



My Brother's
Keeper

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MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

DENISE KENDRICK AND R.D.
SOLANGE

PART I

Prologue

Ciaran kept his eyes glued to the dusty floor when he came into the bedroom. He didn't want to see the frailty that had taken over Father Owen in the last few days.

Ciaran knew the priest's white hair meant he was old, and by that reasoning almost everyone in the monastery was old, but until recently Father Owen had never given him any reason to believe old meant anything more than a little stiffness in the morning and an annoying habit of prattling on about the value of good hard work. Now old had become synonymous with sick.

He tried not to look the priest in the eyes as he let himself be coaxed over to the bedside, but obedience again won out over selfishness. One glance and he knew instantly that there would be more talk of leaving today. His heart sank. So it wasn't just a fever induced fantasy of the day before.

"It has to be you, my son." Even Father Owen's voice, once booming, sounded weak now. He went on, explaining the responsibility.

Ciaran tried not to listen, but the words seeped in anyway. "But Malik," he protested, picturing his brother, his twin. He knew there shouldn't be tears. There had been too many tears in the village that month. It wasn't good to add to them. And besides, fifteen years was far too old for a boy to be seen with wet eyes. But still, his voice wavered.

"Malik is a good boy," Father Owen said gently. "But you're cleverer."

That was not entirely what Ciaran meant. His whole body slumped.

The priest's face softened. "We can't afford to send both of you."

Ciaran blinked at him, wondering not for the first time in the five years he and Malik had been living at the monastery if the priest could sense his thoughts the way he could sometimes sense Malik's. Father Owen laughed and shook his head, confirming the notion even more. "Would that we hadn't let it get so bad, but now..." He shrugged and trailed off into sadness.

Ciaran put on a brave front. "How far is it again, Father?"

"It'll take you two, maybe three weeks to reach the border." The old man struggled to sit up. Ciaran tucked an extra pillow behind his shoulders and then, at a gesture, moved the tray of stationery from the desk to the man's lap.

He meant walking, of course. They didn't have any horses. And even if they did, Ciaran didn't know how to ride. When he was nine, just before his parents died, his Da had promised to buy him a horse someday, like the ones they saw in the market. He thrust the memory away. Even if his parents had lived, they'd be dying now. The sickness was everywhere.

"There'll be just enough money to get you through the border and into the City. Our sister church, St. Magrathea is just inside the gate." Father Owen droned on, repeating all the same things he had said the day before. This time he wrote the details

down.

"What if I can't find it?" The City had always been something of a legend to him. Ciaran didn't know anyone who'd actually been there except the merchants who came through from time to time with their fancy wares.

"Can't find it?"

"The gates."

Father Owen chuckled, "That will be the least of your problems."

Ciaran looked at him dubiously. It seemed like a very big problem to him.

"As you crest the final hill, you'll see a wall of shining blue, almost turquoise in the sun. That will be the ancient barrier protecting the gates. As you draw near, you'll hear it hum to you."

Blue walls that hum? Perhaps Father Owen did have a fever again. "Have you ever been there?"

"Yes," the priest nodded. "Once a long time ago, when I was just a boy, not much older than you and your brother are now." His eyes drifted away, seeing things long since past. Then he shook himself and began to scribble careful words on a thick piece of paper. "Now, this is a letter of introduction. You must not lose it, Ciaran."

Ciaran nodded and stared out the window, half-listening, forehead pressed to the glass. The length of the shadows and the color of the sky suggested it was almost four o'clock. Malik would be back any minute now.

As if on cue his brother's shaggy head appeared on the horizon, his face sullen as he concentrated on balancing the yoke over his shoulders. Hauling water was their least favorite chore. It was the only one they agreed on hating equally. Now the two of them were the only ones strong enough to do it. Ciaran frowned. With him gone, Malik was not going to be pleased about being stuck with the task.

