

# Dragon & Fenyx 3

## Clan Chiefs



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## **Dragon & Fenyx 3: Clan Chiefs**

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A Swordbrothers / Immortal Heroes

Crossover Series Novella

World of Dragonhope

## **Dragon and Fenyx 3: Clan Chiefs**

By Auburnimp and Michael Barnette

# Chapter One

## *Captives*

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Flame fought his way out of deep darkness but found he couldn't open his eyes as his eyelids were glued together with some sticky substance. His head hurt like a bitch too so he guessed the stuff keeping his eyelids closed was his blood. *What happened to me?*

He blinked his eyes a few times, trying to dislodge the dried blood. He moved in an effort to get his numbed arms to move. *My hands are tied. That's why my arms have gone numb like this.* His arms weren't the only part of him which felt numb. His mind was bound by the sluggishness of pain, which lanced through his skull when he moved. With a great deal of struggling got his eyes to open finally and looked around though his gaze refused to focus.

*There was a fight with Dragonwind's clan. Oh dear ancestors, Storm!*

He turned his head from side to side, hoping to find his swordbrother, but winced in agony

at the slightest movement. He concentrated on making his eyes work properly again.

Without moving his head he could tell he was inside a clan wagon. The wooden walls were painted with bright designs of flowers and vines with a scattering of small birds. The painted design stretched across the ceiling. As wagons went, it one was larger than the average clan wagon, and Flame guessed it must be the wagon which belonged to the Dragon Clan's Chief. Apart from him it held several rolled skins and a few pelts, mostly icehare. There was nothing of any real value in his direct line of sight.

He turned his head to the left, very slowly and carefully and blinked at the light streaming in from the wagon's entrance. Outside he could hear two warriors talking about the inane topics men on guard duty would discuss. They were obviously standing guard on him.

Flame repeated the laborious process and turned his head to the right. More rolled skins and pelts came into view and thrown across them was Stormdragon, his beloved swordbrother.

Flame's eyes widened at the sight. Storm had injuries that should have killed him a dozen

times over yet, Flame could see the slow rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. He tried to reach his swordbrother but his head hurt too much for him to move that far without being in agony.

*It's too much to expect my soul ball to be here so I guess I need to see what I can accomplish without it.*

He leaned back against the wooden side of the wagon, disgusted by his weakness when his swordbrother needed him, and softly called Storm's name.

"Storm, Storm, please wake up."

Gold tipped lashes fluttered, telling Flame his swordbrother was trying to respond to his plaintive whispers. A soft, agony-filled groan slid through Stormdragon's parted lips. Flakes of blood fell from his face as he turned his head from side to side. Storm's feet kicked weakly in another sign of intense pain.

Eyelids lifted, to reveal gold-rimmed aqua eyes. Storm's gaze was unfocused, glassy with evident pain. "Flame," his lover groaned his name. His usually silken voice, raw with suffering, slid from his bloody mouth in a gasp as he tried to move.

Flame sighed softly in relief on hearing Storm's voice. "Yes, Storm, I'm here," he whispered. "I just can't move yet. They have me tied up. I'd advise you to keep as still as possible too."

Storm gave a harsh bark of laughter which was broken by a wheezing cough. A bubbling sound came from him, the ominous noise boded a punctured lung. "If you can get free do it. Go without me, Flame." His lover coughed again and spat out a mouthful of dark blood. "I think I'm dying."

Flame fought through the agony in his head as he inched closer to his swordbrother. When he felt he was close enough not to be overheard by the two guards he whispered, "I don't think we *can* die, Storm. I think if we could die, we'd already be dead. You're hurt really bad."

Storm's eyes drifted shut but he managed a rough, gurgling chuckle. "I *should* be dead," he whispered in reply, and coughed again. "I felt and heard my skull crack, and my vision is... strange. Everything's really dark and blurred. I can't see much of anything but vague shapes. I can't see you, Flame and I want to see your face so much, but I can't."

Flame nodded then remembered Storm couldn't see him. He also wished he hadn't moved his head at all when the agony returned. "I'm pretty sure mine is cracked also. They've taken my soul ball so I can't do anything to help either of us."

He fell quiet as he wondered if that was strictly true. The soul ball was a healer's focus, nothing more. He should be able to heal without it. "I'll do what I can when my head stops pounding and I can see straight."

"Turn over and scoot closer to me. I might not be able to see, but I don't need my eyes to work on a knot. With some effort I may be able to untie you so you can escape," Storm said. With a grunt he rolled off the piled furs, coming to a stop at the bottom, a gasp of pain and fresh blood spilling together from his lips.

"Keep still, Storm, let me come to you." Flame gritted his teeth and shoved himself along the floor of the wagon, using his feet to scoot along. Every single motion sent a new jab of pain through his head, yet, each jolt of pain was a fraction less severe. A few moments of struggle and pain later, Flame was close enough to roll



over and hold out his bound hands to Storm. He gazed into a ray light seeping in around the doors of the wagon. The sunbeam shone on something that reflected the light. It took a while before he realized he was looking at something in one corner of the wagon that glimmered in the reflected light. Flame wasn't but what he saw tucked among some folded cloth might be a soul ball. It might *not* be his soul ball but if it caught the light like that it might do the same job. If he could get to it.

Storm's hands fumbled over Flame's bound wrists, his lover groaning as he shifted position to gain a better angle. Storm's hands were cold as those of a corpse, but he could still use them somehow. It took time, but little by little the ropes came loose until Flame could slip out of the bindings.

"Run. Escape while you can," Storm muttered, the bubbling sound in his chest louder, his breathing labored. From the sound, Flame could tell Storm was drowning in his own blood.

*He should already be dead, but we both know why he's alive. The Immortal Beasts mean what they mean in the legends. I know it, even if Storm*

*won't accept it. My poor swordbrother, he's been tortured by that bastard brother of his. I have to get us out of here before Dragonwind can hurt him anymore.*

Flame ignored Storm's words as he slowly sat up again and inched his way towards whatever was glimmering. It turned out to be a small piece of quartz but as soon as his hand closed on it, Flame knew he could utilize it.

He concentrated on the energy within himself, the power of his soul that allowed him to heal others. The smith's hammer beat in his head intensified. Despite the pain, his power gradually awakened and filled the piece of quartz with the soft glow of a healer's magic. He put his hands to his own head, trying to ease his own pain, wondering as he did if he had a concussion. Time crept onward, the effort taking longer than he liked under the circumstances. Slowly the agony in his skull faded to a manageable proportion.

*Not perfect, but much better. Now I think I should be able to take care of Storm without my skull feeling like it's going to fly to pieces.*

He returned to Storm's side, being careful to

make as little sound as possible. He didn't want to let the guards know he was free of the ropes.

Storm lay totally still, unconscious or standing before Death's doorway Flame didn't know, He *could* see the slow rise and fall of his swordbrother's chest as he drew each rattling breath. Storm continued to draw breath, though by all rights he shouldn't be alive from the sound of his breathing.

A trickle of blood fell to the floor, pooling under Storm's cheek from his slack lips. Drying blood lay in a sticky mess under the side of his face. More clotted his blond hair.

Flame could only hope that he could channel his power through the piece of quartz as well as he could through his soul ball. From the extent of Storm's visible injuries there had to be massive internal damage not least of which was his damaged lungs. *He's been systematically kicked and beaten and there are several knife wounds. His brother really wants him dead.*

His eyes narrowed in anger. *You'll pay for this, Dragonwind. I saw what you really are and you can't kill your brother. I can kill you though and one*

*day I will for what you've done to my swordbrother.  
And I want my soul ball and warcycle back.*

He chuckled, wondering if he was still delirious as his last thought sounded so childish and crazy. He concentrated his energy on Storm. He ran the small piece of quartz over his lover's body, winced at what he found. Both his lungs were full of blood, most of his ribs were broken as was his pelvis and both collar bones. This would take a very long time but there was no way he was leaving here alone.

"Please go," Storm murmured. "Save yourself, Flame. It's me Dragonwind wants. So long as he has me, he won't care about you." Storm sighed, but the harsh bubbling sound was muted, his breathing beginning to ease somewhat.

Flame continued to pour healing energy into Storm, ignoring his pleas. "Well he can't have you. You're mine."

Storm gave a weak chuckle. "Stubborn, but I won't argue with you." His lover stopped talking, a groan coming from him as he shuddered under the lash of the healing power Flame unleashed. Flame focused his power on the deeper wounds first, the knife cuts and stab wounds sealed shut.

Visible wounds closed, and some of the angry bruises had begun to fade.

“Please go, Flame. I want to know you’re safe. I want you far from here where I know he can’t hurt you.” Storm gasped, his face contorting, body going tense. Flame could feel something deep inside Storm’s body healing, and the process apparently hurt a great deal. Gritting his teeth, Storm endured for a few moments, then he lapsed into restless unconsciousness.

Flame shook his head, pleased that he could now do so without the fear it would fall off his shoulders. “When I’ve got you properly healed, I’ll go and look for our cycles and my soul ball. Trust me, Storm, I’ll know if he heads this way. He can’t actually kill you if the legends are to be believed and your injuries bear that out.”

*But he can kill me, or I him. One day I will, I swear it.* But that thought he kept to himself.

Tormented aqua eyes opened to regard him. They were much clearer, and from the way Storm looked at him, Flame thought he might be able to see. “When he came for me I saw a black bird wreathed in dark fire. I don’t want him to kill you, Flame. You *have* to go. I don’t want to lose

you. I can't bear the thought of losing you the way I lost..." his voice broke, but Flame knew what Storm had been about to say. He couldn't bear losing Flame the way he'd lost Sandrunner.

*Damn, he's figured it out. Even so badly hurt he's smart.* He smiled at his swordbrother. "What makes you think I'm so easy to kill?" he asked as he untied Storm's hands.

"Please... Flame, I'm begging you. Get out of here before he comes for us." The blond reached out, his hand shaking with the effort. He caressed Flame's cheek clumsily, his hand not working right after being tied so long. The fingers were icy as they ran along his jaw and down his neck. Storm's hand dropped into Flame's lap, his lover's tiny burst of strength gone.

"You've healed me, but I'm so weak I can't walk much less run. With you free you have a chance to rescue me later. After it gets dark." Storm's eyes drifted shut. "It won't do either of us any good if we're both in his grasp, and as you pointed out, he *can't* kill me."

Flame sighed. Storm had a good point there but still he didn't want to leave him to the tender mercies of his bastard brother. "Okay I'll go

but I'll warn you now, I *will* be coming back for you."

"Will you get out of here? I don't want you to risk your life in a fight we're not prepared to wage. Like you said, if the legends *are* right, he can't kill me no matter what he does." Stormdragon gave a mirthless laugh, and spat blood from his mouth. "I think at this point we've more than proved those legends are real, don't you?"

Flame gave Storm a quick kiss, concerned by how cold his lips still were. Reluctantly he made his way to the end of the wagon away from the entrance. "I won't leave you here for any longer than I have to," he promised before lifting the hide wagon cover and slipping between it and the wood of the base.

He glanced around and was pleased to see that the wagon was parked well away from the centre of the camp. He headed towards the very edge of the camp and was surprised to note the wagon was very close to the bluff where they'd been caught. He searched around for a while, staying low, and almost laughed aloud when he saw their warcycles, weapons and his soul ball lying on the

ground where they'd fallen. *Their sheer stupid arrogance is going to be their undoing.*

He could do nothing to hide the warcycles without being seen so he picked up his soul ball and their swords and scrambled over to the edge of the bluff. There was a small ledge about five feet down where he could hide the weapons and himself until nightfall.



Storm awakened later at the sound of approaching voices. He got to his feet, ready to fight, though he had no weapon and his body shook from blood loss. The door of the wagon was thrown open and he met the pair of startled men with fists flying. His left fist caught the first one on the jaw his right fist tagged the other right under the chin.

They stumbled, eyes full of shock.

“What the hell!” one of the two men snarled as they both came for Storm. He put up as much of a fight as he was able to manage, but in the end the pair of them beat him to the wooden floor of the wagon. He lay gasping for breath as they



bound his arms behind his back. Done, they yanked him upright and shoved him toward the door. He lacked the strength to stand, so he collapsed to his knees near the exit. Instead of lifting him down out of the wagon they shoved him out.

Bound and helpless he hit the ground hard, the fall knocking the wind from him. Gasping, he spit sand and blood from his mouth, gritting his teeth as the men hauled him up and dragged him along.

He knew where they were going. They were taking him to the large tent of the Clan Chief at the center of the camp. And he knew who he'd end up facing. Dragonwind. His older brother would be waiting to sit in 'judgment' on him.

*He can't kill me, but that won't stop him from trying, or from naming me an outlaw and making me a slave.*

Guards at entrance to the tent opened the door flap for them. Storm was given a hard shove that propelled him into the tent. Unable to keep his balance he fell face down onto a thick darbear fur that lay on the ground. He tried to get to his knees so he could regain his feet, but other

guards shoved him face down on the rug. The thick fur clogged his nose and mouth, and he struggled to breathe through the choking pelt.

“Cowardly dog, how dare you lift your head and try to look upon honest men?”

His voice was muffled by the fur, but he managed an answer. “I know of only one coward among Dragon Clan, and you’ve let him become your Chief.” Booted feet hammered into his ribs until his breath left his body and he lay on the fur gasping and unable to move.

“Be silent!” one of the men who’d been kicking him snarled. His booted foot struck Storm in the ribs, and he felt something give. He sucked in air, grateful that they were no longer pressing his face into the suffocating fur.

“No! No! Let him speak.” His brother’s words were honey laced with arsenic. “The more he says the more he condemns himself with his own words.”

“You are the one condemning yourself, Dragonwind. Every word you utter is a poisonous lie,” Storm gasped out the reply. A foot came down between his shoulders, shoving him face

down into the fur. This time he managed to turn his head so he wouldn't be suffocated but all he could see was the darbear fur beneath him. A fur with white near the forepaws.

*This was the darbear that Sandrunner killed to become a warrior. This was the fur we made our swordbond on.*

The pain and shock of the revelation had the power to hurt, but it didn't have the power to wound him into silent acceptance of his fate which he suspected his brother might be counting on.

*My love for Sandrunner is undiminished, but the power of the bond with Flame is stronger than any petty cruelty.* He smiled, ignoring the hurt of torn lips. *Flame is free. He will find a way to get me out of here. I know he will.*

"Is that right, little brother?" Dragonwind's voice was still as smooth as satin. "Tell me, where is the fool who came here with you?"

"I don't know. He said he felt like taking a walk," Storm quipped, knowing how such insouciance irritated Dragonwind when he thought he was intimidating someone.

Storm tried to lift his head but a booted foot came down on the back of his skull, forcing his face into the fur and sending a galaxy full of stars dancing through his vision.

“You’re both a bit of an enigma.” A worried tone now entered Dragonwind’s smooth voice. “By rights you should be dead and so should he. And yet here you are as near to a going concern as makes no odds while your friend has simply vanished despite having his skull cracked like a rotten egg.”

Dragonwind stood up and approached. Pausing in front of him, Dragonwind lifted Storm’s chin in one hand so they could look each other in the eye. “Get out all of you and don’t come back until I say to do so.”

Storm heard several warriors leave the tent then his brother said, “You’re a hard man to kill, Stormdragon. We both know I’ve tried three times now.”

Storm gave Dragonwind a mocking grin. “Not really surprising, Dragonwind. You’ve always been a bully, picking on weaker people. Makes it easier to pretend you’re more courageous when you only pick fights you know you can win.”

Dragonwind lifted his hand and gave Storm a leisurely backhand. "I'm a chief, little brother, so I don't need to be a warrior now, do I?"

Blood tricked down Storm's chin from a split lip. "You've always been good at hiding behind other men, Dragonwind. Why should being a so-called chief change anything?"

"I was always *meant* to be chief. Trust the old man to father two immortals, damn him!" His eyes narrowed as his thumb pressed against the chief's mark on Storm's forehead as if trying to erase it. "Did you come here to try and take my clan from me? Is that why you have this?"

"The only thing you were *meant* to be, Dragonwind, is what you are, a liar and coward." Storm lunged, managing to strike his brother in the face with his shoulder.

Dragonwind wiped blood from the corner of his mouth, his expression stunned, before snarling and kicking Storm in the ribs hard enough to crack a few, the sound of bones breaking loud in the silence.

"So brave," Storm gasped, unable to control the pained sound. He hurt, and the healing

Flame had so painstakingly performed on him had been undone by the fierce beatings he'd gotten since he'd been brought to brother's tent.

Dragonwind kicked him again, stomping on his back, his shoulders, kicking his bound arms until Storm could barely draw a breath.

"Oh yes, kick me. Punish a bound and helpless man. It's the," he coughed, spat blood, "the only way a turd like you can pretend he's a human being."

"Shut up!" Dragonwind snarled and kicked Storm until he lay gasping and dizzy on the floor. His brother couldn't kill him, but he could spend an eternity in a misery of pain and suffering. Living in perpetual hell, like some broken and half forgotten hero out of legend.

Dragonwind crouched beside him, touched his bleeding face, his fingers digging into the bruises. "Perhaps I should cut out your lying tongue. It would grow back.... eventually."

Storm spat blood at him and was backhanded for his defiance. He didn't care. His hatred of Dragonwind was growing stronger with every passing moment.

“This suits you, Dragonwind. Coward that you are, the only way you can feel good is by beating helpless people. Hurting helpless men has always been your favorite hobby.” His brother’s fist struck his face, but he didn’t let that stoop his words. “Oh, wait, that’s wrong. Tell me do you still kick small children as you did after you first got your warrior’s tattoos? Everyone else might forget what you did to that boy, Zephyr, but I never will.”

Dragonwind stood. Face twisted in a snarl of fury, he kicked Storm viciously until the room spun in Storm’s vision and blood ran in a steady trickle from his mouth.

*I should die from this, but Flame’s right, we do have Immortal Beasts inside our souls. Neither of us can die, no matter what’s done to us.... Unless there’s another Dragon.*

He lifted his head slightly, glared at Dragonwind and the vague outline of a dark bird wreathed in ebon fire around him. *Fenyx, but twisted like Dragonwind himself. I can’t kill him, but Flame could.*

Dragonwind glared down at him. “You may

not be able to die, but I can make you wish for death.”

Storm managed a mocking smile, though it hurt enough to become a grimace of pain. “I’m sure,” he coughed and spat blood, “father is very proud of you.”

Dragonwind snickered, the sound strange, bordering on the laugh of someone gone mad. “Father no longer cares one way or the other. He’s dead. I had no reason to keep him alive. He’d served his purpose once he disowned you and named me his rightful Heir.”

Storm fought to keep the shock from showing on his face, or in his eyes. He let anger take control instead of grief. “You worthless heap of dung!” he lunged for Dragonwind, straining against the bonds holding him. The muscles in his arms stood out in sharp relief as he tried to snap the ropes around his wrists and elbows. The ropes were strong, but they creaked from the strain he exerted on his bonds.

The rage grew. Mist drifted from his body, swirl around him. Pale blue tinged with gold, the mist thickened as the image of the Dragon manifested around him. The Beast’s wings unfurled, tongues



of cobalt flame flickering along the edges as they spread. Aqua scales edged with gold flickered in and out of visibility as Storm's Immortal form tried to manifest through an emotion other than pleasure.

"Father should have smothered you before you took your first breath, you worthless sack of shit," Storm growled as the Dragon at the core of his being lashed its tail, the ghostly form sweeping through the men around him.

Dragonwind's eyes widened. "You're a Dragon? Damn!" He got over his shock in seconds though and his own twisted, black Fenyx appeared around him.

A swirl of gold and red shot blue flame wrapped around Storm. The ropes charred and fell to the floor as ashes. Grinning, free of the restraints, the power of the Dragon filling him, Storm slammed his fist into Dragonwind's face, all his rage and hate behind the blow. Bone cracked, Dragonwind's nose shattering under the impact.

Dragonwind staggered back a pace, holding his bloody nose. The Fenyx disappeared.

