of a firemage and a healer, so you come to me with a great deal to offer, Flamespirit.” He ran his hand down the man’s throat, trailing his fingers along the exposed portion of his chest. “You are also very beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” Flame repeated the word as if he didn’t understand it, had never heard it before. Then he smiled. “Your mouth, it’s the most perfect thing I’ve ever seen.” The expression died. “But I don’t know what to do, how to please you and I want to please you.”

“Have you never enjoyed the touch of your own hand?” Storm asked, his hand caressing the man’s chest feeling the hard muscle

beneath the very soft skin.

Flame made an appreciative sound before saying, “That, well yes, of course, it was all I had. Why?”

“Well don’t you think what you do for yourself would also please me?” Storm asked and took Flame’s hand in his. He brought it to his lips kissed it, palm and then each slender but strong finger. Done, he guided Flame’s hand to his aching cock, urging the fingers to grasp the sensitive flesh.

Flame smiled, nodded and ran his hand gently up and down the length of Storm’s cock applying just the right amount of pressure.

Storm groaned and shivered at the feel of that firm hand wrapped around his cock.

Being touched by another man after so long alone with nothing but bittersweet memories of making love, of dreams that tormented him drew a shuddering moan from Storm. It felt so good. So right. And it felt so very intense that he reached for Flame’s clothes, wanting to see all of the man he planned to teach the ways of love.

That he planned to make his the way he'd belonged to Sandrunner. The way Sandrunner had belonged to him.

He was doing this, preparing to make love with another man, a man who wasn't Sandrunner, the only lover he'd ever known.

And it felt right because in his heart he knew it was what his dead lover wanted.

'And you have already met the one you will share it with.' He might have been on the verge of death, but he remembered those words.

"That feels good, Flame." He kissed the red-haired man's chest, flicked the tip of his tongue over the nub of his nipple, his hands untying the furs covering his chest.

Flame groaned at the touch but kept gently pumping Storm's cock. "Don't weaken yourself too much Storm. You still need to rest."

"I'll manage what I have planned," Storm replied. He didn't intend to try and make love. His body wasn't ready for that much exertion and he knew it, could feel the heat of

the fever lingering inside his body.

But there was more to the heat raging inside him than the effects of a fever. He was in lust with the sleek red-haired man. The sight of the pale body enflamed him with desire.

He kissed his way down the rippling muscles of Flame's belly, dipping his tongue into the man's navel, tasting, teasing as he started to unlace the closure of Flame's leather pants. He could feel the hard rod of the man's cock, smiled at the length of it. If it was as well formed as the rest of the firemage he was going to enjoy their love making a great deal.

I'm really doing this. I'm really planning to show Flame how to make love. I'm really going to make him my lover. But is it what he wants? Will he want to stay with me or is he just taking advantage of what I'm offering without understanding what it means?

He stopped kissing the soft skin, moved his hands away from Flamespirit's groin, removed the hand Flame had around his erection.

“I...” he struggled for a way to explain this, a way to let Flame know they weren’t just having a bit of quick fun.

Flame cried out and looked almost ready to weep. “Don’t I please you? I’m sorry but I don’t know how. Please - even if you only want my body for a while that’s fine. I won’t try to keep you against your will. Just while you’re here - you help drive away the loneliness.”

That plea hit him hard, as did the desperation underlying the man’s words. Loneliness. He understood that very well.

I don’t even have a clan to offer him. How could I forget that?

Storm shook his head. “It’s not that, Flame. It’s not that at all.” He lay down beside the other man, his hand resting on Flame’s chest. “I’m as clanless as you are. I won’t make any excuses, but it’s the truth. And--” he ran his hand over the soft skin, shivering at the feel of it under his palm. “I don’t think I can be happy with casual sex. Clanless as I am, it’s not right for me to ask you to become my swordbrother.”

Flame shifted nearer, running his hand down Storm's chest in return. "You said it yourself, I'm clanless too. All I have to offer is my power, what is in this tent and on my workbike. I would be honored to become your swordbrother, you are so much more than I ever expected or deserve."

The other man's touch was so good it sent a shiver through Storm, his erection twitching. They were talking, but his cock wanted something other than words. It wanted action. Storm ignored it. They needed to talk a few things out first.

"No, Flame that's not true. You're the ideal of any man from my clan. You're a firemage and healer. Individually those are rare in any clan. Men with those powers are valued greatly by every man among my people. You're both. Do you know how very unusual someone of such talents is among any clan?"

Flame gave a little bark of harsh laughter. "I know I'm considered a freak in this clan!"

He caressed Flame's bright hair, running his fingers through the soft strands. "You're beautiful, so exotic and unusual. But a freak,

no, never. In most clans men would compete for your attention and try to gain you as their swordbrother, not just because of your power but for this too,” he touched Flame’s hair, caressed his face, giving the man a gentle kiss.

Flame’s quick blush appeared again and he stared down at the bedding shaking his head.

Storm sat up, gazed down at the very attractive man in the bed with him. “Your chief said he would grant you their clan marks. That’s not something you should throw away. The life of a clanless man is-- lonely.” He smiled, his expression sad. “But you already know that don’t you?”

“Of course,” Flame mumbled, still not looking at him, “I am a clanless man.”

“I think we should both consider what will happen if we become swordbrothers. Neither of us has a clan, we’d be named as outcasts at the very least. I’m sure you’re very aware how suspicious clanpeople are regarding strangers since your clan seems even more paranoid about it than most. Deep down the clans are a lot alike in some regards. They’re

always worried the stranger they meet is a city spy or a scout from another clan come to find out the weaknesses of your people before they make an attack.”

Flame nodded and finally looked up at him. “I’ve been an outcast all my life even among my own people. They didn’t lift a finger to help my sister and they only come near me if they need healing. Even then they don’t talk or stay longer than they have to. Since my sister followed the call of water seven years ago, I have been alone. I would rather be outcast with someone I trusted by my side than alone amongst a clan that hates and fears me.”

“I know that sentiment all too well, at least of late,” Storm replied, his words carrying the bitterness that remained over the circumstances that set him apart from the clan of his birth and left him alone in the world. “I was allowed to live with my people, but I was no longer part of them, except to a very few who knew my brother for a liar even when my own father did not.”

Flame squeezed his hand. “Then we neither

of us have reason to stay with our clans.”

Storm closed his eyes, thinking about Sandrunner and wondering if he was doing the right thing for Flamespirit or himself. But in his heart he knew he wanted Flamespirit too much to let him go. He was convinced that Sandrunner had brought them together-- somehow.

“If you are willing, then when I leave I’ll ask you to come with me. I’ve had enough of seeking after death. Sandrunner wants me to live and I want a new chance at life. With you if you’ll have me.” He bent down and set his lips to Flame’s, kissing the man tenderly, sealing the offer with the touch.

Flame returned the kiss for a moment, his lips parted, before he broke away. “Then the sooner you get well, the sooner we can both make our own life,” he said with an air of determination.

“But I will say this,” the fire mage continued, “No matter what may happen, I will never regret this chance.

“And you trust my word, the word of a

man you do not know so easily?” Storm gave a bark of harsh laughter, “For all you know I could be a slave hunter for the City.”

“No.” Flame’s tone was certain. “If you had been a slave hunter you would have taken me in that cave. And the time spent in that cave is why I know I can trust you. I slept, Storm. Something I could not have done if you meant me ill. I can read peoples intent, their emotions, which is why I know this clan of mine both hate and fear me.”

Storm thought that over. If it was true that Flamespirit was an empath-- and if it wasn't why would he say so?-- then it might explain why Flamespirit had performed some of the actions he'd taken in the last few days. Protecting him from the Stone Clan for instance. He knew these people for what they were, perhaps he sensed in him a different sort of person. One he could place his trust in and perhaps learn to love? Stormdragon hoped that was the case, because he realized he was already half in love with the mage with the hair to match his power.

“So you know they’ve never liked you.

Do they know you have that ability?” Storm questioned.

Flame’s eyes widened. “And give them even more reason for their fear and hatred? No, they don’t know.”

Sandrunner was an empath too, a powerful one and he loved me.

Empaths were terribly rare among the clans, and those able to communicate directly into the minds of others were almost unknown among the clans, though the legends of such people persisted. Even rarer than firemages, those people with such mind based abilities. But it wasn’t just legend. He knew that. Had experienced something close to the legendary power.

And Flamespirit was an empath, a skilled healer and a firemage too. Men with so many powers were unheard of. But so were people with such strange coloration. He’d never seen anyone with skin as pale as Flame’s. He’d seen one man with hair of a reddish shade but it hadn’t been anything close to the outrageous hue of the firemage’s hair.

The reply was nothing less than Storm had expected. “You’re a man of exceptional power, Flamespirit. Do you realize that?”

The fire mage shrugged. “It’s just seemed natural to me, what I am. And I can feel the power in you. You are just as strong if not stronger than I.”

Storm caressed the lean body, fingers running down the rippling chest and belly of the man who would be his swordbrother soon, perhaps in a matter of days if he recovered his strength enough to form the bond. “Yes, that’s true,” he admitted without any sense of pride. He’d been born that way in a clan where power wasn’t as rare as it had become in the Stone Clan.

He leaned closer, kissed Flame, his lips claiming the other man’s mouth in a slow kiss.

Storm was convinced that he hadn’t imagined speaking with Sandrunner. That his lover had come to him from the land of death to speak with him, to let him know that his place was here, with Flamespirit. That he was needed here, in the land of the living to give

Flamespirit something he'd never known. Friendship. And love.

Power draws power. That was why Sandrunner had never felt interest in anyone until I'd come along. And that's why, since he died, I've felt nothing for anyone either. I need someone like he was, and I am, someone of power.

He broke the kiss, looked into the warm brown of Flame's eyes.

"My swordbrother, Sandrunner was a gifted empath. He could even pick up on thoughts sometimes if he knew the person well enough."

"If that is what it is called then yes, that's what I am." Flame shrugged. "I don't hear thoughts though. At least not anymore." A look of deep sadness crossed his features. "My sister and I used to be able to pick up each other's thoughts."

Storm couldn't control his surprise. "Really? Then you were very close?"

"We were all each other had. The Stone Clan treated her as they treated me except

when they wanted water finding.” Flame’s words were bitter. “Our parents must have died when we were very young for I only remember the women giving us scraps until we were old enough to fend for ourselves.” He gazed into the distance as if at a memory. “She was sweet and beautiful and I still miss her.”

Emotion burned in Storm’s heart, the desire to protect, to comfort, to ease the man’s pain was strong. He pulled Flame into his embrace and held him tight, kissing his lips and face as if that could end the other man’s pain. “I’m sorry she’s gone,” he murmured.

Flame gave him a shaky smile. “Me too,” he said, “but we’ve both suffered unbearable loss. Your swordbrother must have been very special too.”

“Sandrunner was a man of very... intense power,” Storm explained, “he and I were as close as two men can be. Sometimes, late at night when our bodies were weary and sleep crept close to our minds we could speak without words.” Talking awakened memories of lying in bed late at night with

his arms round his lover, the two of them drifting in the greyness of mental twilight their thoughts intertwined in wordless communion. A love so strong they'd known they would never take wives, never end their lives as swordbrothers.

A love so strong he'd thought words weren't needed. Only when it was too late did he realize how wrong he had been, the guilt lying heavy as stone in his heart.

Death had taken from them what only time would have otherwise stolen: the life they would have lived together into old age.

I suppose the words weren't important, he already knew how much I loved him.

The past was done. Sandrunner had given him this equally intense and beautiful man as a reason to live and live he would.

“Until I am able to leave, carefully consider the negative aspects of a life with me, Flame. I know you have no reason to stay among the Stone Clan, but there are many clans who would welcome a man like you with great joy. I have nothing to offer you but my cycle

and a broken heart.” He kissed Flame gently again, and said, “And I’m not sure I will ever fully mend from the loss, though you have made me feel alive for the first time in--” he looked away from Flame, his gaze focused on the past, “a long time.”

