

Dragon & Fenyx 2

Swordbrothers



Auburnimp & Michael Barnette

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A Swordbrothers / Immortal Heroes

Crossover Series Novella

World of Dragonhope

Dragon and Fenyx 2: Swordbrothers

By Auburnimp and Michael Barnette

Chapter One

Forging the Bond

Brown eyes looked at him, raw emotion filling them. Love and trust, hope, so much feeling warming his lover's gaze, and all of it centered on him. Stormdragon got off his warcycle, shaking his head, his braids falling free around his shoulders. He hung his helmet on the control yoke of his cycle and stood there regarding the cave where he'd once become swordbrothers with the first man he loved.

Sandrunner, his lover, friend, swordbrother. The man who'd died in his arms. The swordbrother he'd failed to follow into the awaiting arms of Death as did most men bonded by magic. He'd survived in shame among his people, mourning the loss of his lover until his anger and pain forced him to depart or commit an unforgivable crime: kin murder.

If he'd never run he wouldn't have met Flamespirit. Wouldn't have heard the ghost of Sandrunner whispering to him. Telling him that he had to live, that he'd found a new love,

a new man with whom to forge the bond of swordbrothers.

A ghost whom Storm felt certain had blessed his coming union with Flamespirit. He held his gloved hand out ready to lead them both into the cave. He'd forged a bond with Sandrunner, his first love here, and here was where he would forge an even stronger bond with Flamespirit.

He smiled, his hand outstretched toward the man with the fire colored hair. Hair that matched his power over fire, his soon to be swordbrother a powerful mage able to call flames from within the core of his soul, just as he himself could summon the power of the wind to do his bidding.

"Don't be afraid, Flame. I won't hurt you, I swear it on my soul."

The younger man climbed off his workbike, stretched and smiled as he took the proffered hand. "Who says I'm afraid? I know you'll never hurt me."

He glanced about him, his face showing his interest in his surroundings. Finally he nodded and smiled once more. "Not bad. Not bad at all."

The walls of the cavern were smoothed, any dangerous projections removed by the power of a stonemage. The floor had been leveled giving the first cavern a reasonably pleasant livable area. Off to one side were a collection of things stored on a couple of shelves. Folded tenting, a few furs and a small box of the sort used to carry tools for repairing cycles and workbikes.

“We didn’t stay here long. Sandrunner wanted some place we could come to be away from the rest of the clan,” Storm replied as he led Flame inside. “After I left the clan, this was the only place I had left where I could go.”

Flame was busy, inspecting the smoothed out cave. “My clanspeople were such fools. The few mages they have are battle stonemages and not one of them could do something like this.” He glanced at the wide cave mouth. “What do you do in blackstorm season?”

“We never stayed here through a blackstorm,” he admitted. “We’d thought about it, but there wasn’t any reason for us to leave the clan.” Storm sighed, the old pain rising up to claw at him. “I wish we had left them. Sandrunner would be alive if we had, but I couldn’t leave. I was Heir to

the Chief then. Now I'm nothing but an outlaw, shunned by my own father."

No sooner had Storm said those words than he realized how Flame might feel about what he'd said. "I'm sorry. I don't want you to think I regret anything with you. Not ever. I don't. It's just...." He pulled Flamespirit close, "I still miss him."

Flame was stiff in Storm's arms for all of two seconds before he relaxed and wound his arms round him. Brown eyes gazed up into his, their expression sad but calm. "I understand. I still miss my sister but at least I know she's alive somewhere."

"Enough of the past," Stormdragon said, determined to move forward with his life. "It's time we both forget our past and work on what sort of future we're going to have." He reached up, caressed Flame's cheek. "This is your last chance to change your mind, Flame. Do you still want this with me or do we call it quits and go our separate ways?"

Flame's brown eyes flickered as a whole gamut of emotions crossed them ending on pain. "Is that what you want me to do? Take up my few

miserable belongings and leave you with your memories?”

“No, I want desperately for you to stay with me, Flame. I want it more than words will convey... but I’m damaged goods. The pain in my heart is an old wound that may never heal and I...”

Storm let go of the other man, stepped back knowing his anguish lay plain to see in his eyes. “I don’t want you to feel you’ve been forced into bonding with me. I know my magic calls to yours, and yours has answered, yet... I can’t help feeling as if I’ve somehow coerced you into this, as if I’ve somehow forced you to come with me.”

“Coerced?” Flame repeated the word as if unsure of its meaning. “How did you do that? You kept trying to leave my old clan and now it seems as if you want me to leave. If that *is* what you want then tell me and I’ll go.”

Storm turned away, shoulders hunched as if he expected to be struck. “That’s just it, Flame. I don’t want you to go but...” his voice broke, shoulders shaking under the lash of emotion ripping at him. He was scared. Scared that something terrible would happen to Flame. That

he'd lose him the way he'd lost Sandrunner. He couldn't face that a second time, watching his lover die in his arms had broken his heart. He'd had half his soul ripped out, and he'd lived. To his shame.

Taking a deep breath, Storm fought to steady his emotions. Fighting with the ghosts of his past. The pain of losing the only person he'd ever loved.... *Until now.*

"I love you, Flamespirit. I know it sounds stupid, because we barely know each other, but it's true."

Flame gazed at him for a long moment as if trying to weigh the worth of Storm's words in his mind. Then he nodded to himself and moved back into Storm's arms. "I love you too, Stormdragon, and I think you'll find I'm very hard to lose."

Uncertainty gnawed at him, but Storm wanted the man in his arms so much he'd risk future pain. He held Flamespirit tight as he pressed his lips to the fire haired man's mouth in a gentle kiss.

The kiss was returned, Flame's mouth opening in welcome under his, the firemage's arms lifting

to encircle his neck. A low moan of need sounded in his throat before being swallowed in the kiss.

He touched Flame's tongue with his own, enjoying the slightly sweet taste of the other man, kissing until they were both gasping for air and his erection threatened to rip through the constraints of his pants. Aching and wanting to be sunk to the root of his erection inside Flame, he backed away.

"Right. We need to unpack the sled and get our bed out before we take this farther." He gazed into Flame's eyes. "Unless you want to make love on bare rock."

Flame grimaced as he let go of Storm and headed towards his sled. "I think, on consideration, the bed would be much more comfortable."

He started unpacking his belongings and gave a low whistle at the quality of the thick furs the clan had given him. "I've never owned anything this fine before."

Storm wrapped his arms around Flame from behind, hugging the man to his chest. Having the

other man in his arms was a good feeling. Like coming home after a long absence, or waking up knowing you weren't alone, that you'd never *be* alone as long as you lived.

"You should have been a valued member of their clan, not a virtual outcast. Your ability as a healer makes you someone of rare talent. Add the fact that you're a firemage and their incredible stupidity shines bright as an uncovered sunstone."

Flame frowned, the expression radiating unhappiness. "Hopefully they can put it right but I think Stonecrusher took over too late. There's precious little magic left in the clan and without it they'll die."

"They aren't your problem, or mine. From now on we only have to worry about ourselves. I know it sounds selfish, but what did they ever do to deserve more than that from you?"

He let Flame go only to take him by the shoulders and turn the firemage around to regard him intently. "It won't be easy, we'll be labeled outlaws, but if you're willing, we can try and make our life away from the clans work. Or we can find a tribe willing to take us in for what we

can offer, which is a lot more than most clanless swordbrothers would have. You're a healer and I'm a stonewielder, those aren't common abilities in any clan."

He let Flame go and reached past him to grab some of the load off the sled.

"I know," Flame said, his voice soft, "and I'm certain we'll do well."

He took the first part of the bed framework off the sled and looked around for a suitable place to put it. Nodding toward a convenient corner he raised a brow. "Over there?"

When Storm nodded he carried it across the cave put it down and went back for another piece. Halfway there he stopped, a thoughtful expression on his face. "You know, I can't see you as anything *but* a leader so I don't think we should join another clan so much as form our own. I know some of the people from my clan weren't happy with the way things were. Then again that might change now. But I'll bet there are others out there who need to find some sort of home with good leadership."

"I'm not sure I'm fit to lead a clan," Storm

replied. His future as a clan leader was one of two things his lying brother had taken from him that he really did resent. The other thing was the love of their father, and of the two, that was the loss that hurt most.

Flame gave him a wry look. “And Stonefist was?”

“Point made,” Storm agreed as he carried a section of the bed frame over to Flame and set it down. They might not have every comfort a pair of swordbrothers could want, but they were far from destitute. *For me this is adequate, for him it's got to seem like riches beyond his wildest imagining. How different life is for us both, and it's only going to change more when we make the bond.*

Flame continued unpacking the bed frame and then carried another piece across the cave. “Many lead who are not fit to whilst others, like yourself, who are, never get the chance.”

“What makes you think I'd be a good clan leader?” he questioned as he picked up two of the sections of bed frame and pushed the locking ends together. “I had my chance, and I let my brother take it from me.”

Flame brought the last piece across and crouched down to help with the assembly. “You’re strong, you have power and I think you’d be fair. That’s all most people want from a leader.”

Storm nodded. “You’re right. I know you are. My father chose me over Dragonwind when I was just a kid but that didn’t keep him from disowning me the instant he decided I’d actually done something wrong.” He gave the bed frame a good shake to make sure it was properly locked. “And if I’m clan chief that makes you my second in charge. Do you think you’ll be able to handle that?”

Flame smirked at him. “With every woman depending on me at births and my total control over firestones, yes, I think I could handle it.”

Storm’s brows drew together and his lips pressed into a firm line. He shook his head. “That wasn’t what I mean. You’ll be responsible for helping me make every decision, including who gets into the clan and any trading with the City or other clans. Mistakes could make us very unpopular.”

Flame was suddenly serious again. “I’m very

good at reading people due to the empathy. Which means the first shouldn't be a problem nor should the third for the same reason. The City, however, is an unknown entity."

He glanced up, holding Storm's eyes with his own. "My heart says the less I have to do with the City the better but my head tells me they have access to things we will need. I have to go there and see if I can feel my sister's presence."

"As soon as the blackstorms are over we'll go, I promise. If she's there we'll find her," Storm stated as he headed over to the sled to get some of the furs they'd use for bedding. He carried them over and lay them down on the bed platform, arranging each fur to offer them the comfort a bed should.

Flame watched him for a moment before going across to finish unloading the sled. He picked up more furs and carried them into the cave. "I know," he said simply, "I have faith in what you say."

Storm took the load of furs that Flame carried in and threw them down beside the bed. Eyes on his lover he reached for the buttons holding his own jacket closed, taking it off and tossing it

aside. Still regarding Flame he slowly removed the vest followed by his shirt. Bare-chested he crossed the short distance between them to take Flame in his arms.

His mouth closed over Flame's, tongue pressing to the seam of the flame haired man's lips seeking entry.

Flame's mouth opened immediately, letting him in, offering him all that he was, wordlessly and without hesitation.

Their tongues moving in the age old dance of passion, Storm started to undress his lover, removing Flame's jacket, dropping it to the floor before he reached for the closures of Flame's vest. It quickly fell to the floor behind Flame, his shirt following, leaving the skin of his torso bare for Storm's hands.

He caressed Flame's back, ending with his palms pressed to Flame's behind. He pulled the man tight to him. Chest to chest, the feel of his lover's soft skin against him, Storm deepened their kiss.

Blue ribbons of light shimmered into being around them, the glow lighting the cave. The

faint hint of a breeze ruffled their hair. Fiery shades of Flame's own magic, red and orange drifted up as myriad glittering sparks.

Flame gasped into the kiss, his hands running over Storm's skin, touching gently, hesitantly.

Storm ended the kiss and stared into Flame's beautiful dark eyes. "Last chance," he murmured as a scattering of brilliant sparks danced across his skin. He trembled, gasping at the touch of his lover's power, felt it sink into his flesh, warming him more thoroughly than any pile of firestones could on a cold day.

Flame laughed aloud. "Too late for chances, I think," he said as he felt a warm breeze flow through him. "Our powers have no doubts. Perhaps we should trust them."

"I think you may be right, Flame."

Storm picked Flame up and carried him to the bed putting him down on the soft furs. The windmage regarded Flame, gaze full of admiration. "You're beautiful, Flame," Storm said and knelt to unlatch Flame's boots. "I want you naked so I can look at *all* of you."

Flame blushed at the words but made no

move at all to stop Storm. Instead his eyes took in the swirls of blue dancing around them both joined with red, darting, spark shapes from his own power. He lifted his hips off the bed as he watched so Storm could remove the rest of his clothing more easily.

The windmage tossed Flame's pants aside and stood there, his gold rimmed aqua eyes moving over Flame. The look alone spoke of desire, of how much the man wanted him. If the expression on his lover's face wasn't enough to prove his desire, the hard outline of his cock beneath his leather pants certainly did.

"Beautiful. Beautiful and soon to be mine," Storm murmured and lay beside Flame. His lover pressed Flame into the softness of the piled furs, Storm capturing his mouth in a kiss that burned a trail of need right to his groin.

Flame gasped as the blue ribbons of light intensified, multiplied as Storm's tongue darted into his mouth, touching and tasting him.

Flame arched into the kiss, trying his hardest to touch every part of Storm's body with his own, wanting to feel the texture of skin against skin, breathing in his lover's unique scent. A

firm leather clad thigh pressed between his legs, touching his balls, putting the lightest pressure on his cock; adding sensation, increasing the pleasure.

The darting sparks of his power changed and became long, pulsing streamers of red and gold, intertwining with the blue, weaving through the air, sliding over them both as gentle warmth and the caress of a zephyr across their skin.

Stormdragon broke the kiss, hands caressing Flame, his breathing ragged, his eyes actually glowing with the power of the magic flowing through him. "I want you, Flame. All of you," he stated.

"Oh gods, Storm," Flame cried out as unaccustomed sensation threatened to drown him in pleasure. His hands came off the furs, running down Storm's back, tracing the shape of muscles and sinews, reveling in the feel of smooth skin.

Storm gave a deep hum, evincing pleasure at the touch, a sexy smile curling the corners of his mouth. "There are so many things I want to show you. So many things I want to do with

you, to you, that I'm not sure where to start," his lover admitted.

Flame chuckled softly, somewhat surprised by Storm's confusion. "Start with the basics," he suggested. "We can get fancy later. Right now all I want is for you to claim me, to form the bond."

His lover laughed and shook his head, amused. "I wasn't thinking of anything 'fancy' Flame. I was thinking about how good you tasted when I sucked you."

Warm breath tickled Flame's neck as Storm leaned closer. Pressing his face into Flame's hair, Storm whispered into his ear. "I want to sink my cock deep into your heat and make you scream my name. I want to hear your cries of pleasure as I make you mine."

The blue streamers of Storm's wind magic wove and intertwined into the fiery glow of Flame's fire magic, a combined ribbon slid over Storm's shoulder and Flame felt his lover's shudder. The ribbon trailed down Storm's arm to flow across Flame's chest tingling over his skin.

"I can't believe how... innocent you are," Storm

stated and lowered his head to claim Flame's mouth in another kiss.

Flame's eyes darkened with remembered pain, years of loneliness, of being all but shunned by his clan. "Fear tends to put lovers off."

The tingling magic made him forget all about the past and think only of the now and the man who wanted him. "Did I really taste that good?"

It was hard for him to believe someone could feel that way about him, even now.

Storm's smile turned to a grin. "Hell yes," he replied as he kissed his way along Flame's jaw, a hand sliding over Flame's chest, fingers touching then pinching one of his nipples.

Flame smiled up at him, all signs of pain gone from his heavy-lidded eyes. "Mmm, feels so good, you and the magic."

His hands went back to their explorations of Storm's body, this time sweeping downwards over his back until they came to rest against leather. Flame frowned. "Why do you get to see all of me but I don't get to see you?"

Storm chuckled and rolled onto his back. “You hadn’t asked. Now that you have maybe you can help me get out of these. They seem to have gotten awfully tight in one particular place. Could be you’re to blame for that, sexy boy.”

Flame blushed again at the words but he did sit up so he could loosen the laces of Storm’s leather pants. He eased them down over slender hips, releasing his lover’s already dripping cock.

His eyes widened slightly. *I’m never going to be able to take all that!*

He relaxed again as a new instinct took over and he leant forward to lick the pre-cum from Storm’s cock.

Storm gave a low moan of approval, his hand sliding along Flame’s thigh to stop at his balls, his hand gripping them gently, rolling them. “So many things I can show you, Flame. So many pleasurable things for you to learn,” his lover said, voice deeper, rougher.

Flame groaned softly before taking hold of Storm’s cock by the root.

He hoped he was doing the right things as he took the head of Storm’s cock into his mouth,

wanting more of the sweet, salty taste of his lover. His power flared even higher as if in approval of his actions.

A wide band of cobalt blue spun away from Storm, the light breeze looping around to tease across Flame's skin in a tingling caress that followed Storm's right hand as it moved over Flame's shoulders and spine. The hand holding his balls continued to roll them, fanning the heat of desire, Storm moaning as Flame sucked his erection.

Flame felt a mixture of pleasure and relief. The relief came from knowing that Storm was happy with what he was doing, the pleasure from what Storm was doing to him and the power that swirled around, between and through them both; power that wouldn't be there if this bonding was not intended to happen.

Flame relaxed as he realized the truth of that. Despite Storm's misgivings, they were meant to be swordbrothers. As he relaxed he gave even more lavish attention to the cock in his mouth, using tongue and gentle teeth to try to give Storm the pleasure he always gave him.

He must have been doing everything

right, because Storm's gasps and moans were increasing in frequency, as were the ribbons of magical energy spinning around them from the windmage.

"Flame... it feels... so good..." Storm gasped out, his hand moving from Flame's balls to his erection, closing around the hardened flesh and stroking it in a firm grip.

Flame gasped around Storm's cock as his own was stroked and the red ribbons of his power increased in tempo and brightness as they danced around them both.

Not that he noticed them, he was too busy trying to please the man fate had sent to him just in time, before his heart finally broke and he gave up the will to live. As that thought flashed through his mind he heard a scream, somewhat like that of a hawk, and caught a glimpse of the red bird of his dreams.

It rose into the air, high above both of them; its great burning wings spread wide, the sharp curve of its beak opening for another shrill scream. But it wasn't alone. A dim, misty outline of something else was forming, taking shape. Something composed of blue and gold mist, a

glint of shimmering scales and the vague outline of leathery blue wings.

That was all Flame got a chance to see before Storm pushed him away with a growled, “Stop, or I’m going to cum.”

Storm appeared oblivious to the strange beasts of light, mist and fire above them. As far as Flame could tell the windmage remained unaware of anything but what he desired: him.

Storm rolled Flame onto his back, the misty serpentine form copying the action with the bird of fire.

Flame was confused for a moment, thinking he’d done something wrong, but he settled again when Storm rolled him onto his back. He smiled up at the beautiful man, trusting and anticipating at one and the same time. “I love you, Stormdragon,” he whispered.

Storm kissed him, their mouths meeting in a union as fiery as Flame’s power, as overwhelming as a blackstorm wind.

The mist thickened around them, shot through with coruscating sparks and flickering tongues of fire. Streamers of blue danced and spun through

the dancing embers, the magical energy spinning around them as the forms of the Beasts took on greater clarity. A bird composed of fire, burning wings spread wide, and a lean, scaled body with a long serpentine neck, four powerful legs and two arching leathery wings.

The Beasts above him had names. Flame knew that, but his mind, so occupied with the sensations coiling in his balls, burning through his cock, refused to dredge up what they were called.

And Storm, whose kisses were driving him mercilessly into the inferno of lust, still hadn't noticed the creatures forming above them.

Panting, Storm broke the kiss, his blazing aqua and gold eyes were alight with the magic, filled with passion. His hands gripped Flame's shoulders. Above them the scaled beast held the bird of flame pinned beneath it.

"I love you, and I want you, Flamespirit." Storm's mouth locked to his in another mind searing kiss that felt as if his very soul were being branded by his lover's desire. Above them the serpentine beast lowered its head, tongue

flicking along the bird's beak, slipping inside, the creatures mimicking their actions.

Flame tore his eyes from the strange beasts with an effort of will as he gave in to the desires awakening in his mind, heart, soul and body. This was so right, so perfect.

He groaned as Storm plundered his mouth, not with force but with gentleness and love, and clung to his lover like a sheltering rock in a blackstorm. Above him the bird gave in to the serpentine creature and Flame tried to get almost impossibly closer to Storm, feeling tingling heat and energy wherever their skin touched.

Storm groaned, pressing his pelvis against Flame's, their cocks brushing, touching, the blond shivering at the sensation.

The windmage ended the kiss, gasping for breath. Storm caressed Flame's cheek, brushed across his lips with the pad of his thumb. "Flame, I want you. I want to sink my cock inside you. I want to fuck you until you scream from the pleasure. I want to drive myself into you until we both cum."