Sister Elsbeth hobbled out into the square to meet Malik, no doubt cooing over what a wonderful job he was doing. The darkness fled from Malik's face as soon as he saw her, and Ciaran could feel the resulting smile from where he stood. Malik set the pails down and took her by the arm, helping her back into the building. As he crossed the threshold, he turned, eyes zeroing in on Ciaran's location, and winked.

"Will I feel him while I'm gone?" Ciaran wondered aloud, interrupting the priest's monologue.

"What?" The scratching of the pen paused.

"Malik," Ciaran said. "In my head. Will he still be there if I go away?" He had never been more than a few miles away from his brother before. But as long as he could still sense him, he knew he wouldn't really be alone.

"Of course, my son. The gifts God gives us know not the boundaries of space and time."

Ciaran nodded solemnly. He thought that must be true and he hoped it would make up a bit up for leaving Malik with all the chores. Well, that and not getting to see the blue humming walls.

The next day Malik burst into their tiny bedroom and froze at the sight that greeted him. Ciaran didn't look up from his task of packing his few belongings into his bag, and Malik felt his eyes begin to sting with tears.

"I almost punched Steven Jacobi as a liar for telling me you were leaving." He stepped forward, eyes moving helplessly between the bag and his brother's expressionless face. "Ciaran? Tell me he was lying." Striding forward, he laid a hand on Ciaran's wrist, preventing him from adding another piece of clothing to the bag. "Please!"

Ciaran eyes were full of worry when he finally looked up, but his smile was in place. "Shh, now, Mal. It's all right." He drew Malik into his arms. "I have to go, just for a while and then I'll be back with medicine for everyone."

"Can't I go with you?" Malik pressed his face into the crook of Ciaran's neck. "I need to go with you!"

"They need you here," Ciaran explained patiently. "You'll be okay, I promise."

Malik shook his head. First his parents, and then...if he lost Ciaran... "No, I'll be alone, I can't--" His voice broke and he grabbed fistfuls of Ciaran's shirt and jacket. "I don't want to be alone."

Ciaran shushed him despite his own eyes filling. "You won't. I'll be here." He lay his hand against the side of Malik's head where they each sensed their connection the strongest. "I'll be here, where I always am. Right?"

Malik nodded, tears streaming down his face.

Ciaran pulled him close, mouth pressing once to Malik's lips. He dug his fingers into his brother's temple. "You'll never be alone as long as you can feel me here."

Malik sniffled and nodded. What else could he do?

They stood solid in each other's embrace until a soft knock came at the door. Then they parted, Ciaran reaching for his bag and Malik moving over to the window, refusing to watch his brother leave their room.

"Just a few weeks, Mal. I promise." Ciaran whispered before he turned and closed the door shut behind him.

Chapter One

Ciaran squeezed his hands into fists, impatiently willing the creaking lift to reach the top floor faster. When the doors opened, he stormed down the hallway to the executive suite of Vash Trading Group and his father's office. Dress shoes click-clacking over the imported marble floor of the foyer were immediately silent once they reached the plush carpet of the private offices.

"He's not accepting any visitors." Alyssa, his father's secretary, nearly fell out of her chair in an effort to stop him.

"He'll see me," Ciaran muttered under his breath, pushing the double doors open wide.

Cedric Vash looked up in surprise. "Ciaran, what--"

"He lives, father," Ciaran said, holding up a faded piece of paper. He crossed the twenty steps to his adopted father's desk and thrust it in front of him.

Cedric's graying brows furrowed, and he took the paper and waved a frustrated Alyssa away, waiting until she closed the doors. "Now, what's all this nonsense?"

"My brother." Ciaran paced back and forth. "Malik. He's alive."

Cedric studied the newspaper clipping, dated the previous day. *City Officials Announce Trade Negotiations with Lord Kava a Success.* "Are you quite certain? This man looks nothing like you," he said of the burly, stern faced man in the center.

"The name, Father." Ciaran indicated the name in the caption, then pointed to the leaner man off to the side. "It is Malik." Ciaran would recognize the face anywhere, no matter how much time had passed. "We weren't identical twins," he added softly.