“Your swordbrother must have been a very special man,” Flame said quietly and with sadness in his eyes. “Which is why I’m doubly honored that you should even consider me.”

“Don’t speak about yourself like that. You’re very deserving of a swordbrother. Only idiots like the men from this clan of fools would think you unworthy.”

Flame’s quick blush colored his cheeks once again and he shook his head. “I agree that Stonefist is a fool but some can see the problems.”

“Well then they should speak out,” Storm remarked, then thought about the way his own people had fallen silent, unwilling to defend him against his brother’s lies. “But most people keep their silence when the chief speaks, so these people aren’t unique in that regard.”

The time had arrived to ease the tension in their bodies now that the tension of Storm's mind-- and his concern that Flame might not fully understand the implication of becoming his swordbrother-- had been dealt with. He finished unlacing the front of Flame's leather pants and eased the hard flesh free from imprisonment.

"Just as I'd suspected, you're beautiful everywhere," he remarked and took the firm cock into his mouth, running his tongue over the head in a gentle stroking motion.

A loud gasp from Flame told him how much the firemage was enjoying that.

Storm grasped the root of Flame's erection and started to stroke the whole thing slowly, his mouth laving the head of the man's cock, sucking and savoring the flavor of the firemage's precum. Flame was sweet, salty, with a sharp almost spicy tang, the taste of power flavoring the fluids of his body.

It had been the same way with Sandrunner, and it was the same with him too, the power of their magic evident in subtle differences in their bodies, including the way they tasted.

Flame gasped and writhed, his breath coming in soft pants interspersed with groans of pleasure. “Oh gods,” he moaned.

Storm licked greedily at the treat in his mouth, the taste so good he knew he wouldn’t stop what he was doing until he’d gained the satisfaction of drinking down Flame’s release.

His hand moved down the shaft, his mouth following for the first time, taking most of Flame’s erection in, his tongue stroking along the ridge on the underside, applying just a bit of pressure.

Flame’s fingers dug into his shoulders before scraping down his back. “Storm, please, stop - going to - agh!”

Storm swallowed eagerly, tasting the magic in the man’s semen, shivering at the power he could sense, the tiny caress of Flame’s energies reaching out to his, lighting sparks inside his mind. He groaned, shuddering at the tug of magic, at the power trying to wind around both of them, attempting to forge a bond between them.

Flame writhed as the power of the orgasm claimed him, Storm sucking every warm spurt of fluid, relishing the taste until the bucking of flame's hips stopped, the man going quiet except for his gasping breaths.

Sitting up, Storm blinked as the interior of the tent spun in his vision, the tiny push on his own power taxing his body, the illness reasserting itself on him as if seeking vengeance that he'd dared to forget his current poor physical condition.

Dizzy, Storm lay down beside Flame and pulled the other man close, rolling him over so he had his head on Storm's chest. It felt good to have Flame lying in his embrace, Flame's head pillowed on his shoulder. He closed his eyes, relishing the feel of someone in bed beside him, aware too of the man's magic spinning around them both as Flame drifted toward sleep.

You really did lead him to me, didn't you, Sandrunner? You brought him to me so I'd have someone to love the way I loved you. He caressed the bright fire of Flamespirit's hair, drew in his spicy scent and sighed in

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contentment, letting sleep claim him.

Chapter Four

Commitments Made

Flame awoke to the sound of steady breathing and the feel of warm skin against his. Warm, not burning with fever heat, he noted. Storm would be leaving the clan very soon, if not today.

And you'll be going with him.

There could be no doubt of that, not after he'd had to fight to keep his magic under control as Storm had sucked and swallowed down his come. Power calling to power and he could only hope that it didn't get out of hand when they really made love. The thought warmed him but made him nervous too.

He glanced around the tent without disturbing the other man in the bed. He had the sled that was attached to the workbike when the clan moved locations, but he wondered about that. Storm obviously traveled light and might not want him to take more than he could pack on the workbike.

That meant hard choices had to be made on what to take and what to leave. It didn't even cross his mind to stay. Storm now held Flame's heart in his hands to do with as he wished.

He sighed softly. The furs would be a loss. They were warm and costly but bulky. His firestones, the soul ball and his sword and knives were all he really needed to take, all that his power demanded. Tents and furs could be replaced if required.

Decisions made he closed his eyes and snuggled closer to the man by his side.

"Hmm..." the blond mumbled. Lips brushed his in a gentle kiss showing Flame that Storm was awake.

He returned the kiss and rested against the other man. "Your fever appears to have broken."

"Yes, I think you're right. I feel more myself. If my body will obey my mind we'll be leaving today. The less time we're here the better I think."

Storm's arm slid under him and pulled him

close, the man's face pressed into his hair and he heard Storm take a deep, slow breath, very clearly taking in his scent. "Unless you've changed your mind. If you've decided not to go with me I'll understand."

Flame frowned. "The only decision I have made so far this morning is what to leave behind."

Or does he not want me to go with him?

He spoke the words tentative. "Of course if you should want to go without me I'll also understand."

The arm around him tightened. "I want you, Flame," there was a faint quaver in Storm's voice, as if he fought back tears. "I'm just not sure you've considered how hard it is to survive without a clan around you." The man sighed, his tight hold on Flame easing. "I'm sure you remember how you found me, dying and alone in the middle of a blackstorm."

Flame nodded solemnly. "I remember." He would never forget. "But if I go with you then neither of us will ever be alone again."

Why couldn't he make Storm see the truth

of it? He might be used to having other people around but he also knew that if he were to really need help from the Stone Clan he would be just as solitary as Storm had been.

“It’s settled then.” The man sat up. “I guess we should start packing. We can split the load between your workbike and my warcycle.” The aqua eyes rose to study the tent. “If we had a sled we could take the tent too. The caverns where I’m living aren’t too awful, but water drips from the roof sometimes and gets my furs damp. The best part is the fact that one of the caves has water, a small pool clear as the finest quartz.”

Flame smiled contentedly at that news. “Your caves sound perfect and I have a sled,” he said. “I just wasn’t sure if you’d want to take it or not as you were traveling so light.”

Maybe he’d get to keep the warmth of his furs after all. Although there would be another kind of warmth for his bed from now on.

“I was out hunting, my few possessions are about a half day’s ride from where you found me,” Storm remarked. Flame could hear

him breathing in his scent again, the deep inhalation, the man's nose pressed to his hair too obvious to be mistaken for anything else.

And now he felt like a complete fool. But at least he could take the sled which meant he got to keep the only home he'd ever really known.

He reluctantly disentangled himself from Storm's arms, sat up and draped a fur round his shoulders while he went to the fire pit and set the fire stones to glowing again. It was a typically cold morning, early still judging by the few sounds to be heard from the rest of the clan.

Once the stones were glowing he padded back to the bed to pull on his clothes.

Storm got out of bed and glanced around the tent. The glow from the firestones brought out the muscular form of his body in sharp contrasts of light and shadow.

Flame couldn't help but stare and wonder yet again how such a magnificent warrior could want him as both swordbrother and lover.

Well, his decision was made now and Storm seemed happy enough with it so he shrugged and pulled on his pants.

“Where are my clothes?” Storm asked, sitting down on the bed. He’d paled slightly and raised a hand to his head as if he might be suffering head pain or dizziness.

Flame frowned as he saw the gesture. “Are you sure you’re up to traveling today?” He asked the question as he went to a small opening by the fire pit and retrieved Storm’s clothing from a smaller separate area of the tent which was used on its own when the clan was on the move.

Storm nodded. “I’ll make it to the cave where my things are. It’s not that far. We can stay there until we decide what we’re going to do.”

Flame dropped the high quality leather and fur of Storm’s garments on the bed next to him and nodded. “I’ll run the soul ball over you before we leave so you have enough energy to make it without collapsing. You have only just got over a fever after all and I’m guessing you’re feeling as weak as a

newborn babe right now.”

The man gave him the barest hint of a smile. “I won’t bother to try and deny it. That’s the problem with having a healer as a swordbrother, you can’t pretend nothing’s wrong when you really feel like boiled shit.”

Picking up his clothes Storm started to dress. “My head feels achy and my legs are acting like they have no bones inside.”

Flame nodded. “Yep all the glorious after effects of a fever,” he said with a grin. “Some food in your gut will help.”

He got the firestones glowing creating even more warmth and set the pot containing yesterday’s stew on them to heat through. Meanwhile he started to gather all his power stones and place them in their traveling pouches.

I’m really going to do this.

He shot a glance at Storm as he worked and knew instinctively that life with his new swordbrother would not be easy but that he would never regret his choice.

The blond was dressing, pulling on his leather pants and the vest he'd worn under the furs that protected him from the chill. "It might not be a bad idea to stay at the cave until the worst of the blackstorm season is over."

"Is there room for a sled and this tent there?" Flame busied himself over the stew pot, not wanting to let Storm see how attached he was to his few possessions and the only home he'd ever known.

"There's room enough for a small clan in those caverns, so yes, I think your tent will fit," the man replied. "We can probably manage to set the tent up inside the first cave, but the floors of the other ones don't have as much sand to anchor the tent stakes in. And having the tent will be warmer, I already told you about how damp it gets."

The man raised his gaze to Flame, the aqua warmed with desire. "But even if we can't set up the tent I'm sure we'll find some way to keep warm."

Flame was so relieved about the pitiful amount that he owned going with them that it

took a second for the rest of Storm's words to sink in. When they did he felt his cheeks heat up and swiftly looked away.

Damn this colouring of mine. It shows everything!

Storm crossed the small space between them, his arms pulling Flame into an embrace that drew him close, the man gazing into his eyes. "I know you've said you have no reason to stay here, and I won't argue that point with you because I can see the truth of your words, this clan will never accept you. But there are many tribes that would welcome you, Flamespirit. When we leave here I want you to think that over carefully. I don't want to push you into this and have you regret it later." the blond told him in a quiet voice, then let him go and turned aside.

Flame returned the embrace and actually went so far as to kiss Storm even though his face was still hot enough to boil water. He was disappointed when the blond warrior let go of him, and started wondering yet again if he really was wanted.

Storm stood gazing at the firestones, his

face a blank mask. “I can’t expect you to accompany me just because I tell you the ghost of my lover said you would be my swordbrother. It was wrong for me to say anything about that to you. You have to decide on your own what you want to do with your life. Being my swordbrother won’t gain you anything but a life of hardship.” He turned a haunted gaze on Flame, opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something else, then shook his head and sat down on the bed.

Flame turned away confused by Storm’s words. “I know nothing of other tribes and have no real desire to join any of them.” He frowned suddenly and stared at his prospective swordbrother. “You really believe that I want something from you other than what you are?”

He returned to the fire pit to pour stew into two bowls. “I think I should feel insulted.”

“I don’t know you, Flame. I don’t know what you truly want out of life, much less what you want from me.” Storm sprawled onto the bed and lay there. “But you also don’t know me.” The odd blue-green eyes

closed and the man sighed, sounding tired already. “I’ll be the first to admit I act like a complete ass sometimes.”

Flame smiled at the firestones and rose to his feet. “Human condition,” he said with a shrug as he came back with the bowls of hot aromatic stew, “we’re all quite capable of acting like idiots.” He handed one of the bowls to Storm. “Eat that.”

He ate from his own bowl in silence for a moment. “You’re right though, we know very little about each other. I trust you, I’ve already said that, but I suppose I should say something about what I hope for from this and from life itself.”

He took another mouthful of stew. “What I hope for is companionship and the end to the constant loneliness that I’ve lived with since Oasis went in search of water. One day I’d like to rescue her from the city if it’s possible but only if there is enough water somewhere else to take her to. Those are my hopes.

“In return for your company I offer this tent, everything in it, a sled and my workbike such as it is. They are all I’ve ever needed

before so I can't see that changing.”