“Guards! Get in here!” His warriors were swift to obey and piled on top of Storm.

Storm fought for his freedom, fought to reach Dragonwind. He knew he couldn't kill Dragonwind, but he would enjoy the chance to beat his brother into bloody hash, given the chance. The sheer number of the clansmen who came to their Chief's rescue pulled Storm to the ground. Chains were brought, manacles locked around his wrists. He could burn rope, but Storm was fairly certain he couldn't use the Dragon's fire to burn through chain.

Gasping, body filled by the power of his Dragon, Storm glared hatred at his older brother. “You've not changed. You're still the same coward you've always been, Dragonwind!” Storm spat his brother's name out as it carried a foul taste.

Dragonwind took a few moments to regain his equilibrium, staggering towards his ‘throne’ as he mopped gingerly at the blood on his face. “No, Stormdragon, *you* are the coward. You're the one who kept himself alive while your swordbrother died. No doubt you'll accomplish the same tricks with that red-haired bitch if given half a chance.”

He sat down and glared at his brother. “But you won’t be given that half chance. Stormdragon I hereby sentence you to slavery for cowardice and the death of your swordbrother Sandrunner.”

Storm laughed at that. “And who committed his murder, Dragonwind? We both know the answer. You had Nightwind murder him because you’ve got water for blood. I bet that’s who killed our father too. But no one needs to fear Nightwind, the backstabbing bastard anymore. Nightwind’s gone somewhere he won’t trouble anyone ever again.”

Lips twisted into a sneer, Storm added, “And if anyone should be a slave it’s you, you murdering shit.”

“ENOUGH!” Dragonwind bellowed and his warriors cuffed Storm, trying to silence him. “Take this carrion away until we can find a clan stupid enough to want to buy him.”

Bright points of light flickered and danced in Storm’s vision, the room spinning and whirling from the blows the clansmen delivered to him before he was grabbed and hauled to his feet. He couldn’t walk, the world shifting and dancing

around him. Even the ground felt unsteady beneath his stumbling feet.

“He’s getting off much too easy,” muttered one of the men as they dragged him toward the door. “Sandrunner was a good man. Far too good for this worthless sack of shit.”

Dragonwind held up the hand that wasn’t dabbing at his face with a scrap of linen. “Wait, you’re right. He *does* need to pay for his crimes.” He sat back in his ‘throne’ and smirked. “Make him pay a high price, my friends.”

Fists, boots and weapons immediately rained down on Storm from the surrounding warriors while Dragonwind sat and watched, grinning through it all.

Storm refused to cry out or make any sound as the men battered him. Two of them held him up while they took turns punching him in the face and gut. When holding him got tiring they dropped him to the floor where their kicks cracked his ribs, and turned his entire torso into a mass of black and blue bruises. They hauled him to his feet a second time and pounded his face until his lips split and his eyes swelled shut.

Beaten to a bloody mess, Storm lay on the ground, unable to move, mouth full of blood from broken teeth. His breath came in ragged, bubbling gasps, at least one lung punctured. The pain was even worse than the first beating he'd taken at the hands of Dragonwind's men, and there would be no escape from it. Immortal, he could suffer, but he couldn't die.

A hand gripped his hair, forced him to his knees by dragging him upward. Body a mass of pain, barely able to breathe, Storm tried to get free to discover he wasn't able to resist. His damaged body wouldn't respond.

He heard Dragonwind's laugh through the roar of pain which filled his mind. "Yes, very good, men, very good indeed. I think a beating like that every day till we sell him might help us get over the pain of Sandrunner's loss."

"Fucking bastard," Storm mumbled. Blood trickled down his chin. "You wanted to break me with his death, and you *almost* got what you wanted. But your plan failed, and you and I both know why. When I showed the poor grace not to die, you had to undermine me with lies and deceit." He lifted his head. "Everything you do

takes you one step closer to the hell you deserve. A hell I'll see you in, even if it somehow costs me my own life."

Dragonwind's laughter stopped abruptly and he glared, his grey eyes vicious and as deadly as a blackstorm. "Throw this cur back in its kennel."

Storm laughed, the sound ending in a gurgling cough, bloody froth spilling over his chin to run down his throat and soak his clothing. "I know *how* you're going to die, Dragonwind. And when it happens I'm going to be there sitting in judgment."

## Chapter Two

### *Rescue*

---

Flame watched in impotent fury as his swordbrother was dragged towards the chief's tent at the centre of the camp. The rocks and distance between him and the camp hid him well enough, but he had a perfect view of what went on below. *Damn that bastard! I'll make him pay for every last scratch one day.*

He wondered if Watersong and Heartfire had managed to get their family to safety. He hoped so. If they'd failed then all this suffering had been for nothing. They'd done their best to give the two men time to get their family away, acting as a distraction for the swordbrothers. They'd been captured during the act and now Stormdragon was paying for their effort to help people escape from Dragonwind's clan.

The minutes dragged by as he waited for Storm to be brought out. He saw the warriors leave Storm alone with Dragonwind and then return some while later. Another long period passed before Storm was dragged out of the

chief's tent, bound in chains, covered in bruises and blood. *Damn them all! I won't rest until I can make them pay for what they've done to him.*

He thanked all the gods and ancestors for allowing him to find his soul ball. Although he'd been able to work with the irregular hunk of quartz, it took a lot more of his energy. Energy he couldn't afford to expend if he was going to get them both out of this situation alive.

*Storm should be dead two or three times over, so I was right about us. We are both the same as the Immortals out of legend. How or why though? That's the thing I don't understand. The Immortal Beasts have been stories and nothing else for generations. Why after all this time are there three of us? Are there more? I wish I knew.*

He watched the guards drag Storm to the wagon from his hiding place, hoping the guards failed to notice his absence. Storm was thrown back into the wagon and he winced at the cry of agony his swordbrother gave as he landed. The guards didn't even bother to make sure he was inside before they shut the door behind them. A big padlock was put on the door, but that wouldn't keep him from freeing Storm. The



things were easy enough to break off by ripping the hasp out of the wood.

*I'm going to have to wait for nightfall. Please gods, don't let them think about getting our cycles. We're going to need them to get away from Dragonwind's Clan.*

He considered climbing up from the ledge in order to hide the warcycles, but the risk of being seen in broad daylight was far too great. He glanced at the sky and reckoned on having only another hour or two to wait.

Daylight gradually turned to dusk and nobody had come for the cycles yet so Flame climbed back to the top of the bluff and made his way towards the wagon where Storm was being held.

There were still two guards at the wagon's entrance so he edged around them and slipped into the wagon from the front over the driver's seat, the same way he'd left it a few hours earlier.

Storm lay unmoving on the floor in the center of a dark pool of blood.

Deciding it was better to leave his sword brother in the arms of merciful unconscious while he worked on healing the damage, Flame drew his

soul ball from inside his jacket and ran it over Storm. His injuries were much worse than they'd been before and Flame cursed Dragonwind, calling him every vile name he could think of under his breath.

Even *with* the soul ball it took a long while to heal all the damage and by the time Flame had finished it was full dark.

He used his fire magic to soften the manacles enough so he could remove them and finally shook Storm gently holding a finger to his swordbrother's lips as he did so.

Storm groaned. His eyes opened for a moment, but he didn't appear to know where they were. He reached out to touch Flame's cheek, his hands as icy as they'd been the last time Flame healed his lover.

"Thank you," Storm whispered and forced himself upright. He winced, but gained his feet without any other sign of discomfort.

"We've got to get out of here," Storm informed in the barest whisper.

Flame smiled at his swordbrother. "We've had a stroke of luck. The arrogant fools haven't

retrieved our cycles yet and I hid our swords just in case," he whispered. "Follow me."

He led the way out of the back of the wagon helping Storm to the ground as he knew his lover was still weak from all the abuse. Keeping hold of Storm's hand he took them back towards their warcycles at a crouching run.

They reached their cycles without being spotted--a testament to just how poor Dragonwind's rule as Chief truly was since no one spotted them as they left the camp. "Wait here," Flame whispered.

Storm, crouched behind a cluster of rocks, waited for Flame to return.

"Hold on one moment, please Storm," Flame said as he climbed down to the ledge to retrieve their swords. He returned swiftly with the weapons and handed Storm his sword before slipping his own flame-shaped blade into the weapons compartment of his warcycle.

"Do you know if Heartfire and Watersong got away?" Storm asked when Flame returned.

"Unfortunately, no, I don't. I didn't dare risk moving until it got dark."

Storm frowned as he put picked up his dustmask and put it on. His movements were careful, as if he tried to conserve whatever strength his body retained after two severe beatings. "I hope this wasn't in vain. I'd hate to have endured all this to discover they weren't able to make their escape from Dragonwind."

He put on his dustmask and goggles and mounted his cycle. "I'm guessing, if they did manage to get away safely, they'll have headed back towards the Clan of the She Bear."

Storm nodded and he slipped his sword into the weapons compartment and put his helmet on. "That's where we should go then," Storm said and started up his cycle.

Flame put on his dustmask and goggles and mounted his cycle. "I'm guessing, if they did manage to get away safely, they'll have headed back towards the Clan of the She Bear."

Storm nodded. "We'll meet them there." Storm started up his cycle and took the lead as he usually did.

Flame frowned, not sure how well Storm would take the long ride. Despite being healed,

the amount of damage Storm had suffered at Dragonwind's hands would have taken a toll on his lover's strength. Worried, Flame followed his swordbrother across the dusty land, and through the canyons toward the camp of the She Bear Clan.

They arrived in the general vicinity of the She Bear Clan's camp several hours later. Three women stopped them well outside the camp itself.

"Who are you?" a tall woman on a warcycle questioned, her cycle and those of the other two women blocking them from going deeper into the canyon.

Flame removed his goggles and mask so they could see his face clearly. "I am Flamespirit co-chief of the Dragon and Fenyx Clan. Is either Skybird or Sunchild prepared to speak with us?"

The woman shook her head. "They've gone to bed. The rest of your clan is here though. They're camped over there," the woman replied. She pointed out the narrow opening of a nearby canyon, the darkness rendering it almost

invisible. “They arrived hours ago and said we should watch out for the two of you.”

“Thank you,” Storm told her. “We’ll come by in the morning to speak with Skybird and Sunchild. I’m sure they’ll be interested in the information we’ve gathered from our encounter with Dragonwind’s clan.”

“We’ll let them know. I’m sure they’ll be as relieved as your own clan to know you’ve made it back alive. Good night to you both,” the woman told them.

Flame nodded his thanks to the guard and turned his cycle in the right direction. He smiled at Storm. “Well, at least we now know what we did was worth it. Heartfire and Watersong obviously got out in one piece.” He put his goggles and dustmask on and headed towards the small camp. *Their* camp, their clan, Dragon and Fenyx.

The camp turned out to be a lot larger than Flame expected. Five tents stood in the canyon surrounding a larger one set up in the center. It took him a moment to realize the tent in the middle belonged to him and Storm.

Two men came out of the shadows on their cycles to intercept them, closing from the right and left sides of the canyon.

“Chief Flamespirit! Chief Stormdragon! It’s good to see both of you!” Hearthfire cried out the instant he brought his cycle to a stop. “We’d begun to worry you wouldn’t be able to escape from Dragonwind.”

Flame smiled at the other firemage as he removed his dustmask and goggles. “How many others came with you?” he asked. It was so good to see their tent already set up and waiting for them. They were tired and Storm still had to rest after the horrific injuries he’d received. None of this showed on his face though as he waited for Heartfire’s answer.

“Three other families, a pair of swordbrothers and some unattached young men and a couple of unmarried younger women who said they were tired of being pawed by Dragonwind and his men. There’s also an older woman with several children. Dragonwind got both her husbands killed on one of his raids against another clan. There are others planning to slip away after dark

too. They needed time to get ready,” Heartfire explained.

Watersong pointed at the camp. “We set your tent up in the middle and unpacked some bedding. The rest of your things we left alone. We didn’t feel like we should go through your personal things. I hope we did all right, it was dark by the time we got the whole camp set up.”

Flame blinked then nodded, overwhelmed by both his exhaustion and the sheer number of people from the Dragon Clan who were prepared to trust Storm and himself enough to take such a huge leap into the unknown. “Thank you. You did just fine. It’s much appreciated as we really do need to rest right now.”

“The tent should be warm. We lit a brazier of firestones, and there’s a pot of stew hanging over it,” Watersong explained. “The women thought the two of you would be hungry, so they set some aside from our evening meal.”

“We’ve taken care of the guard detail for you too. You don’t have anything to think about but food and sleep. At least until morning,” Heartfire added. “After that the clan falls on your shoulders, our Chiefs.”



Storm sighed, sounding relieved. “My thanks for everything,” he told them. “And now, if you don’t mind, we’re going to go eat and get some rest. Dragonwind’s hospitality has changed little in the time I’ve been gone.”

Watersong shuddered at some thought. “It was the least we could do after all the two of you have done for us, our Chiefs. For now we’ll bid you goodnight. Time enough to discuss Dragonwind and other things of importance after you’ve both had a good night’s sleep.”

Flame smiled and nodded, unable to find the strength to do more apart from put his goggles and mask on again. He wove his warcycle through the small camp and parked it outside their tent before turning to check that his swordbrother was still safe.

Storm took his helmet and dustmask off and hung them on his cycle. He dismounted, his motions showing the careful deliberateness of someone at the brink of collapse. He stood by the cycle for a moment, then took a careful step toward their tent, his gaze going to Flame as if he wanted to ask for his help, but was too full of pride to request assistance.

Flame ripped off his own dustmask and goggles and was at Sword's side in an instant hands reaching out to support and soothe his lover. "Let's get you to bed, Storm. You need to rest." *He went through so much pain and suffering for our clan. We both did but he endured it twice.*

Storm grunted a wordless agreement and slipped his arm around Flame's waist in a gesture not uncommon among male lovers. It appeared to be nothing more than a show of affection between them, but Storm was letting Flame unobtrusively support some of his weight.

"I feel like I've been trampled by an enraged darbear," his lover whispered. "I'd rather not have everyone wondering what happened to me. It will only upset them if they find out about the things Dragonwind had his men do to me."

Flame understood that and knew his swordbrother's pride would not allow him to take any further assistance. The events of the day would remain a secret held by the two of them. He walked slowly, seeming to stroll, and his hand was the one that held open the door to their tent so Storm could enter first.

There was a delicious aroma emanating from

the pot over the firestones and Flame's mouth watered as he realised that neither of them had eaten since the day before. "Are you up to eating a little food, Storm?"

Storm crumpled onto their bed, more of a collapse to the furs rather than lying down. "I want sleep, Flame. I'll eat after I wake up." His lover closed his eyes and Flame could tell he'd fallen to sleep the instant his head hit the pillow.

Flame couldn't resist taking a bowlful of the stew before he settled. A day spent on a cold and windy ledge and two healing sessions on his swordbrother had left him hungry as well as exhausted. He ate quickly, just enough to take the edge off his appetite, before setting the bowl down.

He dampened the firestones so there was just enough heat coming from them to keep both the stew and the tent warm before pulling off both his boots and Storm's. He ran the soul ball over Storm one more time, making sure that the blond was fit enough to sleep well, then curled up next to him and let his own exhaustion claim him.



Storm awoke from dreams filled with pain to the warm reassurance of his swordbrother lying beside him. He was safe, in their own tent, well away from Dragonwind, the painful beatings and other torments his brother no doubt had planned for him.

He wanted to remain right where he was, wrapped in warm furs with Flame's head pillowed on his shoulder, one of his lover's arms resting across his belly. The sound of people moving around outside, and the tight pressure of his bladder were conspiring against him.

He lay there trying to ignore the sounds and the pain of a distended bladder, the latter being the thing Storm found most distracting.

Amid the discomfort another thought crept into his mind. *We're going to have to move our camp very soon. Dragonwind isn't about to let any of us walk away from him without a fight, and a fight isn't something anyone in this clan needs to face now, or anytime in the near future. Not when Dragonwind's people out number us twelve to one. And I'm not sure Flame's ready to face*

### Dragon & Fenyx 3: Clan Chiefs

*Dragonwind's Black Fenyx. We didn't do very well in that last battle, and I'm not willing to risk Flame being killed by Dragonwind either. The legends say it takes an Immortal Beast of the same kind to kill another Immortal Beast, which means the only way Flame can be killed is by another Fenyx, which is exactly what Dragonwind is, a twisted Fenyx. I won't risk Flame in a battle with him. Not even to stop that dustdelver shit brother of mine.*

*But someday. Oh yes, someday Dragonwind's going to discover what happens to bullying shits like him, and I fully intend to have Flame and I be the one to teach him that lesson.*

Reluctant to leave the warm bed, but aware they had to get moving, Storm shook Flame's shoulder. "Wake up Flame. We need to get our clan moving away from Dragonwind and his clan."

Flame's eyes fluttered open and he smiled at Storm. "We should also warn Skybird. It wouldn't go well for her clan if Nightwind was found there." He sat up and ran a hand through his hair. "But you need to eat first."

"What I need to do first is pee," Storm

remarked as he reached for his boots. “And is it my imagination, or is it damn cold this morning?”

Flame nodded. “It is cold.” He cuffed his swordbrother on the shoulder. “I didn’t need to go till you said that,” he said in a mock severe tone. “Let me turn up the firestones.” His eyes went distant and the firestones blazed into life. “That should get the place warmed up again.” He pulled on his boots as Storm rummaged through their things to find their warmer jackets.

Dressed for the cold, they went out of the tent together to find a private place to take care of business, which they did then headed back to camp.

“If we’re going to make it to the City and then find somewhere safe before the Storm Season hits full force we need to get moving. I don’t like how cold it is this morning,” Storm remarked as they crossed the camp.

Women were already preparing meals for their family’s breakfasts, and some children were sitting quietly and playing with toys, their eyes still filled with sleep. Two young warriors--Storm thought their names were Goldstone and

Greycloud--sat by a pile of glowing firestones sharpening some knives. When the two of them got closer to the center of the camp they found Heartfire and his family up, the men, their wife and children already eating their first meal of the day.

“Good morning my Chiefs,” Heartfire called from the dwelling he shared with Watersong, their wife and several young children.

Three of their four children waved, the last one staring at Storm and Flame with wide bright blue eyes. “Good morning, Chief Stormdragon! Good morning Chief Flamespirit!” the rest of the family said together.

Storm waved in return. “Good morning my clanspeople.”

Flame smiled and waved at the children and Heartfire before disappearing back into their tent to dish out the stew. “Will you come and eat, please Storm.”

Storm sighed as he sat down near the glow of the firestones. He held his hands out to warm them while Flame got out some bowls.

“What do you think, Flame? Should we try

for the City and risk getting caught there during Storm Season, or should we look for a place to weather out the blackstorms first?”

Personally Storm wanted to go to the City for many reasons, not the least of which was a gut feeling something important would happen if they went, and something bad would occur if they didn't go.

Flame handed him a bowl almost overflowing with delicious smelling stew before rising to his feet and going to the tent flap. He lifted it and sniffed the air. “The air is cold but very still. I think we have maybe half a moon or a bit longer left before the first real storm hits.” He let the flap fall into place and returned to the fire. Flame sat, picked up his food and began to eat.

*That would give us enough time to get to the City and get what we need, but it might not leave us with enough time to find a cave system to shelter us during the blackstorms.* Storm ate a few bites of stew, thinking it over.

“I think we should go to the City first. Something tells me going there will solve the problem of where we're going to take shelter for the Storm Season,” Flame remarked. Storm



smiled at Flame's comment. *We're well matched as swordbrothers. He senses things as do I. But if it weren't for Sandrunner telling me to trust my instincts, how well would we do together? I wonder.*

"You're right. Plus the Clan will need sufficient supplies to get us through the blackstorms. It's not as if we can ride out during a lull and get supplies. Once those storms start, we're going to be trapped for the duration, food or no food."

"Yes, that's true. So we go to the City first."