"Now, now. I don't want to see you get your hopes up over nothing. This..." Cedric gestured to the photo while he thought of the right word, "...ruffian is just someone who looks like your brother. That's all."

Ciaran surged forward, gripping the edge of the desk. "It's him," he said firmly. Then, more quietly, as if the thought had just occurred to him, "Did you know about this?"

The older gentleman looked appalled. "Of course not!"

"You never let me look for him."

"For God's sake, we've been over this, Ciaran. We sent aid to the parish you were from. There was no one left. "

The silver ashtray on the desk jumped on the desk when Ciaran slammed his fist down next to it. "Then explain it. How could he have survived?"

Slowly, Cedric leaned back into the leather chair, removing his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose. When he finally spoke it was with the restrained patience he reserved for children and the more tiresome members of the Board. "There was a remote possibility that he could have been picked up by a group that raided the village. They'd been known to take women, or boys, as slaves." He shook his head and circled the desk to rest his hands on Ciaran's shoulders. "But I don't think that was the case, my boy. You said everyone was ill, they would not have burdened themselves with

anyone who was sick. And besides, Walter found the body of a boy your size in the remains. Remember?"

Ciaran shook his head, searching through the memories fifteen years past. "But Malik wasn't ill," he mumbled, letting himself be directed towards a nearby chair. He slumped down into it. "We were the only two not sick. Father Owen said our bodies were too young and foolish to know any better."

Cedric pressed a glass of water into his hands and then turned back to the bar for a scotch.

"I should have known, Father." His blue eyes filled up with helplessness. "Six years ago when I thought I sensed him. I should have gone looking for him that night of the ball." He moaned softly, head falling into his hand. "I was so selfish. I didn't want to believe it was him. Everything was going so well."

"Don't be ridiculous," Cedric snapped. "You made a grand fool of yourself that night, embarrassing me and your mother."

"I was drunk," Ciaran muttered, as if that explained everything.

"Drunk, yes. That you were. I'd had half a mind to throw you out on the street the next day, see if scraping by on your own would have done you some good. But your mother intervened."

Ciaran blinked at him, suddenly feeling eighteen again and wet behind the ears.

"She said your actions were because of that boy. Love-sick, she called you."

"His name was Ian."

"Ian, right. You were fine once we got rid of him. Back to your old self. Which is how you're going to be now."

Ciaran opened his mouth to argue, but the anger didn't come. His father was right. Without Ian the world had suddenly made sense again. After that there had been no more boys. No more confusion. And no more problems.

Numbly, he watched his father pick up the news clipping and, with a deliberate motion, toss it into the trash bin under the desk.

"Your brother is dead. He died fifteen years ago. But you are not. And we've given you a damned good life here, Ciaran, better than any you could have hoped for on the outside. There are people who care about you." Cedric softened and gave him a playful wink. "And quite a few ladies I'm told who would love to care more for you. Don't dwell on the past, son."

Ciaran's head was awash with thoughts and feelings, but he knew better than to press his father's patience further. "You're right," he said, standing, "I'll just take a walk down to the docks. A little fresh air is all I need." He paused at the door, "I'm sorry I bothered you."

"Yes, yes." Cedric nodded and clucked some fatherly nonsense at him, mind already turned back to his work.

On the elevator back down, Ciaran took his jacket off and loosened the tie at his throat. It *had* been Malik in the picture, or a damned good look-alike. He laughed ruefully; Malik only had one twin that he knew of.

The thought that had frustrated him all day returned: if Malik was alive then

why couldn't Ciaran sense him?

When he was younger, Malik's mind had been connected to his like a living, breathing thing. When he'd first awoken in the City hospital, his leg broken and his face bruised, he'd barely noticed the pain of his injuries for the greater loss. Every trace of his brother was gone from his mind. It felt like part of him had died.