Storm's words sent a shudder of desire through

Flame and he looked up into those remarkable and stunning aqua and gold eyes and smiled before he nodded his assent to the plan. “Yesss,” he hissed out. “Do it, Storm. I want it. I want you, all of you.”

His lover reached under the furs, pulled out a small jar and opened it. The scent of something sweet, faintly floral, reached Flame’s nostrils. Storm dipped his fingers into the jar and they came out coated in a glistening substance. Storm capped the jar and set it aside.

Smiling Storm used his right hand to pull Flame onto his side. “Just relax,” he urged and pressed his cool, slick fingers between Flame’s butt cheeks, the tip of one touching the tight ring of his anus.

The finger nudged the tense muscle, then slipped inward, breaching the entrance to his body.

Flame gasped at what should have felt like an intrusion yet didn’t. It felt strange, certainly, but not unpleasant. He relaxed as he got used to the odd feeling and moaned a little at how good it was beginning to feel.

It struck him that the finger would be replaced by Storm's cock, which was far more substantial than his finger. Flame's eyes widened as he wondered if he could do this after all before he relaxed again. He was so used to pain after all. He could and would do this.

The finger withdrew, and when it returned it wasn't alone. A second finger thrust into him, moving deeper, twisting and nudging something inside him that sent a jolt of pleasure rocketing through his body.

The magical energies were intensifying, brightening the cave with a ruddy glow like firelight, a gentle wind played with Flame's hair, caressing along his bare skin warm as the breeze of summer. Flecks of red-gold light danced through Storm's hair, glittered along his shoulders and arms.

Flame gasped as all his senses were filled with Storm and their magic. The pleasure his lover's touch was eliciting deep within his body, the scent of a summer breeze, the sound of crackling flames, the lingering flavor of Storm's cock and the sight of the two mythical beasts entwined above them both. Impossibly enough everything

kept intensifying, climbing higher and higher but with no peak as yet in sight. He gasped at the enormity of his feelings for Storm and the sensual onslaught.

Storm's breath an added caress over his cheek, his lover leaned over him, to whisper, "Does it feel good?"

The power of his lover's magic joined to his own, flowed along his body. Storm shuddered in reaction, a sighing pleasurable sound coming from Storm's parted lips as countless glimmering motes like the sparks of a bonfire danced along Storm's skin.

Blue streamers of light, a soft tingling caress carried on a breeze flowed over Flame's chest, and shoulders, through his hair, drifting like a sigh over his skin.

Flame gazed into his lover's beautiful eyes and nodded. "Good doesn't even begin to cover it, Storm." He wondered if his lover had seen the creatures above them, he had to know if they were real or if he was going crazy. "Look up, Storm, do you see them?"

His lover looked up, eyes widening. “Yes I see... something....”

Storm’s eyes narrowed as if he were trying to bring something at a great distance into focus. His lover’s fingers stopped moving, true shock beginning to register in Storm’s expression.

“That’s.... just impossible... the Immortals, they’re only legends, something we talk about late at night. Stories told around the fire for entertainment, they aren’t *real*.” He shook his head, gaze shifting from the creatures to Flame. “Are you seeing a Dragon and a Fenyx?”

Flame nodded. Impossible or not, they were there and very real. “If that’s what the burning, red bird is called, yes. I’m definitely seeing a dragon and they’re joining the same way we are.”

Storm’s strange eyes were raised to the shimmering forms of the Beasts floating in the air above them. “According to legend, only an Immortal has anything like this connected to them. At least, that’s what the stories of the Dragon clans say about a bond that includes such creatures.”

He shook his head. "But that's just not possible. I'm no Immortal Dragon. I can't be..." but a note of doubt tinged his words. "It didn't show up when I bonded with Sandrunner. Why now and not then?"

Flame wasn't entirely certain what Storm was talking about but the word 'immortal' rang a clarion of bells in his brain. "Perhaps that's why you lived when Sandrunner died," he said, hesitant to hurt but at the same time wanting desperately to believe in the fiery bird above him.

Storm nodded slowly. "You might be right, yet, I just..." he sighed, shook his head, "I just can't accept this, and yet I can't deny what we're seeing."

While the pair of men had stopped to watch the strange magical creatures the Beasts themselves had also ceased their loveplay to regard the pair of them.

Storm bent to nuzzle Flame's cheek, setting a light kiss there, his fingers sliding into Flame's body, working in and out, resuming what they'd been doing.

Above them the Dragon slid two taloned digits into the Fenyx.

Flame's eyes widened but he was no longer seeing the mythical creatures above them. His whole being was taken up with the pleasure running through his body like the sparks from one of his fires. Pleasure that was everything to do with Storm and the deep feelings Flame felt inside him for the man.

"Let's test this to see what happens," Storm murmured.

Storm eased his fingers out, replacing the pair with a trio that moved into Flame's body, hitting the place inside him. Sparks of ecstasy raced through Flame's insides to light his mind with a blaze of pleasure.

Above them the Fenyx shrilled out a cry of passion just as Flame cried out.

"No denying it I guess," Storm said, "they're part of us somehow."

Flame was beyond trying to reason things out in his mind by this time; instead he was completely lost in sensation, in the pure pleasure that Storm's skillful fingers were drawing from

his nerve endings. He was the instrument and Storm the musician playing him in a symphony of passion.

The trio of fingers were pulled free and Storm rolled Flame onto his back. The blond smiled at him. "Do you think you're ready for this?" he asked, gripping his own cock and stroking it slowly.

Flame glanced at Storm's erection and smiled. "I'm both ready and willing," he said, "but I'm not entirely sure about able." He glanced up at the creatures above them, paused in their own joining as he made his decision. He trusted Storm with his life so this should be easy. His smile grew and he nodded. "I'm ready, so do it."

Storm gripped Flame's legs and lifted them over his shoulders. "Is this position going to make your legs or back hurt?" Storm asked, his erection touching Flame's entrance.

He's worrying about my legs or back? They're the least of my worries right now! "No, I'm comfortable." For now....

"It's going to feel tight just stay relaxed and you'll be all right," Storm assured him and then

pushed, the head of his cock pressing against the tight muscles, parting them gently.

“This should distract you a little.” Smile turning to a grin Storm gripped Flame’s cock with his free hand and stroked it, the pad of his thumb brushing over the dampness of precum on the head.

Flame gasped at the sensation of being slowly filled. Surely there couldn’t be more to come, but there was and he was glad of the distraction that Storm’s hand on his cock gave him. He felt like he was going to be split in two. The only pleasure in this was that gentle hand keeping his cock rigid.

“I can’t...” he began to say before something relaxed somewhere and he took deep breaths to calm himself. Now there was no pain, only the sensation of being stretched to his limit, and he began to feel that something was missing, that something else should be happening. “Storm,” he murmured, “move the way you moved your fingers please.”

Above them the Dragon and Fenyx mimicked them, the scaled beast mounting the bird of flame.

“If that’s your wish, my pretty-boy, then that’s what you’ll get,” Storm replied. He shifted position, his cock sliding out until only the head remained inside Flame. “I hope you’re ready for this,” his lover said as his cock sank inward.

The magical energies swirled, flowing outward from them, painting the walls of the cave with embers of red and orange, draping it with streamers of blueness that stirred the fine dust on the walls.

Flame cried out but it wasn’t in pain. Storm’s cock had unerringly found that spot inside that made him feel so good. From there on the sensations only intensified and Flame found he was clinging to Storm as his breath came in little gasping moans of delight.

A whirlwind of magic grew around them as their passion grew. Storm moaned with each thrust into Flame, while above them the pair of creatures, Dragon and Fenyx thrashed, wings beating. The bird shrieked cries of pleasure, the Dragon’s basso growl vibrating audibly, both sounds echoing in the cavern.

The Beasts’ bodies lowered until they were superimposed over them, Storm thrusting faster,

deeper into Flame as the Beasts merged with them.

The streamers of blue and the red-gold embers of their magic flowed through the cavern lighting it bright as day.

Flame gasped as he felt the red bird of his dreams settle into him with the dragon still attached to it as well as to Storm. Was this the bond or something more? He could make no sense of it so gave up trying; concentrating instead on the pleasure Storm and his Dragon were producing both in his body and that of the Fenyx.

Storm captured Flame's mouth in a kiss wrapped within a pleased gasp. Around them the magical energies became a whirlwind of fire and wind, red and blue, aqua and orange spinning and spreading outward. The walls of the cavern were covered in licking tongues of flame, a roaring wind screaming over the stone.

The Dragon that was Storm grasped the Fenyx that was Flame in its talons, the Beast possessive of its companion.

Storm broke the kiss and gasped out, “I’m going to cum. Can’t hold back anymore.”

Flame moaned as his body responded and everything went even wilder as he came. The howling gale had whipped the sparks and streamers of his power into a frenzy of flame while the Fenyx screamed out its pleasure, echoing his own wordless cry.

A gale roared through the cavern, tossing the few things already inside about the cave and whipping around the pair of lovers as the Dragon bellowed and Storm shouted, “Flame!”

Sweating and trembling from the physical and magical exertion, Storm sagged against Flame, twisting his body, bringing Flame with him so they were lying on their sides. He kissed Flame and murmured, “You’re mine, Flamespirit. You’re mine and I won’t ever let you go,” against his swordbrother’s lips.

He could see the fiery lights of magical energy glowing in the air around them, embers dancing on the whirlwind of his own power.

If he chose to look he could see the Fenyx and Dragon, but he didn’t want to look at the

phantom images of the Beasts, not ready to accept that they and those Beasts, Immortal Creatures, were one and the same.

Storm sighed, closed his eyes and let the feel of the bond soak into his soul, let it fill him and warm him, soothing the wound that was the broken bond he'd had with Sandrunner.

Tears filled his eyes and he closed them, a tiny bittersweet smile curling his lips. He'd lost one love and found another.

And this time.... this time he didn't think anything could tear them apart.

Dragon and Fenyx. If they were real, if they'd truly seen two of the legendary Beasts his former clan still told stories about then not even the touch of death could sunder their bond.

Immortals didn't die.

But is it real? Did we really see them or was it just a manifestation of our magic?

Magic.

The Beasts themselves were magical. Immortal and undying.

Yet... how could they have the souls of the

legendary Beasts of Old Earth within them. Hadn't they been left behind on the world that was the birthplace of such creatures? Weren't they left behind on the planet that had served as the cradle of the human race?

He opened his eyes, gazed at Flamespirit and saw the Fenyx looking back, his lover's eyes burning bright as the newest firestones.

"Did we really see them?" he asked.

Flame smiled the expression warm and sated. "I'm still seeing your dragon, Storm."

Storm reached out to touch Flame's cheek and saw the blue and gold scales of the Dragon covering his skin. Little embers of his lover's magic skittered across the scales, sinking into them, turning them red or gold.

He smiled, "I see the fire bird, Flame. But—" he reached upward and touched his lover's hair, the Dragon's talons stroking a blue streak in the crest of the fiery raptor. "—there's blue in your crest now."

Your crest. Yes I have to accept that he's a Fenyx and I'm a Dragon, but what does it mean? No one has seen or heard of anything like this since the

Dragon Prince left our world when it was still a new colony.

Questions were all he had. Questions with no answers he could formulate.

Chapter Two

Hard Choices

Storm pulled Flame closer, kissing him gently, savoring the closeness of his fire haired lover's body, the softness of his skin, the warmth of him in their bed.

Their bed.

He wasn't alone anymore, and he would never be alone again.

Pulling a fur over them before the chill of the cave seeped into their bodies, Storm squirmed around trying to get comfortable, pressing Flame as close to him as possible. "Was that all right? I didn't hurt you did I?" He knew it was silly to ask. Except for one tiny flinch when he'd first slid his erection home, Flame hadn't shown a sign of anything but enjoyment.

Flame gave him a lazy smile that was full of mischief. "I think a few muscles might be protesting by morning, but you didn't hurt me. It was," he paused, "I really don't have the words to describe how good it felt."

“Well we’ll have to keep trying until you figure it out then.” Storm smiled. Yes what they’d done felt good, but it was more than a physical good, his soul wasn’t filled with black sorrow anymore. A grey cloud still lay on the horizon, but with Flame in his arms, he had sunshine and warmth, the bond between them dispelling his former wish for death.

His arms tightened around his lover and he breathed in the sharp spice tang of Flame’s body, closed his eyes and felt the gentle brush of feathers over scaled flesh.

Fenyx and Dragon. Fire and wind. They were now two halves of a whole, swordbrothers who would spend their lives together.

“I love you, Flamespirit.”

Storm gasped and sat up abruptly, realizing that in their hurry to consummate their bond they’d neglected to formally make their oath as swordbrothers.

Flame’s smile grew. “I love you, Stormdragon. Although we forgot something, didn’t we? Does it really matter what order it comes in?”

“Well we were supposed to pledge ourselves

first, but I guess it's a bit late for that," Storm admitted with a sheepish grin.

Storm sat up in bed, urging Flame upright before he slipped off the bed to the cold stone floor. He knelt and held his hands out to Flame. "Will you be my swordbrother, Flame?"

Flame lost the grin and took hold of Storm's hands, his face serious but serene. "I accept your offer of the bond of swordbrothers and all that comes with it. In return I will add my power and magics to yours in peace or battle." As if to add weight to the formal words the Fenyx screeched its agreement.

Storm stood, Flame's hands still clasped within his own. "By my oath and by the power of my magic, and also by the Dragon that resides within my soul, I take you, Flamespirit as my swordbrother. Mine to love, protect and honor as my equal in all things." He'd added the last part as a way of reminding Flamespirit that, if he did become a clan chief, they would share that responsibility equally.

Gently he tugged Flamespirit to his feet and took him in his arms, admiring both the man and the fiery bird that was so clearly manifested

around him, keenly aware of the scales and the edge of a pair of great wings that spread out from his own Dragon.

“I promise you, Flame, no matter what the future brings, I’ll stand by you whether in war, or in peace. Do you accept my bond?”

Brown eyes, burning with both magic and an inner heat, gazed up at him. “With all my heart, with the Fenyx in my soul and with all my power I accept your bond.”

Storm leaned in closer and kissed Flame. A wild heat permeated him, a roaring sound that had to be the wind filled his ears. Silky feathers brushed across his skin/scales and he trembled at the touch of his swordbrother’s lips on his mouth. Storm shivered. The intense heat of flames rippled over his body, sinking through his skin, leaving him outwardly unmarked but inwardly branded by the power of Flame’s soul.

Flame made a small sound deep in his throat as if he were swallowing a blackstorm together with the kiss and Storm knew he had branded Flame in his turn.

When they were both gasping for air, Storm

ended the kiss and stood there staring into his lover's eyes, his gaze taking in the man's fiery hair, pale skin, the perfection of his beautiful face. The rich brown eyes were heated with passion and power, and with love for him.

He felt unworthy of such a man, but knowing that Flame felt much the same way helped him get past the doubts.

There remained only their future to cause them worry. What they would do. Form their own clan or join another one?

That would sort itself out with time.

He placed his hand under Flame's chin, tipped his lover's head up slightly and claimed his sweet mouth for another scorching kiss.

Flame clung to him, arms entwined round his neck, as he returned the kiss.

Storm picked Flame up and put him down on the furs. He got into the bed with Flame, his weight on top of the other man, Dragon holding Fenyx in a tender embrace. He broke the kiss and smiled. "I'd make love to you again, but I'm sure you're sore. The next best thing for us to do

is unpack and have some food then decide what we want to do with our lives.”

He rolled off of Flame and got to his feet, holding his hand out to his lover and grinning. He knew he probably looked foolish, naked with such a stupid smile on his face, but he was in love and he didn’t care.

Flame grinned in return as he took the proffered hand. “I’m a healer, remember? I’ll be fine later. Food sounds like a good plan though.”

Storm shivered, goosebumps rising on his skin. “So does clothing, much as I enjoy looking at your tight little butt, I’m freezing *my* ass off.”

A tendril of warm air wrapped itself around Storm and he realized it was yet another manifestation of Flame’s power. “I’ll keep you warm while you dress.”

Flame gazed thoughtfully at the wide entrance and sighed. “We won’t be able to stay here anyway. Cave mouth’s way too big to keep a full scale blow out.”

“Sandrunner always wanted to work the stone to make it smaller,” he replied. “He did some

work, but it would have taken him several days to accomplish a real change and we never got to stay here that long. Someone always wanted us for one thing or another.”

He started to dress and added, “That’s why I wanted a tent for inside the cavern. Now that I really think about it though, I don’t think a tent would hold up to a blackstorm even protected from the direct force of the wind. That cave mouth is just too wide.”

Kicking at some of the sand on the floor, Storm gave the cave entrance a critical stare. “You can tell the wind gets in here from the sand drifted around. I guess we won’t be able to stay here during the blackstorms.”

Flame glanced around as he climbed into his clothes. “How far back does it go?”

“It goes back a good bit, but it gets really narrow and sort treacherous in spots. There’s some instability along one section of the passage. Sandrunner always wanted to work on that too, but it never got done. We just never had the time,” he explained as he pulled on his boots. “We’d considered offering it for blackstorm shelter to my father’s clan, but decided against it.

It's really not big enough for a whole clan and it would take a lot of work."

Done with his boots Storm picked up his jacket and put it on. "I've heard of an outlaw who's worked his caverns into something any clan would be proud to call their home in a blackstorm. I think his name's Darksy."

Flame went completely still. "Did you say Darksy?"

"Yes, that was his name if I remember right. He never gave a name but one of the clan Elders knew who he was. He paid bloodprice to my father and traded three darbear pelts for salt, a pair of boots and some other incidentals. Good looking man too, big as a darbear, with a voice to match. Sandrunner was jealous of how I watched him, but I've never seen anyone like him before or since. He'd easily make two of either of us."

"Bloodprice," Flame murmured, his tone bitter, "yet none was spilled except his own."

He turned to gaze at Storm, his eyes sad and distant. "Darksy was the greatest stonemage my clan ever produced. He was Stonefist's brother and by rights should have been chief but,

as you know, Stonefist is terrified of people with power. If he needs sunstones, firestones, wind shelter, an oasis,” his soft voice broke on the last word. “He pays for them with furs and other trade goods rather than have the mages that can do such things sully his clan. It wasn’t always like that. When I was a young child there was a fight between the brothers because Darksky wanted the clan to attract mages while Stonefist was terrified of people with more power than his pitiful control of sand in battle.”

His brown eyes closed on remembered pain. “The fight was rigged, of course. Your very good friend Jagged got involved. Darksky was betrayed and beaten and named as outlaw. It was just after that when my sister was taken. Darksky was little more than a boy himself but he used to look out for the two of us. After he was banished we had nobody but each other, then I ended up as you found me. I was tolerated only because I’m a healer.”

Storm took his lover into his arms. “And then you ended up with me, also little better than an outlaw in the eyes of my clan.”

The words Flame had spoken sank slowly into

his mind, and spawned an idea. “You know, if he’s still alive this Darksky might make an interesting friend. He and I have something in common. We both have brothers that lie.”

Flame cocked his head to one side, in a movement very like a bird’s, as he considered this. “He would certainly be a powerful ally and he did show my sister and me great kindness.”

He smiled. “With him at your back you could form an impressive clan council.”

“And make a clan of outlaws? None of the other clans would take us seriously, or they’d demand bloodprice to allow us anywhere near them.” Storm sighed and shook his head. “Besides he’s probably dead by now. Lone men don’t live long, especially when they’re outlaws with a price on their head.”

But what if he isn’t dead? Would he consider joining up with us? Three people can live much better than one alone. And I’m still a virtual outlaw myself so what the clans think of him hardly matters. They’ll be thinking the same of me if Dragonwind has his way.

“Finding him might be worth the effort. If he’s

still alive it would benefit all of us to join forces. We really don't have anything to lose since my brother will likely make me a declared outlaw before the year is over, *if* he hasn't already."

Flame shook his head, his smile still in place. "I think you're missing the point here, Storm. Darksy is an incredibly powerful stonemage, if he still lives. You and I are also incredibly powerful. Who would have the courage to demand bloodprice of any of us if we joined forces? Certainly not the bunch of fools I left behind!"

Storm frowned. Flame's words were disturbing. The implication that his swordbrother wasn't above using force to get what he wanted chilled him.

Then again, look at how he's been treated all his life. Still it's not the type of behavior I want to encourage or agree with, regardless.

"Flame, threatening people isn't the act of a responsible clan leader. It runs counter to the tradition that those named outlaw by their own clan pay bloodprice to deal with other clans." Storm let his lover go and sat down on the bed. "I know it irks you, but you can't go running

around acting the part of an outlaw if you don't want to be perceived that way."