Storm ate a few bites of stew then said, “Oasis? I'm sorry if you mentioned her before now but I don't remember the name. Is that the sister you said you had,” Storm shook his head, “I mean have?”

Flame nodded surprised at how much pain he still felt when he talked about her. “Yes, my sister, a watermage, she could charm water out of the very rocks, but there wasn't enough liquid out here for her to flourish so she followed the scent of water to the city and that lake they have dammed up.

“I received word that she'd been taken as a slave and then nothing more.”

“You'd said she was taken as slave of the city people. That's not a fate I'd wish on anyone,” Storm remarked. “It was one of the things my brother and I fought about many times. He wanted to attack other clans and sell captives to the people of the city. I did not.” Storm stared into his bowl of stew, his brow furrowed into the hard lines of anger.

“With me removed from the position

of Chief's Heir he can do as he pleases.” Storm put his spoon down into the bowl, the blond looking a bit ill. “My clan has a trade agreement with them. Originally we traded sunstones for food and water, but he's made a change and now it's people he gives them. That was why I had to leave. It made me sick to know it was happening and there wasn't anything I could do to stop him.”

Storm's face hardened, his empty hand tightening into a fist. “Nothing other than become a kinslayer and outlaw and that would have broken my father's heart.”

Flame stared down at his stew, taking in what Storm was telling him. “I knew by the quality of your leather and furs that you must have come from a rich clan, but riches obtained through human misery should be just ashes in the mouth.”

He shrugged, believing Storm when he said he'd fought against such a trade. “Anyway those are my hopes and expectations. Nothing in there about a clan or possessions as I'm not used to them and I believe I've found what I needed.” He glanced shyly at the blond as he

spoke.

Storm levelled an appraising look on him, as if weighing something in his mind, some consideration about him. “Well we’re in agreement on that, at least.”

The blond ate another bite of the cooling stew, chewing it, the strong muscles of his jaw working on the chunk of meat. Though it had cooked a long time it wasn’t tender, the bit composed of hard gristle. Nothing Flame was given, even his food, was of any quality.

Storm swallowed. “My clothes weren’t bought, not even with sunstones. I killed the animals myself and a woman of our clan tanned them and made my clothes for the meat that came with them.” He smoothed his hand over the darbear jacket he wore. “And this was my manhood kill, the last of the hide went into this jacket and the one like it that was made for Sandrunner. He died before it was finished though,” he added. “Neither my swordbrother or I had any interest in women so we bartered meat for clothes with the widowed and unmarried women of our clan.”

“A good system,” Flame commented.

So he doesn't feel attracted to women anymore than I do.

No, the only woman he'd ever cared about had been Oasis.

Storm was watching Flame. The windmage's strange eyes seemed to see into his very soul, or perhaps the man had somehow read his mind because his next words were unexpected, and addressed his thoughts. “Perhaps we can find a way to get your sister out of the city.”

“That's something to be thought of.” But he didn't want to think about it, the pain if they failed would be even worse and if something were to happen to the windmage because of him he knew he would never forgive himself.

Storm spooned up the last of the stew, swallowing it down. “You said she needs to be near water, well, the caverns have a small pool.”

He deliberately latched on to the changed subject. “It sounds as if this cave of yours is

huge.” He smiled at Storm again. “But you haven’t yet told me what you expect from me.”

“Expect of you?” Storm regarded him, the blond’s face the total blank that Flame was starting to associate with the other man’s deeper thoughts. “I’ve spent so long mourning Sandrunner that I never considered anything beyond dying.” He put his empty bowl on the floor. “It’s going to take me a little time to adjust. To be truthful I don’t even know what I expect of myself.”

Flame shrugged, smiled and picked up the discarded bowl. “Well that’s very honest. I’m thinking we’ll both have to adjust.” His smile grew and he shot the blond a mischievous look. “We’ll just have to make it up as we go along I guess.”

Storm found himself smiling at the beautiful red haired man. He couldn’t help himself. The way Flamespirit looked when he smiled turned him from an exotic beauty

into something beyond Storm's ability to put into words.

His heart pounded in his chest and he felt a flush of heat fill his veins, a heat that pooled in his balls like living fire.

There'd only been one man in his entire life who'd awakened such a response in him: Sandrunner.

And now Flamespirit was affecting him in much the same way, his body, his power, perhaps even his very soul reaching out for the firemage.

Power calling to Power.

He shuddered and tried to focus on the moment, rather than what might happen in the next few days.

"I've been thinking, there are other people from my clan who don't trust or like my brother. And they never believed what he said about me because they knew my love for Sandrunner was absolute. They might welcome an opportunity to walk away from his leadership and follow me. Disgraced in the eyes of my father or not, if I made my own

clan they'd follow me. I'm sure Dragonwind will bring the whole clan to ruin. I know it in my heart and I'd believed that my father did too, yet he accepted my brother's lies so readily.

"I still don't understand why either." Storm sighed, the memories of what had happened between his father and him was so painful his chest hurt. "He's never believed anything Dragonwind said about me until he came with his lies of cowardice."

Almost a year later and the pain was as fresh and hurtful as it had been the day his father stripped the title of Chief's Heir from him.

Flame had listened attentively to everything, frowning once or twice. "Does your father still live? If he does, perhaps you should ask him why he accepted your brother's word."

He moved about the tent with natural grace, cleaned the bowls and packed them away with the rest of his smaller belongings. Storm found it impossible for him to take his eyes off of the other man as he went about such simple tasks.

I'm falling in love with him already and I hardly know him. But I can feel the attraction growing fast as a canyon tree in the rain.

He'd known Sandrunner his whole life. Growing up in the same clan, seeing one another day after day, the attraction between them had always been there, blossoming into love the day he'd earned his warriors tattoos and become a man.

He'd only just met Flamespirit yet there was no denying the desire he felt, no ignoring the fact that he wanted the red-haired man as much as he'd ever wanted Sandrunner.

Storm didn't want Flame for a night, or a few weeks, or months, he wanted the other man at his side as his swordbrother for as long as they both lived. He knew that with unshakeable certainty.

“Yes, when I left he still lived. And I did ask him how he could believe my brother's lies. His answer was that he always knew a flaw in my soul would come out sooner or later, he just needed to wait to find it.” Storm rubbed his face in his hands and got up. “After that he wouldn't even speak to me anymore.”

Storm began rolling the bed furs, trying not to think about the disgust he'd seen in his father's eyes.

He was also trying not to think of the perfect creamy skin of Flame's body, or the fact he wanted nothing more than to lay the other man down in that soft bed of furs and fuck him until he screamed out in passionate release.

Flame shook his head, frowning at the cooling firestones he was waiting to pack. "But he must have known how much you loved your swordbrother and how you'd never have left him willingly."

"I've never understood why he believed Dragonwind. I still don't. He's lied lying and manipulated, trying to sway father's choice for years. From the time I was very young he tried to get Father to name him heir and Father told him it would never happen. And then Sandrunner was killed and I... wasn't heir anymore." Storm went silent, remembering his lover dying in his arms. Remembering his tears flowing from his eyes as fast as the blood had flowed from his body.

He should have died.

His father shouldn't have believed Dragonwind. Everyone had known how much he loved Sandrunner. How they'd been inseparable since they'd become swordbrothers.

He just didn't understand it. But it no longer mattered. Dragonwind was Heir to the Clan Chief, and that was the end of it.

He finished rolling the bed furs and stacked them to one side. "Will your sled carry the bed's frame?"

Flame was scooping the now cold firestones into a leather pouch. "Yes, the sled takes everything, tent, bed the lot. The only disadvantage is it slows my workbike down quite a lot. And considering how sluggish it is at the best of times I'm not going to be able to manage any great pace."

"When was the last time the sunstone was replaced?" Most clans never had enough stones to go around, and considering how far down in the rankings Flame was--he wasn't even really part of the clan-- Storm

didn't think for one moment the healer had a sunstone that wasn't close to burning out.

But that was something he could fix.

Flame stopped piling up his pouches in the middle of the tent to think about it. "Dustclaw gave me a second hand one about two years ago when my old one finally ran out of power. He owed me for saving his wife and child when she gave birth."

"Let's have a look at it before we load up. If it's close to burning out it will have to be replaced," Storm stated. He had a few sunstones locked into the carry compartment of his warcycle. If they were fortunate he'd have one that fit Flame's old bike. If not, he'd have to risk powering one up and that might mean they'd be unable to leave until the morning.

He was still barefooted, and he glanced around the tent trying to find his footwear. "Do you have my boots somewhere?"

Flame reached behind the bed and pulled out two pairs of boots, his and Storm's.

Storm took the boots from the fire-haired

man and slipped them on. He frowned at the battered appearance of Flame's footwear. They looked old, and there were numerous patches to the soles. His own boots were almost new. "Are those the only ones you have?"

Flame nodded his expression wry. "The only reason I have anything at all is because of the soul stone and my ability to make firestones."

"You will be better off away from them. And with your healing talent and my own abilities we might find acceptance in another clan if we decide that's the course of action we should take." Storm wasn't sure dividing the Dragon clan would help anyone, but the nagging feeling that Dragonwind would lead them into destruction kept nibbling at the back of his mind.

"We can trade firestones too," Flame said. "They're easy enough for me to make."

Storm raised an eyebrow. Firemage, healer, empath and he makes firestones? These people must truly be stupid not to accept such a powerful man into their clan. To Flame he

said, “Really? You make them? That’s a very rare talent.” He refrained from saying he could also make objects of power, the very sunstones everyone, including the City people needed to power their machines.

“Not as rare as the sunstone prospector that the clan trades with from time to time, but useful enough to trade.” He pulled on the worn boots and grinned at Storm. “When I stop to think about it, I’ve been taken advantage of, haven’t I?”

Storm thought his heart would stop when the man turned that stunning smile on him. The warmth and life in the man’s expression drove home how much he’d missed having a companion, someone to share his life with. He couldn’t help it, he returned the grin then swooped in on the other man and kissed him until they were both breathless.

Flame clung to him for a short while, letting him know how he felt without words.

“I’d say you’ve been taken advantage of, and taken for granted. Once you’re gone they’ll realize what they’ve lost. Healers of your ability are rare, so is anyone who can

make a firestone. No one in my former clan had that skill, and we had very few firestones. I've never owned one, I'm used to eating my meals raw.”

An idea took form. “That could give us the excuse we need to head into the City. Wandering traders are always welcomed if they bring valuable things, and healers are always welcomed into the City. There are always sick people there.”

Flame's expressive eyes widened before he looked thoughtful and nodded once.

Storm headed for the door of the tent. “Let's go take a look at your bike's sunstone. We've got time to decide what we're going to do after we leave.”

“As you wish,” Flame said a little dubiously and followed Storm out of the tent to where their cycles were parked under the awning.

The sleek armored lines and the size of Storm's warcycle stood out in stark contrast to the chipped and battered appearance of the workbike which wasn't known for its beauty of design, and this one had certainly seen

rough use. Many years of it from the very antiquated shape of the bike's framework.

“I think my grandmother had a bike like this. Her mother gave it to her,” he remarked as he crouched down beside the machine.

Flame grinned sheepishly and shuffled his feet. “I know it's not much but it's all I have.”

Storm looked at the housing, trying to keep focused on what he was doing, rather than the incredibly sexy way Flame's body was moving just at the periphery of his vision. He studied the exterior of the power core and brushed off some dirt, searching for the latch that would let him in. Instead of a latch he found an old locking mechanism that required a physical key to open the port. “Do you have the key for this?” he asked.

Flame nodded. “It's in the carrier. One moment.” He rummaged in one of the workbike's carriers and after a few seconds triumphantly produced a key. “There you are.”

Storm used the key to open the outer

compartment. A faint tickle of power flowed over him, the sensation so diminished he had a good idea the sunstone was in need of full recharging without the need to actually see it. He also had no intention of repowering a sunstone while he was in this Clan's camp. Not when he could feel several sets of eyes watching them.