For days he'd refused to talk to anyone beyond delivering the bare bones of the message he'd been charged with. And then he'd kicked and screamed when they caught him trying to escape with his leg still far from healed.

Finally Walter, trusted confidant of the man who was to become his father, returned from the mission of aid to the parish. He took Ciaran aside and told him the story of everything he'd seen.

Walter was a quiet man with a stern presence; and Ciaran's lip trembled as he listened, too frightened to protest or interrupt. Walter spoke at length of fresh graves and the houses burned to the ground, until at last there were too many details, too accurate to be fabricated, and Ciaran gave in.

He'd cried for days. Mourned for weeks longer.

When he was better, leg healed and mood much improved, the charge nurse took a liking to him, and took him home to meet her husband, one of the wealthiest men in the City. The man was kind to him, and it was clear they'd always wanted a son.

Soon Ciaran found himself living in more luxury than he'd ever dreamed of. There was no need to haul water ever again.

Out on the docks, Ciaran kicked at a palette of supplies. He'd always considered the luxury of his new life as a blessing, solace in return for his suffering, but now he was forced to wonder if it had been a cruel trick all along, a clever obstacle to keep him from seeking after the only true family he had.

He fought off the guilty feelings that crept in one by one, telling himself he hadn't failed Malik by leaving and seeking help alone. He tried not to think about the slavers his father had mentioned. Instead he brought the news article and picture to mind. His brother's expression seemed hard and cold, without the innocent mirth Ciaran remembered. But that could be just business. Malik had obviously done well for himself if he was working that closely for Kava, the man who was said to govern the lands to the East and North.

He looked out at the open sea, the source of all his new family's wealth. The sea connected the Cities, ports spaced loosely up and down the coast, keeping them supplied and separate, independent from the outlying lands. The ancient shield protected them from anyone who would try to take it from them. It was a good life, but it was worth nothing to him without his brother. Perhaps he could bring Malik back here, offer him a life of comfort to make up for whatever he'd had.

He thought about sending a letter: *Dear brother, I'm alive and well. I thought you were dead. I can't wait to see you.*

It lacked a certain intimacy.

How could one express properly in a letter what he needed to say? Besides, a letter would take two weeks or longer to get there, and Ciaran couldn't stand the

thought of waiting more than a month for a response. It was better to go himself.

Over the following days, he snuck to the outskirts of town to collect the appropriate supplies. He spoke with tradesmen who came in from outside the City walls, learned what manner of dress was expected and purchased the plainer cotton clothes, good sturdy boots, and a long brown leather jacket. Most of the clothes were new, but the jacket and bag were used, less likely to draw attention.

Thoughts of Malik still plagued him, and he quietly nurtured a fantasy of the two of them laughing and embracing. It helped him pass the time.

He hid his growing stash in the bottom drawer of his dresser while he wrapped up the details of his life. Never one to be irresponsible when it came to business, he wrote a careful accounting of all his affairs for whomever would inherit his place.

There was no shortage of suitable replacements at work, most of whom were, frankly, more qualified than he was. He'd enjoyed the thrill of being successful, pleasing his family and having his social status rise, but with each success it took greater effort to earn their adoration. Duty, his father called it whenever Ciaran voiced the slightest longing for something more than business deals and shipping contracts. Duty gave his father's life meaning. All it ever gave Ciaran was a headache.

Despite his frustrations, he loved his adopted family. He knew his father would send men to have Malik brought back to the City if he insisted, paying however much gold was required for the task. But that wouldn't be right. It was his problem to solve. He alone could make things right.

When the time came to leave, he left them each a letter. One for his father, his mother and his sister. All imploring them to forgive him as best they could and to let him have this. He couldn't live without knowing the truth. Above all, he asked them not to worry and promised to send news when he reached his destination.

Chapter Two

For years, all Malik had yearned for was some miracle to bring his brother back to him. He couldn't count the number of times he'd prayed, and the number of gods he promised favors to, if this one thing would happen.

But now, things were different. He was different.

"Sir?"