Flame's smile died and he headed for his sled to bring some more of his belongings inside the cave as a means of covering his hurt and confusion over Storm's words. Once he'd done that and lit some firestones he looked at Storm again. "I only had Stonefist as an example of how a clan chief behaves." He hung his head. "Forgive me, Storm, but I thought they all ruled by fear."

And now he probably hates me for going against the way things should be done. But how was I to know? Stonefist bought and sold who he wanted to with no thought to anyone but himself. Yet I fell for Storm because he was different than that. Now he must consider me as bad as Stonefist.

Flame risked a glance upwards. He didn't want to be like Stonefist and he didn't want Storm to be that way either. "I'm sorry."

His lover came to him, wrapping strong arms around him and holding him close. "It's all right Flame, most clans are run by idiots when you get right down to it. Even my father wasn't above making a slave out of captured men that were magically weaker than the majority of our

own clan's men. I never liked it, and if I have my own clan someday there will be no slaves kept by anyone."

Flame melted into the embrace feeling reassured once again. A world without slaves? He could live with that concept very easily. A world where people who were weaker could keep some dignity sounded good to him. "Well we can start with a slave free clan and hope the idea spreads."

"Let's get unpacked and make some food," Storm suggested, then he leaned down to whisper, "and after that, we'll see if my Dragon can make your Fenyx scream again."

Flame felt his face heat up at the innuendo but smiled anyway. "That sounds like a great idea."

"Then let's get busy. We need to figure out what we're going to do about blackstorm season before it closes down on us and we get stuck here. We don't exactly have a lot of supplies or a good shelter." Storm let him go and patted his bottom. "I want somewhere warm where I can have you walk around naked just so I can watch this nice firm butt of yours."

Flame's face became even hotter which he hadn't thought possible until now. "We need to find a good deep cave system. Once we find it I can keep it warm."

"Good idea," Storm agreed as they stepped out into the afternoon sunlight to carry in the rest of their belongings. The sun warmed them, but a definite chill remained in the air. A chill that would grow stronger as summer came to an end and the blackstorm season drew near.

Working together they quickly got the rest of their possessions inside the caves, Storm moving both of their cycles.

While Storm checked their vehicles, Flame busied himself with pots and pans. Some of the herbs and roots he'd found the night before were chopped into the pots together with some rockboar that they'd found and hunted on the way. "Would it be worth a trip to the city for supplies? Apparently they pay well for firestones and I can make hundreds of those."

"Well worth it, if we also bring a few small sunstones," Storm agreed as he got out a sword from the weapons rack at the front of his cycle. He joined Flamespirit by the fire, taking a

whetstone from a nearby shelf. Storm sat down on the bare stone by the fire pit, his gaze on the edge of his blade. He started working on the edge with the stone.

Flame smiled at the rapid way they'd settled into domesticity. It was a great pity that they couldn't stay here as this place was where they'd formed their bond but the entrance was simply too big. He roasted chunks of the rockboar on a rack over the firestones while he cooked up the roots and herbs to go with it.

His thoughts turned to the city while he worked and he wondered if they had a greater variety of vegetables than were available to the clans. He knew they had wheat for his old clan always traded for flour with which to make bread. "What do you usually trade for in the City?"

"I forget you haven't been there. The City never lacks for a surplus of food. The Market Square has stuff piled high, things you've never even seen, maybe not even heard of. Like oranges. They're a type of fruit. Sweet and tangy at the same time, and loaded with juice. I'd guess you haven't heard of those. They're expensive and

you can't store them for long periods of time. It's a real shame, because I like them a lot."

Storm lifted his gaze from the edge of the sword blade. "My former clan mostly traded for cloth. Kids grow so fast and even with trading between families, stuff wears out and has to be replaced. We'd get different foodstuffs, like flour and honey. Then there were perfumes for the women if we had extra trade goods or credit with the merchants after we'd gotten the things we needed." He glanced down at the sword he held, frowned and set the stone to the edge. "Then there were the occasional cycle or bike, most of our pots, pans and knives. Swords of course, there aren't many weaponsmiths among the clans that produce swords of fine quality, not like the ones from the City anyway."

The blond sighed and shook his head. "Really, when you think about it, the clans would have virtually nothing if it weren't for the City. They probably realize that too as everything we buy comes at a great price."

Flame nodded his agreement. "My clan must have been very poor when compared to yours. All they seemed to buy was flour, weapons and

bike parts. I've never been to the City but some different kinds of food would be nice, especially during the storm season."

He thought about the high prices and what Storm had said about how much the Clans depended on the City. "Would you ever want to live in the City? I mean if they have all the wealth, and the goods we need it must be quite pleasant to live there."

Storm shook his head. "I don't want to live surrounded by that many people, behind walls. Just the few times I've been there on clan business made me feel like I was in a giant cage. Everything's all close together and there's lots of noise all the time."

His lover went back to examining the edge of the sword, the whetstone running along the edge to restore it. "We're not born City people, so we wouldn't be welcomed. Besides their lives are a lot different than ours. They stay in one place, their entire family living in the same dwelling most of the time. I don't think either of us would like that kind of a life, rooted to the same spot forever. Not the way they live, right on top

of one another with just the walls of their homes and a tiny strip of plants between them.”

Flame grimaced. The way Storm described it, the City sounded terrible, yet as far as he knew that was where his sister was held. He was still curious about a lot of things though. “Do they use magic to make things grow and to produce the metal goods?”

“That I don’t know with any certainty. I do know that few of the City born people seem to have magic the way we of the clans do. That’s why they want clan born slaves, to make them work for the people in the City,” Storm explained. “I just find it hard to accept that they kept you so ignorant, but I guess that was to prevent you from wondering about where your sister went.”

Flame kept his head down but grimaced at the food he was cooking. “I was kept ignorant because apart from healing and making firestones, I was considered worthless. I agree with you about not keeping slaves because I’ve lived as one for most of my life. I can see that now.”

His lover set aside the sword he’d been working on, scooted closer to Flame and put an arm around his shoulders. “And now you’re my

swordbrother. All that is in your past, just like the crap that happened to me is in mine. Let's eat and plan our next course of action. If we're going to go to the City we need to go soon or we'll get caught in blackstorm season...." his voice trailed off and he frowned. "That's a problem too. Even if we get supplies this cave won't work as a shelter for us when the blackstorms are blowing. We'll need to locate a better place to stay, on top of getting supplies."

Flame turned the meat one last time, decided it was cooked and dumped it onto wooden dishes together with the cooked roots and herbs. He handed one of the dishes to Storm and picked up his knife to eat his own portion. "Might be better to get the supplies then look for a better shelter." He frowned. "Although if we do it that way we'll be dragging more with us when we search. How far away is the City?"

A thoughtful expression claimed possession of Storm's handsome face. "From here... hmm... about three days of fast-paced travel, about five if we take time for more than short naps and dried food for our meals. Not that we have much dried food." He grinned, "And not that I'm going to

agree to just taking short naps. I just bonded to my swordbrother and I want to have some time to teach him more about making that Fenyx of his sing.”

Flame felt his face heat up yet again. Storm could always do that to him. Luckily he was the only person who could but it was still embarrassing. He felt so childish and foolish when that quick flush suffused his face and neck. “So it’s quite a trek, then? It would probably be better to get it out of the way very soon.”

“Yes, before the weather turns and we wind up stuck somewhere with insufficient shelter and no food. Neither prospect is appealing in the least.” Storm’s face took on an impish expression. “But I do admit to being happy about the prospect of spending a few weeks closed up in a nice cozy place with you.”

Flame chuckled, his face still burning as bright as any firestone. “That sounds like a wonderful way to spend blackstorm season.” He took another bite of his meat and considered how little he really knew about Storm. Not that it really mattered. If the legends were true they had all the time in the world to get to know each

other and the approaching blackstorm season would be a perfect place to start.

He wanted to ask so many questions like why Storm's brother hated him so much but then he remembered Darksky and Stonefist and had an insight as to what the hatred was about. Ambition could twist men's minds beyond recognition and make them do terrible things to those they should support.

"When we're done eating we should get ready to go. We'll have to take everything with us," he glanced around the cave, "I don't think coming back here will do us much good."

Storm put the bowl he'd been eating from aside and moved in on Flame. Taking the last of Flame's meal and putting it down Storm forced Flame onto his back. Lustful fire warming his gaze he set claim to Flame's mouth with a kiss that heated much more than his face.

Get ready to go when he was flat on his back with his lover kissing him like this?

Hormones won out over common sense though and Flame returned Storm's kiss, heating it even further with his own inner fire. His arms

automatically went round his swordbrother to pull him closer.

Storm broke the kiss, knelt there, smiling, smug, amused, one golden eyebrow arched. “You’re so damn hot and sexy it’s difficult for me to behave myself.” His lover leaned in close, lips brushing lightly over his as he spoke, “I’m looking forward to a long blackstorm season with nothing to do but explore the perfection of your body. I plan to find all the places that make you squirm.”

Flame frowned at him even though he wanted to grin like an idiot. “Your words alone can make me squirm, Stormdragon! Now if you want us to move sometime this week, let me up.”

The blond’s grin widened. “I think some part of you is already up.”

Resisting the urge to throw the remains of his meal, dish and all at his swordbrother, Flame contented himself with a glare. “Yes, thanks to you.”

“Well I wouldn’t mind a bit of dessert now that our meal is finished,” Storm murmured, his

hand cupping Flame's groin and rubbing the hard flesh beneath his pants.

Flame shook his head in resigned amusement. "So much for us getting ready to go! I can see I'll be walking with a permanent limp by the end of blackstorm season!"

"Oh I've got something else in mind," Storm replied, a wicked glitter lighting his eyes. He opened the laces of Flame's pants and freed the hard flesh from its prison of leather.

More than the wicked glitter lit Storm's eyes as he regarded Flame for a moment, the barest hint of pallid mist drifting away from him, a touch of breeze tugging at Flame's hair.

His lover's hand closed on the root of his cock, and the man bent down to capture the head between firm, moist lips. The tip of his lover's tongue swept over the end of Flame's erection, dipping into the tiny slit.

Flame arched into the touch and the two of them were surrounded by the crackling sounds of fire as his power reached out to that of his swordbrother. Storm was doing incredible things with his tongue and Flame gave in to sensation

and the pull of their magic, thoughts of packing up and moving forgotten in his pleasure-addled brain.

Hot wetness engulfed his heated flesh, sucking, pulling, sending starburst pleasure through his brain. Magical energies surged, their powers melding, their Beasts arising above them, the Dragon pleasuring his Fenyx lover in perfect imitation of the men they were part of.

The sensation quickly overwhelmed him and Flame cried out as his body surrendered in Storm's mouth, the Fenyx echoing his cry. "Oh dear gods, Storm!"

His lover swallowed down every drop. Smiling, licking his lips, he pressed a quick kiss to Flame's lips. "I didn't want to leave you like that." He picked up the empty dishes, "I'll handle the clean up, while you remember out how to use your legs again."

Smirking, his lover got to his feet, showing the hard bulge of his own erection beneath his leather pants. He grabbed the dirty pans and carried it all off for washing, leaving Flame there gasping for air.

“Bastard,” he said but without any heat. It was almost a term of endearment the way it came out of his mouth. “And what about you?”

Having figured out how his body worked again, Flame sat up and re-laced his pants. “Are you going to walk round with that bulge or let me do something about it?”

“It’s mine and I’m going to keep it,” the blond replied, laughing. “Anticipation will make it much more fun for me later.”

Finished with the dishes Storm brought them to Flame. “I’ll just let you pack these. You know how you’ve got everything organized and I’ll make a total mess of it.”

Flame considered logistics as he started to gather up belongings. “We’ll need to pack your things too,” he said, “so I’m going to have to figure out how to pack the sled so it takes everything. I didn’t actually expect the clan to give me so much stuff.”

He glanced at the rich furs on the bed frame and smiled. “Not that I didn’t earn them over the years but my old furs were thinner and easier to squash down.”

“I’ve got a small sled for my cycle stored here, it will carry what I’ve already got and a bit more.” His lover’s expression grew thoughtful, “One problem I’m foreseeing is being able to carry enough supplies from the City for the entire blackstorm season. We’re already loaded close to maximum capacity for your bike’s engine. I think we’re going to have to locate a safe place to cache most of our stuff before we make the trip to the City.”

Flame nodded. “Yeah, I think you’re right. At least you’ve got a sled for some of our stuff. That makes my job much easier.” He glanced round the cave again, wishing there was a deeper cavern leading off where they could store some of their stuff until they found somewhere suitable to ride out the blackstorm season. But even if there was it would probably be damp. He shrugged and started folding the furs.

“There’s a canyon near here with a cave system, but I’ve never really explored it. Sandrunner gave it a quick look and said it had potential, but that’s all he said. We could look for it if you want. It might work, who knows?” Storm suggested. He headed toward the back of the cave and returned

hauling a small sled that grated over the stone of the cave floor.

“This cave is damper than I realized,” he commented, pointing out some traces of discoloration on the sled’s leather strapping where some mold had started to grow.

Flame grimaced as he realized that they really couldn’t stay in the place where they’d bonded. It was a pity but even if the cave had a narrower opening, he doubted he’d be able to warm it enough to dry it out properly. His clan had stayed in enough wet caves during the blackstorm season for him to recognize one when he saw it. And this one was wetter than many. “For something more permanent we should look in the hard, grey rocks. The brown rocks produce more caves but they’re always damp. Some even have underground rivers running through them.”

Storm grunted an agreement and touched the leather of the sled, frowning. “These straps will have to be replaced, they’ve been weakened. Unfortunately I don’t have any suitable leather to use. We’ll have to be careful until we can get

this fixed or we'll wind up ruining the sled. No fast travel or it's going to come apart."

That was exactly what Flame didn't want to hear. They were trying to outrun blackstorm season with nowhere to shelter, had a trip to the City to make but were slowed down by a faulty sled. He had to wonder if they were destined to die in the wilderness after all.

Chapter Three

New Dangers

Storm finished the makeshift repairs on the small sled, tying the last knot to the rear of his cycle. The rope wasn't an ideal solution, but it would keep some of the strain off the leather if they did have to make speed during their travels. It might also prevent him from wrecking if a strap did break.

"That's the best I can do without the right kind of leather for the repair. Too bad you didn't have any strapping leather in the stuff you got from your former clan. I should have thought of it, but I guess I wasn't thinking too clearly by then. With a skull tough as mine you'd think a thrown rock wouldn't be able to hurt me very much," he joked.

Flame shook his head as he finished attaching his sled to his workbike. "Don't be so hard on yourself. We both should have thought about it. I was just so relieved to be leaving them at last that I didn't remember to ask for more practical goods."

Practical goods.... Damn I really forgot a lot of things we're going to need.

"Oil," he remarked. "We have to make sure we get several bottles, we're going to need them."

The thought of Flame moaning beneath him as he dove his aching erection into his lover's body stiffened his cock.

Flame's face went as red as his hair, just as Storm had known it would. "Well I would never have thought to ask for that!"

Storm chuckled, deciding to play with his lover a little bit. "No I guess that wouldn't occur to you, but without cooking oil it's hard to make a meal."

Flame glowered and started looking around him for something to throw and Storm got a face full of fur from one of his older, thinner hides. "I can't think of a word bad enough for you right now!"

Laughing Storm tossed the fur onto the seat of Flame's bike and took his lover into his arms. "You've got no sense of humor," he chided drawing Flame close and kissing him.

I love him so much, and yet I hardly know him. Maybe he doesn't like my joking and teasing. Guess I should stop before he gets upset with me.

"I'm sorry, Flame. I was just teasing you. I'll stop since it bothers you."

Flame returned the embrace and gazed at him, his expression sad. "It doesn't bother me, Storm. I'm simply not used to it so I'm not sure how I should react. All my dealings with people before have been serious and consisted of very careful respect or ill-concealed contempt."

The revelation drove home yet again how horrible Flame's life had been with his former clan. Bad as his own life had become, he'd enjoyed love and respect from his clan before Sandrunner's death.

He held Flame tighter. "I love you, Flame. No matter what happens I'll always love you. Always."

Flame smiled at him. "I know. I can feel it even when you tease me. And I love you, Storm. Partly because you *do* tease me but mostly because you're more than I could ever have dreamed of."

Storm held his lover close, enjoying the feel of

the other sleek male in his arms. He took in his lover's scent, a soft undercurrent of an indefinable spiciness that was purely Flame. "I'm the luckiest man alive, Flame. I've had two swordbrothers. Most men would be happy to have love even once, and I've been unfairly blessed with the love of two remarkable men." He kissed Flame, the touch of his lips showing how much love he had for the other man.

When they broke apart Flame shook his head, smiled and touched Storm's lips with a gentle finger. "You attract remarkable men because like draws like."

Storm felt a stirring of pride at Flame's words, not about himself, but because Flame had admitted, in a rather sideways manner, that he was worthy of being his swordbrother. "So you've finally admitted you're remarkable. Good." He reached up to caress the silky strands of his lover's hair, admiring the color the way he always did.

"I still wonder if I'm good enough for you, Flame. You amaze me with your talents. Firemage and healer, but you're more than that, you're also a Fenyx. The legends say such creatures cannot

be killed. That they live forever.” He brought the soft strands of hair to his lips, kissed them, inhaling his lover’s unique scent as he did. He couldn’t get enough of it, the smell wrapped around inside his mind and flowed down his body to stiffen his cock.

Mine. My lover. My swordbrother. My Fenyx. And I love him so much I feel like my heart will melt under the fiery passion he awakens in my soul.

Flame pulled on one of Storm’s braids and frowned at him. “Now you’re the one doubting yourself. Windmage and wielder of sunstones. Dragon, the strongest of all the immortals, killable only by another Dragon. I know the legends too, you see.”

“Hmmm... so I see....” Storm murmured as he set his lips to Flame’s in another, gentle kiss.

When he ended it he gave Flame a sheepish smile. “We’re never going to get out of here if we keep this up.”

Flame nodded before glancing back at the cave. “It seems a shame to leave it after what happened here.”

Storm's smile faded. "You're right, we should have gone somewhere else." He looked at the cave, pain rising in his heart.

This was our place, Sandrunner. Yours and mine. He should have had a place that was ours and ours alone.

"I'm sorry, Flame. It was thoughtless of me to bring you here."

Flame placed a hand on his shoulder. "No, Storm, don't be sorry. We can always come back to visit from time to time."

"Too bad neither of us is a stonemage. We could fix it up and live here," Storm remarked wistfully. He sighed. He regretted bringing Flame here, but he couldn't change what he'd done. They'd formed their bond here and there could be no going back now.

Not that he wanted to undo what they'd done. He loved Flame, everything about him he loved.

He patted Flame's shoulder. "I guess we'd better get going before it gets dark and we wind up staying here for the night."

Flame didn't argue. He straddled his workbike

and started it up. "Ready when you are," he said before adjusting his goggles and dustmask.

Storm put on his helmet, goggles and dustmask and got onto his cycle. With a last look at the cave he started his cycle up and took the lead to scout out the best trail toward the canyon he'd mentioned earlier.

He led them through the barren land, across wide swaths of sand and areas of stone swept clean by the winds. They soon came into view of a towering cliff-face which marked the rise of the canyon Storm sought.

Night had fallen before they reached the entrance of the canyon, leaving the inside in thick darkness that the lights on their cycles barely alleviated. They were forced to slow down, Storm worried they'd collide with large rocks or the occasional patch of well armed thorn trees that grew scattered here and there along the canyon.

Flame followed the path Storm chose, the almost continuous movement of his head showing he was looking around him with interest even though the canyon was so dark.

Storm stopped his cycle and wiped the dust from his goggles. “We have to stop. The cave is around here somewhere but we’re not going to spot it in the dark. I have to be able to see the canyon walls. Sandrunner said there’s an old carving of a darbear marking the opening.”

Flame brought the workbike to a halt and nodded before removing his dustmask. “I don’t feel any signs of a blow so we could camp here for the night if we need to.”

Storm glanced at his swordbrother. “You can sense blackstorms?” He pulled his helmet off and shook his braids free, frowning at the dust that floated away as he moved. “Too bad you’re not a watermage, I could use a bath.” He swatted some dust off his clothes. “Not that I don’t love you just the way you are, of course,” he added.

Flame went still and silent at the mention of a watermage but soon relaxed again and smiled wryly. “If we could find enough water I could probably heat it up. As for the blackstorms, I thought *most* clanspeople could sense them. You’re a windmage, you should be able to.”

Storm saw the pained expression on his lover’s face and realized too late what he’d done.

He got off his cycle and went to Flame, putting his arms around the other man. "I'm sorry, Flame. We'll look for her and when we find her, we'll buy her out of slavery. I promise. No matter what I have to do, I'll get your sister back for you."