He grasped the inside cap, paused and said, "You might want to stand back, even an old stone is dangerous for most people." He turned his head and found the watchers, a group of men sitting outside a nearby tent, lounging under the shade of an awning. He waited for Flame to get far enough away.

Wide eyed, the fire mage backed away, moving to a safe distance where he could still watch Storm work.

Storm twisted the cap off and set the thick piece of metal aside. He frowned at what he saw, a sunstone so old the glow was confined to the center of the core alone. The rest of the stone had turned a dull, ashy grey. His own people would have considered a stone so far gone dead, and either given it to him for

recharging or discarded it for a fresh stone.

“It’s almost dead,” he commented, sure that Flame wasn’t close enough to actually see the condition of the nearly dead gem. He reached into the cup that held the stone and took it out bare handed to show it to Flame.

The fire mage gasped and he could guess why. Most people could not touch sunstones, even nearly dead ones.

“I hadn’t realised it was that depleted. Can anything be done with it?”

“Not right now it can’t,” Storm remarked, his gaze focusing beyond Flame at the group of older men he’d already spotted. They were clearly watching the two of them while eating a meal of meat and grilled vegetables off of wide plates.

A meal far more substantial than the stewed gristle Flame had served them. Seeing the men enjoying such a succulent meal irritated Storm. Flame, as a healer and maker of firestones should have been enjoying a meal every bit as good.

I’m glad he’s leaving with me, they don’t

deserve to have anyone as skilled and kind as Flamespirit in their Clan. That meat they gave him wasn't fit for a clan's dogs, much less a human being.

Storm's stomach rumbled at the smell of the grilled meat but he ignored it and went to his own cycle to see if he had a sunstone of the right size. He opened the locked compartment and pulled out a metal tube. Unscrewing the cap he poured out several brightly glowing stones into his hand, comparing them to the almost dead sunstone from Flame's workbike.

The power of the sunstones hummed through his body, increasing his dizziness.

In his current poor condition he shouldn't be handling them, but they had no choice. Not if they were going to leave today with Flame in possession of what little he owned. Considering how difficult it must have been for Flame to accumulate the camp goods he had, Storm didn't want to ask that he leave any of it behind.

Several stones he had were far too small, but the one large sunstone he had should be a

close fit. He dumped the rest of the stones into the cylinder, including the dying one, and put the cover on the tube, sealing the dangerous emanations inside the container.

A glance showed the men watching them, their eyes very intent on what he was doing.

He put the stones inside the locking compartment of his own cycle and returned to Flame's older cycle. He rolled the replacement stone to the ends of his fingers and pushed it into the receptacle. It fit tighter than the old one but it did fit. He closed the compartment and shut and locked the outer door.

Flame's gaze had been darting between what Storm had been doing and the watching diners. He jumped slightly when Storm spoke.

"See if it starts." His words were for Flame but his gaze remained on the men who were watching the.

Flame approached the old and shabby vehicle, staring at Storm in something like awe. He said nothing however, and mounted the workbike. He started it up and smiled

at the low growling purr that came from it. “Might even go forward now.”

“Sounds good, I don’t hear any whine to say the thing’s over charging. Try riding it a bit though, I want to make sure the new stone won’t damage it. I’ll wait here and keep an eye on things.”

The men were still watching the two of them, but now they were leaning close together, speaking in whispers to keep Storm from hearing them.

Flame shot off into the surrounding desert, made a couple of circles and returned to where Storm was waiting. He nodded, smiling happily. “Feels good and I didn’t hear a whine but you’d know better.”

“Was it faster than before?” Storm asked as he set his hand down over the cover to see if it was too warm. A sunstone could overpower the engine and cause it to rupture which would ruin the machine, not to mention what it could do to the person riding it. The housing felt cool to the touch so he knew the cycle was fine.

Flame nodded enthusiastically. “Oh yes and I didn’t even open it out too much just in case. The sled should cause it very little trouble now.”

“Good.”

Storm didn’t have to turn and look at the men to know they were still watching. When he did glance their way it was to discover they’d put aside their food and were having an animated conversation full of excited gestures. They were still whispering among themselves, until one finally got up and hurried off.

“Where is your sled?” he asked, his head bent close to the other man’s, his voice lowered so it wouldn’t carry to the men watching them. “I think we should be leaving as soon as possible.”

Flame watched the man leave with narrowed eyes before he said, “Behind the tent. I agree I don’t think we should hang about do you?”

“No. Go hitch up the sled, I’ll take the bed frame apart,” Storm stated as he headed inside.

He broke down the bed frame but found it left him out of breath and dizzy enough that he had to sit down on the piled bed furs.

“Shit. What the hell is wrong with me?” He was annoyed with himself, but, considering the events of the last few days, he shouldn’t have been so surprised. He’d been poisoned, stabbed, fevered and he’d handled sunstones after just recovering from a brush with death. It was no wonder he felt worse than crap when he looked at it through the critical eyes of cold hard fact.

Flame entered the tent a few moments later to find him sitting on the furs. “Stay still,” he said and pulled the soul ball out of its pouch. He ran it over Storm quickly but efficiently, and he could feel the energy pouring into him.

“I’ll load up the bed. You rest for a moment.”

Storm nodded and wished he hadn’t. The dizzy tip and whirl in his head getting worse from the movement. He slid off the bedding onto the floor and sat there, taking slow, even breaths.

Flame gave him a concerned glance and crouched down next to him, feeling his forehead for any return of the fever.

Storm took the opportunity to give himself something else to think about. He set his lips to Flame's in a gentle kiss, one hand lifting to curve around the back of the nape of the man's neck to keep him there for the kiss.

Once satisfied that Storm was reasonably healthy Flame picked up the first piece of the bed frame and carried it out to the sled.

Disgusted with himself, Storm got to his feet and picked up one of the sections of the bed frame and carried it out. He didn't feel well, but he wasn't about to stay in the camp longer than it took to load the sled. And with him helping it would take less time than if he sat there doing nothing.

"I thought I told you to rest," Flame said when Storm reached the sled and he took the section from him. He leaned closer once he'd attached it to the sled. "Besides, I don't think we'll be going anywhere without a fight so conserve your strength."

“Do you think it’s going to come to that? I’d hoped they might be planning just to persuade you to stay, but you think they mean to make a fight of it? What could that gain but more dead warriors?” Storm asked, his voice kept to a murmur so the men watching them couldn’t overhear.

Flame frowned obviously concerned. “The one thing this clan has to trade its very best for is sunstones and even then they have to add more for the stonewielder as they cannot touch them. Even I cannot although I was made to try once.” He shuddered at the memory. “You’re a stonewielder, so they’ll want to keep you.”

“And I won’t stay so they’ll gain nothing but my anger,” Storm replied. He was about to say something else when the sound of a crowd approaching reached them. Storm turned to see Stonefist, his swordbrother Jagged and a large group of men and few young women coming toward them.

“Well I wonder what Stonefist thinks he’s going to say or do to persuade us to stay.”

Flame turned also, hand going to the hilt

of his sword.

Chapter Five

Conflicts

Flame eyed his chief warily, his mind on how weak Storm still was, both physically and magically. He might well have to protect them both.

I can do that. And he's worth it.

Stonefist came right to the point, speaking to Storm and ignoring him as usual. "You have sunstones and you are a stonewielder. We'd like you to stay among us. I can offer you a tent and a woman of your own." He motioned to the women who'd come and they dutifully stepped forward.

Flame felt his temper rise. "You don't even offer the beauties of the Stone Clan for his power. You make yourself and your tribe cheap by such actions."

Stonefist turned to him next. "Flamespirit you seem to have formed a bond with our guest, can you not persuade him to stay? I have promised you clan status after all."

He glared at the older man. “After seven years of denying it. Sorry, but I’m leaving.”

“I thank you for your offer, but women do not interest me,” Storm replied, his tone polite as he moved to sit on his warcycle. He looked rather pale and his forehead was damp with sweat.

Stonefist frowned and Flame could almost have laughed in his face. He was about to lose the two most powerful men he was ever likely to meet through his own stupidity.

Had he been better treated he might even have tried persuading Storm to stay; had he been clan even.

And Storm had pushed his body and magic too far again and would not rest while amongst this clan. That much he knew about the man he’d chosen as swordbrother.

“A woman for both of you then, and status among my own council for you Stormdragon,” the chief offered.

“Still not interested,” Storm replied, giving a slight smile. “I plan to return to my own people. I have everything there I could ever

desire.”

Flame knew that for a lie but the chief did not.

He busied himself packing the rolled furs onto the sled and attaching them securely before turning to face Stonefist. “If you really want to remain as nonfoe you could help us pack my tent. That way I might even come by every now and then with healing and firestones. If you want to be unfriend though, I can always kill the firestones you have. How do you think the clan will feel about a lifetime of raw meat?”

Stonefist didn’t reply to them. He motioned to his men. “As we discussed, take them. They’ll stay as slaves if they won’t stay as free men.”

Storm started his warcycle and leveled a hard glare on the chief and his men. “You won’t take me easily. Reconsider your order, Stonefist. I’ll make my capture cost the life of every man who tries to make me your captive.”

“I doubt you’re able to raise enough magic

to harm anyone,” Stonefists’s swordbrother stated as he and a group of men came forward.

“Who said I needed magic to kill?” the blond questioned as he reached down and pulled an odd, wide-bladed sword from where it had been hidden among the cycle’s armor.

He kicked the cycle into motion, razor edged blades springing forth along the sides of the machine making approaching the moving vehicle even more hazardous.

Flame felt the world turn red and furnace hot around him. If the old fool wasn’t prepared to listen, his clan would have to pay the price. He wasn’t going to lose his elected swordbrother to this man.

He raised his hands above his head, sparks flying between them before he gestured with them. There was an agonized wail from the nearest tent and a woman came running out. “The firestones went cold!” she screamed.

Angry shouts and unhappy cries from women came from all over the camp.

The blond’s warcyce shot forward,

knocking two men to the ground, one of them bleeding from a gash in his leg, another staggering away with a deep cut across his chest from Storm's sword. Another man howled in pain, clutching his ribs. The rest of the men who'd gone for Storm scattered, dodging the dangerous warcycle as Storm circled around Flame.

"Take them you fools!" Stonefist shouted as Storm brought his cycle around again, pivoting on one foot and giving the cycle more power which sent stinging sand, small stones and thick dust into the eyes of the nearest men.

"What's happened?" a woman shouted to Stonefist. "We've no way to light our homes or to cook!"

"Be silent woman! This is the business of men!" Stonefist shouted. "Take them now!"

Flame took the power from every last firestone in the camp, and drew his sword, the blade shaped like a living flame and wreathed with red and gold energies. Two men charged him and he took them before they reached him, both of them clutching severe burns.

What does the old fool think he can do against us?

The men were trying to close with Storm, but being mounted on his warcycle gave him an advantage and he soon raced away, whirling the big machine around to charge the men, scattering them like a flock of runnerbirds.

“Someone get him!” Stonefist shouted, face turning scarlet with rage.

Flame raised his hands and gestured once again and a wall of fire appeared between Storm and Stonefist’s men. He glared at Stonefist. “Your women and children mean nothing to you. You would let them live in darkness, gnawing on raw food and dying of cold. And yet you wonder why I won’t stay.

“You knew of my powers, feared them even but you never once treated me like a warrior should be treated. And now you want me as slave, you piece of shit?”

Please, Storm, hold on just a little longer. I’ve a feeling help is coming.

Jagged threw a large rock and hit Storm in

the side of the head. The blond struggled for control of the heavy warcycle, twisting it on its side to keep from plowing into the side of a tent where three small children and their mother stood. Wide eyed with shock they ducked inside as the sand and dust from the cycle's abrupt stop showered the doorway.