Malik stilled, furious with himself for not hearing someone come into his chambers. He acknowledged Thorpe, his assistant for three months now, with a curt nod. "How long?"

"About fifteen minutes, sir."

His fingers moved restlessly over the books and papers littering his desk. Fifteen minutes, fifteen years. He smiled at the symmetry of it until memory reminded him that there was nothing humorous about it.

"Show them in. I'll join you shortly."

Thorpe nodded and quietly departed.

Malik needed more time to prepare for this. More time to ready himself before confronting the man who abandoned him, left him to rot in a village of dead. Getting up from his chair, he wandered around the room.

There had been a time when this reunion would have filled him with joy. But that fantasy was gone, a cold anger was all that remained.

He picked up a pen and traced the outline of a star on one hand, finding comfort in the old habit even as he pressed harder into his flesh than he probably should have. He could delay for only so long. There was no way to shirk his duties without there being talk. Talk was something Malik could do without.

From his window he watched the guards herding the day's batch of miscreants into the courtroom downstairs. There were four today, but his eyes were only with the blond man bound within their group.

Ciaran.

His brother.

"He's too thin," Malik whispered to the empty room. His eyes moved up and down Ciaran's small frame. He remembered his brother as always being the bigger and stronger one. Now, he looked small and tired, his shoulders hunched against the brisk wind of the morning, hair a tad too long and flying into his eyes. Malik felt a sudden stab of compassion, and also, strangely, pride for the man who stood defiant in the face of the guards. Just as quickly as the feelings surfaced, he squelched them.

He never came back. He left you to die.

Malik closed his fist and pressed it against the rough stone of the wall, grinding it in until the pain cleared his head. He couldn't afford pity, and there could be no more delay. He turned on his heel, methodically fastening the five black buttons of his officer's coat as he left.

Ciaran was dirty, and the ground was swaying slightly before him with each step. The swaying made him queasy, but he was sure the gnawing ache in his stomach was only hunger.

His head buzzed and ached, but he kept moving, setting each foot in front of the other out of well-worn habit. All he wanted was to sit with his head in his hands and wait until everything calmed inside. He'd rather the clear cold clarity of pain than this rolling confusion.

Perhaps the increased confusion meant that Malik was nearby. His eyes searched the square fruitlessly. More likely it was just another side effect of the illness that had plagued him since he left home.

When he'd finally passed through the City gates and the ancient barrier, a crackling blue haze that really did stretch upward just as Father Owen had described, Ciaran at once felt the familiar tug in his mind, his brother's unmistakable signature.

The feeling was weak at first, but it grew with each step he took away from the low hum of the outside wall. He cursed the fact that he'd never tried leaving before.

He hadn't seen the barrier that had long shielded the City when he'd first arrived. Unconscious from the fall, he'd missed the wonder of the ancient technology and with it the silencing of Malik's presence in his mind.

He might have known that night Ian dragged him to the top of the watchtower. Maybe he hadn't wanted to.

"It's romantic," Ian had insisted, brushing the ever present bangs from his eyes and tugging Ciaran's hand.

Partly drunk, Ciaran had thought it would be more romantic if he were carried up the twenty flights of steps, but he let himself be pulled along.

The air was clear on the roof. Ciaran held his lover's thin form tightly to his chest as they looked down over the railing. The lights of the party below sparkled and the music wafted up, faint by the time it reached them. The City was celebrating, unified for one summer evening a year.

"We could run away together." Ian's voice was a teasing whisper.

Ciaran smiled, "We could."

"My family has land up in the Northern country." Ian spider-walked his fingers up Ciaran's arm. "There's a lake."

"My father would kill me."

Ian stiffened, but by now knew better than to argue. They would only fight again over how much Ciaran owed the man who took him in and gave him a home. "He can come too," Ian said, bristling.

Ciaran snorted softly. The wind gusted around them as fireworks went off in the distance, shooting into the sky and bursting into dazzling colors. The edges of the blooms sizzled where they came in contact with the City's barrier, invisible in the night.