To change the subject he replied to what Flame had said about sensing blackstorms. "Most clansmen can't sense blackstorms, Flame. I can sense them, but I'm a windmage, that's normal for us. A firemage shouldn't be able to, but," he tipped his head to study Flame, "you're not *just* a firemage. You're a Fenyx, and that's a flying creature. Birds always know when the blackstorms are coming and they fly away or hide somewhere until the blow is over."

Flame grimaced, the expression bitter. "So that was something *else* that made me different from the rest, I guess, but they used to pretend they knew too." A humorous little snort came from between his lips. "No wonder they always watched me so carefully at this time of year. It does make sense, though, if my soul is part bird."

"I don't think they knew what you are, Flame.

If they did they wouldn't have risked doing all the things they've done to you," Storm told him as he patted dust off his lover's clothes. "We're both filthy. The dust was worse than usual."

Flame sighed as he submitted to the patting. "It's at times like this that I wish I had her gift rather than mine. But then again it would be cold water."

"And you might not be my swordbrother, so let's be happy how things are, all right?"

"Speaking of water, we *should* try to find some. I don't like being this dirty. Besides, with all these thorn trees around there has to be water here somewhere," Storm remarked as he put his helmet back on and climbed aboard his cycle.

Flame adjusted his goggles and dustmask and climbed back on his workbike.

Storm rode down the canyon, going slow and watching for any sign of free flowing water. They rounded a curve in the sheltered valley and discovered the lower portion of a huge darbear sculpted in the rock face. He stopped his cycle and waited until Flame had come to a halt beside him.

“Well it’s not water, but it looks like we’ve found the darbear Sandrunner told me about.”

Flame nodded as he studied the old sculpture. “It must be very sheltered here for that not to be blasted back to plain rock. If there are caves near here then there is very likely to be water in them.”

Storm rolled his cycle forward at walking speed, going around the carving of the darbear, the animal three times life sized, the stone beast towering over Storm on his cycle. Behind it, lit by the light from his cycle was the narrow mouth of a cave. “We found it. He said there was water inside, everything a clan could want if they were willing to do some work to improve it.”

Flame grinned at him. “If there’s water then I can heat the rocks around it to warm it. We can get clean!”

“That sounds like an excellent plan, so long as there’s more than one pool. I don’t want to cook with our bath water later.” Storm rolled his cycle forward slowly, turning the light on the front to the brightest setting, which illuminated the cavern mouth clearly. The opening was narrow, very narrow. They’d have to go in carefully if

they didn't want to damage their vehicles or themselves. The light also showed that the narrow opening didn't go very far into the cave, the area opened out into a much larger space beyond.

They arrived inside to find a cavern that, with work, could be usable for a fair sized clan. Glancing around, Storm could see someone had begun leveling the floor but never finished the work, which left him wondering if Sandrunner had made a start on some improvements without his knowledge.

That would be like him, to try and work on something as a surprise.

He dismounted and examined the floor, finding that the stone itself had been worked, rather than the floor being leveled by fusing sand over it. He took off his glove, seeking the lingering signature of his lover's power. He felt nothing. His lover's stone magic hadn't been used to make the changes.

Sandrunner had been good, but moving such quantities of stone as was moved in this cave would have taken his first swordbrother weeks of hard work.

“This part of the floor has been worked and whoever did this was powerful. Very powerful.” He motioned to the smoothed area. “That stone looks to have moved rather than being leveled with sand. It’s as if the stone had turned to liquid and spread out in a single flow then re-hardened.” He shook his head. “Something like that would take an unbelievable amount of power, and control.”

Flame climbed off his workbike, removed his goggles and looked around carefully. He took off a glove and touched his hand to the floor. “I only know of one stonemage that could do this or create the darbear and that’s Darksy. He used to make my sister and I little figurines from solid stone. The rock would literally move and reform under his hands.”

Storm turned his head to regard Flame. “I’ve heard a story that stone flows like water under the touch of his power, but I thought it was one of those wild campfire stories that the old people like to tell.” He smiled, a wistful expression on his face. “My grandmother used to tell me stories about a woman named Neekkee who ruled over a distant land. She was married to a Dragon

who was the protector of their people. Legend says they were our distant ancestors, but no one believes it any....” He stopped talking, glanced at Flame, head tipped to one side, his expression speculative. “It occurs to me that I’m a Dragon, so perhaps those legends aren’t just stories told to amuse children.”

Flame gazed back, face impassive. “It seems to me that there’s a lot of truth in those old legends. Darksy really could do that with stone. I wonder why he did all this work and then left without finishing it.”

He moved further into the cave system and found what they were looking for. Two basins of water, one carved by the small waterfall trickling into it, the other larger and obviously not natural as the stone was smooth with steps down into the water. “He liked being clean, too, by the looks of this.”

Flame knelt and put his bare hands to the rock. A look of intense concentration settled on his features and gradually the stone around the larger basin began to glow. A few minutes passed during which the stone became cherry red then Flame gasped and moved away from

it. “That’s not the easiest way of heating water but I’ve never worked out how to heat the actual water without boiling it over firestones. And we both need a bath.”

Storm regarded the hot stone and patted his lover on the shoulder. “Impressive, but wouldn’t heating the water itself been easier? Now we have to wait for the stone to cool before we can get in. Not that I’m complaining. I can help get you undressed while we’re waiting.”

He reached for Flame’s jacket intending to expose some pale skin for his viewing pleasure.

Flame let Storm untie his jacket. “Heating the water from that basin would have taken hours over firestones and I can cool the rock as soon as the water is warm enough. What I can’t do is heat water directly. I’m not a watermage and therefore have no power to heat it the way one of them would.”

“Hmm.... I’d have thought if I poured water through your hands while you wielded your power it might work. It would take a long time to heat that much water though I imagine.”

Storm finished unfastening Flame’s jacket and

slipped it over his shoulders, letting it drop to the floor. He admired the light red-gold speckles that adorned his lover's pale skin. The tiny marks were part of Flamespirit's physical charm, and they enchanted him with their exotic look. He gripped Flame's upper arms and pulled him in close, Storm bending to kiss the place where shoulder and neck joined, rolling his tongue over his lover's silk over steel flesh. He tasted faintly of dust and salt, and completely of Flame's own unique spiciness. He inhaled deeply taking in the scent of Flame's skin, his cock aching to be sunk into his lover's pleasing heat.

Flame moved his head to one side, allowing Storm better access to that spot on his neck that gave him so much pleasure to suck upon.

Storm moved up Flame's neck, his arms going around his lover, body aching for the feel of the other man's flesh surrounding his cock.

Gasping he stepped away from Flame, heart racing, blood afire with lust for the man who'd so recently become his swordbrother. "By all that's holy, Flame, you make it so easy for me to lose control. I want you. I want you so much."

Flame smiled, a gentle yet mischievous expression. “You think that’s not mutual?”

“I’ll find the oil, you check the temperature of the water for our bath.” Storm’s grin turned positively devilish. “I think this will be the perfect opportunity to introduce you to the pleasures you can find surrounded by hot water.”

Flame’s smile widened into a big grin and he let go of Storm to check how their impromptu bath was doing.

Storm found the bottle of oil and a thin sliver of soap. It might be enough for one bath, but after that they’d have to use plain water augmented with a bit of sand to get off the worst of the dirt.

Just something else to get when we go to the City, soap. What we need is a wagon and pair of heavy duty workbikes, but it’s not possible to hunt from one of those bigger bikes.

Too bad we’re a clan of two, it’s going to make carrying enough supplies close to impossible. They had plenty of time to work out the logistics of how to carry what they needed later. Right now the only thing I’m going to think about is what position we’re going to fuck in.

He joined his lover at the edge of the bathing pool. “Is it warm enough?”

Flame considered the question, his head cocked to one side just like a bird’s. “That rather depends on how hot you like your bath. I think a couple more minutes should do it.”

Storm put the soap and bottle of oil down near the pool and took off his own jacket, taking it slowly, uncovering his chest, shoulders and belly as if he were unveiling a special surprise. He watched Flame, waiting to see if his slow unveiling caused any reaction.

Flame’s eyes widened and he licked his lips as he watched Storm strip, his own clothing, which he had been in the process of removing, forgotten.

“Want to see more?” Storm asked as he dropped his jacket to the floor, leaving him in his vest, boots and pants.

“Oh yes,” Flame breathed. “Yes, much more.” He shook his head and checked the water temperature again. The rocks around the basin began to cool.

Desire had already hardened Storm’s cock.

Meeting Flame's gaze Storm slipped off his vest and let it fall to the floor. His boots were off quickly, lying discarded, his hands hovering at the laces of his pants.

Walking with a graceful, almost dancing step that made Flame's heart pound, Storm closed the distance between them and took Flame's hands in his own, guiding them to the ties keeping his pants on. "You do it," he urged in a voice raw with need.

Flame's hands went to the laces of Storm's pants without any hesitation at all and loosened them until he was able to slip the leather down over Storm's hips to pool at his feet.

Storm caressed Flame's chest, pinching a nipple lightly. "So beautiful," he murmured as he lowered his head to tease the other nipple with his tongue.

Flame's head fell back as he gave himself over to the sensations that he was fast becoming addicted to. Storm's slightest touch sent shivers of want and desire through him making the hair at the back of his head stand on end. "Storm," he murmured, his voice full of need.

He was swept up in Storm's arms and carried into the bathing pool, Storm placing him in the warm water his body bent over Flame. Hazy wisps of mist drifted around them, thicker than the steam rising from the water.

The water was just the right temperature, warm enough to soothe chilled bodies and get the dirt off, but not so hot it would scald. Flame moaned in pleasure as he was lowered into it and his arms went round Storm to keep him close.

Storm's mouth closed over his, a seeking tongue touching his lips.

Flame groaned into the kiss, a large part of him wondering what this beautiful man could possibly see in him.

His lover sat in the tub and pulled him into his lap, a hard cock brushing against his own erection, bumping into his belly as the water rolled around them. Storm never broke the kiss as he pulled him close, their tongues in an intimate caress, Storm's passion stealing his breath away.

All Flame could do was submit to that passion, allowing Storm to do as he pleased with

him. He'd never felt so alive before, so aware of both his power and the power that flowed from his lover.

The mist thickened, rising around them as the first sparks of Flame's power spun outward from him to join the blue bands of Storm's magic that wafted outward from his lover's body.

Strong arms surrounded Flame, hands splayed over his back to hold him close, pressing him to his lover's chest, their cocks touching. Storm groaned his desire into the kiss.

As their erections rubbed together in the hot water, Flame broke away from the kiss to cry out. It was tantalizing, the feel of silken flesh against silken flesh but without the additional friction he was beginning to crave. "Storm please."

Storm turned a disarming smile on him. "Please what, Flamespirit?"

"Take me, don't tease me!"

A warm, dripping wet hand lifted to caress his cheek, run behind his head and cup the nape of his neck. He was pulled forward and kissed thoroughly, until he couldn't draw a breath except as a gasp.

Storm's hand firm and sure, wrapped around his erection, gripping the hard flesh and stroking it.

Flame tipped his head back and wallowed in the friction he'd needed so badly. "Yessss," he hissed out. "Oh yes." He reached for Storm's erect cock, wanting to return the pleasure.

Storm moaned as Flame grasped his cock, the blond's hips bucking at the sensation of being held, stroked. "I want to fuck you, but I don't want to make you so sore. If we have to refrain from doing this for a few days, I can live with it. I don't want to hurt you." Storm gave him a gentle kiss. "Tell me what you want, Flame. Do you want to continue what we're doing, or do you want me inside you?"

Flame thought about it. The long ride to reach here had reminded him that he was still a little uncomfortable from before but, at the same time, he wanted Storm so much that he was prepared to put up with some soreness. Besides, he had other means at his disposal. He grinned up at his lover. "I want you inside me again. Let me worry about the soreness. I'm a healer, remember?"

Storm grinned and nodded. “Handy thing, that talent of yours.”

He reached for the bottle of oil. His hand stopped before he picked it up, a frown taking the place of the smile he’d worn a heartbeat ago. “Did you hear that?” he whispered, voice tense, uneasy.

A low rumbling sound, like the roar of an approaching blackstorm seeped into the cave, giving back faint echoes that murmured through the cavern system.

Flame pulled himself back from the desire he was feeling with a conscious act of willpower and listened. “It sounds like warcycles and a lot of them.” He let go of Storm and leapt out of the bath, grabbing for his clothing.

Storm followed him out of their bath, water streaming along the planes and angles of his body to puddle under his feet. “You’re right. Those are warcycles only. I don’t hear any workbikes or scoutcycles so they’re not a hunting party. That means they’re out for a different reason,” Storm commented as he pulled on his pants, fighting with the leather to get it over his soaked skin.

The rumbling of the cycles grew louder as they dressed, the noise filling the canyon outside and reverberating through the caves where they'd taken shelter. The sound so loud it was hard to hear anything else.

"This can't be good," Storm practically shouted.

The rumbling of the cycles grew even louder as they dressed, the noise filling the canyon outside and reverberating through the caves where they'd taken shelter so loud it was almost impossible to hear anything else.

Judging by just how close the cycles were, Flame was pretty certain that he and Storm were the specific reason for their presence in the canyon and he remembered the other watcher from their night in the makeshift tent with a sinking feeling in his gut. He didn't know why they should be targeted but he knew they had been.

"Whoever it is must have followed us here," Storm remarked as he pulled his jacket on and hurried for their own cycles. "We were very careless not to bring our cycles in, and twice fools

for leaving our weapons outside. We can't afford to be that careless, it could get us killed."

Flame followed his lover just as soon as he had his boots on. His jacket he pulled on as he was running.

Storm's right. We were so intent on each other's pleasure and on getting clean we forgot our common sense. If I've put him in danger I'll never forgive myself.

As the blond windmage ran for the cave mouth the mist and ribbons of energy that had drifted lazily around him while they'd been making love roared to life around him, the hazy outline of the Dragon forming as they neared the exit.

They reached the mouth of the cave together, the bright lights of many warcycles lighting up the entryway as Storm ran out.

By the Gods, how many of them are there? We can't outrun them, not with my damned workbike and sled slowing us down.

Then it clicked in his mind what they had to be, they were a clan after slaves. "Storm, get away. Don't wait for me, just go!"

“I won’t leave you, Flame. Not a damn chance!” Storm retorted as he left the cave. “If they are after slaves we’ll just have to knock that idea right out of their heads. We’re not anyone’s easy prey, and I *won’t* be slave to anyone.”

Bright lights painted the area in blinding brilliance and knife-edged shadow.

Storm, threw an arm up to shade his eyes, his hand reaching for the weapon rack on his cycle, the fist that had so recently been pleasuring Flame closing around the hilt of one of the swords stored there.

“That’s the one we’re looking for. Take him down and be quick about it!!” a man’s voice bellowed.

“Son of a dustdelver,” Storm swore. “That’s Nightfire, one of my brother’s cronies. Go hide Flame! Please stay out of this.”

Flame was getting desperate to get his swordbrother out of this mess by now. “It’s you they want, Storm! Get the hell out of here! I’ll only slow us down.”

Storm looked as if he was going to stand and

fight but they couldn't possibly fight that many men and hope to win.

"Flame I'm *not* running. Not if it means leaving you behind! I'd rather die. That's Nightfire giving orders out there. He's one of my brother's staunchest supporters. They won't hesitate to hurt or kill you to gain my cooperation. Now stay inside where it's safe, please! I want you to live! Please do this for me, Flame! Please" his swordbrother begged. "I know we were joking around and speculating on being like the fabled immortals, but I'm not ready to risk you on an old legend and some hazy Beasts mimicking our movements. Please hide somewhere, Flame, please."

Storm's face had paled with fear, but it wasn't fear of the men they faced. Flame could tell Storm was scared that something might happen to him, that he might be hurt or killed.

Joking?

Old legend?

They had both *seen* the Dragon and the Fenyx. Flame had dreamed about that fiery bird all his life. That was no joke. Especially when

he could feel the bird's wings forming around his shoulders and spreading in its defiance. "What about you? You think I'll leave *you* to be taken? I can't do that."

"We're just men, Flame. Despite what we saw, or think we saw during our bonding, that's all we are. We're not legendary warriors with the power of Immortal Beasts locked into our souls! We're not any different than anyone else. Not really."

Storm came back into the cave. He rammed the point of his sword into the sand in the entryway. His hands gripped on Flame's upper arms, the blond shaking him slightly, scared and angry. "I want you to *hide*. If I know you're safe I can fight! Please Flame, please. I can't face a battle if I have to worry about you being killed!"

"Surrender, Stormdragon. You've been named outlaw and we've come to see justice be served in accordance with the Laws of the Clans," Nightwind's voice shouted, the sound almost lost in the boom of the idling warcycles.

"Cowardly cur!" someone else shouted. "Surrender yourself!"

Flame frowned. What the fuck does he think I am that I need to hide? Just because I don't have my stripes doesn't mean I can't fight.

Instead of obeying the shouted command, Storm took Flame's hands in his own. "I love you, Flamespirit but we don't stand a chance if we both go out there. My clan isn't like the one you grew up in, Flame. Those men out there will all be battle hardened veteran warriors, powerful and ready to kill. They'll want to take me back to the clan to face justice. My former clan doesn't kill outlaws, which means a trial and formal enslavement await me."

Storm gave him a grim smile. "Let them take me. They can't hold me, Flame. They might not realize that, but I know it's true. I'll escape and come to you. Our bond will lead me to wherever you've gone."

Flame's anger mounted as Storm pleaded with him. The more his swordbrother said he should hide, the angrier he became. Finally his temper snapped. "You think you made a woman your swordbrother? You think I don't know how to fight? If you think so little of me then we have no meaningful bond! I'm not your damned

concubine! And if you don't believe in what we are just take a look at yourself and at me!"

"I lost Sandrunner after a fight, I won't lose *you* too!" Storm's voice shattered on the last word. Flame was pulled close, held in an embrace full of desperation. "If anything happens to you...." Storm's voice failed.

Storm held him tight, his lover's entire body shaking. "I can't bear the thought of them killing you! I just can't! Please, Flame, just hide. Do it for me, *please!*"

"Let's go after them! They can hide but there's no hole deep enough that we won't find them!" Nightwind shouted from outside.

Flame frowned at his swordbrother, his brown eyes narrowed to slits he was so angry. "No! I'm your *swordbrother*. What we face we face together. I'm not a woman that has to hide from battle and I have no intention of dying." The anger at both Storm and the Dragon clan was so strong that long sparks appeared at his fingertips. "Now let's go and let those bastards know they've tangled with the wrong warriors this time."

Storm, face streaked by tears, held him as if

his lover feared Flame would vanish out of his embrace. He captured Flame's lips in a kiss as desperate as his embrace.

Once he was breathless the windmage broke the kiss, stared into his eyes. "I love you, Flame. I wish you wouldn't do this, but..." he closed his eyes, let Flame go, shook his head. "I hope you're right. I hope we can hold out against some of the most powerful mages the Dragon Clan has, because Nightwind is powerful. My brother would send his only best mages to capture me."

The blond let him go, stepped away, a zephyr of air shifting and dancing through his hair, making the tiny bells at the ends of his braids ring. The beads glittered in the glow of Flame's power. "Let's do this then, let's see if the pair of us has the power of the legendary Beasts, or if we've both lost our minds."

Flame gave him a vicious grin as he returned the embrace, and then turned to face the cave entrance and the men who waited for them there. Fire engulfed his body, before being carried away by Storm's power, wind to fan the flames of his battle rage. "I love you too, Storm. And yeah, let's go!"

The night was bathed in brilliant light from the massed warcycles. Over a dozen men waited for them outside, the feeling of power coming from them like the thrum of a drumbeat against Flame's own magic. But somehow he felt stronger than any of them.

Storm glanced at him, and Flame saw that his lover's eyes were lit with an inner glow, the hazy outline of the Dragon forming around him.

"Outlaw Stormdragon, by order of the Great Chief of the Dragon Clan you are commanded to return and face your shame."

Several of the men had dismounted from their cycles and come closer to the cave on foot. With the lights shining in their eyes it wasn't possible for Flame to see the faces of the men, but Storm murmured, "I recognize them. They're most of the best mages in the clan. Be ready for anything."

All trace of fear gone, Storm folded his arms over his chest. He stood there regarding the dark forms on the warcycles. "I am my own man, and I deny any claim your self appointed Great Chief has made against me. I am Chief of my own Clan."

At his words the roar of the warcycles was joined by a bellow of raucous mocking laughter, all the warriors facing them finding his words amusing.

“Listen to the little fool! The death of his swordbrother has addled his mind so that he thinks he is Chief of a Clan,” someone among the warriors shouted.