He thought about the things they needed to do and said, "Agreed. I'll go let everyone know to break camp so we can move on after we've all had a chance to eat. We really shouldn't stay here longer than absolutely necessary anyway. Not when Dragonwind's men could show up at any moment to give us grief." He sighed. "I hate to leave you to start the work, but one of us *does* need to warn Skybird and her people about Dragonwind."

Flame nodded as he continued to chew the food in his mouth. When he'd swallowed he said, "Don't worry about it, Storm. I'm very used to packing up on my own. Our Clan and

Skybird's people matter more. You're right, we do need to get out of here before Dragonwind's men show up and cause us trouble."

"We're agreed then." Storm finished the stew left in his bowl quickly. Though the food was good and he wanted to take his time to savor the meal, he didn't have the luxury to do so, not when so many things needed to be done.

He put his empty bowl aside. "I won't be gone long," he promised. He crawled across the floor of the tent to pull Flame into his arms and give him a kiss. He held his lover tight for a moment then let go. "I love you, swordbrother of mine," he said, and brushed some of Flame's outrageous hair from his face.

Flame pressed his cheek into the caress as a cat would. "I love you too, and I always will," he said. Flame's lips met Storm's in a passionate kiss that left them both breathless and aching.

Body aching with desire, Storm broke the kiss, got to his knees, preparing to stand. Storm lowered his head and brushed his lips over Flame's in a quick show of affection. "You better, or I'll have to hunt you down and spank you for

being a naughty swordbrother,” he joked, his lips touching Flame’s as he spoke.

“Spank me?” Flame’s confused expression reminded Storm of how little Flame knew about the things that went on between swordbrothers. Storm had learned from Sandrunner, now it would be his turn to teach Flame. The thought of all the things Flame had yet to learn sent a thrum of desire through Storm’s body.

*That’s for later. Right now I have to be a Chief, not a lover.*

Sighing, Storm let Flame go and picked up his jacket. “And if I stay here kissing you much longer I’ll forget what I’m supposed to be doing in favor of something a lot more fun.” He winked and put his jacket on, grateful that it was long enough to cover the evidence of his arousal.

Flame chuckled softly. “Spank me eh? And that is fun?”

Storm grinned. “Oh yes, lots and lots of fun, for both of us, I promise you!” He caressed Flame’s cheek. “I’ll show you all about it the first chance we get, all right?”

Flame's adorable blush suffused his cheeks but he was smiling. "All right."

Storm had to force himself to step away from his lover. *I want him so much it hurts.* "I won't be gone long." He stepped out of the tent, stopping by the doorway.

"My people, please listen!" he called loudly.

When he had everyone's attention he said, "We are going to be moving our camp, heading for the City. We will buy supplies there, and try and barter for the return of any relatives or friends of our clan that may have been sold into slavery. We will also be seeking a wagon to carry our supplies. I will be offering sunstones, so bartering should go smoothly."

Cheers rose from the assembled clanspeople at Storm's announcement.

"Make ready. We leave in two hours."

"Yes our Chief!" they called, many of the women were crying, even the men overjoyed, hugging one another in a display of joy.

Storm mounted his cycle, put on his helmet and dustmask and headed out of camp. He

passed the information about leaving to the sentries then rode on to the camp of the Clan of the She Bear.

The sentries on duty recognized him and waved him through. He arrived in the camp proper and pulled off helmet and dustmask as several women, their Chief among them, came forward.

“Greetings Chief Skybird,” he said holding his arm out in greeting.

Skybird nodded to him and took his arm in the greeting of Chiefs. “Greetings, Chief Stormdragon. I’m glad to see you alive and well. What can I do for you?”

“I’ve come to warn you that Dragonwind and the Clan he controls will probably be coming this way to reclaim me.”

Storm glanced skyward. “By now they’ve discovered I’m no longer a captive and they’ll be hot for blood, any blood. I’d hate for your people to be caught up in the feud between his people and mine. We’re going to be moving on, but he might take his anger out on your people if he cannot find us.”

Skybird grinned slyly. “Especially as we hold one of his as a slave,” she agreed. “It’s almost time for us to retreat to our Storm Season caverns anyway so a few days more or less makes little difference. I thank you for the warning Stormdragon and look forward to seeing you and yours again after the Storm Season.” She gave him a warm smile. “I’d hoped we could remain in company for a while to get to know one another better. Perhaps some other time, a Gather or Festival some time in the future?”

Storm thought it over, trying to decide which of the many Gather’s and Festivals his clan might easily be able to attend. If they were stuck in the City for the entire time the blackstorms blew across the barren land it would mean going on a longer journey to many of them.

“There’s a Gather about five weeks past the Storm Season which takes place at Whistling Rocks. After that there’s the mid-summer Gather at Red Canyon. Dragon and Fenyx Clan should be at one, or possibly both of them. I hope to see you at one of those two, Skybird.”

Skybird smiled the expression warm. “I look forward to it, Stormdragon. We should all have

some craft goods to trade by then! I'll make sure my clan is at them both, that way we can see one another again."

Storm smiled at the tall woman. "Good enough."

"I'm sure you're right about, Dragonwind, so we're going to move out as fast as we can." She patted his shoulder in a friendly gesture.

"Perhaps by the Gathering at Whistling rocks we'll have sufficient goods ready for trade." He reached out and clasped forearms with her. "May your clan prosper, Chief Skybird. Good luck and may the ancestors and deities of the She Bear Clan watch over you during Storm Season."

Skybird clasped his forearm in return. "Good luck to you and yours, Chief Stormdragon, and the regards of my clan and myself to Chief Flamespirit."

"I'll speak of you to my co-Chief Flamespirit. Convey my thanks and well wishes also to your swordsisiter Sunchild."

"I will certainly do that, Chief Stormdragon. Until we meet again, farewell."

“Fare you well also, Chief Skybird.” He picked up his helmet and put it on, followed by the dustmask. He waved to the woman and left their camp, a plume of dust marking his passage toward his own camp. He frowned, slowed his cycle down to watch at the way the dust shifted and danced on the wind.

*Another indication we're bound to have an early Storm Season. How in all the hells are we going to get to the City, buy the goods we need, and find a good cavern system not in use by another clan before the blackstorms begin?* He shook his head. *So much to do, and so little time left in which to do it all. Ancestors and gods help us, but how can we possibly manage to accomplish this? I don't know, and as a Clan Chief that's bad. Really bad.*

He set his cycle in motion and headed toward his own camp.

*There has to be an answer to this problem, but what it is I don't know. Maybe we should plan to spend the entire Storm Season in the City. I get a big rent house from Johah, I'm sure he's still in the business and since we're friends I know he'll give me a good price for the whole season. I can pay in sunstones, or have Flame make up a bag of*



*firestones. No one in the City ever has enough of those. I'd rather not keep a clan in the City that long, but if we don't find an alternative it may be the only way we can survive. Flame and I won't die in a blackstorm, but the rest of our people would, and we can't risk being caught with no shelter.*

Storm slowed his cycle as he reached the camp. Preparations were well under way for their departure when he brought his cycle to a stop in front of his tent. Most of the tents of the clanspeople were down, the canvas and poles being readied for travel. The sleds the women dragged behind their workcycles were attached to the bikes, their camp goods in the process of being loaded. Children hurried around the camps of their parents, helping to pack, rolling up the hides and rugs from inside the tents and binding them with twine.

The flap of the tent he shared with Flame was open and a quick glance inside showed it to be almost empty of camp goods. He smiled.

*Flame certainly wastes no time.*

He found his lover inside the tent, packing the now cooled firestones into a large pouch. Their bed had been dismantled and was ready

to pack on Flame's sled. The furs from their bed were rolled, tied and stacked to one side. His swordbrother glanced up as he entered. Flame offered him a smile of welcome. "You were quick. I thought you'd talk longer than that. I'm nearly done, but I guess you can see that."

Storm nodded. "The fact you've got almost everything ready to go *is* rather apparent," he replied and grinned. "You're efficient, I'll give you that, Flame."

Flame shrugged. "I got used to doing everything alone."

Storm crossed the tent and knelt down to give Flame a quick hug. "Well that's not how it's going to be in the future. You've got most of the packing done already, but I'll help you get the stuff on the sleds," Storm said. He gave Flame a quick kiss and scooted across the floor to grab the last floor rug. He started rolling it up while he said, "Skybird conveys her greetings and well wishes. I told her we were going to try and make the Gathers at Whistling Rocks and Red Canyon next year. I hope that's all right with you. By then we should have goods to trade for some of the things we might want."

Flame closed the pouch and grinned at him. “That’s fine by me. I’ll enjoy seeing her and Sunchild again,” he said. “Are they going to move on before Dragon Clan descends on them?”

“So will I. I’ll also enjoy meeting up with other clans and warning them away from my former clan. Dragonwind cannot be trusted, not even at a Gathering. He’s always terrorized weaker people, especially those from smaller clans.”

Storm tied the rolled up rug with some cord and started on another one. Voice lowered he said, “He admitted he murdered our father as soon as the old man served his purpose by disowning me and naming Dragonwind Chief of the Dragon Clan.”

The pain he’d refused to feel surfaced and he sank to the ground, his hands covering his face, trying to hide the tears flowing from his eyes in a torrent.

*Dead. My father is dead. Murdered like Sandrunner was murdered. Both of them killed by Dragonwind or one of his murderous bastard friends. He is trying to take everyone I love away from me, but he won’t take Flame! He won’t! Together we’ll kill him someday, I swear it!*

### Dragon & Fenyx 3: Clan Chiefs

Flame crossed the tent in three quick strides and took Storm in his arms, rocking him gently.

Storm met his swordbrother's concerned gaze as he returned Flame's embrace. "He has to be stopped, Flame. We're going to have to kill Dragonwind as soon as we can manage it."

## Chapter Three

### *The City*

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Flame drove his warcycle across the Barrens, the two wheeled vehicle bouncing along the uneven ground. He'd been thinking hard about what Storm had said. If the legends really *were* true, then Storm couldn't kill his brother to get his revenge for the murders of his first swordbrother, Sandrunner, and his father. A Fenyx, even a black one, was an Immortal and such a Beast could only die at the hands of another Immortal Fenyx.

*That means I will need to kill him.*

He thought about the Black Fenyx, wreathed in dark fire which had surrounded Dragonwind. Like the man, the Immortal Beast within him was warped and twisted. A cowardly murderer who forced others to carry out his nefarious plans, Dragonwind lacked the courage of a dustdelver, much less that of a warrior. Flame considered the damage which Dragonwind's empathic manipulation had done to Nightwind and possibly others of the Dragon Clan.

Using the twisted empathic abilities of a Black Fenyx he was tampering with the minds of his clansmen, turning them into puppets eager to do his bidding. Flame also remembered all the lies which had been told about Storm. Lies their father and enough of the clan believed to make Storm's life unbearable within Dragon Clan. *His father didn't turn on him, it was Dragonwind meddling with his mind that caused him to turn on Storm.*

*Dragonwind has to die, and if I succeed in killing him, I'm not likely to lose any sleep over it. He needs to die for the things he's done to everyone around him.*

He thought back to what had been done to Storm, to how the man had been in search of death when they'd first met. The only thing that had kept Storm from the death he sought was his own Immortal Beast. A Dragon which his brother's Black Fenyx could not destroy.

*I'll spend the Storm Season honing my warrior skills as well as making firestones. I can't let Storm down. Dragonwind has to die before he can hurt more people.*

Storm slowed his bike as he neared the top of

a rise. He come to a halt at the crest and waited for everyone to catch up with him. Flame pulled up beside Storm, wondering why he's stopped. Flame frowned and glanced at the land lying before them. He saw a hazy shape in the distance. Something huge which rose from the plain below them the way the wall of a canyon rose out of the ground. He stared, trying to figure out what it was, because the color was too even, the shape too regular to be anything natural. After a moment the object resolved itself into a dark red wall which from the plain to a great height. It curved in a long arch from the high cliffs on one side and ended some distance out in the lapping waves of an enormous lake that sparkled in the sunlight. He squinted, trying to make out what lay beyond the wall. He could see many blockish shapes inside the protected area. Rows and rows of them that stretched from near the wall all the way to the shore of the lake. He realized these where the things called buildings and they were the homes of the City people. The lake itself stretched toward the horizon, going on much farther than he could see. Never had he seen so much water in one place.

*If they have so much water why do they need watermages?* It didn't make any sense.

"Is that the City?" he asked Storm.

"It is," his lover agreed. He took off his dustmask and smiled at Flame as he tapped the dirt out. "This is the first time you're seeing it so take a good, long look, Flame. The first time I saw it I was a kid and the place awed me into amazed silence."

The rest of the clan arrived. They came to a stop behind their Chiefs. Some of the children jumped off their parents' cycles and bikes and ran up the shallow rise. Their amazed cries showed none of them had ever seen the City before either.

"It's huge! The hugest thing I've ever seen!" the oldest of the children exclaimed in excitement.

"Do we get to go there too?" a girl asked from where she rode pillion behind her mother.

"It looks sort of scary," another child remarked.

Storm removed his helmet and nodded, giving the children a smile. "Everyone will be coming



into the City, but we have to stay together and be wary. City people can be as unscrupulous as Dragonwind.”

“Oh,” a few of the children said. Their disheartened expressions showed even they were aware what an awful person Dragonwind was to everyone.

*Does he hurt children too?* Flame wondered, and decided, based on the unhappy looks the children had on their faces that the dustdelver’s leavings probably hurt anyone and everyone weaker than himself.

Flame glanced round to see the rest of their small clan nodding and murmuring their agreement. “How long will it take us to reach the City from here?” he asked.

Storm glanced at the lavender sky, checking the position of the sun overhead. “About two hours which will make it three hours before mid-day. The middle part of the day is the busiest time in the Market Square, which is both a good and bad thing.”

Flame sighed quietly as he wondered if he could deal with the crowds. He wasn’t used

to them, never having been allowed to go to the City. “Why is it a good thing?” He could already see a multitude of reasons for it being a bad one.

“All the booths are open by that time of day which makes finding things we want a lot easier. But we’ll have to keep a close eye on the children. The City people aren’t above grabbing a child they think isn’t being watched,” Sword explained. “They also aren’t above accusing a ‘grubby clansman’s brat’ of stealing things. I’ve seen it happen, and they usually try and rob the parents blind with the threat of calling the guard and having the child put in prison.”

Heartfire, who was standing behind them, sighed. “Once they find out you’re trading in sunstones it will only get that much worse.”

Flame frowned. This whole business seemed fraught with perils in every direction. Going into the City was a risk, remaining outside was also a risk. “Wouldn’t it be better for the children to wait outside the City with a few people to look after them?”

Storm shrugged. “It would be, in some ways, but not in others. I hesitate to do it because

we're very small as clans go. Anyone left out here would be at risk of coming under attack by other clans or even slavers. Those dustdelver's leavings are numerous in this area. They lurk around the City's gate watching and waiting for anyone they're sure they can capture without much of a fight," Storm explained. He was telling Flame the things his own father had taught him on their frequent trips to the City. "We also can't be totally certain Dragonwind, or rather his men, haven't followed us. He won't come after us himself. He's too much of a coward." Storm frowned. "But that doesn't mean he didn't send some of his dogs to follow us."

"He's right," Heartfire agreed. "Dragonwind won't come after us himself. Not unless he has the entire clan with him. He's afraid if he goes too far from the clan people will run away."

His wife snorted. "Him being there doesn't always prevent people from sneaking away after dark, they just don't get far. He sends warriors after them and either brings them back or kills them."

"He's a waste of water," Storm stated, voice cold and hard. The gaze he turned on Flame

showed hate. “He needs to be dead, but we’ll worry about that later. Right now we’ve got other problems.”

Flame thought about all the reasons their people were in danger outside the City and realized Storm was absolutely right. There really was no way of knowing if the children and their minders would be safe when most of the warriors would be bartering in the City. He gazed across the intervening land at the City and thought about his sister Oasis. *Is she there. Will I see her, I wonder? And if we do find her, will we be able to buy her from her owner? What if he won’t sell her to us?* His thoughts were stopped when Storm spoke.

“We’ll need to be careful.” He turned to the children clustered around them. “You children can’t go running around in the City. It’s dangerous. Do you understand?”

There were nods and several children dutifully replied, “Yes my Chief,” as was expected of them.

“What about somewhere inside that isn’t the Market Square then? I don’t want any of them accused of stealing but I don’t know the City

either, so if I'm not making any sense tell me so," Flame suggested.

Storm nodded, a pleased smile curling his mouth. He reached over and patted Flame on the shoulder. "You're making perfect sense, my swordbrother. I can secure a safe haven inside the City and use it for our camp while we're there. I'm sure we can get such a place for a small bag of firestones. That should give us the use of a City style house for the few days we'll be here." Storm appeared thoughtful, as if he might be mulling something over in his head. "As Chiefs of this Clan it's our duty to make sure our people are safe. We'll stay here long enough for you to make a batch of firestones. While you're doing that I'll convert some pebbles to small sunstones. We can use both types of stones as trade goods for the things we'll need while we're in the City, and for the goods we'll need to get through the Storm Seaason." He glanced at the rest of their clan. "Does everyone agree?"

Their clanspeople nodded their agreement, the entire group of adults adding their, "Yes our Chiefs," to their visible acceptance of the plan.

"I'd say you've got a yes," Heartfire remarked.

“Dragonwind doesn’t give a thought to the benefit of Dragon Clan. His decisions are all about what’s good for him and his asskissers.”

Flame’s swordbrother smiled at the people gathered around them. “I want everyone to consider the things we’ll need in order to get through the Storm Season in comfort, rather than simply surviving it.”

“I’d really enjoy some craft I can do. Something to kill the time while we’re stuck hiding in a cave!” Watersong called and several people laughed, including his wife and oldest child.

“That’s a very good point. If we’re all stuck in close quarters with nothing to keep us occupied we’ll soon be at one another’s throats. I’d rather not hear people bickering for days on end. I want everyone to think about all of the things we’ll need. I don’t mean just food either. I want all of you to consider the raw materials we need for making trade goods, cloth for clothes, everything and anything else we may need. Children, I want you to think of some things you’d like to have to keep you busy and happy during the Storm Season too. I’ll want a list as soon as possible after we’re settled into one of the trade houses.

The first thing we're going to find is the food, but we're going to require a lot of material to keep everyone happy and busy. Me especially. I'm a real moody jerk when I'm cooped up too long. But most of you know that."

There were laughs as Storm admitted to his biggest character flaw.

Flame chuckled with the rest. "All I'll need are a lot of stones and rocks to keep me occupied." Which made Flame think of something else. "Do the City people use soul balls to heal or do they need the skills of a healer?"

"They have very few people able to do the things clanspeople can do, Flame. They usually need clanspeople as their healers," Storm replied, giving Flame a nod of his head. "You're a genius for thinking about your talent as a healer. We should easily be able to gain some goods in trade for your talent as a healer. We can get things we need, or use what we receive for your services to get items our clan needs. We can even save things we get to barter to other clanspeople later at one of the Gathers." He grinned and clapped his hand on Flame's shoulder. "See, you are a good Cheif!"

Flame blushed. "I'm just making suggestions to try and help us, Storm."

"Yes, and it was a very good suggestion too, Flame. I'm very proud of you for thinking of it. I certainly wouldn't have."

"Perhaps we need a merchant booth as well as one of the stone dwellings for a few days time. What do you think, our clan, does that sound like a wise idea?"

"It sounds like an excellent plan," Watersong agreed. "I will need to look for a project or two to occupy my time while we're cooped up for Storm Season, but there's no reason I can't work on a few things to sell while we're in the City. The more trading we can manage the better off we'll be."

"Very true," Storm agreed.

Other members of their clan added similar requests, the majority of the women mentioning camp goods they'd had to leave behind like pots, pans, skillets and firegrates and cooking tripods and bedding. Heavy and bulky things they'd left behind because they were worried about the need to run from Dragonwind and his men.