The men closed on Storm. Dazed, blood running down his face, he met them on his feet, sword swinging, keeping them at bay.

A younger man came striding forward, more young men hard on his heels along with two women. "Halt! You men, leave our guest alone! I, Stonecrusher son of Stonefist, chief's heir command it!"

"What are you doing!" his father demanded, stalking toward his son.

"Father you are showing the judgment of a fool. I declare you no longer competent to be chief and I make myself chief in your place."

"No!" the old man howled and shoved Stonecrusher. "And again I say No! You cannot and will not be chief!"

“And I say yes!” Stonecrusher countered and shoved his father to the ground. “I’ve had enough of your foolishness. You and your idiot swordbrother both! These two men are to be accorded the honor of guests. They may leave as they chose!”

Stonecrusher looked to Flame, “Please, honored guest, if you would return the life to our firestones, I would be in your debt.”

Flame was more concerned with Storm than the clan’s firestones right now. “Once I am assured my swordbrother is safe I will trade with you.”

He deliberately turned his back on the clan that had never accepted him and went to Storm’s side. What he saw was not reassuring. “Are you going to be able to travel?”

Storm wiped blood from his eyes, but more spilled down his face. “I’ll make it,” the blond whispered between gritted teeth. He’d been pale before but he’d gone ashen and his eyes didn’t seem to be focusing very well. “It would help if you could get the bleeding stopped.”

Flame shook his head at his own stupidity and pulled the soul ball from its pouch at his waist. He held it close to Storm's head, letting its power do its work. Seemingly his chosen swordbrother was strong, stubborn and sarcastic as well as sexy. The thought made him smile.

Once he'd finished with the soul ball and put it back in its pouch, Storm looked a lot better.

Time to see just how much he could get out of the clan.

People were coming out of their tents. Women and children, older people male and female, and warriors were gathering around to find out what all the commotion was.

The man with broken ribs and the other with the torn up leg were crying out to Flame for help. The man with the slashed chest was moaning and bleeding, his wife trying to staunch the flow of blood as she berated her husband for his stupidity. Another of the men who'd tried to face down Storm and gotten a face full of sand for his trouble sat on the ground begging for help to get the dirt from

his eyes.

“Flamespirit, please help my people,” Stonecrusher requested. “You may name your price for aiding us and returning light and heat to my people.”

“Fool!” Stonefist shouted at his son. “They should be slaves and nothing more!”

“Silence you old idiot!” Stonecrusher snapped. “If it weren’t for your foolishness we’d have a healer among us as part of our clan, but no, you and your idiotic fear of power will cost us the best man our clan had! Now shut up and be silent or I’ll have you gagged!”

“You arrogant whelp!” Stonefist began, only to be silenced by the application of a gag put in place by Stonecrusher’s young warriors.

Stonecrusher would never know it but he had paid half the price with his words. Words that gave Flame some of his pride back. He thought carefully about what he should ask for, murmuring to Storm, “What are we going to need?”

Storm draped an arm over Flame's shoulder, the blond leaning on him for support yet somehow making it look as if they were nothing more than lovers having a private moment.

“Were it me, I'd ask for boots and clothes. Yours aren't in the best condition. A bigger pot and a skillet would be nice too. I have neither. I didn't think to bring any when I left my own clan because I don't know how to cook.”

Smiling slightly at his lover's admission, Flame supported Storm while turning them both to face Stonecrusher. “I find I've grown tired of second hand rags. I want new boots, new clothes, new and larger pots and at least one of the really precious furs. And help in packing all my things onto the sled.”

Stonecrusher nodded but was frowning slightly. “You could have asked for much more.”

Flame chuckled. “I have to leave you something to trade with me when you need healing or firestones. Treat us well now, and I will return to trade.”

Stonecrusher's gaze was drawn to Storm when the man stumbled. "Perhaps you would remain with us for the night? At least until morning when your companion will be well enough to travel." The man came forward and offered his assistance to bear Storm to a place where the blond could rest, but Storm warned him away with nothing but the cold anger in his eyes.

"Please, Healer Flamespirit, my husband has been badly injured," the woman kneeling beside the man Storm had cut begged. "I'll give you his best tunic and the nicest fur from our bed if you will stay and help him."

Other women came forward, holding out their hands in gestures beseeching his understanding and aid.

"We never wanted you to leave, but our former chief gave us no voice in clan matters!" a woman stated.

"That's right! If it were up to us you'd have been more than clan, you'd have been first of the men in the tribe!" another agreed.

Flame smiled without humour at the sudden

changes of heart. “Bring all the things I asked for and the healing will be done as well as the return of your firestones.”

The women looked to Stonecrusher who nodded. Some departed to get the required items while others began to take down Flame’s tent and pack his belongings on the sled.

Meanwhile he healed the men who had been wounded in the fight, instructing their women on how to care for them after he was done.

Once finished with that and clothing, pots and a really beautiful and soft black fur had been packed onto his sled he kept the other side of his bargain and raised his arms to gesture once more. This time instead of sparks there was a ruddy glow. A child came racing up. “Mama, mama, the fire burns again.”

“My thanks, Flamespirit. You and our other guest are free to leave or stay as you choose,” the new chief said.

Storm retrieved his warcycle from where it lay. Flame could tell it was taking a great

deal of determination on the windmage's part to keep his steps steady, his empathy telling him how weak and unwell Storm felt. "You'll forgive us if we decline any hospitality from you. While my intended swordbrother might be willing to forgive how he's been treated, I am not so inclined."

Flame nodded politely to the new chief, packed the last of his pouches in the workbike's carriers and climbed on. He shot Storm a worried glance but said nothing as they pulled away. He left his old clan behind him without a backward glance.

Storm took the lead, not turning his head for fear that it would cause him to lose what little control he had over his body. He felt terrible. Weak, dizzy, nauseated. And the pain in his head from being hit with the stone only added to the feeling of illness.

He led Flame away from the camp, their pace fast, but not so rapid it would cause Flame to lose control of his bike and the sled

it pulled.

If he could hold out for just a few hours they'd reach a place they could stop and rest. A place near a canyon where the hunting was good and there were a few wild plants that might have roots or fruit to be harvested. They needed food and they needed to get it well before the Storm Season arrived and the blackstorms became an almost daily occurrence.

Getting to his cave home would have to wait until the following day.

Flame followed silently, obviously deep in thought about something or other, a worried frown a permanent fixture on his face.

Storm slowed their pace as he led Flame up the long slope they'd descended during the sandgale. The journey was accomplished much easier and at a better pace. They reached the sandy, stone studded plain above and continued onward.

Utilizing well-known rock outcroppings and the position of the sun to navigate, Storm guided them toward the canyon he had in

mind. He intended to do some hunting, but by the time they reached the walls that led into the canyon Storm decided they weren't going to get any farther. His vision was blurred, and nausea gripped him. He slowed looking for a good place to camp, but the nausea worsened and he found himself swallowing repeatedly to keep from throwing up.

It reached the point Storm couldn't fight the urge anymore and he stopped the cycle. Staggering away, his stomach heaving so hard he couldn't avoid the inevitable anymore he moved behind a scattering of boulders. With the world spinning around him Storm set a hand on a stone to keep him steady and vomited up the little bit he'd eaten that morning.

Flame sighed and stopped his own cycle. He was motionless for a moment as if unsure of what to do before unpacking the smaller traveling tent that served as storage in the full-sized version.

Storm felt better almost immediately, which left him wondering why he'd felt so sick. He'd been thinking it was the blow to his

head, but it might have been something he'd eaten, specifically that less than good meat. But Flame wasn't sick, so he just put it off to handling sunstones and having a banged up head and stopped thinking about it.

He watched Flame for a moment as the red-haired man started to put up the small tent. His stomach had already settled, and the dizziness was subsiding. He kicked a thick layer of sand over the mess he'd made to help keep the smell down.

"Well this works out all right, I was thinking about stopping here to do some hunting," he told Flame and went to his cycle to get a sip of water which he used to rinse his mouth out. He felt much better, but not so good he wanted to go off hunting yet.

Flame turned his head and smiled at him. "No need to worry. Concussion does that to people. I'm surprised we got as far as we did. Just rest while I get this tent put up. It won't take more than a few moments."

Storm nodded and rested on the seat of his warcycle while Flame set up the small tent. "I'll rest a bit and see how I feel. I might

try and do some hunting. We could use the meat.”

He probably thinks I’m just short of worthless. I’ve been sick and hurt ever since he found me.

Flame nodded. “Fresh meat would be very good,” he said and continued erecting the tent which didn’t take him very long. He spread the larger tent out as a ground sheet inside and then piled a large armful of furs in there for them to sleep on.

Storm watched Flame set up their camp with quick efficiency. He’d never been very good at doing that sort of work, and Sandrunner had frequently chased him away, teasing him about being a typical male, useless except for hunting, fighting and making love.

The memory brought a bittersweet smile to his face. He missed Sandrunner, he knew he always would, but he was already feeling something for Flame. Admiration and the first bloom of affection that made him want to go over and take Flame into his arms and kiss him thoroughly until they were both breathless.

Instead of getting in Flame's way he got off of his cycle and scanned their surroundings, getting his bearings. He felt good enough to go hunting since he planned to stick to small game this time. "I'm going to try a bit of hunting, but I'm not sure what I'll find."

He pointed toward a nearby series of slender stone spires banded in red, cream and a dusty orange color. "There are some food plants that way. Not sure what kinds because I never went with gathering parties, but I know my people always harvested food down there. I saw some bushes with ripening fruit when I was here a few days ago."

Flame grinned at him. "Don't worry I know what I'm looking for." He gave him a quick assessing look before adding, "Take care."

And there it was again, that big smile that melted Storm's heart. He looked away to keep his body from reacting, but his pulse was racing, his groin tightening.

"Be careful, there are dangerous animals around here," he said as he swung onto his warcycle to hide his condition. He felt like total crap, yet all it had taken was a smile from

Flame to get him hard and wanting. “There are a few pools of water in some of these canyons, it’s why the hunting is so good. But water draws the predators too, so stay alert and use your fire if anything big comes for you,” he advised and then felt like a total fool. Flame wasn’t a boy, he was a grown man, yet he was giving him the same sort of warning about danger his own father often gave him when he’d been a boy.

“But I guess you know all that,” he added with a sheepish smile.

Flame’s smile got even bigger if that was possible. “I do, but it’s nice to have someone care enough to warn me,” he said. “I’ll be fine. Good hunting.” With that he picked up one of the bowls and headed towards the rock spires.

Storm stared at Flame. The smile warmed his brown eyes, and turned his sensual mouth into something he wanted to kiss, to explore. He wanted to lay Flame down on soft furs and make love to him until the other man shouted out his pleasure. He tore his gaze away and started his warcycle.

Beautiful. Simply beautiful, he thought while his cock throbbed with desire and his heart pounded in his chest.

He wasn't feeling all that well, but Flame's smile made it easy to forget he felt bad. He wanted to impress Flame, to make him smile again. A successful hunt might give him the chance to make an impression and get Flame to smile. Feeling crappy or not Storm was fairly sure he could manage to find some sort of meat and bring it back to camp.

And maybe, just maybe he'd get another one of those breath stealing smiles from Flame.

He took it slow, heading into the narrow canyon he knew best, one where a shallow pool of water brought in many kinds of animals. Animals had to drink so that made it the best place to start.

As he'd warned Flame, such places also drew predators which was how he'd gotten clawed and poisoned in the first place.

But if that hadn't happened I wouldn't have met Flame.

He left the warcycle near the entrance of the canyon, going on foot, because the sound of the warcycle would scare off the game. He was taking it easy and not rushing himself, and he discovered that walking helped to clear his head which left him feeling better.

A loud screeching followed by the squawking sound of runnerbirds echoed down the canyon and Storm took cover behind some rocks. A flock of the birds came streaming toward him in a panic, their stubby wings flapping in alarm. He used one of his swords to bring two down, dragging them into cover as the rest of the flock streamed away.