“That was Stonewarp, he’s dangerous, watch out for hurled spikes of rock,” Storm stated.

“A clan of outlaws perhaps,” Nightwind added. “See the fire-haired boy with him? I say they’re both outlaws ripe for enslavement.”

Flame stepped forward then so they could see him more clearly and realize that the fire wasn’t confined to his hair color. “I am no outlaw nor am I slave. I am the newly bonded swordbrother of Stormdragon. Flamespirit is my name and you will live to remember it or you will die with it on your lips.”

Flame had no idea where this strange arrogance in him had come from but the attitude of these warriors and their contempt for Storm brought

out the defiance and rage in him that had been buried for too long under Stonefist's rule.

“Foolish boy. You'll join him in slavery to our Great Chief, Dragonwind! Take them!” Nightwind ordered, motioning his men forward.

Chapter Four

Battle of Mages

Sand from the floor of the canyon erupted into a towering wave that threatened to engulf them. Storm made a rapid shoving motion with both arms, a blast of wind strong as any blackstorm's fury slammed into the oncoming wall of sand, whirling embers from Flame's power caught up in the gale.

The wall of sand kept coming. "Shit, they're working as a team, that's four of them," he informed Flame.

If it reached them they'd be slammed into the rocks at their back, or suffocated. Storm pushed harder with his wind magic and the top edge of the mass sheared away, spilling backward to rejoin the main body of the wave of sand coming for them.

"HELP ME, FLAME, I CAN'T STOP IT ALONE!" Storm shouted over the screaming wind and the roar of the moving sand as it neared them.

Flame raised his hands and sent a bolt of white heat at the approaching sand that spread out as it touched the mass and fused it solid. So great was the temperature that the sand turned into a wall of semi-opaque glass.

The glass burst into thousands of fragments as the stonemages exerted their power, driving columns of stone upward through the glass wall. Shards of glass rained down toward them. Storm raised his arms, wrapping a rampaging wind around them to sweep up the fragments of glass and hurl it toward their attackers.

Water burst through the ground at their feet, knocking Storm off balance so that he almost fell, a jet of chilling liquid turning the dirt underfoot into a mire that sucked at him.

This time Flame's attack was more direct and men howled as their warcycles became too hot for them to sit on, the metal buckling in the heat.

Storm guided the whirlwind he'd created to protect them from the falling glass at the men. His power fanned the flames of his lover's attack. The mages they faced abandoned their warcycles

out of self preservation as their skin began to blister and their clothing smoldered.

Water fountained up beneath Flame as the opposing element's mages sought to extinguish his power.

The liquid was instantly turned to steam which evaporated in the cold night air where it instantly became a concealing fog.

Storm struggled through the sandy mire left after the attack of the watermage. He made it to Flame's side, the wind of his magic howling along the rockface behind them. "We can't hold them off forever," he whispered. "We need to combine our attacks and somehow drive them away."

Flame nodded, his eyes still on their attackers. "What do you suggest?"

The enemy mages had left their cycles and were huddled together apparently discussing strategy. Though Storm couldn't hear what was being said, he could tell by the angry gestures of Nightwind and the others they were arguing.

The argument ended, the men turning to face the swordbrothers.

Storm frowned. “I hoped you’d have some ideas because I think they have one already.”

Sand burst into the air just feet in front of the swordbrothers, but when it came down the sand had solidified into stones the size of a big man’s fist.

Flame stared, his eyes reflecting his horror. “What the fuck are they doing?”

Storm grabbed Flame and shoved him to the ground, throwing himself over his lover to protect him from the hail of rocks with his own body. He waited for the painful impacts but instead of agonizing bruising as they hit, they pattered to the soggy ground with soft plops. He turned his head, puzzled and saw the span of hazy wings arching over them, the stones striking them and rolling off onto the wet ground.

“Nothing good. We’d better think of something fast or they’re going to kill us.”

Flame’s Beast had the same idea as the Fenyx dived at their foes, screaming defiance and battering them with its wings while pecking at their eyes.

“What in all the hells was that!” one of the men shouted.

“It’s just an illusion created with the power of a firemage! Don’t let it scare you!” Nightwind told his men.

“Illusion my ass! Illusions don’t rip chunks out of my skin!” one of his men countered angrily.

“They sure as hell can’t set my hair on fire!” a second man added.

Storm grinned. “That’s what he wants them to think, but a couple of them seem to have figured his lie out. Let’s see what I can do to change the minds of the rest of them about that *illusion*.”

Storm got to his feet and called up magic from the deepest recesses of his soul. Roaring wind battered the men from the Dragon Clan as Storm’s Dragon manifested around his body.

“You name me outlaw, and I deny the charge. I deny that Dragonwind has any power to rule over my life. I am my own man, and co-leader of the newly formed Dragon and Fenyx Clan. Return to your own Clan and tell your self proclaimed Great Chief to send no men to name

us outlaw or slave as we do not recognize his authority over us!”

He felt like a pompous ass making such arrogant statements but if Nightwind and his men believed him then the fight might end before they did have to kill anyone.

Flame still held fire in his hands and had it surrounding his body like a nimbus of white heat. It was very obvious that he didn't trust these men at all. He stood up and moved to stand at Storm's side, still watching the men carefully.

“Arrogant and foolish boy. Do you really think your little tricks can scare us?” Nightwind shouted.

The last echo of his words hadn't sounded in the canyon before another attack was launched against them. Rock, sand and water burst around them, hammering at them in a three-fold attack that was soon joined by sheets of pallid flame and a screaming wind that buffeted them.

Hunks of stone battered Storm, sand almost blinding him, water almost drowning him.

They're going to beat us into surrender or kill us in the attempt. I've got to protect Flamespirit!

Storm stood his ground, the Dragon manifesting in sharp clarity around him. Seeing the dancing sparks of Flame's power mingling with his own gave him an idea. He reached out and blended his wind magic with Flame's power creating a shrieking maelstrom of fire and wind that blasted the area around them with such power that ground beneath them rolled like a sea and the walls of the canyon shook.

The Fenyx screamed out its defiance once again and the Dragon bellowed its own fury over the tumult.

Screams of terror and pain mixed with the roar of the fiery whirlwind blasting across the canyon.

Storm, bleeding from cuts, covered in bruises, dripping dirty water, staggered forward a step, reaching out as if trying to recall the firestorm they'd created.

Too late.

Nearby thorn trees flickered as the flame touched them, the plants falling into ash as the wind struck them. Steam rose from the seared ground as scalding fog.

“Oh gods, what have I done...?” Storm whispered, sinking to the steaming sand beneath him, head bowed, shoulders slumped with the realization of the destruction they’d wrought.

Flame ran to his side and put protective arms around him. The fire was gone from his body, used up in the maelstrom that had hit the canyon.

Storm knelt there, shaking and cold inside. “What have I done, Flamespirit? What have I done?” he asked in a barely audible voice choked by the horror of their unleashed magic.

Flame looked out over the carnage they had wrought and winced. “What have we *both* done? Those bodies are charred, Storm, not simply wind lashed.”

“My fault,” Storm murmured, dazed, blinking and unsure why he couldn’t see clearly until he touched his face and looked at his hand which was coated in sticky redness. “It’s all my fault.”

Everything had taken on a distorted, foggy sort of quality in his vision, and when he lifted his gaze to look at Flame all he could see was

the beak and feathers, the bright-fire eyes of the Fenyx.

Flame was quick to deny his words. “No, Storm! They’re the ones who came looking for a fight so that makes it their fault, not yours. Don’t beat yourself up over this, my love.”

“But is *my* life worth destroying the lives of so many others, Flame? I know who those men were, they had swordbrothers, wives, children.... And now they’re dead...” Pain lanced his mind, etched with an acidic burn into his heart. “I didn’t *want* to kill them...”

The arms around him tightened. “They didn’t give us a lot of choice.” But the words were hushed as if Flame didn’t quite believe them himself. “I’ve never been able to do things like *that* before.”

“Me either, and considering the result... I never want to do it again. *Never.*”

Flame pulled away and climbed shakily to his feet. “I’d better check for survivors and see what I can do for them.”

“Survivors?” Storm got to his feet, stood there swaying, drops of blood falling from his

battered flesh to spatter the wet sand. “Could anyone survive that, Flame? It turned the trees to ash the instant it touched them, and those warcycles look as if they’ve melted. Human flesh can’t withstand that kind of heat.”

“I don’t know, Storm, but we do need to find out.” Flame smiled although the expression was mangled and lop-sided. “Let me heal you first.” He drew his soul stone from under his jacket and ran it over Storm’s body, wincing at some of the wounds his lover had sustained.

Storm closed his eyes, soothed by the touch of his lover’s hand, the gentle warmth of the soul ball as his lover healed him. He enfolded Flame in his embrace and clung to the other man, hanging on to him as the understanding of why he’d done mass murder dawned like a cloudless morning in his mind. He’d done it to protect Flame. Not to save himself, but in defense of his lover.

Along with that knowledge came the realization that, horrible as the killings might be, he’d do it all over again if Flame’s life was threatened.

Does that make it right?

No, it didn't. But it also didn't change the fact that, given a threat to Flamespirit's existence, he knew he'd do it again. He knew he'd kill to protect his lover. He pressed his face into Flame's soft hair. They both smelled of blood and the scent of killing magic clung to them, but under it lay that smell he sought. Spicy, the perfume of his lover's essence.

"Storm." Flame's use of his name and the serious tone it was said in brought him back from his dark thoughts. Flame was gazing at him, his expression troubled. "Storm, I don't quite know how to tell you this properly, but you should have died from your wounds." He frowned. "And yet I needed very little energy to heal you."

Dragon and Fenyx. Immortals. But how? Why?

He was too tired to even consider the answers.

"Like the legends," he murmured, mind refusing to completely grasp the implication despite the fact he'd voiced it to his lover. To the Fenyx gazing at him, eyes so full of compassion and love.

Love. He was loved. And he loved in return.

That was what mattered most. The man that loved him was at his side.

Tears blurred his vision as he kissed Flame, heedless of the blood covering them both. "I love you."

Flame returned the both the embrace and the kiss for a few breathless moments before pulling away and standing up. "I need to check those men."

Storm let him go, following behind as they went to see what his rage and their combined power had done to the men who'd attacked them.

His eyes saw the horror, accepted it as something of his own creation. Men burned into charred remnants. Twisted and contorted in the throes of agony.

His doing.

Men he'd known by name.

He closed his eyes, turned away, but the image remained, burned into his memories.

No one could have survived the conflagration they'd released.

A dozen of the most powerful mages the Dragon Clan had among their number, dead by his hand.

"I love you, Flame. They would have killed us both if they couldn't subjugate us. I have to keep telling myself that, but.... does it justify this... this carnage?"

Flame said nothing in reply but instead began to move quicker. A soft groan was coming from further down the canyon which meant at least one mage had survived. There were two burned and battered young men lying there. One was obviously a water mage judging by the small pool that they were lying in; water that had obviously saved their lives. The other man was possibly fire to have withstood their attack and survived at all.

Flame crouched by their side and ran his soul ball over them. One, the water mage, opened blue eyes to gaze at them in awe. "Dragon and Fenyx," he murmured. "The legends were true."

“Don’t try to talk yet,” Flame said gently. “Lie still while I heal your burns.”

The second young man gasped, burnt skin flaking as he tried to move, reaching for the man beside him. “Please save my swordbrother... please...” he begged through lips that cracked and bled as he spoke.

Storm watched Flame as he healed the terrible injuries, the burned skin and charred flesh knitting together, all traces of the horrible wounds vanishing under the touch of Flame’s magic and the power of the soul ball.

Flame smiled at them. “Don’t worry. You’re *both* going to live. Lie quiet and rest while I see if anyone else needs me.”

He rose gracefully and headed down the canyon towards a lone figure well back from all the others. It could only be Nightwind. The soul ball glowed again.

The leader of the group that had come for them opened his eyes to stare with unconcealed hate at Flame. “Bastards... you’ll both.... pay for this....”

Storm frowned. “Hasn’t this defeat taught

you anything, fool?" he asked, anger turning his voice into a harsh snarl. "Three survivors, that's it. You, Watersong and Heartfire. How many more will you kill trying to make me a slave, Nightwind? Is my brother's ambition to rule all the clans worth so much misery and sorrow brought down on the clan to which we were born?"

"It was never him that brought sorrow and misery, Stormdragon, it was you!" the man snapped in response. "Coward!"

"Is that your answer to everything? Naming me coward doesn't make it truth, Nightwind. Gods help me, but I wish I were a coward and had run from you rather than standing to fight. It would have saved the lives of these poor misguided fools who've chosen to follow my brother rather than listen to their own hearts and see him for the war-mongering idiot he is!"

Nightwind glared at him, the look sullen and full of undisguised hate.

"Hate me all you like. That hasn't changed since I accepted Sandrunner as my swordbrother. You always resented that I loved him and not you."

“You’re insane! I never wanted you!”

Stormdragon laughed at him, the sound just as harsh as his words. “I see you’ve gotten as good at changing your memories as my brother is. But I remember it, I remember everything and nothing you say can change the fact you burned our tent out of jealous rage.”

He turned to Flame. “Heal this worthless dustdelver’s leavings and let’s go. I no longer want to remain in this canyon, it stinks of death and lies.”

Flame nodded. He felt the same way with far less reason. In their own way, Storm’s clan had let him down even worse than Flame’s had treated him. “I’ve done all I need to do for him.” He indicated Nightwind with a foot. “He was far enough back for his wounds to be superficial. The other two worry me more.”

He rose to his feet and flicked a look of utter contempt at the leader of the little war band before heading back to his other two patients. “Watersong and Heartfire, have I got that right?”

The watermage nodded and tried to sit up.

Flame held him in place with a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Don't try to move just yet, please. Let the healing finish its work."

Blue eyes studied him intently for a moment but the watermage stopped struggling. "Why did you heal us? We tried to harm you."

Flame thought about how he should answer that for a short while before the answer came to him unbidden. "I'm a healer, I can no more leave someone to die than you can ignore water. You used your power to save yourself and your swordbrother, just as I used mine to save my swordbrother. We are not so different, you and I."

Watersong searched his face as if looking for some answer to an unspoken question. "I'm a good watermage, but you're an Immortal, Fenyx."

"I never loved you!" Nightwind shouted at Storm.

"No, you didn't love me and I knew it. I saw through you from the start, Nightwind. All you have ever loved is power. When you couldn't gain it through me you went to my brother and

became his ass kisser instead,” Storm replied before he turned his attention on the younger pair of mages who’d barely survived the battle.

“Don’t let those two idiots drag you down with them, Watersong. You and Heartfire are better than that.”

The men both lowered their gazes. “We’re not given much choice,” Heartfire replied.

“We obey orders or...”

“He names you outlaws?”

Both men nodded.

“The choice remains yours,” Storm reminded them.

“We’re not like you, Stormdragon. We’ve got our wives and the children to think about,” Watersong argued.

“And if you die fighting for my brother do you know what will happen to them?” Storm asked. “Have you thought about it?”

“He’ll sell them,” Heartfire admitted. “We know it. We’ve seen it happen and your father does nothing to stop him.”

“He’s no longer Chief, so he won’t do anything. I knew Dragonwind would take the mantle of Chief from our father the minute I was named coward,” Storm admitted. “I don’t know what has happened to my father in the last half year, but he is not the same man he once was.”

Flame regarded the two young men intently. “I think there will be more than enough women and children for sale from the nine dead men behind us.”

He shifted his gaze to Storm. “If you really want a clan of your own, I believe you have the beginnings of one right here. The question is; *do* you want it?”

Gold rimmed aqua eyes regarded Flame. “They’ll be taken to the City. He gets the best price that way.” His lover turned to stare at Nightwind. “Too bad I’ve retained my overgrown sense of honor or I’d sell that pile of dung to the City people and use the money from his sale to free clan women and children.”

Watersong, no longer having the restraint of Flame’s hand on his shoulder, sat up and glanced from Flame to Storm and back again. “What was that about your own clan?”

Flame was still gazing intently at his swordbrother. “You told them all you were chief of your own clan, you even named it. Will you allow the disaffected from your old clan to join?”

“I...” Storm turned away, took a few steps from them and stood there looking at the dead men surrounding them.

Time to decide. Do you really have what it takes to lead a Clan or were you blowing hot air all these years you were Heir to the Chief? Once you decide, there won't be any changing your mind. You either are a clan chief, or you aren't.

But you already know the answer. You made your choice when you faced these men.

Storm's head came up, back straightening, shoulders losing their bowed posture. The defeated appearance that had clung to Storm since they met fell away.

“My father raised me as the Heir to the Chief. My brother somehow managed to take that from me. I don't accept his pronouncement of outlaw. I don't accept anything he has done or said as the Chief of the Dragon Clan.”

He turned to face them. The change in Storm was visible in his eyes, in the calm, assured expression on his face. “I am the Chief of the Dragon and Fenyx Clan and this man is my co-chief and swordbrother, Flamespirit. We would welcome you and your wives and children as part of our clan. I accept the responsibility for caring for the women and children of the men who were killed here today since the man who is my blood brother will not.

“I swear this. Anyone who decides to leave my brother’s clan and come to us will be made welcome in the Dragon and Fenyx Clan.”

The tension seeped out of Flame like water out of a squeezed sponge and he walked into Storm’s arms. Once there he turned to see how Watersong and Heartfire would react to his swordbrother’s offer.

Watersong turned to his swordbrother, hope shining in his blue eyes. “We’ve always been able to trust Stormdragon’s word but I’m not so sure about our new Chief.”

“You miserable shits!” Nightwind snarled as he got to his feet. He stalked closer, anger

blazing in his gaze. “How dare you turn against your rightful Chief.”

Heartfire frowned. “Yes, you’re right. How did we dare turn on Stormdragon the way we did? We knew something was wrong the day his father believed that stinking pile of offal named Dragonwind, but we just accepted it and look what it’s gotten us. Our own people sold into slavery, and us too worried about being named outlaws to even question anything Dragonwind orders. If anyone should be named coward it’s the warriors of the Dragon clan for refusing to stand up to an egotistical lunatic with delusions of ruling the world.”

Watersong nodded his agreement while Flame watched Nightwind carefully. His emotions were twisted, the hatred carefully nurtured, the kinder emotions buried behind an empathic shield. It took a skilled empath to do that, to feed sullen sulking into hatred, to carefully wall up reason. “Chiefs who rule by fear rather than respect are not true chiefs.”

Flame wondered if he could do anything about the mess that was Nightwind’s emotions. He wasn’t particularly impressed with the way the

man had stayed at the back of the other warriors where he would be safer so he sent a wave of self-doubt at the man.

Nightwind kept wary eyes on them as he checked the damaged remains of his cycle. “You’ve stranded us here with no food or weapons. It will take days to get back to the Clan.”

Stormdragon shrugged. “It will take you that long. Watersong and Heartfire can come with us. We’ll leave them within walking distance of Dragon Clan.”

“Bastard!” the windmage snarled, taking a step toward them, hands tightening into fists.

“Blame your new Chief. All I ever wanted was to be left in peace,” Storm stated as he helped Heartfire to his feet.

Flame stepped forward so he was between the enraged windmage and his swordbrother. “Don’t come any closer,” he warned quietly. “You’re out of your depth here and you know it.”

Watersong scrambled to his feet and Flame was pleased to see him stand by Storm and Heartfire before turning to scowl at Nightwind.

Anger turned Nightwind's handsome face ugly. Features knotted into an expression composted of hate and barely contained fury he said, "You'll all pay for this! I swear you'll both regret the day you chose to side with a couple of outlaws."

"Outlaws to you, maybe. But I doubt most clans will accept any of us being named outlaws for refusing to sell our own people as slaves in the City. Dragonwind is defying clan custom, ignoring the old Laws that we've lived by for centuries in his greed for money and power," Storm remarked. "How long do you think the Clan can exist with him as leader when he's selling the children of the Clan? Without them the Clan has no future. None."

"Shut up!"

"Why should he? Maybe it's because you don't want to hear the truth!" Heartfire countered. "We're going to go back to the Clan and we're going to tell everyone what we saw, what happened and how very courageous you were during the attack. Then we're going to leave Dragon Clan and we won't be coming back! We've got a new Chief who won't threaten to sell

our wives and children into slavery every time we disagree with his orders!”

Flame smirked, his eyes on Nightwind. The look on the man’s face wiped the smirk from his face. “One would hope that any disagreements could be solved through discussion rather than threats.”

“They can just try to leave. They’ll see what happens then they turn traitor to their Chief!” Nightwind shouted.

“He’s not our Chief. Not anymore,” Heartfire retorted. “Stormdragon and Flamespirit are.”