Unexpectedly, a familiar feeling crept into Ciaran's mind. He was at once overcome with the sweet smell of grass and dirt, seeming to flow off the well-dressed

body before him. "Mal?" he murmured.

"What?" Ian turned.

The man in his arms felt so much like his brother, even looked like him. Confused, Ciaran shoved him away, but the presence remained, flickering tangibly in his mind. "Malik?" he asked again, squinting. It couldn't be.

"Stop calling me that," Ian snapped.

Ciaran turned to look out into the night. His gaze fixed on the brightest star in the northward sky, the one he'd often looked upon as a boy, the one that reminded him most of where he'd come from. If Malik was not here, then maybe he was there, back home at the village! Eyes widening, he scrambled back down the stairs, but the sensation was gone before he even reached the bottom. He felt the loss again, just like he had before. He sobbed at the ache of it, rubbing at the emptiness in his head.

He was stupid. He realized that now. The answer was there right in front of him, but he let himself be talked out of what he knew and into the comforting lies of friends and relatives: Malik was not alive, and Ciaran was not at fault.

Once outside the City, all traces of its bustling trade were gone. The landscape turned rural, with a well traveled dirt road leading away towards the outlying lands. Only the occasional ruin, monuments mostly, from centuries before, interrupted the natural flow of the countryside.

Ciaran slept peacefully that first night, secure in his decision to go after his brother. When he grew pale and failed to keep his food down for two days following, he attributed it to weakness and chided himself for not spending as much time sparring at the club as his friends.

But he hadn't gotten better, rather he'd grown worse over the next several weeks, and he'd dourly joked to himself that it was a curse placed on him by his father upon finding his letter. He'd hoped it was something he could outrun.

As the guard gestured them forward again, Ciaran rolled his thumb over his ring finger, finding it bare. His father's signet ring was still gone, missing for three days now, ever since he'd woken in the local jail. Theft was the charge, though he had no memory of it. Apparently, he'd passed out in the middle of the marketplace with a loaf of bread hidden under his jacket.

He tried to explain the mistake to the jailer, certain that it was a mistake, despite the fact that he obviously had little to pay with--the greater part of his funds had mysteriously disappeared several days earlier. Unsympathetic, the man ignored his pleas, promising Ciaran a fate worse than death if he didn't cease his infernal complaining.

He cursed silently. Without the ring he couldn't prove his identity. His word wouldn't count for anything if the judge was anything like the rest of the people he'd encountered. One look at his soft hands and pale skin told the locals all they need to know. He lacked even the strength to maintain his anger.

The guard at his side shoved him in the direction of the door with a grunt, and he followed the other prisoners into the courtroom, the chain linking the manacles between his wrists clanking softly. Despite their incessant yammering in the holding

cell the night before, the other prisoners had all grown silent, the hunch of their shoulders giving an impression of impending doom. Ciaran didn't like the look of it one bit.

Thorpe had been talking non-stop since they left Malik's private rooms, and Malik was almost to the end of his rather thin and frayed temper. In his mind, he'd already snapped the boy's neck six times over. He tried to find his patience. It was, after all, the young soldier's job to be the assistant in today's judgments. It wasn't his fault that every word he spoke grated on Malik's nerves.

The office of Judge was never something Malik had aspired to. Rescued by Kava and his soldiers from the sea of corpses his village had become, Malik had been a slave, a whore, a soldier, and more. It seemed fortune never ceased to tire of using him in her cruel games.

It wasn't that he disliked wielding what power had been given to him; in many ways, his current role was better than the ones he'd played before, but this land, like his life, was Kava's. Malik made a point never to forget that.

Around the next corner, his body suddenly betrayed him, falling prey to a wave of nausea. He stopped, covering his discomfort by pulling the folder of documents from under the young soldier's arm.