“So it’s settled? We all go into the City, rent a home and get settled in. It’s probably too late today, but tomorrow we can get a merchant booth. We can start securing things we need to make Storm Season comfortable.” Storm scratched his chin, his gaze distant, the look alerting Flame that his lover was mulling something over. “You know, since we have sunstones, we could easily acquire a wagon or three and make it a lot easier to carry the goods we need and want.”

“Now that’s an excellent idea,” one of the unbonded young warriors agreed. Flame knew his name was Greycloud because they’d talked a bit early that morning. “If it’s any help at all, I know how to drive a wagon. My parents taught me. I’d be happy to lend my warcycle to help pull it, but we’ll need a second one if you’re planning on carrying a heavy load of goods and food.”

Flame nodded his agreement. “A wagon would make life a *lot* easier. They’re much better than relying on the sleds. As for the rest, the more craft skills we have, the more we can barter at Gathers. Storm Season is the perfect opportunity to learn some new crafts and share the skills we already have.”

“Agreed,” Storm remarked. “But don’t anyone waste their time trying to teach me how to weave unless you want to ruin some good wool.”

The women of their clan giggled at his comment. Watersong added, “And try not to let him do a lot of cooking. Unless you like eating boot leather and over cooked vegetables.”

“I’m still learning!” Storm remarked to their good natured banter.

Flame climbed off his warcycle. Looking through the dust and sand he found several ordinary looking, fist sized rocks about the size of a typical firestone. He concentrated for a moment or two and ended up holding several firestones.

Something occurred to him and he looked up at Heartfire. “You’re a firemage too, you should be able to pick up this skill. At least I think you should.”

Heartfire nodded in agreement. “I can make small firestones. They’re nothing but firepebbles really, but with three or four of them they make a good light. I can’t do anything of that size though,” he replied, pointing at the large stones

Flame had created. Heartfire's face showed his awe of what Flamespirit had done.

The other unbonded young man, Goldstone, dismounted and came over to Flame. Giving him a shy smile he picked up a handful of dirt and closed his fist around it. When he opened his hand he held a gleaming perfectly round sphere of striated stone. "Would something like this be easier to work with than those unshaped rocks you're using?"

Flame took the sphere from him and studied it minutely. It was almost flawless, unlike the ordinary rocks he worked with. "Yes, I believe Heartfire would be able to work with those very easily. After all, the more firestones we have to trade the better off we'll be."

Heartfire joined them and took the stone from the younger man's hand. He studied it for a moment, gave a shrug and closed his hand around it. A short time later he opened his hand to reveal the dull reddish surface of a dormant firestone. "It will work but it isn't as good as the sort you make, Flamespirit."

Stormdragon searched the ground, fingers sifting through the dust until he found three

small pebbles. He closed his hand around them and shut his eyes.

Flame grinned at Heartfire. “Who in the City would know the difference? Yours we sell or trade in the City, mine we keep for ourselves or for trading with other Clans. Does that make you feel better?”

Heartfire nodded and gave him a sheepish grin.

“Our clan will never lack wealth,” one of the unmarried women remarked, pointing at Stormdragon who’d opened his hand to reveal three pebble sized sunstones.

Flame glanced up at the woman’s words and smiled in pride at his swordbrother’s very special ability.

Heartfire frowned. “I can’t make more than a couple of these a day though. I don’t have the sort of power you do, my Chief.”

Storm joined them. “Make a ball of stone for me, Goldstone, I want to try something.”

Flame joined the rest of the clan as they gathered round to see what Storm could do with

one of Goldstone's rock balls. He had the feeling that it would be something pretty spectacular.

Goldstone picked up a handful of dust and sand and formed it into a sphere which Storm took. Flame's lover closed his hand around the ball and again shut his eyes, his face tight with concentration.

After a few moments he opened his hand to reveal the brilliant glow of a fully powered sunstone of the size needed to power a warcycle.

"By all the ancestors," one of the woman said, her brown eyes wide with awe. "Our Chiefs are both men of great power."

One of the unmarried women added, "We are very fortunate to have such powerful Chiefs."

A general murmur of agreement came from the rest of the clanspeople.

Flame frowned. "Don't push it," he whispered to his swordbrother, "you've gone white."



Storm gave Flame a wan smile. "Good advice," he replied. He felt a bit dizzy. Under normal

circumstances he could make more sunstones than the few he'd formed in the last few minutes, but yesterday's ordeal hadn't provided 'normal' circumstances. While he felt better than he'd expected after such a short time, exerting his abilities had proven he hadn't recovered. The beatings he'd received at the hands of Dragonwind and his cronies had left their mark on his endurance. Despite Flame's best efforts to heal him, the affects of the injuries lingered. It annoyed him, but he was confident he would recover soon enough.

*I always do, even when I should be dead. We are Immortals. It's the only way to explain why I'm not dead.*

"We should go. The sooner we get to the City the better," Storm remarked.

He tucked the sunstone into a pocket inside his jacket with the smaller ones he'd made. They would be safe from thieves in there, though any thief foolish enough to grab a sunstone without the protection of the proper gloves would get a deadly surprise. Most people would die from handling such powerful gems bare-handed. For some reason Storm had never been able to figure

out, he could handle--and make--sunstones. The ability was unusual in any clansman. Considering he was a windmage it was even more peculiar. Storm had never heard of another windmage able to make sunstones, which were something only a few firemages were able to accomplish. Then again, he'd never heard of a firemage who was also a healer, until he met Flamespirit.

*Perhaps it has something to do with our Immortal Beasts. Maybe the strange abilities we have come from them. I wish the legends were clearer on such things, but I suppose over time a lot was forgotten.*

He got onto his cycle and picked up his helmet and dustmask, put both on and started up his cycle. From the corner of his eye he saw Flame drop the new firestones he'd made into a small pouch and climbed onto his warcycle.

The rest of their small clan quickly organized themselves and within the span of a few breaths they were ready to move on again.

"Let's go," Storm said and Storm led them down the switchbacks which took them to the plain on which the City had been built when their people first colonized the planet.

As they rode nearer, the walls of the City loomed above them. The red stone they'd been worked from rose like the walls of some unnatural canyon high above the plain. Huge doors in the walls stood open, a scattering of people entering and exiting from the City through the twenty five foot high portals.

Storm saw Flame's eyes widen behind his goggles. "Dear gods, it's massive!"

Storm laughed as they slowed down, the group of them passing from the rough terrain of the country to the well worn path leading toward the gates. "Wait until you get inside, swordbrother of mine. It's even bigger on that side of the wall."

"Bigger?" Flame shook his head, his awed disbelief apparent.

"Imagine the biggest Gather you've ever been too," Storm said, "the multiply it by thirty and you'll get a basic idea what the City is like inside."

They reached the gates themselves, the whole clan forced to stop while several men in odd matching blue and gold clothes stopped a group



of people who'd arrived ahead of Dragon and Fenyx Clan. Clansmen, being individualists, never wore the same clothes as anyone else in their clan, but these men's garments were almost exactly the same. Storm frowned. While he'd been to the City several times, he couldn't recall seeing the City warriors at the gate being clothed in matching attire. Even the swords hanging at their sides and their belts and boots were much the same.

*I wonder what caused the change? Maybe they have a new Chief in the City, or maybe their warriors are led by a new man. If I think about it I'll ask someone about the change. Not that it matters what their warriors wear, though it will make spotting the warriors who guard the City easier to spot if they're all dressed like this.*

The blue and gold clad warriors at the gate had stopped a group of ragged warriors who had arrived at the gates ahead of their clan. They were questioning them at length, though Storm couldn't hear the conversation. To his critical gaze these 'clansmen' had the look of outlaws.

Wary of any entanglements with such people, Storm motioned his clan to stay well away from

them. The clan stayed back, obeying their Chief without question.

Storm didn't want to encourage any confusion among the City's warriors between their clan and the unkempt men ahead of them. Staying well away from the group ahead of them would make it clear to the outlaws were part of their clan. At least Storm hoped so. With City people you never knew what they might think when it came to clansmen.

The blue and gold clothed men at the gate motioned the ragged group through, though Storm could clearly tell from the frowns on their faces that the City's warriors were reluctant about letting them pass. Storm gave the outlaws a moment to clear away from the gates then he motioned to Flame and the two of them rode forward.

"What business do you people have here?" one of the men in the strange clothes asked.

Storm took off his helmet and dustmask. "We've come to buy things we need for the Storm Season."

The men turned critical gazes on the rest of the

clan. Unlike clansmen the men at the gate were all dark haired. Their eyes ranged deep brown to amber colored. They all had the same light skin tone, a shade somewhere between Flame's pallor and Storm's golden hue.

"Looks like you people are in need of some wagons," another of the gate guards remarked.

"That was precisely our thought on the matter too," Storm agreed. "Like I said, we're here to do some trading and buy stuff we need before the storm season hits."

Flame removed his headgear and leaned forward on his cycle. "Perhaps my skill as a healer will help purchase wagons."

The guards exchange glances and one of them asked, "How good a healer?"

"Good enough," Storm replied without giving details. He didn't want the full scope of Flame's ability mentioned or demonstrated unless it became necessary. The last thing he wanted was for some rich City person to hire slavers to kidnap Flame.

*Not that they'd have a chance of stealing him from me, but why take the risk?*

The first guard who'd spoken to them nodded. "Rumor says the Storm Season might be early."

"We've heard the same thing," Storm remarked. "So can we go in or not?"

"There's a few people that we know need some healing and you're the only one to have arrived this year," another guard explained. "Healers get premium prices this time of year anyway."

Storm glanced at Flame hoping they could make some good trade with his lover's skills as a healer, but he didn't want to expose them to more risk than absolutely necessary either.

"You can go, but be sure keep those children close to hand. There are a lot of questionable sorts here right now."

"We will," Heartfire said from where he sat on his idling cycle, his oldest son seated behind him.

Storm offered the guards a friendly smile. "We need a rental home. Are there still any available on Visitor's Street or Merchant's Lane?"

"Should be," one of the guards replied. "I'd try

Visitor's Street first. There are a lot of clansmen in town and most are going to Merchant's Lane."

Storm nodded. "My thanks." He put his helmet and dustmask on, and motioned his clan forward, leading the way to Visitor's Street.

A broad plaza and two buildings made of stone fronted the gate, both of them decorated with the blue and gold colors the guards wore. Between them lay a broad path paved in smoothed stone of some sort. They passed between the buildings and a second set of gates between the e buildings and entered the City.

Buildings stretched off to their left and right, others lay directly ahead of them. The structures kept them from seeing very far in any direction, but by peering down the streets they passed it was possible to see more buildings, some of them crowned with lush greenery, others surrounded by it.

All of the structures were of a reddish brown or a rusty orange color, a rare few were of a dusty yellow shade, the colors reminiscent of the banded stone of the canyons where many clans made temporary homes. The walls of the

buildings were smooth, though some showed small cracks as if they'd been standing for many years.

"These houses look as if they were formed by stonemages," one of the unbonded young men remarked as they made their way slowly down the street.

"They were," Storm replied. "My father told me in the old days the City people paid clansmen to make their houses, now they simply enslave mages to do their work."

"Makes you wonder what changed, doesn't it?" the other of the unbonded men commented.

Storm led them down a broad avenue to another street almost as wide. He rode a short distance down the street and brought his cycle to a stop in front of a building of reddish stone crowned with lush greenery in yellow stone pots.

He took off his helmet and dustmask, turned off his cycle and dismounted. "This is the office where we pay for a temporary home in the City," he explained to Flame and the members of their clan who might never have come to the City

before. "Oh, and they don't call this place 'The City' they call it Colbyville."

Flame removed his dustmask and goggles and raised a brow. "It has a name then?"

Storm nodded. "It does, but if you say 'Colbyville' to a clansman--" he shrugged and shook his head, "most clanspeople only know this place as the City. The people here refer to it as Colbyville, most of the time, though ones used to dealing with clansmen will call it the City."

Flame took off his helmet and shook his hair out. "I wonder who or what it was named after." He shrugged. "But I guess we'll never know."

"I think it goes back to the old Legends, but we've forgotten so much about our past and how we got here since the Cataclysm I guess everyone in the clans has forgotten." Storm put his helmet and dustmask on the seat of his cycle and walked toward the gate of the low wall surrounding the building.

He opened the gate and headed for the door. "Close the gate behind you," he instructed Flame. "Some people keep small animals as pets

and they'll wander out of the yard if the gate's left open."

The scent of green growing things reached them from above, along with the odor of wet ground. "There are pipes throughout the City that move water between the buildings," Storm explained softly. "It's why they want watermages."

The door was made of some reddish brown wood and it gleamed in the sunlight. Storm rapped his knuckles on the door and waited for someone to answer.

The door opened and an elderly woman with sparse grey hair pulled into a bun peered out at them. She wore a strange shapeless garment made out of linen that hung around her body in a loose drape of fabric which covered her all the way to her feet. The shape of the garment was unflattering, and the drab blue-grey color made her skin appear as washed out and colorless as that of a dead woman. "Are you looking for accommodation? If so for how many?" She regarded them with open hostility, her face twisted into a scowl of disapproval.

"We need a large dwelling place with several



sleeping rooms and a protected area where we can park our cycles,” Storm replied, eyeing the old woman. He didn’t recognize her which left him wondering where the man he usually bartered with for the rooms might be. It was the middle of the day Jonah’s absence came as a surprise to Storm. “Is Jonah in? I usually speak with him.”

At mention of Jonah’s name the woman opened the door wider, her scowl replaced by a slight smile. “He’s in the back room. Go on through but the rest of your friends need to wait here. I’ve just mopped the floors and I don’t want a pack of clansmen trailing dust all over the place.”

Storm turned to the rest of the clan who were quietly sitting their cycles, their gazes roving over the nearby buildings, most of them looking upward at the lush greenery on top of the structures. The women were pointing and chatting about the flowers that could be seen blooming on nearly every rooftop.

“Wait here, we won’t be long,” he told them.

“Don’t worry about us,” the unbonded warrior, Greycloud said. “We’ll be safe enough for a while.”

Goldstone grinned. "Good luck with your bartering, our Chiefs."

Storm smiled. While the two unbonded warriors were young, he knew he could entrust the rest of the clan to them and the other warriors. Storm led Flame into the place.

"I've been here several times, so I'm known," he explained as he walked across a large room, which was lit by narrow windows covered with a clear substance which had to be glass. Storm had seen such windows before, but he always looked at them with a sense of amazement. The clansmen never used glass in such quantity as it didn't hold up to the sort of lives they led.

The room itself had furniture of a type too heavy for use by any clan. The pieces stood near the walls, chairs and odd multiseat chairs that were big enough for more than one person to sit on filled most of the room. Amid the odd seating stood solid tables about knee high formed of flat planks. They appeared to be formed of the same type of wood used for the door.

The floors and walls of the room were decorated with rugs in the bright geometric designs common to the clans.

“Jonah?” Storm called as he reached a divider which split the big room into two uneven pieces and formed a narrow portion that denied access to the area beyond. “Hello, Jonah, are you back there?”

A man a few years older than Storm came out of the back. He had the dark hair and pale skin typical of most of the City folk. He opened a door in the divider and came into the room, a grin curled his lips when he saw them. “Stormdragon! Welcome! I didn’t think I’d see you this year, it’s gotten so late in the season. What will you be needing this year, my friend?”

Storm clasped Jonah’s forearm in the manner of clansmen. “Jonah, it’s good to see you.”

He released the City man’s forearm and put his arm around Flame, paused but pushed on with the news. “Sandrunner is dead. He was killed by my brother, Dragonwind. This is my new swordbrother, Flamespirit. He saved my worthless hide after I was bitten by a dustdelver. He’s since shown a total lack of sense and bonded with me.”

The man’s smile faded at the news of Sandrunner’s death, but it quickly returned at

the mention that Flamespirit was Storm's new swordbrother.

"We're co-Chiefs of the Dragon and Fenyx clan, and we're in need of one of your bigger houses to hold all of us."

Jonah nodded. "I've got just the thing. The biggest house on my street. It can hold a good sized clan." He reached under the counter and picked up a small box. "I've got the key. I'll take you to the house and let you in, once we've sealed the price."

Storm reached into his pocket and pulled out two of the small sunstones he'd made earlier. "Will these do for a stay of four days?"

"Those, my friend, will get you an entire sevenday." Jonah took a metal box out from beneath the cabinet and opened it, holding the box out for Storm to put the sunstones inside.

Storm took the box from the City man and put the sunstones into it and shut the lid, turning the small locking mechanism. "Safely put away so you need not handle them."

"I thank you. Now let's get your people into the house so you can rest and clean up."

Storm motioned to Flame and they followed Jonah out onto the street where they mounted their cycles and, with Jonah riding behind Storm, they headed to their temporary home which turned out to be a huge building with a riot of flowers and greenery surrounding it, with more crowning the rooftop.

“How is this?” Jonah asked.

“I think we can live with it,” Storm replied, smiling at the rental house merchant.

## Chapter Four

### *Love and Laughter*

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Flame was hard put to get over his awe of Colbyville's huge buildings and massive pieces of furniture. The house Stormdragon rented for them was just as enormous as everything else, there was even a huge covered area at the back where they could store their cycles, bikes and sleds. While they were far from being the size of an average tribe, it amazed him how much room remained in the storage area. They could have gotten three or four wagons into the place and still had room left.

The bed in the room he shared with Storm was also somewhat scary. For a start it was raised way above the floor at a height he wasn't used to sleeping at and he was nervous about falling off it in the night.

In the main room they all shared there was a contraption attached to a pipe which, when turned, gave them clean water for drinking and cooking. The children thought it was great fun to turn the handle on and off, but it simply made

Flame think about his sister and how he could possibly find her in this large place.

Storm entered their room, hair dripping from his a turn in the bathing chamber. The subtle scent of growing things came from his skin as he dried his hair with a fluffy towel. "I feel better for having gotten the dust and sweat off of me."

Flame smiled but it felt like he'd plastered the expression on rather than it being real. "I keep thinking that all these things like bathing chambers and the water in the main room are only there because of the sweat and toil of enslaved watermages."

Storm's smile vanished. "You're right." He dropped the towel and moved to where Flame stood. His arms went around Flame and pulled him into an embrace, hands rubbing along Flame's back. "We're going to find her and buy her out of slavery, I promise. We've paid for a week, and if we have to, I'll buy more time in the house for us so we can keep looking until we find her."

Flame burrowed into the caress, taking in Storm's own unique scent under the plant aroma. "I don't see how we can in this huge place, Storm."

I know I'm naïve in the ways of the world and this is my first visit here but... I'm afraid."

Storm tightened his embrace, his hand going to the nape of Flame's neck to pull his face closer until Flame found his nose pressed into Storm's fragrant hair. "Don't be afraid, Flame," his lover murmured. "I'm here with you and this place doesn't frighten me. I'll keep you and everyone safe, and we'll find your sister too and get her out of here."

Storm let Flame's head go and kissed him tenderly. He leaned away to look into Flame's eyes. "I *promise you we will* find Oasis. I have numerous acquaintances in the City and some actual friends too, like Jonah. Someone will know where she is. Once we know who holds her enslaved we'll buy her out of servitude. Everything will be fine, you'll see."

Storm smiled. Love and confidence filled his gold-rimmed aqua gaze as he ran his fingers through Flame's hair. He kissed Flame and said, "Since she's got fire colored hair like yours she's not going to be hard to find. Not many people anywhere have hair like yours."

Flame clung to Storm and murmured, "It's



not just finding Oasis that bothers me. It's that damned bed."

Storm blinked then frowned, staring at Flame with a puzzled expression he asked, "The bed? What's wrong with the bed?" He turned his regard on the massive piece of furniture then returned his gaze on Flame. His lover was plainly unable to figure out the problem.

Flame sighed, feeling even more stupid over the bed. "It's so high! Hasn't any clansman or woman fallen off one of those things?"