“Flame, middle of the night or not, we need to get out of here,” Storm remarked. “We’ll have to take them to Dragon Clan and then decide what to do, well away from any spying ears that can carry messages to my brother.”

Flame nodded his agreement, gaze still on Nightwind as he wondered again about the man and his twisted up emotions. “Yes, you’re right,” he said to Storm and finally turned away from the spineless windmage. The man’s emotions were so knotted up with hate that Flame wished

he could bathe his empathic power to clean it of their taint.

Storm headed toward the cave that had served as their all too temporary refuge, the pair of young swordbrothers from Dragon Clan following him, the two of them casting uneasy glances at Nightwind.

The older mage lifted his hand, the magical energies gathering as pale bluish streamers, a faint trace of wind dancing through his dark hair.

Storm turned to regard him, his eyes glowing an intense blue in the darkness. "Do you want to die today?" his lover asked, voice calm, pale mist rising around him. Mist that showed how close to the surface of his magic the Dragon remained.

Flame spun, a fireball ready in his hand, just in time to see Nightwind's hand drop to his side. Doubly a coward then, avoids confrontation and attacks from behind. He wanted to get away from the damaged windmage, partly due to disgust but also partly due to guilt. Someone with the same power as he, the power of empathy, had used it to twist Nightwind's emotions into the hate-filled mess they now were. He wondered if he could

do the same then shuddered as he realized he would never want to.

He strode to his workbike and turned to the swordbrothers, noting comparative sizes and weights. The watermage was slighter and probably weighed twenty or thirty pounds less than the firemage. “Watersong, I think you’d better ride behind me as I don’t have the best bike in the world.”

“Neither did I, but it was mine,” Watersong said, his remorse at the loss of his vehicle reaching out to Flame across his natural empathic ability.

Heartfire sighed. “I’m not even sure how we’re going to manage to leave Dragon Clan without our cycles. We used them to tow our family’s wagon since we can’t afford the price Dragonwind charges for the bikes he gets from his slave trading with the City.”

Storm frowned. “We were going to head to the City ourselves. Do either of your wives have bikes?”

Heartfire shook his head. “No, like I said, we can’t afford them.”

Flame frowned. Storm had told him his

clan was well run but it seemed that things had changed for the worse since he'd left it. Even Stonefist had allowed him a bike, even though it was a crappy, second-hand workbike. The Dragon Clan was obviously being run by a greedy lunatic. Even if they took the swordbrothers back they had no way of getting their families out of there.

"If the two of you don't mind, my swordbrother and I need to talk alone," Storm said as he headed into the cave.

"You'll pay for this affront! You'll pay with your lives!" Nightwind shouted from where they'd left him.

"Oh shut up you pompous idiot!" Flame was totally disgusted with both the man and his attitude. He followed Storm into the cave and picked up the few belongings they'd brought in there before glancing at his swordbrother with a worried frown. "How can we help them?"

"I'm trying to think of some way to get their families free of my brother's insanity, but with no cycles or bikes they're going to be unable to make a run for it. That leaves finding another clan and trying to buy cycles from them or.... taking them

with us to the City, buying cycles for them there and sending them to get their families.”

Storm sighed. “Anyway you look at it, the situation’s complicated.”

Flame thought about that for a while. The only clan he knew of in the area was his old clan and although Stonefist’s son had taken it over now, he wasn’t sure whether they would want to trade any of their cycles or bikes. They weren’t that well off. This left the option of taking the men to the City while leaving their families to deal with the fallout from Nightwind’s report to his chief and that wasn’t a viable option in his opinion. He smiled as he had an idea.

“If we can, we need to find a nearby clan willing to trade for two bikes or cycles and they won’t come cheap. Can we even afford to do that?”

A wry smile curled Storm’s mouth as his lover picked up a bland stone and closed his fist around it. He stood there for a moment his gaze slightly unfocused. When he opened his hand a sunstone half the size of the original rock lay in the palm of his hand. “I think we can manage,” he remarked.

Flame's smile widened into a grin. "Sunstones and firestones, of course! Let's just hope we can find a clan willing to part with two vehicles. The City is too far away as they need to get their families before that bastard out there has time to spread his poison or your brother to sell their families."

Thinking of Nightwind reminded him of what had been done to the man's feelings. "His emotions have been twisted. There's only hatred and loyalty to his Chief left. All the more human emotions have been carefully buried under the weight of those two. Does your old clan have a strong empath? Because his emotional response is not normal and it takes a strong empath to do that much damage."

"Not that I know of, but things have changed since I left. Someone might have discovered a hidden talent they didn't know they had. It happens sometimes. I didn't know I was a stonewielder until I happened to accidentally knock one out of my cycle while I was making a repair.

"My brother doesn't like new people joining the clan, so I doubt it's someone new.

“And, while I hate the idea, there might be a solution to Nightwind.” Storm sighed, shoved a lock of hair out of his eyes and turned his faintly glowing eyes on Flame. “Selling Nightwind to another clan might be the best answer for everyone. That will keep him alive, get him away from my brother and keep him from carrying tales about Heartfire and Watersong back to Dragonwind.”

Flame grimaced at the thought of selling another clansman but inwardly he had to agree. If Nightwind was kept away from the source of the tampering with his emotions he might even heal enough to become a useful human being. There was an upside also. If they sold him it would go towards the cost of one of the vehicles and it would give them the time to get to the City if they had to go that far to get the bikes. “It’s actually not a bad idea. It keeps him from having his mind even more fucked up than it already is and gives it the opportunity to heal.”

“So we sell him to the first Clan we locate and try to buy at least a pair of sturdy workbikes in trade for him and whatever else we need to give them. Failing that we all go to the City and get

bikes there.” Storm put an arm around Flame and gave him a quick kiss. “So much for my plans for this evening.”

Flame returned both the embrace and the kiss. “I could quite happily kill your brother at this moment.”

“Why do you think I left? I didn’t want to become a kinslayer. I made a mistake by not killing him. I can see that now. He’s going to either destroy our clan, or start a war between clans through his ambition to rule everyone.”

Storm’s frown deepened. “Maybe that’s how he got to our father. He knew what life would be like if Dragonwind ever became Chief, yet all it took was my brother naming me coward for father to change his mind. I’ve always wondered about that. It never made any sense but if there’s an empath tampering with people’s minds... It would explain all too well why my father had his abrupt change of heart.”

Flame nodded. “I did wonder about that part of your story, but if what has been done to that windmage’s mind was also done to your father’s....”

“Then the clan of my birth is being run by an egomaniac who will stop at nothing to achieve his long held goal of ruling every clan even if it means starting a full scale war. No clan chief worth his people’s trust will passively accept my brother’s rule and yield a clan to his brand of leadership.”

Flame held Storm tight as he shuddered. “And it will mean war, of course.” He pulled away somewhat reluctantly and sighed. “I guess we’d better get moving.”

“Yes, I guess so, but...” Storm kissed Flame, his lover’s arms tightening around him. “I wish they’d never found us. I had so many plans for this sexy firemage I’m holding.”

Flame felt his face heat up yet again at Storm’s words. *Damn this coloring!* “You’re the sexy one, not me.”

“Don’t argue, Flame. If I say you’re sexy, then you should learn accept it.” Storm leaned in closer and whispered, “If you argue with me I might have to spank you.”

Flame snarled against his lover’s ear. “You might have more than an argument on your

hands if you try doing that.” But part of him wondered if he would put up any more than a token resistance. The idea of Storm spanking him was exciting somehow and his body had responded very differently than his mind.

“I love you, Flame,” Storm murmured into Flame’s ear, warm breath flowing over his skin and raising goosebumps. “And I wouldn’t mind a bit of a wrestling match, winner takes loser if you like. Unfortunately we can’t have our fun at the moment. But later, I’m going to pin you to our bed and have my way with you.”

Flame sighed in irritation. “Then stop talking about it and let’s get moving!” But he did plant a kiss on Storm’s mouth before pulling away from his lover. He wondered when he had become so able to face problems head on and tackle them and came to the conclusion that it was Storm’s quiet strength that aided him.

Flame grinned to himself as he thought about what Storm had just said. The sooner they sorted out the problem caused by the three men outside the cave, the sooner he could make love with his swordbrother again.

Chapter Five

Unexpected Alliance

The break of day washed the cloudless sky in soft lavender light, making the canyon they were traversing easier to navigate with the lessening of night's grip. Storm kept the lights of his warcycle on for the time being. The shadows of the canyon were still too deep for him to risk colliding with anything.

He skirted a shallow mud hole—the remains of a pool of water being slowly reclaimed by the dust and sand—and drove around another meandering curve of the canyon.

The going was slow, the weight of two riders on Storm's cycle not nearly the problem that the weight of three men and their possessions posed on Flame's workbike which strained at any effort to make speed. Held to a crawling pace by the overloaded workbike, Storm found himself chafing under the desire to bring the whole situation to a satisfactory end and get on their way to the City before the Season of Storms closed over the land.

When that happened they wouldn't be able to travel anywhere, not even for food. He glanced past the man behind him to see his swordbrother, wishing they were alone and free of the responsibility they'd accepted as a result of the battle they'd fought.

Nightwind's muffled curses had long since subsided. The ropes binding him assured he could neither kick himself free of the sled, nor use his magical abilities. The gag in his mouth prevented them from hearing any more of his endless vilification and threats.

Storm still wasn't sure he could actually sell another human being into slavery. He wouldn't know if he could until they either found another Clan or reached the City itself if it came to that.

He drove his cycle around another curve in the canyon and stopped. Ahead the darkness was filled with myriad points of ruddy light. The red glow lit the near distance and showed shadowy forms moving against the light, their shapes betraying what they were: women going about their morning duties. The scent of roasting meat reached them on a chill morning breeze.

Flame drove his workbike up alongside

Storm's warcycle and stared at the sight before them. "That's a lucky break. Let's just hope they want to trade with us."

Storm motioned Heartfire off of his cycle. "Wait here, I'll go in alone and make sure they're not going to be hostile. You three be ready to fight because we couldn't outrun a child as overburdened as that bike of Flame's is."

"Be careful, Stormdragon. I'd really hate to lose our Chief before there's even a tribe," Heartfire remarked.

Flame gave a little snort of humorless laughter but his brown eyes were full of concern as he glanced at Storm. "Yeah, what he said. You'd better come back in one piece!"

Storm leaned over and patted his swordbrother's arm. "Keep an eye out, if you see the Dragon you'll know we're in a fight."

Warning delivered, he rode his cycle toward the encampment, mouth dry, sweat trickling along his back. Not all Clans welcomed strangers and approaching any clan by the light of dawn when mostly women would be up and about was risky under the best of situations.

From the thick shadows lying along the canyon wall came a cluster of five riders mounted on an assortment of scout, hunt and warcycles.

None of them carried weapons, but with the glow of magical energy surrounding them, Storm knew they were well prepared for any hostility he might represent. They were showing caution, but not open intent to attack.

Not yet anyway.

One of the warcycles approached ahead of the others and came to a stop in front of Storm. The rider removed goggles, helmet and dust filter to reveal a feminine face framed by soft brown hair. Her eyes were blue and as hard as flint as she gazed at him. "What business do you have with the Clan of the She Bear?"

A peaceful greeting. Good, this might turn out all right.

Storm removed his own protective gear so the woman could see his face. He gave her a smile as he set them aside, refusing to show any sign of the nervousness making his heart race.

"We'd like to trade for bikes or cycles. Which ever you have a surplus of right now. Our

friends lost theirs in a..." he hesitated, then said, "mishap."

The woman laughed. "Mishap huh?" She quickly became serious again. "Vehicles aren't cheap. What are you looking to trade?"

She gazed past him to where Flame and the others waited and grunted. "That workbike your friend over there is riding has seen better days too."

"We've got firestones and..." he debated wondering how they'd take his offer of a man in trade. "We've captured an enemy of our people. He's a powerful windmage and we'd rather not let him go to return to his clan." He'd suggested Nightwind posed a problem without blatantly offering the man as an item of trade.

If they rejected the offerings he had, he would offer the sunstones he'd made as trade items and see how those were received.

The woman nodded slowly, her expression knowing. "Some brawn to do the grunt work is always useful. I'll take a look at him, at least. How many firestones are we talking about here?"

"We can spare about fifty. They're fresh, fully

charged, or never used,” Storm replied and got off his cycle. He held his hand out toward the woman, waiting to see if she would clasp his wrist in friendly greeting. “My name is Stormdragon, I’m co-Chief of the Dragon and Fenyx Clan.”

The woman climbed off her own cycle and stepped forward, hand outstretched to clasp Storm’s. “I am Skybird, Chief of the Clan of the She Bear. Let me see this captured windmage of yours.”

He closed his hand around her wrist and they shook, meeting as equals and possible friends. “It pleases me to meet Skybird who is Chief to the Clan of the She Bear. Stories of your clan have been carried to my ears by those who have met you, and always they speak of how fair you are, and how generous.”

While the words were phrased in the formal speech of chiefs, they were also the truth. Storm had heard of her, though his former clan had never dealt with her She Bear Clan directly.

Skybird’s lips twitched in a self-mocking smirk. “I know very well how most clans view us Stormdragon, co-Chief of the Dragon and Fenyx Clan. But I always try to be fair in trade

dealings. Now let me see your offerings and make a decision.”

As she spoke a second warcycle came forward and another pretty woman revealed herself. Skybird smiled at her as she made introductions. “My swordsisiter, Sunchild.”

Storm offered the newcomer a smile of greeting and then waved to Flame to show his swordbrother there was no danger. “Well met, Sunchild swordsisiter of Skybird.”

Flame started his workbike and drove slowly forward to where the little group waited. Watersong was still riding pillion and Heartfire walked at Flame’s side. When they drew abreast with Storm they all removed their riding gear to show their faces.

Skybird and Sunchild exchanged a significant look before heading towards the sled and the still bound Nightwind.

“This is my swordbrother and co-Chief Flamespirit,” Storm told them. “And that man is known as Nightwind a son of the Dragon Clan which is an enemy of my own Clan.”

One of the young women with them had her

gaze on Heartfire. She offered him a warm smile and Storm saw the firemage blush and lower his gaze, but the hint of a pleased smile had found its way to his lips.

A thoughtful expression crossed Skybird's face as she examined the bound windmage. "I am prepared to give you two good warcycles, Stormdragon of the Dragon and Fenyx clan in exchange for this man," She prodded Nightwind with a booted foot, "fifty new firestones and a night or two with your men if they are willing."

Before Storm could speak she held up her hand. "They can return for that as I know the Season of Storms is almost upon us and none of us have any time to waste."

"Then our captive interests you? Good. Two warcycles for the windmage and the fifty firestones. As for the night with my men," he glanced at Heartfire and Watersong," that is up to them. One warcycle will go to them and the other will go to my swordbrother, Flamespirit.

"And yes, the blackstorms will soon be upon us and there is no arguing with them as they do not listen to our complaints," he added, laughing

softly. “Not that I haven’t tried to get the storms to listen now and then.”

Heartfire glanced at his swordbrother, one eyebrow lifted in an unspoken question. “It does seem fair to me that we shoulder some of the cost, Watersong.”

Watersong glanced at the women and smiled. “I agree with you, Heartfire, and will be glad to return whenever is convenient to these ladies.”

Flame meanwhile sent a look of absolute panic in Storm’s direction.

Storm leaned closer to his lover and whispered, “Take it easy, Flame. It’s not us they’re interested in, it’s Heartfire and Watersong. We’re too slender and short to be considered good breeding stock,” Storm explained. “At least I think so.”

“Agreed,” Skybird said with finality. “We’ll take the captive and the firestones now and you and you,” she pointed to Heartfire and Watersong in turn, “will meet with us at the Place of the Three Rocks after the Season of Storms.”

Flame visibly relaxed when she spoke.

Storm grinned at his lover. “See I told you,”

he murmured into Flame's ear, all too aware of his lover's intoxicating scent. His cock stirred and he pulled himself away from his lover before things tried to get out of hand. Or rather before his arousal became too evident.

"Agreed," he told Skybird, "and I'll make sure the two of them arrive as soon as the storms come to an end." He smiled at Skybird. "I'd like to see the cycles we just bought then we can seal the agreement."

The woman nodded. "Come then. Just you and your swordbrother for now. Sunchild, can you get the captive Nightwind, please."

Sunchild and the other women gathered round the sled and dragged Nightwind to his feet. He was dumped on the pillion of Sunchild's warcycle and the women disappeared with him towards the main camp.

Skybird led Storm and Flame to a large tent set aside from the others where several cycles and bikes were parked. Two warcycles, not new but in excellent condition stood to one side and it was there that she led them. Her blue eyes were sad as she ran a hand over the seat of one of them. "These belonged to two of my clan who are no

longer with us. One was caught by a darbear the other died of old age. They've been well looked after."

"The loss of anyone you are entrusted to protect is hard, even if the loss is to old age," Storm remarked as he studied the cycles. They were both in excellent condition, though one was of an older style that he hadn't seen since he was a boy. The old cycle had a larger than average weapons rack and a pair of hitch points that would allow it to pull a sled. An important point as the other cycle didn't have that feature. He motioned Flame to that cycle. "See if you can ride it."

Flame glanced at Skybird for permission and she nodded, smiled and stood aside. He mounted the cycle and started it up. Its powerful roar was smooth and Flame knocked the stand up and swung it out of the tent. He drove it about a hundred yards, turned and came back. "I can ride it." He was smiling like a kid with a new toy. "I'll be able to keep up with you now."

It makes me happy to see him smile like that. I wish he could always be as happy as he is at this moment. Better yet, I wish all this mess with

Dragonwind was over and we were in our own Clan's camp with happy, contented people around us and a comfortable tent or cave for shelter.

Storm motioned Heartfire over to try out the other cycle and the younger firemage got on and started it up. It too sounded good and when Heartfire rode it into the canyon it raced over the sand. He came back and nodded, "It's a good cycle."

"So we have a deal then?" Storm asked, holding his hand out, ready to seal the bargain.

Skybird grasped it. "Yes, we have a deal."

"Agreed," Storm stated as he clasped her wrist. "Do you have anything warm for us to eat? We've been riding all night and we're cold and hungry. I've got some trinkets we can trade if you like," he offered, hoping for the generosity he'd heard of, rather than the need to pay for a warm meal they all needed.

From the corner of his eye, Storm saw a group of women surrounding Nightwind. They were untying the ropes that held him to the sled, but not those that bound him.

Unfortunately the man managed to get his

gag off. Snarling Nightwind bellowed, “Damn you, Stormdragon! Damn you!” and he started filling the air with invective that could have scorched steel, the racket shattering the relative quiet of the camp.

Not in the least dismayed, the women pulled him off the sled, tied him to a sturdy pole and hefted him off the sled, the man struggling in vain.

“He’s a lively one, he’ll make an excellent slave,” one of the women remarked.

Panting from his struggles and cursing Nightwind glared at Storm. “You’ll pay for this! I swear by all that is holy you’ll pay for doing this to me!”

Storm felt a chill run up his spine and he instinctively reached out to put an arm around Flame, seeking to protect his swordbrother even though he knew Nightwind’s threats were empty ones.

Flame leaned against him, mouth still curved into a smile. “Did Nightwind always rant and rave so noisily?” He went quiet, the smile dying,

as he wondered if he'd said too much in front of Skybird.

The woman glanced his way and smirked. "I would be a very unusual Chief if I didn't know your swordbrother was once destined to be Chief of the Dragon Clan. I've also heard rumors of how much that clan has changed in recent moons. Don't feel the need to hide things. I have no love for Dragonwind."

Flame relaxed again but made a mental note to keep things to himself in future or share them only with Storm.

Skybird gestured for them to follow her. "Breakfast should be ready. Free of charge save for news and conversation."

"Yes Dragon Clan has changed and not for the better," Heartfire commented. "He's selling our people as slaves to other clans and even a few to the City if they would make him enough profit. Worse he plans to take over other Clans and if their Chiefs resist being controlled he plans to fight with them until they yield to his demands."

"He always was a fool," Stormdragon

muttered. “He forgets a battle can have more than one outcome. His is a dangerous arrogance. His confidence in the power of the clan’s mages will lead to his downfall someday.”

Skybird led them to another large tent, this one obviously living quarters, where food was laid out for them all. Flame sighed happily at the sight of roasted meats and vegetables. It had been a long, cold ride through the night and he was hungry.

They sat down on thick furs and began to eat. Skybird was the first to break the silence. “You have given me much to think about, Stormdragon. The Clan of the She Bear has enough problems with male dominated clans thinking they can use us as an easy place to pick up women or slaves without Dragonwind attempting to lord it over all clans. I think we might need to rethink our dealings with other clans in the face of this.” She turned to Flame then and studied him for a moment, making him feel decidedly uncomfortable.