He could hear growling and roaring. A darbear and one of the canyon lions bellowing and roaring, the sound evidence that the two predators were quarreling over a kill. He'd have to settle for the runnerbirds because this wasn't a good time to go after larger prey. Not with the two dangerous predators fighting over something bigger. He picked up the birds and headed out of the canyon, mounting his cycle and riding back to their

small camp.

Flame had been very busy while he'd been gone. Not only was there a large bowl of berries outside the tent but also full water skins hanging on one of the uprights and a pile of firestones blazing merrily. The fire mage was busy sorting what appeared to be herb plants, some of which he was chopping into a pot of water.

He looked up and smiled at the sound of Storm's cycle.

And there it was, that warm smile welcoming him into camp.

Storm shut down his cycle and joined Flame by the fire, laying his kill, two very plump runnerbirds, beside the other man. "There were some large predators fighting it out over a meal so I decided against going down the canyon after something more impressive. I hope these are all right for tonight. I'll have to do some serious hunting later or we're going to starve when the Storm Season hits."

He sat down in the sand near Flame, the temptation to lean closer and kiss the man

close to overwhelming. He fought the urge. Flame had come with him, even agreed to be his swordbrother, but he wasn't his yet and he didn't want to act like he was taking their impending bond for granted.

Flame smiled again and leaned closer until he shook himself and blushed. He hurried into speech. "These will be fine once I've gutted and cleaned them. I found some herbs which will dry nicely and the berries were ripe." He started plucking the birds.

"Do you want some help? I'll be the first to admit I'm a lousy cook unless you enjoy raw meat with a crunchy burned exterior," Storm remarked as he peered into the pot that hung over the firestones. It looked more like a pot full of weeds than food but he refrained from saying that, not wanting to insult this man who'd agreed to be his swordbrother.

He lifted his gaze to Flame, and found he was still fighting the urge to kiss the other man.

Flame shook his head as he deftly plucked the birds. "I'm used to cooking for myself - though not usually with meat of this quality

- so let me be the cook. It's the least I can do as I have never been allowed to hunt and wouldn't know where to start."

Not allowed to hunt? Storm frowned at that comment but didn't want to break the peacefulness of their camp by making Flame talk about his past among the Stone Clan. At some point he'd want to know all about Flame's life among those people, but not right now. The comment did bother him because, as a male and a warrior, Flame's duties should have included hunting, yet he hadn't been allowed to hunt. Like many other things involving Flame and the Stone Clan, it made no sense.

Flame finished plucking and sliced the birds open, removing the innards which he placed carefully onto a piece of old leather, and cut some of the flesh up into the pot. The rest he set to grill. Once that was done he collected the feathers up and stored them carefully away. Then he picked up the leather containing the offal and stood up. He walked a good two hundred yards with the birds' innards before finally dropping them to the

ground. Scavengers around the tent was not something they needed.

Storm watched Flame take care of meal preparation, the barest hint of a smile curling his lips. Sandrunner had always done the cooking if a woman from the camp hadn't brought them meals in exchange for their help.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a filling and hot meal until Flame had cooked for him.

When Flame sat down to watch the food Storm put an arm around his waist and leaned closer in a wordless effort to show his appreciation of the red-haired man's skills.

Flame returned the sideways hug and leaned his head against Storm's shoulder as he watched the pot bubble gently and turned the grilling meat, the smell from the cooking meat and the aromatic herbs wafting up on the steam.

"That smells good," Storm remarked and gave Flame a gentle squeeze. He wanted sleep more than he really wanted the food,

but he wasn't going to abandon Flame for the comfort of the sleeping furs. He rested his cheek against Flame's soft hair and closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of another man beside him.

"Bird will cook quickly too," Flame said. "Eat some and then you can sleep. The bed's ready for you."

"Thank you, Flame," Storm replied, giving the man a one armed hug. "You've been very good to me, even when I was no more than a stranger you found dying in the sand. Thank you for everything you've done for me. I'm unworthy to have such a fine man for my swordbrother."

Flame shook his head and colored up a little at all the attention and thanks, obviously not used to it.

Soon the grilled meat was cooked and he placed a few pieces for each of them onto plates. The rest he dropped in the pot, covered it and placed it inside the tent.

Storm raised an eyebrow at Flame as he put the pot into the tent, but he said nothing.

The red-haired man was used to stretching the meat he got into more than one meal, he'd noticed that while they'd been in the Stone Clan's camp. To Storm the reasoning behind saving food for a later meal was very clear: Flame must have learned such frugality from going hungry.

Storm took a careful bite of the food, rolling the hot meat around in his mouth and inhaling to try and cool it. The flavor was quite savory and he smiled at Flame. "Hot but good," he managed to remark around the scalding hot meat.

Flame chuckled as he took a bite of his own meat with obvious relish. "You're supposed to let it cool down a little first! I'm glad you like it. If I can find some roots or leaves along the way we should eat well."

"There's a canyon full of plants not far from the caverns I've been staying in. I haven't seen standing water but there must be some they can reach," Storm told him as he blew on a chunk of the meat to cool it. When he thought it was safe he popped it into his mouth and chewed, enjoying the taste after so

many meals of raw or charred meat.

Flame's smile died a little. "My sister told me there is more water under the ground than we realize. Springs, streams, even rivers. It's the only reason we have any plants at all." He took a bite of his own meat before saying slowly, "That's what makes it so unlikely that she would need to be by the lake in the city."

"Who told you she did? I've known a few who could sing to the waters and call it from the ground, and they've all been women of a clan." Storm was curious about why any woman of the clans would risk going near the City when they were often forced into being slaves. Especially those who had the ability to summon up water since they were greatly prized by the City people. Why, Storm didn't know, the City people had a huge lake of water to themselves, yet they offered large piles of trade goods, even sunstones for watermages.

Flame glanced at him, frowning. "Stonefist told me. He said he'd tried to reason with her, to bring her back to the Clan but that she wouldn't listen to him."

Storm couldn't believe Flame was so

gullible and believed a man who'd done nothing he could see to warrant such trust. "And you believed him? He refused you clan status among other things didn't he?" Storm asked gently, keeping his tone free of accusation while pointing out the major flaws in the situation.

"No, this was before then. My sister has been gone for seven years."

"About the time he should have made you clan," Storm remarked, as he pondered a few things. Stonefist hadn't made Flame part of their clan, and at first he'd thought it was nothing but the fear of his power, now he wondered. If he'd sold Flame's sister to the City people and Flame found out about it as a man not of their clan he had no recourse. But had he been clan....

Storm felt hot rage fill him.

If Flame had been clan and he discovered his sister had been sold he would have been entitled to blood price for her loss, and a watermage, even one of minor ability came at a very high price. One measured in a small fortune of trade goods, like sunstones.

“And it took my brother almost twelve years to discredit me in the eyes of my father, but not once in all that time did he ever stop trying.”

Flame stared down at the ground and put his empty plate aside. “Dear gods, am I really that much of a fool? The bastard must have sold her for sunstones. No wonder he never marked me as clan.”

“Think about it carefully. Did they get a large number of sunstones or other expensive goods about the time she vanished?” Storm wanted to know. “He might have been trying to drive you away from the clan by not accepting you all this time in the hopes that if you left you’d never realize what he’d done.”

Storm put his food aside. “And if he did, he owes you a blood price, not just a clan debt. You were never clan, so he had no right to sell her.”

Flame buried his head in his hands, pulling at fire-colored hair. “Yes,” he murmured, “not only new sunstones but also a stonewielder to fit them in all the cycles. They even gave

me one of the older ones.” He looked up at Storm, expression anguished. “How could you possibly want such an idiot? No wonder he did nothing to find her. He knew exactly where she was!”

Storm put his arms around Flame and pulled him into his lap, held him close. Even though the man was almost as tall as he was, Storm wanted to hold him, to comfort him. “Don’t punish yourself over it. You were very young when that happened and you had no one to turn to for advice or help.”

He hugged Flame. “But you’ve got me, and I’m a bit more than a stonewielder, I’m a shaper and maker of stones too. That gives me an automatic entry at the City gates.”

Flame snuggled into his shoulder hiding his face although his sobs were audible even when so muffled.

Storm held Flame, caressing his back and thinking. If his sister was sold to the City, then she’d be there still as a valued slave to someone. But seven years, that’s a long time. We might find her but she might not want to leave or her owner might not want to sell

her.

And to buy her we're going to need something worth more than she is, and that means a lot of average sunstones or a few very large high quality ones.

"I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll rest a few days at the cavern then we'll pack up and head for the Valley of the Sun. I'll do some mining and when we've got enough sunstones we'll go to the City and try and find her. We can use the sunstones to buy her back from whoever owns her."

Flame raised his tearstained face to stare at Storm. "You'd do so much for me and for her? I don't deserve you. I'm so stupid."

Storm brushed the tears away with his fingertips turning it into a caress. "Yes. You're going to be my swordbrother and that makes her my sister by blood. Of course I'll help you find her and get her back," Storm replied. "No matter how many stones it takes, I'll make sure you get her back and that we have a suitable home for her."

What he didn't say was: So long as she's

alive.

Chapter Six

Companionship

Flame was thoroughly disgusted with himself over his stupidity. It was all very well for Storm to say he'd been young and with no one senior to advise him but he'd trusted Stonefist when he shouldn't have done. It would take him a long while to get over that.

Then his mind set off on a different route and he found he was thinking how unlike the man he'd first met Storm now was, and just how good it felt to simply be held by him.

Why does he still want such an ignorant, womanly fool as a swordbrother? I can't even hunt.

"Thank you," he said eventually.

Storm kissed him, the touch of his lips light, undemanding. It ended and Storm sat there holding him for a long time as the sun slid below the towering walls of the canyon. With the departure of the sun the air grew colder, but Storm's warmth seemed to surround

Flame the way the blond's arms embraced him.

He felt rather than saw the last of Storm's willpower give out and the man slumped against the hide tent. He freed himself from his lap. "Please go and get some rest, Storm, you're still not at full strength."

Storm nodded and crawled into the tent, the door falling shut behind him.

Flame sat by the firestones for a while longer, deep in thought. It was beyond anything he'd expected for Storm to want to help him try to get his sister back. It almost seemed too much to ask even of a swordbrother and yet the offer had been made, Storm stating that Oasis was now his sister by blood due to them being swordbrothers.

He'd never experienced the swordbrother relationship, never experienced any kind of relationship in fact, but he wanted to do as much for Storm as the blond seemed to want to do for him.

But I've already done enough to save his life a few times so perhaps I'm not totally

useless.

His eyes widened. He should have found no more than a corpse in the wind when he'd first stumbled upon Storm a dreadcat's venom being very quick to kill. And the rock that Jagged had hit him with should have crushed his skull not just made him bleed.

And I saw none of it till now. I really am a fool.

Unable to make more sense of things than that, he put the leftover meat into the pot with the rest, tucked the berries into the tent also and, having made sure there was nothing outside to attract predatory animals, put the firestones out and crawled into the tent.

Storm waited for him inside with his shirt off. The bed furs were pulled aside to welcome Flame to a place beside him. "We'll do well to spend the storm season in the protection of the caverns. If the Season of Storms wasn't so close I'd be in favor of going to the Valley of the Sun to get the stones, but we don't dare. We've got no wagon and being caught in the open by a great blackstorm isn't something we should risk under those circumstances.

Going to get your sister will have to wait until we can mine for stones.”

Flame nodded, it made perfect sense to him. Even his strong hide tent could be blown away by a really fierce sandgale let alone a blackstorm. And he'd waited this long without any hope, so he could manage a few months with some of that emotion to warm his heart. “I'm really looking forward to seeing these caverns of yours. They must be quite something if they have room for the tent, our vehicles and a pool of water.”

He removed his outer clothing and crawled under the furs before he started shivering.