Storm actually laughed at his question, as he hugged Flame close. "My poor love, scared of being so high off the ground." He shook his head, the damp tendrils brushing across Flame's cheek. "You're just as far off the ground on a City built bed as you are on your cycle. I haven't heard you say you're afraid of falling off it, and at least the bed isn't moving. I can personally attest to the fact falling off a moving cycle hurts a lot worse than falling off a stationary bed would."

Flame blushed and hung his head. "I don't actually sleep on my cycle but you're right to laugh at my fears. I should have been allowed to

come to the City years ago so I could get used to it. Now I just feel like an idiot.”

Storm shook his head, his arms tightening around Flame in a reassuring hug. “You’re not an idiot, Flame. The City is totally alien to your experience. Don’t think you’re being foolish because you feel out of place or nervous.”

Storm gave a chuckle. “I’ve been coming here since I was ten years old, and my first night here I didn’t sleep a single minute. There were too many weird sounds and the place smelled strange. So did the bed. No furs, just the odd cloth blankets. How’s a boy supposed to sleep without furs over his bed?” Storm laughed again. “You’d have laughed if you saw me.”

He hugged Flame again and continued with his story, “There were strange shadows dancing on the walls. Those turned out to be the plants outside the window moving in the breeze and casting shadows in the moonlight. The City is a very strange place to any clansperson, and it takes everyone, even grown men, time to get used to it.”

Flame hugged him in return and kissed Storm for good measure. “Thank you, Storm. I feel

better now though I will admit I'm looking forward to leaving here and going back to what I know."

"You and me both." Storm reached for the clothes he had laid out on the bed. "The sooner we get done with our business and find Oasis, the better. I don't want to get caught here for Storm Season if we can avoid it."

"Wait, Storm." Flame grabbed his lover's outstretched hand then blushed again. "It's been a while since we were able to... to reaffirm our bond."

Storm grinned, tossed his clothes aside and swept Flame into his arms to deposit him on the bed. "Oh I understand it now. You aren't afraid of the bed. You were looking for an excuse to try it out. I see how your nefarious plan works." He all but pounced on Flame, his mouth closing over Flame's for a searing kiss.

Flame smiled inwardly as he returned the kiss. It was just like Storm to pretend Flame's fears were a scheme so as not to belittle him. It was the last coherent thought he had while his lover gave him such a scorching kiss his entire body tingled. His arms wrapped round Storm's neck and he

clung to the other man, enjoying the sensations the kiss awakened in his body. His entire being, body and soul came achingly alive with the touch of his lover's kiss. The way Storm held him close caused odd sensations to course through his body. He wanted... something from Storm. Something he had no name for, no manner in which to describe the need filling him. Ripples of light, like tiny tongues of flame danced along his body as the kiss continued. Tiny ribbons of blue and aqua fluttered over his skin, tickling, teasing him with the kiss of Storm's wind magic.

Storm ended their kiss, his aqua gaze hot with desire. Flame could feel something hard and warm pressed to his thigh. Storm braced himself above Flame on his hands and knees and gazed down at him. "Don't you think you might be a just a tad over dressed for the occasion?" he asked. A perfectly wicked smile gave a sexy curve to his lover's mouth.

Flame smirked at him. "It's very difficult to remove clothing when being tossed onto beds and kissed. But as you're being nice to me I'll consider undressing, unless you'd like to do it."

The wicked smile transformed to a downright

evil grin. His lover gripped his vest and hauled him to a sitting position. Still favoring him with that too sexy look, Storm stripped Flame's vest off and tossed it aside.

He lowered his head until his lips brushed Flame's ear. He whispered, "Do you know what I'm going to do with you, once you're naked?"

Flame tipped his head to one side and pretended to think about Storm's question. Then he smiled as he thought about what he wanted. "At a guess I'd say you're going to kiss every inch of my body."

"And I repeat, you're over dressed for the occasion." Storm gripped Flame's shirt and tugged it off over his head without even bothering to unlace it. The shirt too went sailing across the room and vanished behind a piece of the furniture.

Storm grinned. "Look what I found, some nice kissable skin," Storm murmured huskily, voice tight with lust. He pushed Flame down on the bed and set his mouth to Flame's pale flesh, starting at the point beneath his ear and working his way downward. The kisses turned to gentle

nips, which alternated as Storm worked his way along Flame's neck and shoulders.

Lazy spirals of magical energy drifted away from the tattoos on their arms and shoulders, the golden shades of Flame's fire magic mingling with the blue of Storm's windmage powers.

Flame writhed and squirmed as Storm's lips traveled over his neck, throat and chest. His cock sprang up and his pants became uncomfortably tight. "Storm... not... naked," he gasped out.

Storm stopped his assault. "No you aren't are you? I guess we should get you out of these too." Storm unlaced Flame's pants and tugged them off. "Will you look at that? I've found more skin," he remarked and lowered his head to kiss Flame's belly and thighs, ignoring the rigid shaft of Flame's aching cock.

Flame squirmed some more, trying his hardest to get his cock near Storm's clever, teasing mouth. The cool touch of Storm's magic drifted across his skin, sank into him, increasing his need, increasing the want.

The kisses stopped as Storm sat back on his heels. "Was there something specific you wanted,

Flame?" he asked in an innocent tone belied by the smirk on his lips.

Flame glared at his swordbrother, torn between kissing him breathless and punching him in the mouth. "You're such a tease! Please Storm, I'm aching for you."

"Could have fooled me," Storm commented with a teasing smile. A tiny flicker of golden fire slid over Storm's skin, and the man shuddered at its touch. "I mean it's not as if you've grabbed me and thrown me down on the bed, or kissed me breathless."

Flame's eyes widened. He was both shocked and surprised as he was under the impression that Storm preferred to take the lead in their love making. He growled suddenly and sat up, pushing Storm backwards as he did so. *This was what I wanted. This is the thing I desired*, he realized as he climbed over Storm and kissed him, claming his mouth. Flame's tongue slipped inside, conquering Storm's mouth before moving to his neck, his throat and chest, taking the same route Storm had taken over his body.

Storm groaned and gasped as Flame continued his kisses. A hand closed in the hair at the nape

of Flame's neck, Storm's other hand caressing across his shoulder, fingers exploring the muscles of his back. "I love you, Flame."

Flame smiled as he kissed Storm's belly and thighs and left his cock strictly alone.

A soft groan followed by a sound closer to a growl vibrated through Storm.

Hands closed on Flame, flipping him off of Storm. He landed on the bed face down, Storm pinning him, that growl of sound filling his ear.

The tip of Storm's tongue followed the curve of his ear, dampening it, making goosebumps rise on his skin.

"Someone wants a spanking," Storm whispered, his warm breath tickling through the strands of hair. It sent another chill racing along Flame's body.

"Yes," Flame said, "you do!" Then he chuckled low in his throat. "But I'll let you off - this time."

A chuckle rumbled in his ear. "Will you now?" Storm asked. His lover's hand slid along Flame's ribs, moving downward to his hip before



it cupped his left butt cheek, the fingers kneaded the muscle.

The teasing whisper returned to tickle the nape of Flame's neck. "Such a nice behind, maybe I *should* spank it. I bet it turns a spectacular shade of red." His lover's lips brushed the curve of Flame's ear, the tip of Storm's tongue sliding along the curve again. More teasing that made Flame's balls ache and his cock throb with an intense need for what his lover could give him. Pleasure culminating in a spectacular release that would leave his body thrumming from the aftermath of being fucked.

Flame shuddered and groaned softly, both the action of Storm's tongue and his words having a profound effect on him. The touch of their mingled magic drifting across his body, added another layer to the sensation and added fuel to his curiosity. *Do I really want him to spank me? Is that normal amongst swordbrothers?*

He had no experience to call upon to help him in this situation. *Go with your instincts then.*

He bucked suddenly, trying to dislodge Storm. *Maybe that'll get me a spanking.*



Storm barely kept himself from falling off the bed as Flame's action caused him to lose his balance. *Figures, I tell Flame not to worry about falling off this thing then I almost do it.*

*I can take the hint though. He wants a spanking so he's going to get one.*

"Someone's being a very naughty boy," he told Flame. He swung his hand and brought it down on in a stinging smack on his lover's behind.

Flame gasped and turned his head to gaze at Storm with wide eyes. "It actually feels good."

"Good." Storm nodded in satisfaction and admired the bright red handprint he'd left on Flame's bottom. It was every bit as colorful as he'd expected it to be on such pale skin. Pleased with the results he added a second mark beside the first one. "Such a pretty pattern," he commented. Lust burned through his veins, his cock throbbing, body hot with desire. He added a print to Flame's other asscheek.

Flame gasped and writhed under him.

*I can't believe he's mine. My swordbrother. He's*

*so beautiful. So cute and so damn fuckable it's hard for me to keep my hands off of him.* He smirked to himself. *And the best thing is I don't have to keep my hands off of him.*

He lowered his head and kissed the heated skin, laving it with his tongue. Beneath him Flame cried out, wordlessly begging for more.

Storm swatted Flame's behind, left cheek then right, a few times, pleased at how his lover's face flushed, the color rising there as bright as the color Storm's spanking had created on his swordbrother's behind.

Satisfied with what he'd done to Flame's behind, Storm flipped his lover over and pinned him to the bed with his arms over his head. He gazed at Flame's flushed cheeks and moist, inviting lips. Lust thrummed through him with every beat of his heart as he gazed upon his lover. He wanted Flame. Wanted to fuck him until they both screamed out their passion. He restrained himself, denying his desire. There were other things besides the hot clasp of flesh around flesh which could bring pleasure to them both. *But by all the gods I want to be in him, I want to fuck him and watch the fuckblush brighten his cheeks.*

He leaned down to claim Flame's mouth for a hungry, possessive kiss.

Flame's arms wrapped around his neck as he returned Storm's kiss with passion and a hunger to match his own.

Drifting threads and streamers of magical power danced around them, wafting across them, sending a shudder through Storm, wresting a soft moan from Flame.

Storm ended the kiss, both of them gasping for air, seething energies spinning in a wild tornado of magic around them. He ran his fingers through Flame's hair, watching as the flickers of fire danced over his hands. Warmth spread through him, the glow of their bond fueling his desire, his love for the man in his embrace. He stared into Flame's passion heated brown eyes. "I'm going to fuck you until you beg for mercy," he murmured. "I'm going to pound my cock into you until you're whimpering for release."

The brown eyes widened but there was no fear in Flame's expression, nor any anger. His cheeks were flushed with desire. "I love you, Storm," he whispered.

Storm grinned. "What no begging for mercy, no pleas for me to be kind? No defiant arguments about how you don't beg?" Storm chuckled and shook his head. "How am I supposed to maintain my illusion of being the dominant partner in our relationship when you won't play by the rules?"

Flame's delightful blush appeared again. "I'm sorry, Storm, I didn't realize there were rules involved."

Storm sat back and gave Flame a stern look. "*Of course* there are *rules!* *Everything* has rules!" He smirked, and had to stop himself from bursting out with laughter. Flame took everything so very seriously, and now wasn't an exception.

Flame frowned at him. "You're teasing me again, aren't you? I can't help not knowing these things!" He was silent for a moment before he chuckled. "Look on it this way, because of my profound ignorance, you can mould me into whatever you want."

Storm's smile faded. "But you're already everything I could want, Flame." He pulled his lover into his arms and held him close, kissed his mouth, his cheeks, moved to his throat. "You're my swordbrother, Flame, and I love you."

Flame gave him a hurt look. “Why do I get the feeling I’ve broken one of those unspoken rules again?”

Storm shook his head. “That’s just it, Flame, there aren’t any rules. I was teasing you.” He slipped his fingers through Flame’s silken hair, the flickers of his lover’s power shimmering amid the fiery color. He and kissed Flame again, their tongues sparred in a gentle battle of love. Storm ended their kiss, smiled and said, “Okay, maybe there *are* a *few* rules. When someone says they love you, you should always tell them that you love them too.”

Flame sighed, a frustrated little sound. “I’ve got so much to learn about everything, Storm. I love you dearly but I’m not sure that I’m experienced enough for you. Please be patient with my stupidity.” He buried his head against Storm’s shoulder for a second or two before giving him a tender kiss.

Frowning Storm gripped Flame’s shoulders, pushed him away and gave him a little shake. “Stop *it*, Flame. There aren’t *any* rules between lovers. Really there aren’t. And you *are not* stupid.” He shook his head and grinned. “All

right, maybe you *are* a little stupid for taking me as your swordbrother, but it's not your fault. I'm so damn handsome you didn't want to let me go." He was teasing Flame, he hoped the younger man would realize it.

Flame's dark eyes widened then he chuckled. "Oh I *do* love you, Storm," he said and hooked his legs round Storm's waist. "Now, what were you saying about making me beg for mercy?"

"Oh yeah, that," Storm replied as he reached for the bottle of oil he'd hidden under the pillows a few minutes after they'd arrived in the house. He'd been planning on making love with Flame for hours before they'd arrived at the City. In fact, for several hours of their trip that had been all he'd thought about. Getting Flame in bed, and his cock inside of Flame. He'd had to think about something else, because the desire had gotten so strong he'd almost called a stop to indulge his lust.

*Being a chief of a clan does have its drawbacks. You can't just stop to make love anytime you feel like it, for instance.*

"Give me your hand," he instructed, Flame.

Flame obediently held out his right hand.

*I've never wanted anyone to submit to me before, but Flame is bringing out feelings and desires Sandrunner never awakened in me. Maybe it's because he's so innocent. Or maybe it's because I'm not innocent anymore. Either way, spanking him was a lot of fun. We're going to have to do that again. I might even let him give it a try with my behind. It could be fun.*

Storm poured oil into his lover's palm, capped the bottle and set it aside on the table beside the bed. "Can you guess where the oil goes now?"

Flame smiled. "I think I've learned that much." He rubbed his palms together, spreading and warming the oil before reaching for Storm's erect cock.

Storm sighed as Flame's hands closed on his erection. He kissed Flame, enjoying the feel of his lover's hands on his aching cock. *He's so beautiful, and I can't believe he's mine. I keep thinking I'm going to wake up some morning and find out this has been a dream.*

Flame returned the kiss as he spread the oil evenly. He broke away to say, "I want you



Storm, I really *do* want you. I love you so much it hurts.”

Storm gazed into Flame’s dark eyes, seeing love and lust mingled in their depths. “I love you too, Flame. And I sort of figured out you wanted me as much as I want you because of this,” he said as he took Flame’s erection into his hand and stroked it gently.

Flame groaned and arched into the touch as the magic arose around them, the heat of passion dancing around them as streamers of wind and bright motes of fire.

Above them the Dragon and the Fenyx flickered in and out of visibility, their emotions not yet to the heightened stage where the Immortal Beasts would fully manifest.

“Tell me what you want,” Storm urged as he continued to caress Flame’s erection, his mouth roaming along his lover’s shoulder in light, kisses intended to tease and arouse Flame even further.

Flame stroked the slick surface of Storm’s erection, the sensation bringing Storm closer to

losing control and shoving Flame onto the bed so he could fuck him. “I want this inside me.”

His lover’s words didn’t help, and Storm’s throat tightened, his voice coming out in a growl as he replied, “Then I guess you should turn around and kneel.”

Flame nodded and let go of Storm’s erection before he turned around and knelt on all fours. “Like this?”

Storm nodded, his eyes focused on Flame’s firm behind. He swatted it to brighten the lingering redness. “Oh yes, that’s definitely it.” He ran his hands over Flame’s butt, caressed his lover’s bottom, feeling the heat from his swats. He smacked again, turning the left then the right cheek a bright red. Still grinning he lowered his head and licked the reddened areas he’d made.

Flame shuddered and moaned but the sound wasn’t one of pain. “You like doing that, don’t you?”

Instead of replying with words, Storm blew over the dampened skin, smirking when Flame shuddered, goosebumps rising on his pale skin.

“Yeah, you like it,” Flame said decisively. “But I still want you inside me.”

Storm patted Flame’s nicely presented ass, taking a moment to admire his handiwork. He liked the way Flame’s butt looked with his hand prints on them. “So impatient. One of these days I’ll get to take my time with you.” *Even if I have to tie you to something to get it*, he mused. Storm positioned himself behind Flame and nudged the tight ring of his lover’s anus with the head of his cock.

“I’m impatient because it’s been too long,” Flame said. “Next time you can take as long as you like.”

“I’ll take that as a promise,” Storm remarked. He eased his slick cock into Flame’s awaiting heat, a soft groan of pleasure came from his parted lips as his lover’s body embraced the hardened flesh of his cock. “This feels so good, Flame.”

Flame sighed softly and pushed his hips back, helping to take Storm even further into his body as Storm gripped Flame’s hips. He paused, unwilling to begin thrusting because he didn’t want to lose control and turn this into a session which ended before he’d gotten a good start. He

leaned down and kissed Flame's shoulder, then he started to move, his cock slipping out then sinking inward. The sensation was bliss.

The swirls of magical power around them brightened, spun faster as he continued to fuck Flame's tight hole. He smacked Flame's hip and felt his lover jump at the combined sensations of a cock pleasuring him and a hand giving him a taste of pain.

Flame moaned. "Oh gods, Storm, yes! Feels so good."

Flame's words urged Storm to greater effort, and he thrust faster, enjoying the soft sounds of pleasure coming from his lover. The energies swirling around them thickened, the pair of Immortal Beasts manifesting, their outlines hazy at first, but strengthening as the pleasure they were sharing built.

Flame stopped speaking, instead he gave little gasps and groans as his hands fisted in the bedcovers.

"The problem here," Storm gasped out, "is that you're so fucking hot, I can't make this last as long as I want it too." He held tight to Flame's hips,

fingers digging into his lover's pale skin. Storm's hips moved faster driving his cock harder and deeper into his lover's clenching heat.

Above them the Dragon took the Fenyx, the bird clutched in the Dragon's talons, beak wide and gasping, wings fluttering amid an inferno of gold and red flames. A whirlwind spun around the two men, embers of a firemage's power burning amid the wind which fluttered the bedcovers and sent their clothing rolling across the floor.

Flame gasped out Storm's name.

Storm gasped and shuddered at the sensations filling his body. The intense pleasure numbed his mind until he lost awareness of anything but the tightness of Flame's flesh grasping his erection.

Flame lifted one hand from the bed and gripped his erect and weeping cock.

Storm let go of his lover's hip and closed his fist around Flame's hand, helping Flame stroke his hardened flesh. Flickers of fire danced along Flame's body, licked across Storm's skin. The windmage groaned, his grip around Flame's

hand tightening, The motion of their locked hands sped up.

“I want you to come,” Storm gasped out, his own body teetering on the precipice, ready to fall over the edge into orgasm. The wind tugged at his hair, whipped Flame’s red hair until the flames crackling through it became a streamer of bright, dancing embers in the air. Above them the Dragon and the Fenyx mimicked their every move. The spinning energies of their unleashed magic lashed the walls of the room, the wind singing through the heavy framework of the furniture.

Flame’s breath came in short, hard gasps. “It’s close... just a little more. Ah!” Flame spurted his seed over their hands and the bed.

Storm’s entire body tensed. He cried out and spent himself in Flame’s body, his free hand wrapping around Flame’s waist as he bent over him and kissed the nape of his neck. “Love you,” he gasped, breathless and sated. The magical torrent subsided, the wind dying, the dance of the embers on the air vanished into nothingness.

Flame’s head drooped between his rigid arms as he gasped in air. “I love you too.”

Storm rolled his lover over onto his back and sank down beside him. “So much for that bath I took,” he remarked as the Dragon and Fenyx faded from sight.

Flame chuckled. “Is there enough room for both of us in the bath?”

“If we’re really friendly, which, all things considered, isn’t a problem.” Storm laughed. “Unless you’re suddenly going to go all shy on me.”

Flame gave him a look. “I might blush a lot but I’m not likely to go shy on you.”

“I like it when you blush,” Storm said as he lifted himself up to kiss Flame.

He ended the kiss, smiled at Flame and told him, “Come on, let’s get cleaned up and get busy. We don’t have a lot of time before Storm Season hits and we’ve got to find your sister, get a wagon and buy food *and* a cavern system to hold us before it does.”