“What is your story, Flamespirit?” she asked. “I can see you have only just formed your bond but I don’t recognize your name from any clan.”

Flame grimaced at his food. "It's hardly surprising that you don't know of me, as I was considered little more than a slave in my own clan. That is why I have no warrior markings."

An arm went around him at that remark, Storm hugging him. "Those don't matter to me, Flame. You've got to know that by now. Still...."

His lover gave him a squeeze and whispered, "All the same, let's see if we can remedy that, shall we?"

"Skybird do you have anyone skilled in the tattooing arts? I'd be willing to pay to have the marks of a clan warrior and chief put on my swordbrother. I'd also like to have my heir's mark changed to that of a chief. The changes for us both would be welcomed and well rewarded for good work."

Skybird smiled. "The news you've brought alone is well worth the tattoos. Besides, can't have two such important men going without the correct markings for their rank. I will see to it after we've eaten."

Flame stared from Skybird to Storm and back again. To go from no mark to those of a Chief

was more than he could take in as yet although he knew the marks would be important in the future if he was to be the co-Chief of his new clan. Storm might say they didn't matter to him, but Flame knew he had no authority at all without them.

Skybird was speaking again and he did his best to listen to her words. Luckily she was speaking to Storm. "Why is Flamespirit this age and obviously powerful without warrior marks?"

"The former leader of Stoneclan, Stonefist fears anyone greater in magic than the pitiful amount he himself wields. For someone who became Chief of a tribe, his command of power is pitiful. Because Flamespirit is very powerful Stonefist feared him so much that he spent years denigrating and subjugating my swordbrother until Flamespirit felt he was the most worthless man alive. He was never offered any of the normal things a man of any clan is entitled to, not the marks of a warrior, not even the basics of living from day to day. He was treated as a disgrace and a shame when in truth he was the most powerful mage in the entire clan."

Storm's pale aqua eyes gazed into the flower

blue eyes of Skybird. “He’s a healer, a firemage and more than that, he’s a living legend come to life. He’s my swordbrother and I love him, so it would please me greatly for him to be marked as my co-Chief.”

Flame watched Skybird’s eyes widen in shock as she listened to Storm even though he felt his cheeks heat in embarrassment.

“A healer was treated in this way? It defies belief, and yet I have heard of this Stonefist and his fears and can only be thankful he is now the *former* leader of his clan. Had they continued to follow his fears they would cease to exist very quickly.” She smiled at Flame then. “It will be an honor for us to give you your rightful standing in the world, Flamespirit.”

“Thank you,” Flame murmured, his throat too tight with emotion for him to be able to say more at this moment. A warrior’s marks would have been enough so that he didn’t shame Storm in their dealings with others, but to receive the mark of a Chief. He couldn’t get to grips with that thought at all.

“If you have anyone in need of healing, I’m sure Flame would be happy to see to them,” Storm

commented as he picked up a bowl of food and took a bite. “We’re a new tribe as I’m sure you guessed. In fact we only officially decided to call ourselves a clan as of last night. Right now we are ideals rich and clanspeople poor.”

Flame shot a look at Storm, wondering why he had admitted their lack of numbers to this powerful woman. He turned his attention back to her to find her face was serene as she continued to eat. “New,” she said, “but powerful if the four of you are any indication.”

She frowned as if in deep thought. “We are speaking frankly here, Stormdragon, and we both know I would be within my rights to insist that you join my clan. However, I have no desire to even make the attempt. I believe that we could be useful to each other if you are agreed. My clan’s way of life does not sit well with some of the other clans even though we often provide them with young warriors who have no desire to stay in a clan of women. If our boys had a good clan to go to instead of the indifferent ones prepared to take them at present, it might help us both, you would get young men eager to become good warriors and mages and I would get the peace of

mind that seeing them well established would grant.

“We do have a healer but it always pays to be on good terms with another in case of war or other emergency. I’m a pragmatist, Stormdragon. I’ve had to be with my lifestyle. So I’m suggesting we do each other favors along the way, become allies.”

A pleased grin turned Stormdragon’s already handsome face into a breathtaking sight. He nodded, the ornaments in his braided hair sparkling in the glow of the morning sunlight. “It would make me very proud and happy to form such an alliance, Chief Skybird of the Clan of the She Bear. Perhaps we can share a camp during the Season of Storms to become better acquainted, my little Clan and yours.” He patted Flame’s knee. “I’ll be the first to admit that Flame and I aren’t likely to take even a single wife, so my clan will probably get the same sorts of side-ways looks yours already gets.”

Flame sat entranced by the sight of his lover smiling so widely. It was the first time he’d seen such a happy and carefree expression on his

swordbrother's face and he hoped to see plenty of it in future.

Heartfire cleared his throat. "Not with Watersong and I as part of your clan. We've already got two wives and six children between us, my Chief."

"Way to go Heart!" Watersong knocked an elbow into his swordbrother's ribs but Skybird laughed. "Then you two will always be welcome here as long as your wives can spare you!"

Heartfire blushed and stammered, trying to find something to say and failing.

Storm patted the man on the shoulder. "You're a good father, Heartfire. I haven't been gone from the Clan so long that I don't remember how good you are with your kids. They adore you. Both of you. So do your wives."

Flame had listened carefully to the conversation, trying to pick up the skills he would need as co-Chief of a clan. He found Skybird fascinating with her brisk manner and good sense and Storm's skills were obvious but then he'd been raised to be a chief. Flame could

only hope he didn't make too many mistakes in his new position.

They finished eating and Skybird rose to her feet. "I'll send for my tattooist."

"I appreciate it. We probably won't be able to stay long enough for the whole job to be completed, but once we've gotten a pressing matter taken care of, we can come back this way and your artist can finish the job." Storm said and put an arm around Flame. "Besides, he hasn't felt the needle in a long time. I don't want him hurting too much...."

Storm started to chuckle, shaking his head at the same time. "I must be really tired. He's a healer and I'm worried about him being in pain. Silly isn't it?"

Flame just grinned and shook his head. "Yes, he really is this protective of me. All the time."

Skybird chuckled. "Well we can make a start so neither of you will be named outlaw." She left the tent and they heard her calling for a Dewmist to come to the tent.

Flame took the opportunity to turn worried eyes in the direction of his swordbrother. "We

need to get Heartfire and Watersong to their families before your brother sends another party out looking or sells the women and children before the storms.”

Storm glanced at Watersong and Heartfire. “When did he expect you back?”

“I’m not sure since we weren’t positive how long it would take us to catch up with the two of you,” Heartfire replied. “Nightwind said we had four days to find you and bring you back. It didn’t seem like enough time then and this is the start of the third day already. It took us longer to locate you than Nightwind thought it would.”

Flame was thoughtful. It would take about two hours for the tattooist to give Storm the chief’s mark and do the outlines of his warrior marks. Two hours that might be better spent on the road. He would never forgive himself if Heartfire and Watersong lost their families for his warrior stripes. “My marks can wait, Storm, but you need that chief’s mark to stop your brother from naming you outlaw.”

Watersong shook his head. “It wouldn’t stop him, my Chief. His hatred of Stormdragon is too deep for a mark to change anything.”

“He’s right,” Heartfire agreed. “He hates Stormdragon. He always has because, as the older brother, he felt it was his right to be Chief of the Dragon Clan. He might be first born, and of a woman born to the Dragon Clan, but Stormdragon has always been the better man. Dragonwind might be Chief now, and he might have threatened us into silence, but we aren’t the only ones who chafe under his leadership. Given the choice I think almost half the clan would gladly leave him in favor of our rightful Chief.”

“He may very well officially name me outlaw,” Storm stated. “I think that was his intention when he sent you to capture me. Name me outlaw and make me a slave and forever silence the dissent he must know exists.”

Storm sighed and ran a hand over his braids. “Soon that won’t be enough. He’ll want me dead and then I don’t know what we’ll do. I don’t want to kill any more of the people I grew up with. Last night’s battle... I can’t repeat that. I just can’t.”

Flame abruptly realized the fundamental difference between them last night. He had been fighting strangers while Storm had been battling

childhood friends. He put a hand over one of Storm's and squeezed it gently. Why hadn't he thought of this before now? He felt like the world's biggest fool at that moment.

Pain darkened his lover's gaze, the glitter of unshed tears shining bright in the morning sunlight.

"It probably isn't any consolation," Heartfire began, "but we were the only two who were forced to come. We didn't want to see you brought down and dragged in as a helpless prisoner, but the others, well, they thought you deserved whatever pronouncement Dragonwind chose to make. You do still have friends in the Clan, but not everyone you grew up with thinks of you that way anymore."

Flame smiled although the expression was a bit wan. "Then I'm doubly glad I was able to save both you and Watersong. I know I'm biased but I could never imagine Stormdragon acting in any way but honorably."

The tattoo artist arrived with Skybird at that moment and Flame contented himself with giving Storm's hand another squeeze.

“If I’m so damned honorable why do I want to kill him so bad?” Storm asked, tone as bitter as the words.

“That’s simple. It’s because you *are* an honorable man and you know what a waste of water your brother is,” Heartfire replied.

Watersong snickered and Flame had to join him. Heartfire had been spot on with that jab. Skybird shook her head at the grinning men and indicated the tall, slender woman by her side. “This is Dewmist, our tattooist. She works quickly and well. So who’s going first?”

Flame looked up and smiled. “That’s easy. Give my swordbrother his chief’s mark.”

“I’d rather you have your warrior’s marks,” Storm murmured into Flame’s ear, his breath a warm distraction. “You’re already a pretty boy, with your warrior’s marks I bet I’ll have to chase off men looking for a taste.”

Flame shivered in delight and gave in. “I guess it’s me then.”

Chapter Six

Best Laid Plans

The tattooing had gone smoothly, the work, though complex, was performed by an older woman with expert precision and the speed of many years doing the job.

Storm admired the beauty of Flame's warrior marks, but he didn't touch them for fear he'd somehow ruin the work.

His own face hurt a bit, his forehead sore where the mark of a Chief's Heir had been transformed to that of a chief, the brilliant blue design of a windmage Chief shot through with traces of red to mark his bond with Flamespirit.

He was quite pleased. Pleased not only with the tattoos but with the alliance they'd formed with the Clan of the She Bear.

Tired from the night's travel, he leaned his head against Flame's shoulder and sighed, content to be in his lover's arms for a brief rest before they moved on.

"Damn women, let me go!" he heard

Nightwind shout from somewhere on the other side of the camp. The man had already attempted to escape once, an attempt that had been easily stopped by the powerful battlemages living among the Clan of the She Bear.

“We should leave soon,” Storm remarked, though he made no effort to move from the softness of the furs he shared with Flame inside Skybird’s tent. She’d given them her own tent to honor their alliance and status as co-Chief guests with her clan.

Flame chuckled softly at the hullabaloo outside. “Doesn’t Nightwind like women?” he asked.

“I imagine he does. He stopped having anything to do with his swordbrother the day they married their respective wives. They don’t even share them like most swordbrothers do, which I always thought was awfully peculiar.”

Flame frowned. “You’re right, it is weird, especially as he wanted you as swordbrother.” He sighed softly. “We could have given him a worse fate than a breeder to a clan of women. He should think himself lucky.”

“He’s proud. Arrogant. He never treated his wife very well. Neither does Dragonwind.” Storm pulled Flame closer enjoying the feel of his lover beside him, the warmth of the bed they shared. “They’d both be happier as widows considering how badly they’re treated.

“As far as Nightwind wanting me as his swordbrother, that never had anything to do with me personally, it was his attempt to gain some sort of powerful position in the clan.”

Storm closed his eyes and tried to relax. He wanted to take a nap but his mind wouldn’t settle enough for him to sleep. Thoughts of the men he’d killed, of what might happen to Heartfire and Watersong when they went back kept rampaging through his mind.

“We can’t let them go back alone,” he commented softly. “Dragonwind won’t let them leave. They’ll have to sneak off and to do that they’ll need a big enough distraction to keep my brother from noticing.”

Flame nodded against his chest, one finger tracing the outline of a nipple. “I take it we’re to be the distraction. It works for me.”

Storm sighed at the teasing touch. He wanted more than that finger on his nipple. He wanted Flame's hot, wet mouth on his throbbing erection. He gripped Flame's face between his palms and pulled him closer, kissed him. The heat of the lust flooding his veins made him forget everything else but the need for the man in bed with him.

Flame made a startled sound but came to him easily enough and returned his kisses with a passion to rival his own.

Letting go of Flame, he gazed into his lover's passion warmed gaze. "We don't have a lot of time," he murmured, his lips seeking Flame's for a series of teasing kisses. His tongue dove into Flame's mouth, tasting his lover's spicy sweetness. "But I've got to have you. *I need* you, Flame."

A slow smile spread across Flame's face as he held Storm close. "I'm not going to argue with that. I'm yours whenever you want me. You should know that."

In answer Storm reached for Flame's cock and found it as hard as something made of stone. He grinned and stroked his lover's erection. "I want

to taste you, to take you in my mouth. Is that all right with you?"

Flame's smile grew. "As long as I can return the favor," he said. "How do you feel about that?"

"How do I feel about it?" Storm pressed Flame onto his back and sat up. Getting quickly into position, on his hands and knees over Flame he took his lover's weeping cock into his right fist and tongued the head.

"Does this answer your question?"

"I think it counts as a positive response," Flame said with a chuckle before he took Storm's cock into his mouth.

Storm moaned as his lover's mouth closed around the head of his cock. He had to focus on what he was doing or he'd have been instantly lost in the incredible sensation of that wet heat encasing his hardened flesh.

In reaction he took all of Flame's erection deep, feeling the head of his lover's cock hit the back of his throat. Fighting the urge to thrust into the greedy mouth sucking him, Storm forced his body to obey his mind, his hips staying still. Each

breath he took drew the spicy aroma of his lover deep into him, the scent adding to his arousal.

Is this what it is to be a Dragon in love? Is this sensitivity to how Flame smells to me part of my Immortal Beast.

Scent had never played this much a part in his relationship with Sandrunner. While he'd liked how the other man smelled, he hadn't been this aware of it, or this aroused by it.

Flame sucked even harder, then licked down the large vein under Storm's cock before swallowing him whole again.

Storm groaned, his own mouth and tongue working along the stiff rod of Flame's cock. He did his best to please Flame, but he was having a lot of difficulty concentrating on the erection in his mouth because the action of Flame's mouth on his hardness was nothing short of incredible.

I can't believe he was a virgin.

An answering moan came from beneath him so he had to be doing something right. Then Flame moved away from his cock and licked his balls before taking them in his mouth.

Storm cried out sharply, his hips bucking twice before he regained control of his body. He recaptured Flame's erection in his mouth, taking it down his throat until his nose bumped the tight fiery curls at the base.

He inhaled, a shudder passing through him. Reaction to the pleasure he was being given, along with the intoxicating odor of the Fenyx.

Flame groaned and let go of Storm's balls only to deep throat his erection once again.

Storm gasped, his body reacting, balls drawn tight to his body as he neared completion. The sensations were like white lightning, the bright heat of lust, love, and the flow of magical energies that spun in glittering whirls around their bodies. Blue of the wind. Red of fire it danced along the bed, crept across the walls of the tent, rose in ribbons up the central pole of the tent.

He clutched at Flame's thighs, taking the flesh deep into his mouth, savoring the sweet spice that was his lover's precum. Each gasping cry, the vibration of the sound through his own cock drove him closer to release.

He wanted to climax, and he wanted it to go on forever.

Time, and their bodies were allied against them both.

Storm felt the blaze of impending release, felt the volcanic eruption flash through his balls, burning through his body to burst in a tempest of intense sensation through him as he took his lover's erection down his throat. The abrupt tightening of Flame's body proved the firemage was on the brink of orgasm.

A stream of warm fluid in his mouth and Flame's gasping cry and then the firemage went limp and boneless against him.

Storm swallowed the result of their love, and turned to lie down beside Flame, pulling the man close, holding him, letting his mind become lost in the dance of the magic through their bodies.

Above them the Dragon and the Fenyx clung to one another in complete imitation of their human bodies.

"We really are what we keep seeing, aren't we?" he questioned in a sleepy murmur.

Flame gazed up at the legendry beasts and shivered but whether it was in disgust, fear or anticipation, Storm had no way of knowing until Flame said, "I've been seeing the Fenyx all my life in dreams but it's still hard to take in that he and I are one being."

Storm lifted Flame's hand to his lips and kissed the palm. "Until it appeared for you I never knew about the Dragon," he admitted. "So maybe it took something about you to awaken it."

Flame cocked his head to one side, a sure sign that he was thinking deeply. "Perhaps it takes another immortal to call the beasts forth. There might be quite a lot of Immortal Beasts out there but they've bonded with non-immortals. Or perhaps it takes something like real need to call them." He chuckled softly. "And I have no real clue as to what I'm talking about."

"You're retelling parts of the old legends, that's what you're talking about," Storm replied as he watched the shimmering bands of blue and red fade gradually, their Immortal selves dissipating along with it.

"There's usually a grain of truth in old legends,"

Flame said quietly. "I just don't know how to feel about it yet. I guess it hasn't really sunk in."

"I don't think it's fully registered with me either," Storm admitted. He rose up on one elbow and smiled down at Flame. "Next time I want to be in a position to watch your face when you cum. I love watching the passion as it overtakes you." He leaned down, pressed his mouth to Flame's, tasting himself on his lover's lips.

He pulled back and just watched Flame, taking in the man's masculine beauty, the curve of his too sexy and kissable lips, the arch of finely formed cheek bones. The clean well defined line of his jaw.

"I love you," he murmured and lowered his head to taste his swordbrother's mouth, tongue finding it's way inside, his body tightening, ready for more of the incredible creature beneath him.

And there wasn't time for more.

Flame returned his kiss, their tongues dancing together, and held him close for a moment before pulling away from the kiss to murmur, "I love you, too."

Storm sat up and reached for his clothes. “We’d better get moving. The sooner we get this whole thing with Dragonwind done with the sooner we can head for the City and find your sister and get our supplies for the storm season.”

I said that so calmly but inside I feel cold and sick. Am I really afraid of him or am I just worried about risking Flame this way?

He honestly knew the answer to his own questions. It lay deep down inside him right next to his memories of Sandrunner’s death and the horrible pain of that loss.

He’d killed people he’d grown up with. People he’d known by name rather than a bunch of strangers. It had upset him when it happened. It still did.

But he knew if it came down to it, he’d kill anyone who threatened Flame. Anyone.

Flame moved reluctantly from the comfort of the rich sleeping furs and sat up. He dressed quickly knowing they would need to travel fast in order to reach the Dragon Clan in time to meet the deadline Dragonwind had set. It was not

acceptable to arrive there only to find Heartfire and Watersong's family already enslaved.

Storm's words about getting the whole business with his brother done and out of the way were stuck in his mind. Flame had an uncomfortable feeling that the brothers would have unfinished business until one or other of them was dead and, as Storm was supposedly immortal, Dragonwind would have to go. His thoughts darkened. Especially if he harmed Storm in any way.

With his decision made, Storm wasted no time getting them moving. Within moments they were dressed and mounted on their machines, the four of them bid a quick goodbye to the She Bear Chief and her sword sister and off they raced.

They were making good time because at the last moment, Storm had chosen to leave the sled and their possessions with Skybird so they could travel faster.

Behind them a trail of dust drifted into the air, marking their passage as they exited the canyon and reached a long flat area of the barrens.

Flame found the warcycle a dream to ride after

his workbike. It was much lighter to handle and far more powerful and he gloried in the speed it could muster. He now understood just how frustrating it must have been for Storm to wait for him as they now had to wait for Watersong who had inherited his old workbike and was slowing them somewhat. At least without the sled to slow him even further the watermage was managing to keep up with the larger warcycles at the pace they were setting.

Flame had been thankful for the slower pace at first as he got used to driving the big warcycle but now he just wanted to open it up and see exactly what it could do.

They crossed the level ground at greater speed, the flat area allowing even the old workbike to open up and move at a better pace.

An hour later they'd reached the end of the barrens and were climbing up a steep switchback that lead to a higher plateau. When they reached the top Storm signaled a halt and removed his helmet, getting off his cycle to stretch his legs.

"How much farther?" Storm asked, his gaze on Heartfire and Watersong.

Watersong shifted about on the workbike as he looked around them for familiar landmarks. He glanced at Heartfire before leaning across to have a low-toned conversation with him. Then he straightened and pointed towards the south east. "About two to three miles that way," he said.

"Not much longer then. Let's plan this out before we head into their camp." Storm turned to the pair of swordbrothers. "I want the two of you to hang well back. Give us about five minutes head start then follow. We'll get the camp stirred up and get the mages to follow us and you two go in, grab your families and whatever possessions you can and get the hell out of there," Storm said.