“They are pretty impressive I suppose. To be truthful I've never gone past the cave with the pool of water. There's at least one more cavern beyond that point, but you have to go through the water to reach it and I don't like being wet and cold,” Storm told him.

Storm's arms went around him, spooning against his back, something hard pressed to his behind. “Sandrunner brought you to me, I'm sure of it,” he murmured into Flame's ear. “I needed you, and I think you needed me.”

“Am I really what you want though? I’m fast beginning to believe I’m stupid, and nobody else has ever wanted me.” And that fact although hard to bear in some ways was the only reason Storm had been able to find him. Perhaps it was fate after all - or Sandrunner.

“Yes you are what I want and what I need. I cannot be swordbrother to a man of less power than my own. Sandrunner was powerful, but I think in you I’ve found my equal in power, and Sandrunner, though I loved him with all my heart, was not.”

Flame smiled into the darkness of the tent. “I doubt if another man in all the clans has as much power as you. To be able to handle sunstones alone...” He wouldn’t say more, didn’t want to voice what he was beginning to believe about Storm. That the man seemed unable to die.

“Among the Dragon’s Sons as our clans are called collectively-- and yes there are more than one that name themselves a Dragon Clan-- it is not an unknown talent. I know of two others, both distant kin of mine, and the

son and daughter of chiefs who can shape and make sunstones the way I do.”

Storm lips touched the nape of Flame’s neck, warm breath tickling his skin. “Do you want the full reason no one ever became your swordbrother in your former clan?”

Flame sighed and moved into that soft caress of lips. “Although I’m beginning to think it was fear of me, it would help destroy a few internal demons if I knew the truth.”

“None of them had the power to hold a bond with you. Power like ours can kill lesser men without us meaning to do it. We can so overwhelm their own magic that they die, or become little more than a dim reflection of the power we ourselves have.” Storm nuzzled the back of Flame’s neck, and whispered, “And yes, many times yes, I want you.”

The hardness pressing Flame’s bottom was unmistakably the man’s erect cock.

“I wish I wasn’t so tired,” Storm murmured, his tone full of regret.

So it had been fear of him coupled with the instinctive need to survive at all costs.

He snuggled back against Storm, much more relaxed and sure of himself now, feeling a lot less foolish. “I think I’ve wanted you since I first saw you,” he admitted. “Seemingly like draws like somehow.”

“They say that power calls to power. I believe that. I’d felt the pull from Sandrunner long before we were swordbrothers. Even as a child I watched Sandrunner and he’d watched me almost as if we had unspoken knowledge of what we were to one another. Sandrunner was older than I, but he’d never taken a swordbrother. Not until the day I became a warrior. He came to me and held out his hand without saying a word. I took it and we went off into the wasteland to be alone and make our bond.”

“You know, now even more than before, I really want to see this cave,” Flame said with a low chuckle. He surprised himself with how huskily it came out and was glad Storm couldn’t see his heated face in the dark.

He’d waited so long for someone to claim him, had been so lonely, and now the waiting was over and he’d never be alone again.

He found himself wishing they had been able to get to the cave already as there was an uncomfortable hardness between his legs and his balls were tight as drums.

I'm not going to be able to sleep like this. I want. . . But exactly what it was that he wanted he wasn't sure. He had no reference points apart from his own hand and what Storm had already shown him.

A hand slid around Flame to grip his cock, stroking the hardened flesh with firm gentleness. "I'll give you relief with my hand. I don't want you to suffer."

Flame swallowed hard, his already heated face becoming even hotter. "Storm...I..."

But the feeling was too good for words and he snuggled back against Storm's warm, hard body.

"Pleasure is something I can give you as thanks for all the things you have done for me, Flame," Storm murmured, his lips brushing over the skin of Flame's neck in light kisses as Storm's long fingered hand worked his sensitive flesh.

Flame sighed quietly and contentedly and gave in to the pleasure, his balls tightening even more at the feeling of another's hand on his cock. He was not used to such sensations and knew he wasn't going to last very long. It was all too new and intense for that.

He was rolled onto his back, Storm kissing him briefly then taking the hard flesh of his cock into his warm mouth and sucking. The firmness of Storm's tongue stroked over the head of Flame's erect flesh, increasing the pleasure of the contact.

He cried out at the feel of the satiny, wet warmth surrounding him and it was only a supreme effort of will that stopped him from bucking his hips, trying to get more of that feeling and more friction.

Warm flesh engulfed his erection as Storm's head moved up and down the pace increasing, his tongue stroking along the underside of Flame's cock adding sensation, driving him rapidly toward orgasm.

“Storm! Oh gods that feels so good...” He wanted to give pleasure in return so he did the only thing he knew how to do and

grabbed Storm's cock in his fist. It was the last coherent thing Flame managed before descending into little gasps and moans of pure pleasure.

The pace picked up, a hand wrapping around the base of Flame's cock, Storm's tongue stroking over the head, dipping into the tiny slit. A moan from the blond vibrated through his cock as the man kept sucking him.

Flame cried out again, Storm's name, wanting him to see what he was seeing, a mix of blue and red energies wrapping round both them and each other in a misty dance. Then he felt everything tighten in a prelude to orgasm. "Going to... please Storm going to. . ."

The tongue moved along the underside of his cock, stroking harder, urging him toward the release that already threatened to take him over the edge.

Flame's hand sped up as he tried to make Storm feel even a fraction of what he was feeling. At the same time he attempted to wriggle away, not wanting to embarrass them both by coming in Storm's mouth again. The

man had been very polite about it the first time but he really shouldn't make a habit of it. He found he couldn't get away though. Strong hands had hold of his hips, pinning him to the furs. It was all too much and with a wail of intense pleasure he came.

Storm swallowed every spurt of fluid, Flame's cock still in his mouth as it went soft. When it was finally over he smiled at Flame, licked his lips and lay down beside him. "What you're doing feels so good," the blond sighed. "You taste good too." Flame was pulled close, Storm's lips closing over his in a gentle kiss that tasted faintly of some sweet spice and salt.

"I do?" Flame said when he could finally speak coherently again. "Really? I was so ashamed to have so little control again." Then he remembered the cock in his hand and stroked the silken length of it the way he'd stroked himself in the past.

The strange energies were still swirling around them and he felt oddly happy at their presence.

"Don't worry about it. Endurance comes

with experience,” Storm replied, voice rough, tense, the tiredness gone. “Put your head on my shoulder and let me hold you while you pleasure me, though you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to, I’ll manage if you don’t.”

“But I want to do that for you,” Flame said. “It’s not right that I should have all the pleasure and you none.”

“But I want to do for you what you did for me,” Flame said. “It’s not right that I should have all that pleasure and you only this.”

“This isn’t the place or time to give that to me. I’ll try to make a bond with you and I don’t have the strength for that. I’ll wait until I do and then I’ll show you what real love making is like between men,” Storm told him and gave a peculiar little laugh. “At least I’ll try.”

Flame felt a spear of lust run through him at Storm’s words and he moved his hand even quicker, wanting to give his lover some pleasure in return.

His lover, the words rang in his head and

his heart and something stirred deep inside of him. The energies swirled even more quickly.

Storm held him tight, his breathing coming in ragged gasps that proved Flame knew how to give pleasure. “Flame, my swordbrother, my lover,” he groaned.

There they were again, those two words that touched his very essence - my lover. He snuggled into Storm’s embrace as his hand continued to pump the rigid flesh.

Flame found himself being kissed with hungry intensity. He was rolled onto his back, Storm breaking the kiss to look down at him, his breathing coming in harsh gasps, eyes bright with passion.

No, not just passion, they were actually glowing.

“Do you feel it, Flame? Do you feel our magics trying to join the way I desire to join my body to yours in passion?”

“Is that what I’m seeing?” he asked. “Brilliant blue and vibrant red energy swirling around us like a dance? If so I’m seeing it as

well as feeling it.”

He smiled up at his lover. “Your eyes are actually glowing. They’re so beautiful.”

A gentle hand touched Flame’s cheek, brushed across his lips. “You’re so pale and perfect it makes my heart ache. I want you, Flame. I want to make love to you, but this isn’t the right place or time.” Storm kissed him, his tongue delving deep into his mouth, giving him another taste of that spicy sweetness. “By all the gods I never expected to feel this again, not for anyone, yet--” tears blurred the glow in Storm’s gaze, “I find I want you as much as I wanted Sandrunner.”

Flame clung to the blond with his free arm wanting to comfort him as he remembered his lost love. His hand still gripped Storm’s beautiful cock. This was something he could do for his lover, could give him back a small part of the pleasure he’d received. He began moving it again, a steady rhythm to match his heartbeat.

Those hot lips closed over his again, the contact scorching in its intensity, a soft moan vibrating down his throat as Storm responded

to the touch of his hand and the power of his magic. Soul to soul, the bond trying to form around them.

He smiled into the searing kiss before moaning at its power. It was too much. Perhaps he didn't have enough power to match Storm's concentrated might. And yet somehow it all felt so right, he was complete as he'd never been before.

The kiss stopped, those unnaturally brilliant aqua eyes alight in the darkness, even the golden rim glowing. Looking at the windmage, Flame could see the whirling blue and gold of Storm's magic mingling with the red of his own power, the colors intertwining to form rich violet.

Storm said nothing, his mouth covering Flame's in another deep, impassioned kiss, Storm groaning loudly as his erection spasmed in his hand.

Flame felt warmth spill over his hand but didn't stop until Storm's cock stopped spurting. When it did he lifted his hand to his lips and licked up Storm's fluids smiling at the rich and delicious taste.

Storm lay down beside him, his arms pulling Flame close. “Thank you,” he murmured, voice slurred by exhaustion.

Storm’s breathing slowed, falling into the deep, even pace of someone walking in the land of dreams.

Flame lay awake, staring into the darkness of the tent and thinking about what Storm had said earlier. I’ll show you what real lovemaking is like between men. The words sang in his soul, calling to something deep within him, something alive and powerful. Something he’d never experienced before this night.

He felt as if he should be afraid of whatever it was but found that he wasn’t. He wanted to embrace whatever it was as much as he wanted to form a bond with Storm.

He heard distant scavengers, fighting over the bird offal he’d carried away from the tent as an offering to them and felt at one with both them and everything around him and remembered the energies flowing about them, merging.

Did this mean the bond had already started to form? He recognized that whatever this new awareness was it was part of his magic, not Storm's.

Everything felt new, different, more intense, from the feel of the warm furs around him to the sounds of the night outside.

Flame was lying there, listening, aware of everything round him in a way he'd never experienced when he noticed something else: the warm presence of the man beside him.

But it was more than just physical warmth he felt. He felt the seething power contained within the soul of the man at his side.

Did that mean that Storm too had this extra awareness, this part of his soul that was different somehow?

He began to wonder if it was simply his imagination playing tricks on him. Small tent, middle of nowhere, none of the sounds of the clan around him, closer to nature-- such as it was-- on this icy mud ball. Could that be affecting him?

A small burst of energy filled him. A flash

of power that spoke of anger and disgust that he might consider what he felt to be nothing but a figment of his imagination.

Eyes wide in surprise he gave up trying to figure it out in case whatever it was became too infuriated with him.

The energy faded slowly and sighing in relief, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep. Gradually he relaxed and slid into dreams of a fiery red bird.

Storm came awake, his awareness of his surroundings acute. First he felt the warm comfort of a man's body beside his. A man, but not his lost Sandrunner.

Flamespirit. A healer and man of great power. A man he was certain Sandrunner had led to him from beyond the grasp of death.

Ghosts. He believed in them because he'd seen more than one in his twenty plus years of life.

Beyond the soft breathing of his new

lover-- warmth filled him at that thought, the word lover like the golden glow of the sun on a cold morning-- he could hear the soft blowing of the wind, the sound of the sand shifting.