## Chapter Five

### *Market Square*

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The street they traversed opened out into a huge square, large enough to take a whole Gather of clans and still have some room left. A fountain threw water in many different patterns in the centre and all around it there were the brightly colored awnings of hundreds of stalls. These stalls were selling everything Flame could possibly think of and a lot of things he had no name for at all. He tapped Storm's broad back. "Don't let me get lost in this crowd. Maybe if we get separated we should agree to meet at that waste of water in the middle."

"Good plan, if we get separated we'll meet at the fountain," Storm agreed as he pushed his way through the throng toward the wagonmaker's booth.

"I hope Goldstone and Heartfire are successful in their ventures. We need that flour, jam and soap for the Storm Season."

Storm glanced behind them wondering where



Greycloud had gone. “Do you see Greycloud? He was supposed to help us pick out the wagon.”

Flame glanced around but could see no sign of their clansman in the throng. The man he *did* see made his eyes widen in shock. “I’ve just either seen Darksy or his ghost,” he said, “but not Greycloud.”

“Darksy? You mean Darksy the outlaw?” Storm asked, turning to try and spot the notorious outlaw. “He’s from your former clan too, isn’t he?”

Flame nodded. “He was the only one who was good to Oasis and I. He fought his brother, for which I can’t blame him, and was declared outlaw.”

Storm was watching the tall, dark-skinned man. Flame found himself wondering if he was mistaken after all the years that had passed since his childhood. “I’m almost certain it’s him.”

The man was tall even by the standards of the clans, which meant standing near the City people he towered over them. His hair was a black tangle of dreadlocks which framed a very handsome, strong featured face. His dark eyes

flashed with the pridefulness of a lion, yet when he looked on the small blond at his side his gaze softened with the warmth of love.

The blond with him was smaller, but he was by no means a small man. Standing beside the darbear of a man, he seemed almost fragile, though it was an illusion, there was nothing fragile about the slender blond.

Storm nudged him. "We need to find Greycloud before we barter for a wagon. I want to be certain he can drive it. Let's look for him and, perhaps, see if this man is who you think he is," Storm suggested.

Flame glanced around again and smiled as he spotted Greycloud threading his way through the crowd. "He's on his way. Must have got sidetracked by something."

"Probably a pretty girl," his lover remarked, and turned a grin on Flame. "If I were so inclined I'd have wandered off myself."

Flame's brows rose. "You mean you're not so inclined?"

Storm's arm went around Flame's waist. "I've got everything I want right here."

Greycloud reached them through the press of people. "Sorry, I saw a warcycle and I had to look at it. When I stopped looking at it you were both gone." He glanced around. "I've never seen it this busy, and I've been here several times."

Storm nodded his agreement and said, "You're right. There are a lot more people here than usual. Must be the aftermath of the early blackstorm, it's got people talking about an early and longer than usual Storm Season."

Flame glanced at his lover but didn't say anything about his worries over finding a suitable cave system in front of Greycloud. "Okay let's look at the wagons."

Greycloud followed them to the wagonmaker's booth. five types of wagon models were on display atop the counter. The booth itself was much too small to contain full sized versions of the wagons.

Storm glanced at Greycloud. "What do you think? Could you drive any of these?"

Greycloud didn't get a chance to reply, the man behind the counter coming forward. "Good afternoon, clansmen!" he said loudly. "If you're

looking for the finest in clan wagons, you've come to the right place."

Greycloud studied the models while Flame said, "Good afternoon," to the wagonmaker. Greycloud smiled at Storm. "Any of these, yes," he said.

"It will depend on the price, and what Greycloud is *sure* he can drive. He's the only one among us who knows how to drive a wagon."

The wagonmaker's smile faded at Storm's mention of their purchase being dependant on price. His gaze turned critical, the man's dark eyes looking the three of them up and down. "My wagons don't come cheap. If you want a bargain, go barter for a used one. They're on the other end of the market near the beast pens."

Another clansman approached the wagonmaker's booth, and the man quickly moved to greet him. "It's good to see you, Chief Windbender. How is Bluesky Clan doing these days?"

"Good enough," the tall clan chief replied. "But I do believe these young men were here first."

Flame stared at the wagonmaker, wondering if all City people were so rude.

Greycloud took another look at the models. He pointed one of them out to Storm. "The hitching mechanism on this one is probably the most practical. The others seem too ornate, more decoration than strength."

Storm nodded and smiled at the Bluesky Clan's chief. "I noticed. I suppose for some clans decoration is important, but we need practicality and the ability to carry a very heavy load."

The wagonmaker frowned at them. "My wagons *don't* come cheaply."

"What do you think, my swordbrother, do we buy here or keep looking?" Storm asked.

Flame smiled at the Clan chief before saying, "I'd prefer to deal with someone who knows more about the actual terrain a wagon has to cross rather than someone who adds useless decoration to push up the price. I think we take a look at the stall over there."

He pointed in the direction of another wagonmaker whose models looked more robust.

Greycloud's eyes gleamed. "Now that's more like it!"

The man in the booth gave them a dirty look.

Storm smiled. "Sorry, but being rude to potential customers does have consequences," he said and followed Greycloud and Flame to the other vendor.

"Greetings young men." The woman behind the counter fairly beamed at them as they came to a stop. "Oh, goodness, you two are so young to be Chiefs. Quite handsome too. What clan are you?" she asked.

She wasn't nearly as tall as most clanswomen, and her hair was a dull listless brown, but other wise she was attractive, despite the clashing bright blue and green clothing she wore.

Flame smiled at her. "Dragon and Fenyx clan," he told her. "We're looking for a sturdy wagon that Greycloud here can drive."

Greycloud inspected the models with a smile on his face. He pointed out two of them. "Either of these would be perfect for our needs, my Chiefs."

Storm nodded. “How much for this one?” Storm asked, indicating the larger of the two models.

“That’s our biggest, sturdiest rig,” she replied. “It’s pricey, but built for years of use and functionality, unlike those of a certain competitor of mine.”

“How much?” Storm repeated. “In firestones, for instance?”

“Firestones?” Her expression turned thoughtful. “About three or four hundred, but where would anyone get that many firestones?”

Flame chuckled softly. “I’m a firemage. How about we split the difference and I give you three hundred and fifty firestones?”

The woman’s mouth dropped open. “Three hundred and...” she stared at him, glanced at Storm, and held her hand out to Flame. “Take my hand on it and we’ll call it a deal.”

Storm smiled. “Sure, we can do that, unless you’d rather have fifty firestones and a warcycle grade sunstone.”

“You’re joking, right?”

Storm shook his head, his smile widening. “No.”

Flame leaned against his swordbrother and smirked at the woman. “Take your pick,” he suggested.

The woman smiled back at him. “I’ll take the mixture if you don’t mind. Fifty firestones and a warcycle grade sunstone. Actually no, make it forty firestones and the sunstone working in my cycle.”

A golden eyebrow lifted. “Well, Flame, what do you think? Does it sound like a good deal to you?” Storm asked.

Flame nodded. “Yes, it does and, as she’s giving us such a fair price I’m prepared to give fifty firestones rather than forty.”

The woman stared. “You don’t need to go that high. Forty firestones is fine.”

Flame shook his head at her. “I’ve got the whole Storm Season in which to replenish my stocks of firestones. Fifty and the fitted sunstone still seems like a good deal to me.”

Storm took the woman’s hand and shook it



in a gesture similar enough the one used by the clansmen sealing a deal. “Done.”

The woman smiled. “Your wagon will be ready for you when you leave Colbyville. I’ll bring my warcycle then for the fitting.”

“Good enough,” Storm replied. “We’re going to be here a few days, but we’ll give you warning the day before we’re going to depart.”

The woman nodded. “That will be perfect. Thank you for your custom and I hope to see you again next year if only to say hello.”

Flame smiled at her. “That shouldn’t be a problem at all.”

As they walked away from her stall he nudged Storm. “Pity they’re not all like her. Still, lord high and mighty over there seems very unhappy.”



Storm chuckled. “Oh yes he does, doesn’t he? Could be he noticed how quickly we made the deal with her which has left him wondering what young pups like us had to trade. I’m sure she’ll

tell him and gloat the whole time she's explaining to him we bartered with a sunstone and a pile of firestones."

Flame laughed out loud at Storm's words. "My heart bleeds for him. So what next?"

Storm paused, considering. Their biggest, most imperative purchase was over, but what would be considered another vital need? "Well Heartfire and Goldstone were going for the flour, jam and soap. Of course we could look for more food, or durable items like pots and knives. I heard one of the women, I can't remember her name, saying they came away from their camp with nothing to cook in and only one pitiful kitchen knife."

Flame nodded. "It stands to reason they left things behind. They had to leave in a hurry after all. Now I have more varied ingredients to cook with, I could do with some new pots and pans also. With flour available a hearth cake griddle would be useful too."

"You're right. We don't have one. In fact there are a lot of things we're going to need to get through Storm Season."

Storm patted Greycloud on the shoulder. "Do

you mind if we put you to use carrying purchases to the house and having you return for more? We can meet by the fountain. You can find out what everyone needs on the first trip back, that way we can get everything we need without exposing the women to this,” he gestured to the throngs of people around them, “bedlam.”

Greycloud nodded. “Of course, Chief Stormdragon. It will also save on duplicated purchases.”

Flame smiled as he spotted some wooden toys with clever moving parts. “The children might like some of those.”

Storm turned to see what Flame was talking about. “You’re right. We should buy extra and keep them for the next Gather we go to, because I think they’d make great trade goods. Lots of clans don’t get to the City on a regular basis, and something like that will give good value.”

Putting an arm around Flame, Storm urged his lover toward the vendor’s booth. “Let’s see what sort of deal we can make on a small quantity of them.”

The toymaker was carving a piece of wood as

they approached. "Greetings, clansmen, how can I help you?"

"We were admiring your toys," Storm said. "We have a few children in our clan who might appreciate having new toys." He glanced at Flame, then pushed on with the start of the bargain. "What would, say, ten firestones bring us in trade?"

The toymaker's eyes widened. "Ten? Almost all my stock!" He leaned forward in a conspiratorial fashion. "A word to the wise, there's a severe shortage of firestones in the city this year. It seems the clansmen who can make them are in very short supply." He eyed them. "If any of your clan have that skill, don't let too many people know or they might be grabbed as a slave."

Flame stiffened under Storm's arm. "I see. Well we were lucky enough to come across a firemage at one of this year's Gathers. We got a good trade on a large number of his firestones and are now seeing what we can buy with them."

Storm gave him a reassuring but discrete hug. *He needn't worry about being taken as a slave. With his power and mine no one can hold us. I*

*think we've proven that already in Dragonwind's camp.*

"How long does it take you to make a toy like this?" Storm asked, picking up a jointed doll and turning it over in his hands. "We're interested in buying extra toys."

The toymaker leaned back and smiled. "It depends on the complexity of the toy. That doll, for example, takes me about four or five hours to carve and put together and my wife about two hours to make the clothes."

"We're going to be here a few days. If you'd make up as many toys as you can, we'd be happy to buy them before we leave." Storm held his hand out. "Agreed?"

The toymaker smiled and gripped the proffered hand. "Agreed, my friend. I'll have a good selection waiting for you."

"Excellent," Storm replied, sealing the deal by shaking the man's hand. He led flame and Greycloud away from the booth. "Now where?"

They needed so many things it left Storm wondering how long they would take to find

them. Then there was also the matter of trying to locate Flame's sister, Oasis to attempt.

"I think it's time we started making enquiries into the whereabouts of Oasis. We can work it into our barter conversations if we're careful," he suggested.

Flame started. "Are you sure that's wise after that talk of looking for fire mages to enslave?"

Storm gave him a blank look. "What does that have to do with trying to find your sister? It's not like we're going to tell people who, or what, you are while we're asking around."

Flame looked away. "Okay, my inexperience is obviously showing again, but I just don't trust these people."

"And you think I do?" Storm asked. "But if we don't ask, we're not going to find her."

Greycloud nudged Storm. "We're being watched by that tall clansman over there. He might be a slaver."

Storm glanced in the direction Greycloud indicated to find a very tall man with dark hair and unusually dark skin was watching them. At

his side was a slender blond with the distinctive green tattoos of a watermage.

“Darksky,” Storm remarked. “You were right, I think that is him, Flame. I wonder if he’s here to sell that watermage. I’ve heard he kidnaps clansmen to sell here in the City.”

Flame frowned. “If he does he must have changed a great deal from when I knew him.”

“People change, not always for the better. Maybe we can buy that mage from him before he can sell him,” Storm suggested.

Greycloud nodded with enthusiasm. “I bet he’d join our clan if we do!”

Flame was staring at the pair by now and nudged Storm as the watermage in question grabbed Darksky’s arm and pointed something out to him. “Those aren’t the actions of a captive.”

Storm studied the pair of men. “You’re right. They seem to be friends... or swordbrothers.”

Flame nodded. “I’d like to talk to Darksky if that’s okay.”

“All right,” Storm agreed. “We can go talk to him.”

*An outlaw who knows he's a firemage. I wonder how much of a risk we're taking. Oh well, we won't know the answer to that until we speak to him.*

The blond watermage glanced up as they approached and immediately put a hand on the hilt of his sword. Flame ignored him as he spoke to Darksky. “I doubt you’ll remember me, I was a child when you left, but I’m Flamespirit. You used to make toys for my sister and me.”

The outlaw regarded Flame, for a moment, then he smiled. “I remember a skinny boy and his scrawny sister. You’ve certainly grown up.” The man’s dark eyes searched the crowd. “Where is your sister, Oasis? How is she? Is married and raising children yet?”

The man turned to his companion. “Take it easy, Lakesinger, this is Flamespirit. He *was* part of Stone Clan.” The man’s gaze went to the mark on Flame’s forehead, his eyes showing surprise. “A clan Chief? I take it this man is your swordbrother then?” he asked, his gaze falling on Storm.



Storm nodded. "I'm Stormdragon of Dragon and Fenyx Clan." He held out his arm to the outlaw, offering the man a friendly greeting.

Darksky's grip on his forearm held power, not simply the power of the man's muscular body, but the tingle of a stonemage with an amazing amount of magical energy pent up within his towering frame.

Flame's eyes darkened at mention of his sister. "Stonefist sold her. She's somewhere in the City."

Darksky's eyes narrowed. "Then we must find her," he stated. The man turned to look at the blond by his side. "What chance have you of finding a very powerful watermage using your own abilities, Lake?"

Storm frowned. "Best not to display any overt magic in such a public place. City folk watch for such things and will try and enslave watermages, and firemages too. We were recently warned about the firemages. There's a shortage of firestones in the City," Storm explained.

Darksky nodded. "Good to know. Perhaps you should keep Flame somewhere safe out

of sight. Even the City folk know how to read tattoos.”

Storm’s eyes widened. “Dear ancestors, I didn’t think of that,” he said his gaze going to the bright gold and red designs covering Flame’s arms. “I’m such an idiot!”

Greycloud removed his jacket and offered it to Flame. “This will cover your tattoos my Chief.”

Flame took Greycloud’s jacket with a smile of thanks and put it round his shoulders effectively hiding his tattoos.

“Let us go to the City dwelling we’ve rented. I think we need to speak in private,” Storm urged, his gaze on the handsome outlaw and the pretty blond man at his side.

Darksky nodded. “I think you’re right. There are too many people here, and I think some of them have taken a keen interest in you, Chief Flamespirit.”

Flame sighed. “Damn! That means I’ll be stuck indoors for the rest of our stay in the City.”

Storm grinned. “Well you’ve got a lot of

firestones to make anyway,” he teased, and put his arm around Flame. “But if you wear a jacket from now on, it will help. To most City people we clansmen all look very much alike anyway.”

Storm glanced at Darksy. “Well most of us do,” he amended. “Some of us stand out more than others.”

Darksy indicated Flame’s bright hair. “He stands out too with that hair of his.”

“True,” Storm admitted, giving his co-Chief a hug.

Flame almost snarled at his swordbrother. “I am not intending to hide away the whole time we’re in the City.”

“Settle the hell down, Flame. I was joking,” Storm muttered. “Besides you were the one just complaining about being stuck indoors the rest of our time here, remember?”

Storm let Flame go and led the way from the market square, the five of them pressing their way through the thick crowds of people, finally escaping the busy area.

“As many times as I’ve come here,” Darksy

said, "I'll never get used to such crowds. It makes me long for the open spaces of the barrens."

"Isn't that the truth," Storm agreed as he paused to get his bearings. "And if you're not careful you'll get turned around and lose all sense of direction."

"Very true," Greycloud sighed. "I can't tell you the number of times I've gotten lost in this place."

Flame exchanged a look with the watermage who was close on Darksky's heels. "Your first visit too?"

The watermage nodded. "Yes, and although the goods for sale are interesting and useful, I'd be quite happy if it was my last."

Darksky put his arm around the blond's shoulders. "Well if you want that jam you like, and the soap, and the oil we use for our..." he grinned, "fun evenings, you'll have to get used to annual trips here."

Storm glanced at the tall, very dark man. *I can't believe we're actually walking in the company of the notorious outlaw, Darksky. I wonder if he's*

*really an outlaw or if he's like me, at odds with a brother?*

They reached the house they'd rented, the scent of flowers filling the air from the plants covering the roof and the narrow space between the surrounding houses.

"Here we are," he said.

Flame handed Greycloud his jacket. "Thank you. Could you ask if one of the women would be good enough to make some tea for us and our guests, please?"

Greycloud nodded. "Sure. Where are you going to be, up in your room or in one of the common areas?"

"The back garden seems a good choice," Storm said. "Let everyone know we have guests if you would, Greycloud."

"Of course my Chief," the young watermage agreed. "I'll see if there's food for you too, if you like."

"That's an excellent idea," Storm agreed. "It's this way, please." He indicated the hallway they should take to the garden with a gesture

to Darksy and his swordbrother and headed for the door they could see at the end of the corridor.

They came out into a greenery draped arbor where the scent of flowers was stronger. Some sort of fruit unknown in the barrens hung in clusters from the leafy vines over head.

Storm pulled a cluster down and offered it to Darksy and his lover. "They're called grapes. I understand from a friend of mine that these are what wine is made from here in the City."

Darksy smiled and nodded. "Yes, City made wine comes from these for the most part," he agreed as he took a few and gave Lakesinger a couple. "Watch out for the seeds," the man warned.

Storm offered the cluster of fruit to Flame. "Try them, they're really good."

Flame took a few of the grapes with a smile and popped one into his mouth. His smile turned into a grin. "You're right they're very good."

Lakesinger didn't appear to be so happy. "What am I supposed to do with the pips in my mouth?"

Darksky laughed. “Spit them out,” he instructed and showed his lover what to do by spitting the seeds into the nearest potted plant.

*The watermage is cute, but not as cute as my own Flame,* Storm mused.

“Sit and let’s talk,” Storm said indicating the wooden benches under the arbor. He took a seat and patted the spot next to him. “Come sit with me, Flame.”

Flame sat next to him, leaning against him slightly before drawing himself upright as befitted a Chief. He addressed Darksky. “Stonefist’s son finally saw sense when I left with Storm. He’s now in charge of Stone Clan but I think it’s already too late for them to survive. They have no strong mages of any type left.”

Darksky sat on the bench across from them, pulling Lake down beside him.

Darksky shrugged his broad shoulders, the movement drawing Storm’s gaze. He’d seen many clansmen during his life, but none as big as the man seated across from them. “None of my concern. They’ve set their course, and now they take the journey fate has put before them. I

long ago stopped caring about what happens to Stone clan.”

Storm sighed. “I wish I could say the same thing about the branch of Dragon Clan I came from.”

Darksky frowned. “Is it true Dragonwind has taken over as Chief?”

Storm nodded. “He had me driven out, then he had my father murdered to seal his place as Chief.”

“Unfortunate, but not unexpected,” Darksky’s deep voice rumbled. “I always knew foulness filled that one’s heart, even when he was a boy.”