Both Watersong and Heartfire nodded their understanding of the plan while Flame smirked at his lover. "Finally I'll be able to open this baby up and see what she can *really* do!"

Storm gave Flame a tight, humorless smile. "Yes, you will while we play a dangerous game running from some powerful mages out for my blood."

Flame's smirk vanished to be replaced by a

much darker expression. If even one drop of Storm's blood was spilled those powerful mages would be paying for it with their own blood. "They can try," was all he said aloud.

Storm took off his dustmask and knocked the grit out of the filter then put it on before taking off his goggles to wipe them clean. "You might all want to make sure you can breathe and see well. Things may get pretty nasty once we reach the Dragon Clan's camp." He gave a bitter laugh, lips twisting into a wry smile. "We can be certain we won't be welcomed with friendliness we were in the camp of the She Bear."

Flame followed his swordbrother's example. Although excited, he knew they were playing a very dangerous game but somehow the image of the Dragon and Fenyx intertwined above them kept coming to mind and he found it soothing. As long as the legends were true, then his lover couldn't be killed. That was all that mattered to him; that and getting their people out of the clutches of the Dragon Clan.

Our people. It's not just us anymore. We have responsibilities now.

Storm glanced at the other two men, and then

leaned in close to give Flame a lingering kiss. “I love you, Flame. No matter what happens, keep that in mind.”

His lover put dustmask and goggles on, nodded to the other pair of men then said to him, “Let’s go, Flame.”

Flame replaced his dustmask and goggles, now sand free, and started his warcycle, following Storm as he led the way across the flats towards the Dragon Clan’s camp.

Storm led him across the plateau, the speed of his cycle increasing to a pace unlike any Flame had experienced. The ground beneath them went by so fast it became a blur.

It was exhilarating but also nerve-wracking. Flame couldn’t help but imagine what would happen to him if he fell off, lost control or hit a pot hole. They might well be immortals, if the legends really *were* fact, but he guessed they could still be badly injured. He concentrated hard on his driving and gradually began to relax.

Just as he felt he had riding the big warcycle at speed down to a fine art, the camp came into view.

Storm slowed his cycle, brought it to a stop amid the thick cloud of dust kicked up by their speed. He took his helmet off, attached it to the back of the seat and leaned close to Flame. A grim smile curled his lips, the hard, cold stare of a warrior looked beyond Flame toward the camp. Gaze meeting Flame's he said, "Be careful. I don't want them to hurt you. Just ride through with me and they're sure to come after us."

Flame glanced at the large camp, reminding himself that at least half would be women and children, then back at Storm. He nodded, trusting Storm to know what he was doing. "I'll follow your lead," he promised.

Storm pulled off his goggles and dustmask, took off Flame's helmet and mask, gave him a thorough kiss that left him gasping for air. "Fast as we can," he murmured, hand cupping Flame's cheek, gold rimmed aqua eyes full of love and visible fear. "Be ready to fight, my beloved Fenyx," Storm murmured, touching his lips to Flame's in a quick parting kiss. "I love you."

"I love you, too, my Dragon," Flame whispered before putting his helmet, dustmask and goggles back on.

They turned the cycles and were speeding towards the camp, going straight through the centre. Tents and wagons rushed past in a blur but Flame saw men running for warcycles in his peripheral vision. Then they were on the other side of the camp but there was the steady roar of pursuing warcycles. Flame gunned his cycle in an effort to catch up to Storm.

Concentrate on that, he told himself, and not on what's behind us.

Ahead of him Storm turned his cycle, the vehicle leaning over so far his lover's knee almost dragged the ground, a plume of dust and sand leaping into the sky as he changed their direction from east to south, heading for the far rim of the plateau.

Behind them the sound of many warcycles and scoutcycles rose to a screaming roar to rival the shrieking of a blackstorm's winds.

So many men were following them that it was hard for Flame to believe any had remained behind at all. That should help Heartfire and Watersong but he wasn't too keen on his own chances.

“Just how big is this damned clan anyway?” he muttered as he turned to follow his lover towards the rim. He found himself thinking that if they could just make it to the edge of the plateau they would be safe. If they got that far he would set himself a new goal.

The men behind them were fanning out, those on the fastest cycles, the scouts, were gaining on them, the cycles flying across the sandy soil on the plateau’s top.

Cycle rocking wildly, Storm slowed down a trail of sand and gravel spewing away from his cycle as he abruptly brought it to a stop.

“Keep going!” he shouted to Flame as he raced off in another direction, the pursuit following him, led on by the streaming banner of his braided hair. His swordbrother was taunting the men, letting them know exactly who they were chasing by leaving his helmet off.

Storm was the one they wanted. The one his brother planned to see named outlaw and enslaved.

Flame raced towards the rim, watching as it got closer and closer. There were still several

riders coming after him though and he could only hope he got to the rim in time so he could disappear into the canyons that had appeared beyond it.

Two hundred yards, one hundred, he was there but faced with a sheer drop. He had to turn and look for a way down and while he was doing that they would catch him.

Well to the east Storm was trying to outrun the bulk of the pursuit, but the men were closing in on him. Just as Flame was certain one of the riders would overtake him, Storm switched directions, the cycle sending a plume of dust and gravel over the men closest to him, blinding them.

Distant or not, Flame could see the blue ribbons of power forming around Storm despite the thick dust clouds they'd kicked up. His lover had called up the magic within his soul, but as yet the Dragon remained unseen.

Heartened by that sight, Flame called up his own power, giving off red tendrils of heat to blast the first of the riders in pursuit. He sped on, still frantically looking for a way off the plateau.

A screaming sound drew his attention in time for him to see Storm unleash a sample of his true power, a blast of wind striking a quartet of riders, lifting them and their cycles from the ground and tossing them toward another cluster of warriors.

Flame smiled grimly. They might just get out of this mess after all. He spotted a gentler slope down about a mile ahead and made for it, letting the heat stream out behind him to keep his pursuers at bay.

A wave of sand and gravel lifted right in front of him, coming toward him fast, growing in height until it loomed three times his height.

“Fuck!” He wheeled the warcycle round only to find six others facing him. If these bastards thought he was the easier option they were in for a surprise. He brought the cycle to a halt and reached into the weapons compartment for his sword. It burst into life as soon as he drew it, throwing off glowing streamers of flame.

The sand wave fell into a heap which rose and came for him again, the mage wielding the magic making himself apparent as he’d stopped his cycle in order to direct the attack.

Off in the distance the wind screamed and men shouted in alarm.

Flame cut through the sand, searing it into glass as he did so. His eyes narrowed. This had been done for Heartfire and Watersong and he hoped they'd used the confusion to get their loved ones away.

All that was left was him to keep the mages in front of him away from Storm. As long as his swordbrother remained free and safe that was all that mattered. He doubted he was worth enough to these men to keep alive so he prepared to fight to the death. He jumped clear of the warcycle and sent a wall of fire towards the men gathered in front of him.

They scattered fast as a flock of rockhens, a couple managing to strike with some countering magic. A wall of stone rising to protect one pair of men, while a mix of sand and water was hurled toward Flame from another pair.

The flame of his attack met a weak column of water that burst into steam which obscured the men Flame fought. A sheet of fire collided with his flames, and another huge wave of sand followed behind it, further diminishing Flame's

own magical assault as it too glowed and fused becoming a second wall of glass.

Physical powers were going to be of no use to him so he tried using his empathy, twisting the emotions of the men opposing him until they were wondering why they were fighting him. Their doubt weakened the physical attacks enough for Flame to move forward and start actually fighting blade to blade. He was wreathed in fire so hot it burned blue and his sword was like a flame, burning and cutting whatever it touched.

The men who were able retreated, regrouping at a short distance, more men coming to join them. The hesitation to return to the battle among the men he'd already faced showed Flame's empathy had set doubt in them. Most weren't ready to join the newcomers' charge toward him, but a few came on, still willing to fight. Stones burst from the ground, large chunks that struck his cycle or hit him with painful results. A blast of wind slammed into him coming close to knocking him off his feet, the burst of air followed by a sheet of fire that

should have scorched him but didn't even warm his skin.

"GET AWAY FROM HIM!" the voice was Stormdragon's, Flame recognized it. But the bellow could not have come from any human throat, the sound far too loud for any living man to make.

Flame frowned. "Why didn't you get the hell away, Storm? Why did you come back for me?" Then he realized he would have done exactly the same for his lover. His momentary distraction was his undoing as the men rushed him. A large rock caught his head and he staggered. They were on him now, beating him into submission.

His last coherent thought was that he hoped Heartfire and Watersong had got their family to safety. He stared up at his attackers and frowned. Why was there a black Fenyx hovering over him? He saw a flash of lovely aquamarine eyes and then darkness swallowed him whole.

Storm stood over Flame, the Dragon manifest, the Beast's wings staving off the battering stones as he crouched over his fallen lover. He took Flame into his arms and held his bleeding lover. Pulling Flame close he kissed his slack lips,

breathed in his scent, tainted with the blood that covered his face.

Once a fool, forever a fool! You should have taken care of your own, you should have just ridden off and left Heartfire and Watersong to their own problems instead of getting involved in them. What are they to you? What do they matter if Flame dies?

He wept over his lover's unmoving form, no longer caring about anything but the dying man he held.

First Sandrunner, now Flame. I can't live through this again. I can't.

Without Flamespirit at his side, life held no meaning. His thirst to avenge Flame's death gripped him with cruel talons, something inside him twisting, a fragment of something dark and filled with hate coming to life inside him.

Crying out in misery Storm unleashed the fury within his soul no longer caring if he killed the men who'd been his people, the people he would have protected as their Chief. They'd hurt Flame, the blood pouring from his lover's

skull telling him of the death that would claim the man he loved.

“Such a temper,” a voice he knew, and hated, said from nearby. “Too bad you’ve chosen to pit yourself against me, brother. That leaves me only one choice, which is to kill you.”

Heart burning with unquenchable rage Storm looked up knowing who he would see. Dragonwind, his hated brother. The man stood over him, regarding him with nothing but contempt in his deep green eyes. But it wasn’t the man’s eyes that caught his attention. Behind and above Dragonwind spread a broad expanse of dark wings. Feathered wings attached to a bird that was wreathed in flame that seemed to suck the very light from the sun into the oblivion of its midnight dark presence.

“Goodbye, brother. This is the end of you.”

A wall of ebon fire slammed into Storm, burning, scorching, battering his body and mind. He welcomed the end of pain, let the light-eating flames tear and rend him until everything went black....

END

Auburnimp

The pen name of Tracy Boyall. She is the author of two successful series *Fallen Angels* and *Sweepers* and the co-author of the *Dragonhope* books.

She has been writing since she was fifteen but it is only in recent years that she decided to see what publishers thought of her work. Her characters are always strong, feisty and often impetuous enough to get into dangerous situations rather like their creator.

She has recently become a partner in a e-publishing house, *Shadowfire Press*, where she is responsible for finances and customer service.

She has been a knife-thrower's target, an exotic dancer, a drummer, a homeless wanderer and many other things due to a desire to go wherever life takes her.

She now lives in a small house in a large English city with four resident cats and one frequent visitor.

She is female and has blue eyes; anything else is often subject to change without notice.

About the Author

Links

author site

www.auburnimp.net

myspace site

www.myspace.com/auburnimp

fanfiction site

www.geocities.com/maddelena2000

livejournal/blog

www.livejournal.com/auburnimp

newsletter/chat group

www.groups.yahoo.com/group/auburnimp

Michael Barnette

Michael Barnette grew up in the wilds of Miami, Florida where he enjoyed the nightlife and wide variety of cultures, but not the late night driveby shootings. Deciding on a change of pace, Michael moved to Athens, Georgia where he lived for several years before migrating west. He misses the ethnic food in Miami, he doesn't miss the driveby shootings.

The last two years he was in Miami, Michael went from being a poet to writing short stories. One of the short stories he wrote, *Zoner*, was also the first gay erotica he'd ever written. Set in his cyberpunk world setting--which takes place in a future variant of Miami--and using characters established from an unfinished novel he was working on, he submitted the story to Circlet Press. The story was published and has been well received in the gay community, garnering a Gaylactic Spectrum Award nomination in 2003, while the anthology, *Wired Hard #3*, was a finalist for the Lambda Literary award that same year. He has since been nominated for the Gaylactic Spectrum Award five more times, both for novels and short stories.

About the Author

Seeing the popularity of erotica-- and finding it much easier to sell than poetry-- Michael changed his writing focus in 2003 and started researching the types of erotica popular with readers.

The rest, as they say, is history.

You can visit Michael and find out about his worlds at the following places on the net.

Website:

<http://www.michaelbarnette.com>

Immortal Heroes:

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/immortal_heroes

Kink Promo:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/kinkpromo/>

LiveJournal:

<http://m-barnette.livejournal.com/>

About the Author

Shadowfire Press:

<http://www.shadowfirepress.com>

MySpace:

<http://www.myspace.com/michaelbarnette>

Insane Journal:

<http://m-barnette.insanejournal.com/>

Blog:

<http://mbarnettemuse.blogspot.com/>

Book Excerpts

Following are some excerpts of other hot m/m erotic romance titles from Shadowfire Press.

If you enjoyed *Dragon & Fenyx 2: Swordbrothers* by Auburnimp and Michael Barnette, you might also like *Swordbrothers 1: Outlaw and the Brat* by Auburnimp and Michael Barnette.

Sometimes kidnappings don't turn out the way the kidnapper expects.

Darksky Stonetamerson is an outlaw who makes his living kidnapping watermages and selling them to the people of the City to make his living.

Lakesinger Rockmanson is a very talented watermage and the biggest brat of his clan.

When Lakesinger falls prey to the notorious outlaw, Darksky, the older man's intention is to sell the spoiled young warrior to the City dwellers. But an out of season storm keeps the pair stuck in Darksky's cave with unexpected results.

Book Excerpts

Here is a short excerpt from *Swordbrothers 1: Outlaw and the Brat*

by Auburnimp and Michael Barnette

He blinked as he recalled the firm flesh of Lakesinger's butt. A fine, very fuckable butt. One he had no intention of keeping, despite the lure of the man's youthful beauty.

A very find ass indeed. He'll bring a good price on the open market in the City. A better price than I'd get from any clan.

Grinning, he headed for the pool. If he was going to sell him, he should get a good look at what was under those leathers and furs besides a perfect butt.

You'll be able to drive a harder bargain that way, he told himself. Clan or City, beauty is worth more than an ugly darbear of a man like me.

When he reached the cave he found Lakesinger sitting in the bathing pool which was giving off steam. The boy blushed when he saw him and ducked his head.

Book Excerpts

“I hope you don’t mind me heating the water, but I really hate cold baths. They never get you really clean the way hot water does.”

He stared at the slender body, the lean lines of the young mage from the sweep of his shoulders to the expanse of his nicely defined chest down to the rippling abs. His eyes swept along the sleek thighs, but soon lifted, coming to rest on the smooth shape of the cock nestled in the spun sunlight of his pubic hair.

He swallowed, forced himself to stop staring, to focus on the bright blush coloring Lakesinger’s cheeks. But it was no good. His blood hammered in his veins, pulsed in the hardening flesh between his thighs.

Thought deserted him and he crossed the room, mind focused on one thing and one thing only: the beauty of that sleek body. Dark virtually pounced on Lakesinger as he dropped to his knees by the pool and captured the perfect slim body in his arms. Dark set his mouth to the younger mage’s in a demanding kiss.

The boy went completely still beneath him for a moment or two then, to his surprise, wet arms snaked round his neck and the kiss was returned

Book Excerpts

with an equal amount of demand and even more passion.

Part of him commanded that he stop, but the louder part wanted to pick the young mage up, carry him to bed and show him why being a swordbrother was a desirable state of being.

Instead he shoved the watermage into the bath he'd made for himself and stood there gazing at him, taking in the young masculine body and the upthrust cock that proved what he'd done hadn't gone unnoticed by Lakesinger.

He wanted, needed. Instead of taking Dark turned away. "That's something else for you to think on, boy," he growled and stalked for the exit.

There was a soft groan behind him and a murmured, "Oh gods."

Darksky smirked, but the satisfied expression quickly faded. He'd kissed the brat. What had he been thinking? He had no intention of keeping the boy, none. And yet... the feel of the watermage's lips on his lingered, as did the throbbing ache of his arousal.

Book Excerpts

Apparently they both had a few things to think about.

Or you might like *Plague Dance* by Michael Barnette.

A plague ravaged the world. Cory and Deshawn survived. But can they survive Roderik, the man who would be King?

After a mutated strain of Ebola ended the world as we know it, Staff Sergeant Deshawn Roberts finds himself alone and longing for companionship.

Cory Wilson, one time office worker, finds himself a captive of Roderick, King of the Lone Star Empire. It's a life of slavery worse than death, and Cory escapes to find himself on the run.

Brought together by chance, can these two men survive in the harsh reality of post Collapse America, and will they find the love they both crave?

Book Excerpts

Here is a short excerpt from *Plague Dance* by Michael Barnette

A torrent poured forth from the darkened sky, the pounding drops intermingled with the chattering sounds of hail against the windows. Bursts of lightning shattered the night, bright as explosions in an embattled city.

Deshawn Roberts stared out at the fury of nature, wondering who else might be out there witnessing the storm. Wondering if he might be the only one left after the outbreak of Ebola tore through the country leaving millions dead.

Millions that included almost everyone else on the base where he'd been stationed.

Other than himself he didn't know who else might have survived the pandemic that had swept the US— the entire world— and left more people dead than living.

The barracks where he'd lived with the rest of his platoon was empty, the rest of the men he'd liked, and those he'd tolerated were dead. Their mortal remains lay in the mass grave he'd managed

Book Excerpts

to dig with a backhoe from a construction site, a subdivision that would never be finished.

There was no one left to do the work, and no one alive to buy the half finished houses anyway.

Of the hundreds of people who'd lived at the base, he was the only one left.

Him alone with the echoing silence. He'd never understood that term, 'echoing silence' until he experienced the utter quiet of a place so devoid of life that seeing a bird made his heart fill with joy.

He braced his forearms against the window sill, stared out at the raging storm.

Lonely.

He craved the sound of a human voice. The camaraderie of other soldiers, of men he knew, missed, wished he could talk to one last time. Share a beer and off color jokes, stare at the TV and hear laughter and angry words exchanged.

To hear any voice break the plague of silence that ate at him day after day the way the plague of the body had eaten away at the people he knew until all that remained was the dust of the grave.

Book Excerpts

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. The words mocked him. Taunted him with the promise of a release from loneliness he was unable to take.

A few others *had* survived, a couple men from a different platoon, one of the officers from his own command group. But they'd gone to find their families and no one had tried to prevent it. Not after captain Ferrel had killed himself in the bedroom of his home, surrounded by his Ebola murdered family. There wasn't much point in saying anything to them about duty or remaining to guard the base. Not after the government collapsed.

That's what the media had begun to call it in the last few struggling days of the United States. The Collapse. The end of civilization as everyone knew it. Even then the reports of warlords rising to power were coming in. Men— women too— carving out a niche in the plague shattered land.

He wondered if any of the men he'd known reached their homes. Wondered if they'd found anyone alive if they had.

Deshawn sighed, gaze riveted on the wild night, the storm torn riot beyond the glass and came to a decision.

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At first light he would load up a Humvee with supplies and head out. There wasn't any reason to remain at the base, no one left to care what he did or whether he remained loyal to his oath as a soldier.

With no government he had no one left to be loyal *to*, so his oath meant less than the rain hammering the base.

Sooner or later other survivors would show up. Survivors he might not want to meet. People like the warlord types the last few newscasts he'd seen reported about. He'd heard a few radio broadcasts after that, the station running on a generator for a few days. The last disc-jockey left for hundreds of miles talking himself hoarse, passing on any information he received, broadcasting rumors about the self-proclaimed King of the Lone Star Empire. A king who the rumors said was some former military guy named Roderik who'd raised an army and sent them rampaging around the countryside capturing the few people alive. People he forced to work for him, women he turned into servants fit only to cook and clean, the prettiest ones forced into lives of slave prostitution.

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Then the station went silent. Either out of fuel for the generator or silenced by one of the warlords. Deshawn didn't know and he'd probably never find out.

In the long run it hardly mattered.

The world had gone from a thriving global economy, from civilized high-tech and instant communication across the globe to a barbaric age of savagery in the span of less than a month.

There *were* some really bad customers out there, prowling the post-Collapse landscape. People he had no desire to meet. Nor any desire to join in their egomaniacal quest for power.

"Rain, rain go away," he murmured to himself before turning from the hammering of hail and rain to try and get some sleep.

Deshawn climbed out of his bunk the next morning, loaded up the Humvee and rolled out into the new world created by the Hand of Fate at a wink from Old Man Death.

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