He sat up. The sand shouldn't be shifting, the wind wasn't strong enough and that meant that something, or someone, was approaching them stealthily.

He put a gentle hand over Flame's mouth and leaned in close to whisper directly into his ear, "We've got company and I don't think they have our best interest in mind."

They were both naked, but that hardly mattered. The warriors of all clans were trained to fight from childhood. Clothing wasn't needed to fight, only weapons were important when one's life was at stake.

Flame nodded and one of his arms reached for his flame shaped blade without making a sound.

Storm picked up his twin swords and exited the tent in a rush ready to do battle. He felt like a total fool when a flock of small runnerbirds

went scurrying off into the darkness.

Flame just behind him and obviously as ready to fight chuckled softly. “It’s not the first time I’ve done that!”

Storm didn’t reply. The birds had made him think the danger was close, but they weren’t the threat. Something was out there in the deep shadows among the spires of rock. He could feel eyes on them. Watching them.

A faint drift of breeze told him of dawn’s approach.

Dawn, typically the time when clans were attacked by wandering bands of outlaws. Killers who did murder for the things they wanted. And the two of them with their two vehicles and a sled loaded with things made an easy target for such people.

“Can you see well enough to pack up? There is someone out there watching us, I’m sure of it.”

Flame nodded. “I can feel it too,” he said quietly, “and the hair on the back of my neck has risen. Leave the packing to me.” He returned to the tent’s interior and started

rolling the furs.

“Get dressed first. We can worry about our stuff after. It won’t do either of us any good to get chilled. I’ll keep watch, and when you’re dressed I’ll put on my clothes and you can watch.”

Storm scanned the plain, watching for motion. Other than the startled runnerbirds there wasn’t anything moving out there. But that didn’t make him any less wary. They were being observed, whoever was out there was lying in wait, planning, considering, weighing their next move.

Flame nodded and climbed quickly into his clothes. He was still wearing his old clothing, the new furs, leathers and boots packed under the cover on the sled.

Once dressed he crawled back outside, sword in hand.

“You ready?” he asked Flame, speaking in the barest whisper as he pulled Flame into a quick embrace, his lips seeking out the other man’s mouth, setting a tender kiss on the firm flesh. He let go, shoved his swords into

the sand and left them standing there beside the door. Entering the small tent he dressed, pulled out the remains of their meal from the night before and crawled out of the small space.

“Eat while I watch. Something tells me we’ll need our strength before the sun has risen fully over the horizon and starved bellies aid no battle or flight.”

Flame risked setting a very small pile of firestones aglow, just enough to reheat the left over stew from the night before. While it warmed he chewed on a few of the small sweet berries he had gathered.

The meat was soon warm enough to eat and he shut down the stones while he ate a portion of the savory food.

While Flame ate, Storm kept his eyes on the crags of the canyon where he’d hunted yesterday evening. There were eyes on them, watching them. He felt it in the prickling at the nape of his neck, and in the chill dancing along his spine.

“Do you feel it?” He whispered the question

to Flame so the sound of his voice wouldn't carry on the predawn cold air. "Do you feel the gaze of a watcher?"

"More than one," Flame whispered back with a nod. "I think about four or five although that might be my disquiet speaking. I'm finished eating so I'll take watch."

Storm thought about what Flame had said. "I feel only one, and he's definitely not a friend, but I'll trust your judgment on the numbers. You have powers unlike mine."

As they swapped places Flame stared out into the night. "I don't believe I would feel this uneasy if there was just one watcher," he said very quietly. "One is easy to deal with but my instincts are saying fight or flee."

Storm shoveled a spoonful of the stew into his mouth and grunted an agreement as he chewed. Whoever was watching them probably knew they were on the move, the glow of the firestones would have pinpointed the precise location of their camp.

If the watchers had the advantage of height they would know the instant the tent came

down that they were running, no one struck camp and moved in the darkness unless they had no choice.

And, the way Storm looked at it, they didn't have much of a choice. His magical abilities were far too depleted to risk a battle, and he had no desire to risk Flame's life either. Not when they could avoid fighting by running.

He finished his portion of the meal and wiped the pot out with some sand before rinsing it with a splash of precious water. Where they were going they'd have more than enough for their needs.

Unless they were forced to bypass the cave because of pursuers.

Flame tensed. "They're on the move, coming towards us. I think they want our possessions."

Storm swore under his breath. "Pack fast I'll see if I can persuade them we're not worth their effort," he told his lover and sheathed his blades before jumping on his warcycle and starting it up.

"Be ready abandon anything not packed

and make a run for it just in case they aren't willing to talk," he added as he fed power to the warcycle the heavy vehicle rolling forward at a crawl so he didn't shower Flame and their gear in sand.

"Be careful," Flame said softly. "I've only just found you and I don't want to lose you." He blushed as he spoke and turned abruptly away to pack.

"I will. Be on the look out for anyone coming up from another direction. I don't feel anyone else, but then again I didn't feel the number of people you noticed.

Storm rolled out toward the oncoming men, giving his warcycle more speed as he drew away from their camp. He didn't go far, staying within Flame's range of sight and hearing--within shouting distance. But there was enough space between where he was meeting the danger and Flame to give the other man time to work, or flee if it came to that.

There were four of them, two men and two women mounted in pairs on scoutcycles, all of them armed with knives. One of the men,

burly and with no warrior marks, dismounted leaving his cycle for the woman to hold and stepped forward. “Just give us the warcycle and the furs and we’ll let you and your friend live.”

Storm regarded the man coolly. “You’re City people aren’t you?” he asked, ignoring the man’s demand. His gaze took in the woven clothing they wore. They lacked the proper furs needed for the cold of the upcoming season of winds fast approaching.

The man glared attempting to look brave though Storm could smell the fear coming off him in waves. “What if we are? Just give us the stuff and we’ll be on our way.”

Scared. I’m small for a clansman but I’m a half head taller than this man. I must look terrifying to them.

“I’m a clansman and a warrior. Do you think the four of you with your puny knives and those pitiful bikes you’re riding are enough to intimidate me?” He smiled, but there was nothing humorous about the look, his baring of his teeth had more in common with the snarl of a predator.

He stroked the dark fur of his jacket. “Do you know what a darbear looks like? Twenty feet of pure hate equipped with claws longer than those knives of yours. They’re wrapped in silky black fur just like this, and to become a warrior a boy has to kill one and survive to tell the story to his clan. This is the fur of the darbear I killed. I suggest the group of you ride away as fast as you can in the opposite direction before I show you how a warrior of the clans goes about killing a darbear.”

It sounded like pure bravado, but if the group of them knew anything about the clans they’d know it wasn’t empty bragging because that was exactly how many clans determined who was a warrior and who wasn’t, and he’d killed one year before most warriors even made the attempt.

The man attempted to look nonchalant although it didn’t quite come off as he was shuffling his feet, while the women started looking around nervously as if expecting to see a darbear appear before their eyes. “I said coming out here was a bad idea,” one of them whined.

“She’s right. Armed with nothing but knives you won’t stand a chance if a predator decides you look like a meal,” Storm told them. “And the Season of Storms is almost on us. Without shelter and enough food to make it through the bad weather you’ll die.”

He pointed in the direction of the Stone Clan’s camp. “If you go that way, down a long stone ramp you’ll come to the camp of Stonecrusher. If you beg shelter and aid they might give it to you, or they might kill you as outlaws, but either way, you’ll die if they don’t help you.”

Storm fed a trace of power to his warcycle, ready to leave because he’d come close to talking himself out. “And if you know what’s good for you the four of you will leave my swordbrother and I alone, unless you want to die.” He fed power to the cycle and turned it around, waiting for them to do something stupid, hoping they would heed his advice and just leave him and Flame alone. He’d done enough fighting and killing over Stonefist’s idiocy, he didn’t want to engage in more pointless battles.

There was a short but heated debate the women voting to try their luck with the clan while the men argued that they had nothing to offer said clan. One woman muttered about two perfectly good cycles and a tube of sunstones and that seemed to sway the men enough for the first man to remount his cycle.

Storm shook his head and left them to their argument. It had nothing to do with him and he wanted no part in whatever they decided so long as it took them away from Flame. He returned to their camp, stopping his warcycle but not shutting the machine down.

Flame's skin shone under the caress of the dim light of daybreak, the first rays of the sun striking fire from his lover's hair.

This man is my lover. My lover. My lover. And I think I'm already falling in love with him.

"They're busy arguing, how much is left to pack?" he asked as he dismounted and went to help Flame.

The tent was still up, but it appeared to

be completely empty, the contents already packed on the sled.

“Just the tent to take down and pack,” Flame said. He glanced in the direction of the still arguing foursome. “They don’t look like much after all, yet I still feel uneasy and there is another presence out there somewhere.”

Storm glanced out into the growing light of day. “I don’t even feel them, but there’s someone else out there who is triggering my internal alarms.”

He scanned the distant walls of stone, but he couldn’t see anyone. Then again that wasn’t a surprise, he’d defy anyone to spot him if he were watching someone from so much possible cover.

“They thought they were going to steal from us with threats but I convinced them how stupid it would be to even try. They’re only armed with knives, can you imagine either of us surrendering to a quartet of idiots with knives? They’re City people, not clan outlaws which I’m happy is the case. I played the bragging game like any clansman and they backed down.”

He helped Flame take down the tent, aware that the four squabbling City people could still talk themselves into something he didn't want to deal with: a fight.

Flame chuckled at the tactics he'd described. It was the normal way for a clansman to act with a weaker foe. "What are City people doing out here?" he asked. "They wouldn't even begin to know how to survive." He shook his head at the stupidity as he lashed the tent hides to the sled.

"I don't know, but I told them to head toward your clan. They might let them stay because the women are attractive or they might just kill them, I don't know and it's not our problem." Storm glanced toward the City people to find them still quarreling among themselves.

He lifted his eyes to the rocks, frowning.

Whoever I feel out there is still watching us. Those City people aren't any real threat, but whoever this might be is hostile. Dangerous. I wonder what he wants and why he's watching us?

Maybe it's Jagged come to get revenge or someone else from the Stone Clan.

"Is that everything?" he asked Flame as the last of their things were loaded onto the sled.

"Yes that's it, all done. We can move." Flame stood up. "If the men have some useful skills to teach or the women can weave those City dwellers might just survive though they'll find it hard out here."

His talk was easy, unfazed yet his eyes were constantly moving as he searched for whoever was watching.

"I think they're already discovering that leaving the City was a mistake," Storm remarked as he checked Flame's sled to make sure nothing would come loose if they had to go at speed. The City people were on poor quality bikes that made it unlikely they could even match the pace Flame's workbike could attain with its new sunstone.

Better to run than be forced to kill them.

Storm put on his dust mask and protective helmet. "You ready Flamespirit?"

Flame climbed onto his workbike and nodded, smiling slightly. “I think I’m ready for just about anything.”

He adjusted his mask and goggles and started the bike.

Power does call to power, Storm mused, his heart warmed by that trace of a smile Flame had given him. We’re together and no matter what happens, we’ll face it and meet the challenge. I’m not alone, I’m alive, and I have a beautiful man to share my dreams and my future with.

He leaned his cycle toward Flame’s, rested his helmeted forehead against the other man’s helmet, bumping them together gently. “Are you sure you want me?” he asked one last time before it was too late for Flame to return to his former clan.

“I’m more than just sure,” was all Flame said and there was a wealth of conviction and some other warmer emotion in his tone.

Storm bumped his helmet to Flame’s a second time, reached out and touched his hand, his fingers curling around warm flesh

and giving it a quick squeeze. “Well what are we waiting for then? Let’s go.”

He put his cycle in motion, taking the lead, scouting out a trail the workbike and sled could follow.

Two young mages with strong magic striking out on their own. Two mages soon to be swordbrothers as Storm believed Sandrunner wanted. Together they rode into the darkness, heading for an uncertain future.

No matter what happened they would share that future together.