Flame shifted. Opened his mouth, closed it again then spoke. “Do you believe the old legends about the immortal animal souls, Darksky? If you do you’ll know what I mean when I say Storm’s brother is a Black Fenyx.”

Across the way, Lake gasped. “How do you know?”

Flame looked to Storm and when he nodded, said, “I’ve seen it.”

“We both have,” Storm admitted.



Darksky's face twisted into a hard frown. "I noticed something strange about him when I last saw him, oh, about two years ago here in the City. He and his men were here with a batch of clanswomen and children. I offered to buy them and he refused. He told me he wouldn't sell women and children to a known outlaw.

"As if he's not an outlaw wearing the marks of a Chief. Those were his own people he sold. The women kept begging him not to sell them. His reply to all of the women he sold was he had no use for any female with no warriors to care for them. Dragonwind's a murderer, because he's the one that had their husbands killed."

"Dragonwind's only interested in his *own* welfare, he doesn't care about anyone who doesn't kiss his ass. And the minute someone no longer serves his purpose, he turns on them like a wounded darbear and gets rid of them," Storm stated, face contorted in lines of righteous anger.

Darksky nodded. "So I've heard."

"There's something else too," Flame stated, "something that makes him very difficult to deal with. A Fenyx has the gift of empathy.

Dragonwind also has that gift but it's warped. He can twist the emotions of his warriors until they are convinced he's right and everyone else wrong. On top of which, he's immortal."

"Well if that's true, and I'm not saying I believe you, not yet, then he can't be killed," Darksy remarked. "Which means he's going to continue to plague us for many years."

"And everyone else, too," Storm added. "He's not satisfied with being Chief of Dragon Clan, he wants to subjugate other clans and make them his also. I've heard him plotting how to do it, and it will tear the clans apart if he succeeds."

Darksy rubbed his chin. "So you are no longer part of Dragon Clan, yet you bear the mark of a clan Chief. I'm curious to know what clan you've taken over."

"None, we've made our own, Dragon and Fenyx Clan." Storm gave the outlaw a tight smile. "Some of Dragon Clan's former warriors have joined us."

Darksy nodded again. "I see." He glanced at the watermage beside him. "Clans need places to weather out the Storm Season."

Lakesinger grinned at him. “You’re the one who wants children underfoot.”

Storm regarded Darksy warily. “True enough. But why do you bring it up?”

Darksy glanced at his swordbrother. “What do you think, Lake, should I try and bargain us into a clan?”

Lake glanced at Storm and Flame as if attempting to sum them up. He turned back to Darksy. “While we’ve been together you’ve talked about the lack of a healer, the need to continue traditions and other stuff like that. We have to do everything ourselves and last time we went hunting you got poisoned so badly you thought our bond was broken.

“If we’d had a Clan behind us, you would have healed quicker. In fact we would have had back up when they tried to take you.”

He folded his arms over his chest. “I think you should bargain. Just don’t ever let my mother join us.”

“Ancestors forbid,” Darksy muttered. “I’d sooner have a pride of lions in my tent than that harridan.”

Storm wasn't entirely sure of some of the things the two men were talking about, but from the sound of it, they'd had as difficult a time as he and Flame had experience since becoming swordbrothers.

Greycloud and a couple of the women arrived with a small table, a tray with cups and a pot of tea. For a moment they were busy pouring and passing out cups. The three of them bowed and murmured, "My Chiefs," as they departed.

"So you're offering us what? A place of protection during the Storm Season, and in return we accept you into our clan?" Storm wasn't sure about striking such a bargain. He didn't know much about Darksky, other than the fact the man was considered a notorious outlaw among the clans. An outlaw who was known for selling clanspeople to the City. It wasn't the sort of reputation that made many friends among the clans, though the man probably knew a lot of people in the City. *He might be able to help us to find Oasis, but is having someone with his reputation in our clan worth his help to find her?*

Lake nodded and looked at Flame. "You knew him. You know he's not a bad man."

Flame frowned. "I know he made stone toys for me and my sister and I know his fight with Stonefist was both courageous and honorable. However, you have to remember I viewed all this through the eyes of a child."

Darksky put his arm around Lakesinger. "You've no reason to trust me. It's been years, but I swear to you, whatever I might have done in the past is over." He put his arm around Lakesinger, "I've got a swordbrother now, and I've changed because of it. So that's my offer. An entire canyon full of caverns, most of which have abundant water."

Storm stood. "Will you wait here while my co-Chief and I discuss your offer?"

Darksky nodded. "Of course."

"Let's go have a talk, Flame," Storm said and headed into the house. They needed a cavern to shelter in for the Storm Season, but did they want to give an outlaw like Darksky a place within their clan?

*I don't know if this is a good idea or not. He might not be the same man Flame knew as a child,*

*but I'd be willing to give him the benefit of the doubt if Flame's in favor of it.*

## Chapter Six

### *Compromise*

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Flame followed Storm into the house knowing that a lot would depend on what he had to say about Darksy. He let his mind drift back over the years, making sure that his memories weren't playing him false. It was important to weigh the reputation against what he actually knew of the man but he also knew just how difficult it was for two men to live in the wilderness alone. Storm and he had experienced it for themselves.

They needed a place for the Clan to spend the Storm Season and with Darksy being perhaps the best stonemage that had ever lived, he knew that the cavern system he'd mentioned would be far more than simply adequate. *Certainly better than anything we could find in the time we have left.*

He was so busy thinking that he bumped into Storm's back when his swordbrother came to a halt in their room. They wouldn't be disturbed here.

“In his own way, Darksy was treated as badly as you were.”

“Which doesn’t negate the fact he used to kidnap and sell clanspeople, watermages mostly, here in the City,” Storm countered. He sat down on the bed and looked up at Flame. “My question is, do we dare let a known outlaw into our tribe? This is Darksy, the most infamous outlaw to roam the barrens in generations.”

Flame nodded. “I know. He handled his bitterness badly, I agree, but when I look back all I see is the only member of Stone Clan that treated Oasis and me well. And we do need somewhere to spend Storm Season where your damned brother and his screwed up clan aren’t going to find us. If we go anywhere you know of, chances are he knows of it too. The only place I know is where Stone Clan holes up.”

“Which does us no good.” Storm sighed and ran his hand through his hair, his expression turned grim. “Staying here in the City is not an option either. It’s not the expense I worry about, I can make sunstones in plenty, but having so many will bring the sort of attention from the



people here we do not want which could lead to fighting and being enslaved.”

His lover turned an unhappy look to him. “Which means, regardless the problems it may cause, we’re going to have to take Darksky up on his offer, though, perhaps we can put a condition on it. We get the use of these caverns he knows, and we let them be clan so long as he doesn’t cause us any trouble.”

Flame stepped forward and hugged Storm. “I don’t believe he will, beloved. I think he has been very lonely in his long solitude and now he has a swordbrother he wants to protect him just as we wish to protect each other.

“He didn’t kill his brother yet I’d bet twenty firestones he’s had to pay bloodprice to any clan he’s ever traded with. If I’d been treated that badly, I’d want to get back at my fellow clansmen.”

“Finding a swordbrother can change a man.” He took Flame’s hand in his and brought it to his lips for a kiss. Still holding Flame’s hand Storm flopped backward onto the bed and lie there, staring at the ceiling.

“And I’m familiar with bad treatment too, Flame, so were you and you didn’t do the things he did. Neither of us turned to kidnapping, or murder either for that matter.”

“I worry what sort of trouble it will make for us. I’m as good as a declared outlaw myself, and I’m sure Dragonwind will spread lies and make me as infamous as Darksy himself is. That will be trouble enough and may cause us no end of misery at Gathers.”

Flame could understand those concerns. Gathers were an essential part of the Clans’ way of life. If they were unable to attend them due to Darksy’s presence in their midst they would have problems.

Dragonwind’s probable lies didn’t bother him so much. From what he saw and heard, the other Clans were becoming very wary of Dragon Clan and it’s Chief.

“No, I didn’t do what he did, but the temptation was there at times. You said it yourself, Storm, Dragonwind will spread lies about you. Who’s to say that lies haven’t been spread about Darksy? You met Stonefist, so

you know he'd be capable of it, just as he was when he lied about my sister."

Storm frowned. "But I don't think the stories about him kidnapping people are lies, Flame, which is why I hesitate to say yes. I've heard clan Chiefs say he's kidnapped their clansmen."

Flame thought long and hard about that. "They would be unlikely to lie about that," he agreed. "Perhaps we should ask Darksky why he did it."

"Fair enough," Storm replied. He rolled to his feet. "So let's go ask him."

Flame reached out and grabbed one of Storm's hands. "He doesn't *feel* evil, Storm, but let's see what he has to say first."

Storm's eyes widened. "I'd forgotten you can sense such things from other people, but yes, I would still like to speak with him about this. Selling other clansmen is... wrong in my eyes, though a great many clans do not see it that way." He scowled, "Both our former clans for instance."

Flame couldn't argue with that after what had happened to his sister. "You are better at

negotiation and drawing people out than I am. While you ask the questions you need answering I will read his emotions and then we can make a more informed choice.”

“Good enough,” Storm replied. He took Flame’s hand and together they returned to the garden where Darksy and Lakesinger awaited them.

Storm sat down on the bench. “We need to know something, Darksy.”

The man nodded. “All right.”

“Did you actually kidnap clanspeople and sell them here in the City,” Storm asked.

Darksy sighed, his lips twisting into a frown. “Yes, but I made it a point to take only men, and only when their being gone would be helpful to their clan.” He put an arm around his swordbrother. “But my days of culling the clans of their troublemakers is over. I’ve promised Lakesinger I won’t do it anymore.”

Lakesinger chuckled. “I was one of those very troublemakers, Dark.” He glanced up at Storm and Flame. “I can understand exactly why he thought my clan would be better off without me.

Even they had heard some ludicrous tales about him though.”

Flame thought about that. All he was reading from Darksy was earnestness and the desire to change mixed in with a fair bit of lust for his swordbrother. As well it was returned. He nodded to Storm, letting him know that Darksy was not lying.

“Can you give us a day to think it over?” Storm asked the older man.

Darksy nodded. “I understand it’s an important decision for you, so I don’t mind waiting. There wasn’t any reason for us to rent a house for the two of us, so we’re staying at one of the inns. It’s the Kettle and Keg. Do you know where it is?”

“I do,” Storm admitted and stood to let the men know they were done talking. “I’ll show you to the door.”

Flame remained where he was, deep in thought. *If Darksy only took men whose clans were glad to see go, wasn’t he doing those clans a favour? But then again, with the tales that had been spread about him, he could be a liability.*

*Still, it must be hard for him and Lakesinger to exist without any backup of any kind. No healer, no clansmen to hunt with, no women to make tea and cook if they needed a break.*

Realizing his thoughts were going round in circles, Flame sighed and entered the house. He felt the desire to see and hear the Clan around him.

Greycloud was showing one of Heartfire's young children how to braid cord into a strong rope, some of the women were sewing, and he could smell the rich odor of stew cooking and hear the other women talking in the kitchen.

Flame drank in the sights, smells and sounds and smiled.

Watersong's little daughter tripped and fell, grazing her knees and Flame quickly scooped her up and sat her on his lap. He pulled his soul ball out of its pouch and held it up so she could see. "Do you know what this is?"

The girl's tears stopped and she shook her head as she gazed at the ball.

"This is going to make the hurt go away," Flame told her.

Her eyes went round with wonder as he ran the soul ball above her knees and the grazes closed up.

“There, is that better?”

She smiled, nodded, put her arms round his neck and planted a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you, Chief Flamespirit.” She slid off his lap and ran off to resume her game with the other children.

When Flame took notice of his surroundings again he discovered Storm watching him, an odd, bemused smile curling his lips.

He raised a brow. “Is something wrong?”

Storm shook his head. The smile widened, his eyes full of love. “Not a thing, beloved.”

Flame returned the smile and stood up. He tucked his soul ball back in its pouch. “So, what do you want to do now?”

The children ran past them their laughter and shouts. The noise was joyful, filled with the carefree happiness only childhood seemed to offer. *Too bad our childhood was spoiled by the loss*

*of our parents. Oasis and I didn't get to play the way most children did..*

“Heartfire hasn't come back, so I thought we might go out and look for him, see how he's faring and bring the things he's bought back here if there's a lot,” Storm suggested. “Unless you would rather stay here, Flame. I know the crowds bothered you.”

Greycloud looked up from what he was doing. “I'd be happy to go with you, or I could go alone if you'd rather stay here away from the crowds, my Chiefs. I know I know Chief Flamespirit doesn't like being in the middle of that mess,” he remarked, and gave Flame a smile. “It actually doesn't bother me. Well not *too* much.”

Flame gave Greycloud a quick smile. “I'll go. I need to get used to the crowds, otherwise I won't be much good when it comes to offering my services as a healer. I'd better get my jacket first though. No sense showing off my tattoos when they could bring unwanted attention.”

“We'll wait here,” Storm told him. “If I go with you we might be delayed.”

Greycloud blushed and made a point of



turning his attention elsewhere which brought a flush of embarrassment to Flame's face. The other man must have heard them making love before or he wouldn't have reacted to Storm's remark.

Heart racing at the memory of Storm's kisses and his touch, Flame went up to the room he shared with Storm and collected his jacket. He put it on as he returned to the main room. He arrived to hear Storm say: "I'd rather have you here to help protect the women and children, Greycloud. Keeping them safe is more important than finding soap and jam."

"I guess," the younger man replied with a sigh of disappointment.

Storm patted his shoulder. "We'll be here a few more days at least, so you'll get another change to go out and look around."

Greycloud nodded, still disheartened. "There are so many clansmen here I'd hoped for a chance to search out a swordbrother."

Flame frowned as he remembered how it felt to be without a swordbrother. "I can stay here if you really want to go, Greycloud."

"Let's compromise," Storm suggested. "We'll

go out now, and you can go out with us tomorrow and Heartfire can stay to guard the women.”

“Thank you, my Chief. I accept the compromise you’ve offered,” Greycloud replied. He smiled and went back to what he’d been doing without another comment.

“Are you ready, Flame?” Storm asked.

Flame nodded and followed Storm out of the house and onto the street. “I hope Greycloud is successful in his search.”

“I wish him all the luck in the world,” Storm agreed and slipped his arm around Flame. His lover hugged him close as they walked down the street. In this part of town most of the people on the roads were clansmen who gave them polite nods.

A breeze ruffled their hair and sent the leaves of the myriad plants waving, the air carrying the scent of water from the huge lake on the far side of the City.

“We should go walk the lake shore,” Storm suggested. It’s really beautiful.”

Flame glanced at him. “I thought we’d come

out to find Heartfire. Won't he be in the market place?"

His question was answered by the approach of Heartfire, carefully balancing six or seven large boxes. "Oh. Very well, a walk by the lake it is!"

"First we help him with those packages before they wind up all over the street," Storm said as he hurried to claim a few of them.

Heartfire gladly turned some of the boxes over. "Thank you my Chiefs. I thought Goldstone was going to help me, but he disappeared right around noon and I never did locate him afterward."

Storm frowned and turned a concerned glance on Flame. "Maybe we need to postpone that walk and go find Goldstone."

Flame retrieved a box or two and nodded. "I think you're right."

"Did you get everything you went looking for?" Storm asked.

"Everything but the flour," Heartfire replied. "They were completely out by the time I got there. They're going to grind more tonight and have it bagged up for market tomorrow. I paid

in advance for two of the hundred weight bags. I hope that's enough."

"Get another two if you can, if not then try for a few fifty weight bags. There's a lot of us and a whole Storm Season ahead." Storm shook his head, "Better yet, we'll order it while we're out."

They carried the boxes back to the house then left again, this time heading for the Market Square.

Flame glanced up at the sky. "He's been missing for two or three hours now."

"Which worries me. He knew Heartfire was depending on him for help getting the things he bought back to the house. It's not like Goldstone to shirk a duty," Storm informed as they headed down the dusty street.

Flame frowned. "He's a stonemage isn't he? So he shouldn't be of any real interest to the people here as a slave."

"How do you think they build their houses here, Flame? Take a good look at them. Every one of them is made of stonemage flowed rock." Storm turned down a side street. Ahead of them

the noise and number of people increased as they neared the market square.

“But Goldstone’s ability is rather limited, so I don’t think anyone would want to enslave him, unless they’re in the market for someone able to work stone for jewelry.”

Flame shook his head. *I’m so ignorant. If I’d lived as a proper warrior in an intelligent clan, I’d have known all this.*

“The reliance of City and Clans seems to be a mutual thing,” he said. “I’m sorry, Storm, I’m probably not worthy of being your co-chief. There are way too many gaps in my knowledge of the world.”

“We *are* reliant on one another, the Clans and the City. And please stop doubting yourself, Flame. I don’t know everything either, believe me. If I did I wouldn’t be so damn worried we weren’t getting enough food for the Storm Season to keep everyone’s belly filled. And this whole think with Darksy is making my stomach churn. Do we let him in, or do we send him away?”

They reached the market square which was

even more crowded than before. They pushed their way through the throng of people, trying to spot the young warrior Goldstone.

Flame clutched at Storm's sleeve and brought them both to a halt. "You know Goldstone. What does he enjoy doing? Chances are that something has attracted him and he's lost track of the time."

Storm frowned. "He loves to gamble. Always has, even when he was little he used to make bets on things with anyone who would accept one," Storm replied. "So let's circle around to the entertainment area of the market. And if we find him there, I'm going to be really annoyed with him. He was supposed to be helping Heartfire, not playing games."

Storm led Flame down a side street, his lover taking him around the market to an area twice as noisy and even more crowded with clansmen.

They pushed their way through the throng, the sound of shouted wagers vying with loud music and laughter. The smell of fermented beverages filled the air, along with the scents of flowers and leather.

The swordbrothers passed a tent from which music and raucous cries emanated. A glance inside showed scantily clad girls dancing on a stage with dozens of clansmen watching them from the seats which filled the rest of the tent.

“I don’t see him in there at least,” Storm remarked.

Flame couldn’t see the attraction in watching half naked women dance, but then again, he had all he needed in Storm. They moved amongst the booths and tents until a booth hosting a dice game caught Flame’s attention. He nudged his lover and nodded towards the booth.

There, at the table, was a glassy eyed Goldstone and, judging by the large pile of parchment in front of him, he was losing badly. “That might just be worse than the dancing girls,” he observed.



Storm frowned in disapproval. “You’re right. He’s loosing and hasn’t enough sense to quit,” Storm remarked as they arrived at the gambling booth. It was a dice game. Men were tossing

the dice onto a table covered with small things of value. Little firestones, polished stone beads and other items which were placed on numbers around the edge of the table. If the dice came up with the number on which the bet had been set, then the betting man won. If the dice came up with any other number, the bet was lost and the owner of the dice game won. The person throwing the dice won or lost in the same way.

Goldstone took the dice from the man running the game. He was just about to throw them when Storm's hand closed around his wrist.

Startled eyes regarded them. "My Chiefs what are you doing here?"

"We've come to get a young fool," Storm said, glancing at the pile of parchment strips. "But it appears we've come too late to save the fool from himself."

Flame shook his head. "Do you even know how much you've lost?"

The young warrior glanced down at the pile. "No, but I'm sure I can make it all back soon."

Storm shook his head. "No, you will not. You were supposed to assist Heartfire in carrying



things, and he had to carry them to our house by himself.

“Worse than breaking your promise of help, you’ve put yourself in debt, and you’ve no way to pay it off without selling things you do not have.”

Flame retrieved the pile of parchment and began glancing through them. “By all the ancestors, Goldstone, you owe your cycle to someone!”

Storm took the paper from Flame and stared at it. He turned an angry scowl on Goldstone. “Go to the house. Do not stop between here and there for any reason.”

Goldstone opened his mouth to argue, thought better of it, and nodded. “Sorry gentlemen,” he said to his gambling companions, “but I have to leave.”

One of the men, a City dweller by his clothing, reached out and caught Goldstone by the shoulder. “You go nowhere until you pay your debts.”

Flame took the dice out of Goldstone’s hand

and frowned. "Storm, you're better with stones than I am, would you say these are weighted?"

Storm reached for the dice, but before he could take them another man, also from the City, knocked them out of Flame's hands.

"Well that tells me a lot," Storm said, his gaze flashing with anger. "And what it tells me is these two are cheating clansmen out of their hard earned wealth."

Angry glares from the other clansmen at the table turned both men pale.

"We weren't cheating," the first man said and let go of Goldstone.

"Weren't you?" Storm questioned, his tone about as friendly as a darbear's snarl.

Flame smiled at the City men and reduced the parchment to ash. "I don't think anyone at this table owes you two a thing."

Angry words filled the air as the clansmen gathered up their winnings, or throwing the papers they held at the two men running the dice booth. A few of the older clansmen closed

in on the owners of the dice game, anger burning in their eyes.

“You two dustdelvers are going to return everything you won from us,” one of the men ordered.

“Come on,” Storm said, “let’s go before a fight starts. That can get you tossed out of the City, and we’ve got too much business left to conduct before we leave.”

Flame shook his head as they left the booth. “You’re a real clown, Goldstone. If you *must* gamble do it with people you know and trust.”

“They had some good stuff they were offering as prizes,” Goldstone said as they headed away from the dice booth. “I was trying to help, but I guess I just added to the problems.”

“No real harm done, but please, while we’re in the City, avoid doing any gambling. Flame’s right. Gambling here is a risky thing because City people cheat more often than clansmen do.”

“I’ve learned my lesson,” Goldstone replied.

“Good enough,” Storm told him. “You go

on back to the house. We're going to do some trading if we can."

"Forgive me for being an idiot, my Chiefs. I won't be this stupid ever again, I swear it."

"You'd better keep that promise, Goldstone. Neither of us will forget you made it," Storm warned.

"When you get back, apologize to Heartfire," Flame added.

"I will, my Chief. And I really am sorry for being such an idiot," the younger man said then hurried off vanishing in the crowd faster than water vanished into the dry soil of the barrens.

Stormdragon shook his head. "Well at least we got him out of there before anything too awful happened," he remarked, pausing to get his bearings. "We need to go this way." He took Flame's hand and led his lover toward the food suppliers.

Flame stared at the array of foodstuffs, brown eyes wide. "I've never tasted any of this stuff. I don't even know what most of it's called!"

Storm laughed. "Well let's get started on your

education,” he said and led Flame to the nearest booth which was filled with fruit in both fresh and dried forms.

Flame chuckled before coming to an abrupt halt. He was staring across the square. “Look, Storm, that woman has red hair. Maybe it’s Oasis.”

His gaze sought the flash of flame bright hair, but Storm didn’t see it. “Where, Flame?” he questioned, gaze scanning the horde of people clogging the market.

Flame pointed and finally Storm could see the back of a woman with rich auburn hair, not the bright color he’d expected.

“Do you think it’s her?” Storm asked as they moved through the press of people. Long before they got anywhere near the red-haired woman she vanished from their sight around the far side of some clustered booths.

Flame shrugged his eyes full of sadness. “I don’t know. It’s been so long... I just saw the red hair and hoped it might be. Thinking about it though, I’m really not sure if I’d recognize her at all now.”

“Well we’re not going to give up trying to find her, Flame. She’s your sister, so let’s find this woman and see if it’s her or not.”

Flame nodded. “All right.”

They trailed the woman, finding her and losing her in the crowd, but not able to easily reach her through the crush of the people filling the market. Frustrated, Storm pushed his way through a cluster of clansmen, and spotted the woman standing at a booth looking at cloth.

“She’s right ahead,” he told Flame.

Flame studied the woman for a moment. His shoulders drooped and he shook his head. “I’m almost certain she’s not Oasis. For one thing she’s a clanswoman and for another I don’t recognize anything of my sister in her.”

Storm slipped an arm around Flame. “I’m sorry, I really am. We’ll have to keep looking for her, that’s all.”

A tall, dark-haired clansman in a vest and leather pants approached them. Deep blue eyes regarded them from a face the reddish color of clay. The muscles of the man’s chest and arms were well developed in the way only a smith’s

upper body would be formed. “As I live and draw breath, is this Stormdragon formerly of Dragon Clan I’m seeing?”

Storm couldn’t place the man, though he was sure he’d met him before. Then it came to him. “Sword Dancer, the weaponsmith!” They clasped arms in the manner of clansmen. “What are you doing in the City so late in the season?”

“Trying to supply the group of us with enough food and whatnot for the Storm Season.” The man leaned closer to him, peering at his forehead. “Clan Chief now is it? Tell me you’ve taken Dragon Clan from that worthless shit Dragonwind.”

“I wish that was true, but no.” Storm shook his head. “Where are my manners? This is my swordbrother and co-Chief Flamespirit. Flame, this is Sword Dancer, the finest weaponsmith I’ve ever met.”

“Co-Chiefs? And your own clan you say?” the man looked thoughtful as he reached for Flame’s forearm to exchange a friendly greeting.

Flame returned the greeting just as the woman they’d been following turned round. “Did

you just say Stormdragon, Sword?" she asked. She approached and then smiled. "You did indeed! I doubt you'll remember me, we were mere children when last we met. I am Starshine Greenhand."

Storm smiled. "I remember you, but you were a skinny girl the last time I saw you. Didn't you and a boy named Windspinner get the better of my older brother Dragonwind?"

Starshine chuckled. "We certainly tried often enough. Windspinner is one of my bondmates now." She glanced around. "Ah there they are, over by the leather stall."

"*One* of your bondmates?" Storm questioned.

Sword Dancer grinned. "Oh we're quite the bunch, Star and her boys and me and my swordbrothers."

"Swordbrothers? You mean you've got more than one?"

The man's grin widened. "I've got three, actually."

Storm exchanged a shocked glance with



Flame. “Three? You mean to tell me you’re in a four way bond?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Sword agreed. “Come on, we’ll introduce you to Star’s boys then you can meet my swordbrothers, Trueflight, Summerbreeze and Zephyr.”

*Zephyr? Now where do I know that name from?*

Sword led them toward the leathermaker’s booth. “You two are Chiefs of your own clan, and here we find ourselves without a clan at the moment. Maybe we can work something out.”

“Seems to be going around lately,” Storm remarked, turning to give Flame a questioning look. He lifted one eyebrow, hoping Flame would give him some sort of reply to the unspoken question of: ‘Do you think we should take them or not?’

Flame must have picked up on his feelings again. “You seem to have found a lot of old friends here, Storm.”

“Dragon Clan goes to a lot of Gathers, or at least we did when my father was Chief. He loved

socializing and taking to the Chiefs of other clans.”

They reached the leathermaker’s booth to find two attractive young men examining the wares with critical eyes.

They were both taller than Storm and his swordbrother--which wasn’t unusual as they were both on the short side for clansmen--and blond, the taller one with silky golden hair a few shades darker than Storm’s pale blond. He smiled a warm greeting, his bright green gaze was friendly.

The other man’s hair was a pure silvery white and the gaze he turned on them with the most unusual eyes Storm had ever seen because they were purple. Both men were quite attractive, and Storm found it easy to smile at them.

“Why I do believe you’re Stormdragon, aren’t you?” Windspinner asked as he offered his arm to Storm.

“I am, and you’re Windspinner.”

“That’s right. I see you’ve met Starshine once more. This is our swordbrother, Riverspring.”

Riverspring stepped forward with a smile and grasped their arms in turn. "I'm honored to meet you both."

"We're pleased to meet you as well," Storm said, speaking for both of them and hoping Flame wouldn't mind.

Storm failed to notice Sword leaving the vicinity of the leathersmiths while he spoke to Windspinner and Riverspring. He noticed the arrival of the weaponsmith, who came in the company of three other good looking men. He couldn't help himself. He stared. He knew Sword and the smallest man of the group. *It is Zephyr Northernwind. But why are his warrior's marks in rose, lavender and light blue? That's just about the worst insult I've ever seen perpetrated on a man.*

Storm noticed the tall red-haired man behind Zephyr. The man put a possessive hand on the small blond's shoulder and Zephyr leaned into the touch. Zephyr wore had the angry expression Storm remembered from their childhood, but when red-haired man put his arm around him it eased.

*Dear ancestors, Zephyr finally found a swordbrother. Or rather he's found three of them.*

The last man drew Storm's gaze and held it. *He has blue hair. How can it be possible? Perhaps it's some sort of dye he used to color it. That's got to be the answer. People don't have blue hair.*

Sword Dancer put his arm around the blue-haired man. "These are my swordbrothers, Summerbreeze," he said, squeezing the blue-haired man close. He continued, gesturing to the blond, "And this is Zephyr, and the red-head is Trueflight."

Flame clasped arms all around and smiled. "I'm not sure if I'll remember all the new names for a while but I'll try my best."

Sword laughed at Flame's comment. "That's all right. We all answer to 'hey you over there' pretty well."

Storm didn't remark on the colors of Zephyr's tattoos as he clasped the young blond's arm with his hand and offered him a friendly smile.

"Your brother still an ass?" Zephyr asked, his mouth twisted into a snarl. Dragonwind had

been merciless in his efforts to hurt and humiliate him when they were children.

“No, he’s worked himself downward on the scale. He’s a dustdevilver’s droppings now.”

Zephyr nodded but said nothing else.

Storm realized something, as he looked at the tattoos of the four swordbrothers. They were all windmages which made him really look at the others around them.

He glanced at Windspinner, and noticed the complexity of his tattoos, deep blue whorls and spirals which covered his arms from his wrists upward. Storm could see the pattern beneath the edges of the vest the man wore. They were the tattoos of a powerful windmage. And Riverspring, as his name implied, carried the distinguishing light green color of a watermage. His tattoos as extensive as those of Windspinner. Their woman, Star, had the tattoos of a rare greenmage decorating her hands and what he could see of her forearms. The bright green tracteries of vines were delicate, but very intricate which spoke of an unusual amount of magical power for a woman.

“There’s enough wind magic in this assembly to stop a blackstorm in its tracks,” Storm observed.

Sword laughed. “So it would seem, though individually the four of us aren’t much, together my swordbrothers and I are quite capable of creating some interesting effects.”

Flame smiled at the smith. “You said the group of you are without a clan. Why is that?”

Trueflight held Zephyr even closer and scowled. “Some prejudiced people decided that, as Breeze has blue hair and Zephyr’s mother never stays in one clan for long, we were not welcome in their clans.”

Storm met Flame’s gaze, wondering if his lover’s empathy would tell him his thoughts. “Why don’t you come by the house we’ve rented? It’s on the street where Jonah has all his houses, we’re in the big one with the flowering tree in the front yard. Maybe we can strike some sort of bargain where you get a clan and we get two more families out of the deal.” Storm offered.

Flame hugged Storm close and smiled at him. “I like that idea.”

Windspinner smiled. “If my bondmates

agree, we might be able to come to some sort of mutually agreeable arrangement.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Sword replied and glanced at this trio of swordbrothers.

Zephyr shrugged. “I go where Flight goes.”

“What do you say, True? Sound like a better plan than the seven of us weathering out the Storm Season alone?” Sword asked the other man.

Trueflight nodded. “I certainly don’t want to spend it in the City. Most of the people here are downright greedy.”

“They’re cheats too,” Zephyr remarked. “Most of the games of chance are rigged.”

“So we’ve discovered,” Storm said. “Well if it’s settled, we’ll meet all of you at our house later this evening that way you can finish up your bargaining and we can take care of some of our own business.”

They clasped forearms all around the seven returning to their bargaining while Storm and Flame resumed searching for Oasis.

They left the market square, heading for

the shore of the distant lake. “We’ll find her,” Storm told Flame as he put his arm around his swordbrother. “We won’t leave until we do.”

*This trip to the City has proven to be a lot different than I anticipated. We came here to get supplies, and we’re going to be leaving with a bigger clan. Sword and his swordbrothers and likely Windspinner and his family. The question remains though: Do we let Darksky and his swordbrother Lakesinger join?*

They walked in silence, hand in hand down street after street. City dwellers gave them scant notice, barely glancing their way if they paid any attention to them. After a while they could smell the water and hear the sound of waves lapping at the shore. They turned down another street and the lake came into view. A huge expanse of translucent green that glittered under the light of the sun.

They reached the shore and Storm put his arm around Flame, hugging him close. They stood there looking out across the vast body of water, water that seemed to go on forever. The wind coming off the water was cool and moist. So



different than the air out in the dry lands where the clans lived.

Storm finally spoke, "Our lives are changing, Flame. For the better, I think."

Flame nodded, his expression serious. "Even if we don't find Oasis, we've almost doubled the size of our clan. I liked Sword Dancer and the men with him, and Windspinner and his family seem nice too. I think they will all fit in well with our Clan."

"So do I," Storm agreed. "And we *will* find Oasis. I don't know how, but we'll find her."

Storm turned Flame to face him and gazed into Flame's warm brown eyes. He saw love in their depths, a love as powerful as the Fenyx within his lover's soul. A love as deep as Storm himself had for Flame.

"I love you," Storm murmured. He set his mouth to his lover's and kissed him, the soft lips parting under the gentle thrust of his tongue. Threads of power rose from them, dancing on the damp wind from the lake as the hazy outline of a Dragon and a Fenyx took form above them.

He ended the kiss, gazed into Flame's lust

warmed eyes. “We have our own clan and no matter what happens, we have each other Flame. We’ll solve our problems and find Oasis. I just know we will.”

“I love you, Storm.”

Storm hugged Flame. “I love you too.”

Flame’s answering smile warmed his heart and he put his arms around Flame and kissed him again as the sun slid into the lake. The sky above them transformed from lavender to bright gold and blue, the colors of the Fenyx and Dragon painting the City’s walls with gentle light.

*END*

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## 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](http://www.auburnimp.net)

myspace site

[www.myspace.com/auburnimp](http://www.myspace.com/auburnimp)

fanfiction site

[www.geocities.com/maddelena2000](http://www.geocities.com/maddelena2000)

livejournal/blog

[www.livejournal.com/auburnimp](http://www.livejournal.com/auburnimp)

newsletter/chat group

[www.groups.yahoo.com/group/auburnimp](http://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](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/immortal_heroes)

Kink Promo:

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## About the Author

Shadowfire Press:

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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 3: Clan Chiefs* 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

## Book Excerpts

steam. The boy blushed when he saw him and ducked his head.

“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.

## Book Excerpts

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 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

## Book Excerpts

the watermage's lips on his lingered, as did the throbbing ache of his arousal.

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

## Book Excerpts

America, and will they find the love they both crave?

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

## Book Excerpts

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 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

## Book Excerpts

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.

*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.

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Deshawn sighed, gaze riveted on the wild night, the storm torn riot beyond the glass and came to a decision.

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



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for him, women he turned into servants fit only to cook and clean, the prettiest ones forced into lives of slave prostitution.

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.

## Book Excerpts

You might also enjoy *Fallen Angels 1: On Death's Wings* by Auburnimp.

*Fallen Angel meets fallen mortal.*

Samael, Fallen Angel with the power of life and death discovers a young junkie being beaten in an alleyway. Ever the impulsive creature, he rescues the Daniel from his pimp. From that moment Samael's life changes. But is it for the better or worse?

Daniel, addict and whore, knows his former 'employers' will come searching for him. What he's not suspecting is how useful being befriended by the Angel of Death will be.

Can Samael forget his former lover, the Angel Raphael while in the arms of a mere mortal? And what of Daniel, can he accept Samael for what he is?

Here is a short excerpt from *Fallen Angels 1: On Death's Wings* by Auburnimp.

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Samael waited only until his charge had settled before going out again. He rarely felt the need to sleep and almost never the desire, tired of the nightmares it always brought with it. And the boy reminded him so much of his lost love that he wanted to bathe himself in death as a way to forget.

A vague fluttering caught his senses and he glanced up. There, high above the city was an angel although he couldn't tell which one from here. A smile came. If the other was here on a mission of mercy he would take great pleasure in thwarting his or her desires. It was just the sort of game he needed.

He unfurled his six black-feathered wings and took to the dark sky to take a closer look at this possible adversary. Only the last remaining legend could stand against him. One of the original three, two of whom had chosen to fall rather than live as slaves to a creator they never saw.

Blood red hair and wings like a feathered rainbow. He snarled and dove before the other saw him. Damnation! Why did it have to be Raphael? The one archangel he would never

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again face, not through fear but because he still loved him.

He landed on a roof and watched as Raphael flew down to a particular house in Brooklyn. A slender young mortal opened the door and smiled at his visitor. Then the two were in each others arms and kissing before they disappeared into the house.

Samael's hands clenched into fists as the pain ate at him; pain that only millions of years of love followed by ten thousand years of separation could cause. The mortal didn't bother him. He'd watched Raphael from afar for long enough to know that he sought his forgetfulness in the bodies of pretty mortals.

"Whore," he muttered and turned away to find another figure on the roof gazing at him from amused forest green eyes. "What the fuck do you want, Beliel?"

"I just had the feeling that you might be up for some real mischief tonight and I'm bored."

"Your emotions don't concern me."

"No, but the Son of the Morning hearing about your good deed towards the pretty mortal

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in your apartment might.” Beliel was openly grinning at him as he spoke.

He glared at the other fallen one. “Don’t try to blackmail me if you know what’s good for you.”

“Then let’s go and have some fun! Hell knows you’re gloomy enough tonight!”

Resisting the urge to swat the demon like the bug he was, Samael contented himself with glowering at him. “I warn you now, I’m in the mood to kill and keep on killing.”

“Perfect! Shall we get started then?” Beliel was completely unrepentant.

He shook his head and sighed. “Okay, I know I’m going to regret this but what do you have in mind?”

Beliel skittered about the roof in excitement his pale green hair flowing and his wings also the green of all growing things fluttered. Everything about him was shades of that color, even his skin. “Oh, now you’re talking! I think a little mayhem throughout the city should suit.”

He shot Beliel a look of deep suspicion before

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thinking more carefully about his words. Then he smiled as an idea occurred. Opening his senses he took command of the hurricane approaching the eastern seaboard and changed its direction whilst both strengthening it and speeding it up.

Seeing Raphael had hurt him badly so he would use his beloved's element to wreak havoc on the city and kill several of its inhabitants.

"You might want to get off this roof," he warned Beliel.

His companion's green eyes widened. "Oh! What have you done?"

"Look at the sky."

Beliel looked up where the swirling cloud formation of an approaching hurricane had appeared. He cackled in delight and resumed his skittering little dance. "Oh yes! Perfect! Samael, I love your work!"

"Well sit back and admire if it suits you. I'm going home."

"Are you going to fuck the pretty mortal?"

He turned narrowed eyes on Beliel who had the intelligence to back off a few paces. "Mind

your own damned business! If you want to ride this storm on a mortal's carcass, find your own plaything!"

Beliel attempted to look contrite and failed miserably, managing only disappointment. "Just because I like to watch," he muttered. "And with the little one on a drug come down he'll be in even more pain." He was wheedling now.

"Have your fun watching the mortals suffer through this storm. I promise you there will be anguish enough to sate even your appetites." Beliel's time away from Heaven and the company of the earth angel, Uriel, had made him as perverse and twisted as an old tree root.

Having had more than enough of the little green demon he spread his wings and headed for his apartment. He stopped in the main foyer only long enough to warn Jackson to batten down the hatches before stepping into the elevator.

Once in the sitting room he flicked a switch that closed storm shutters on all the windows before staring at the door to Daniel's bedroom. A strangled moan from behind the door decided him and he strode towards it as the wind began to howl around the building.

## Book Excerpts

You can buy *Swordbrothers 1: Outlaw & The Brat* by Auburnimp and Michael Barnette, *Fallen Angels 1: On Death's Wings* by Auburnimp and *Plague Dance* by Michael Barnette along with other fine m/m erotic romance and yaoi titles from:

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