He'd known Ciaran was coming for weeks now, and the pressure of his brother's presence in his mind, alternatively familiar and alien, had grown to near painful proportions. It was all Malik could do to shake it off once more, pushing it back at the source with a fierce vengeance.

This wasn't the first time he'd had these feelings, albeit, nothing this strong before now. Years ago, when they were out on campaign, in the thick of battle, the sensation of Ciaran suddenly quite close to him overcame him. The night had been dark and full of the cries of dying men, several from his own sword. He'd fought back to back with Dex, his only real friend in the world, and he'd kept them safe, but a moment's distraction had been all it took for the bite of an enemy sword to reach him. Thrust into his side, it brought agony of the type he'd never even imagined before.

Hours later, in the bloody cot of the surgeon's tent, he'd thought he'd seen Ciaran and heard his voice calling, plaintive in its innocence. "*Mal?*"

"Don't call me that." He'd brushed the faded memory of his brother away with his hand.

"Don't call you what?" Dex's firm grip on his shoulder had grounded him.

"My name's Malik now." His eyes had grown wet, the pain from the wound suddenly eclipsed by the pain of the brother he'd lost.

Later, he'd explained the entire episode away, claiming fevered delusions. But a month ago, when he felt Ciaran's presence tickle at his consciousness again, there was no fever to take the blame.

After a night of fighting the urge to leave the compound in search of his twin,

Malik had settled in to wait for his brother to find him. The closer Ciaran came, the angrier Malik became. In the quiet and stillness of his garden at night, Malik would try and define his anger, but there was always too much there to pull out just one strand. Guilt, anger, joy, shame and abandonment were all rolled into one mass of pain. He was permanently marred now. Even if he forgave Ciaran, he could never wipe clean all the things he himself had done.

When he could wait no longer, he'd simply had Ciaran picked up and delivered to him. Here.

A cough interrupted his thoughts, and he looked up. The door to the courtroom loomed before him and with a last fierce burst of energy, he forced everything he was feeling behind a solid mental door in his mind.

Paperwork gave him an excuse not to look up as he walked in. He waited for the scrape of the chair, knowing it had been pulled out for him, before gracefully lowering himself into it.

The Lief brothers had gotten into a fight at the pub again, Malik read. That would be another talking to and a stiff fine. Perhaps he should be stricter than usual with them, this was their fifth offense.

He rubbed a fretful hand across his forehead, wishing his headache would pass. "Water," he requested quietly, reading on: a wandering thief who refused to give any information about himself. Malik's stomach tightened. He squashed the need to look up and forced his concentration back, noting lastly a report that Mr. McGlickney had killed another of Lady Dafine's dogs.

Malik sighed out loud and finally lifted his eyes as he began to speak. "Mr. McGlickney, you have to stop killing..." His voice tapered off as his eyes slammed into those of a ghost, the features were at once so familiar and yet so different from the ones he'd adored and worshipped as a child.

Ciaran stared back at him in earnest, and his brother's name was almost at Malik's lips before he recovered himself.

He forced himself to turn to the nervous gentleman to Ciaran's left. "I told you last time, if this happened again there would be a harsh penalty."

"They keep killing me lambs, Sir. Am I to let them? I'll starve!" McGlickney wailed, shuffling his feet, the manacles clanking in the sudden quiet of the room.

Only half listening as the man pleaded his case, Malik's attention was drawn back to his brother. Why now? What had drawn Ciaran out from hiding? Guilt? Surely he would have cast off that as easily as he'd brushed the dirt from his shoes the day he walked into the City he now called home.

A touch on his shoulder brought Malik back to the room. A quick glance up at the confused faces before him had him wondering if perhaps he'd spoken some word out loud.

Forgetting McGlickney's sheep, he closed his folder and got to his feet. With each step towards Ciaran, the tension between them grew. He stopped in front of him. "Give me your name."

He watched Ciaran frown at the question, the hopeful light in his eyes fading.

"Mal, it's m--"

The back of Malik's hand rocked Ciaran's head before he could complete the sentence. Ciaran stumbled back a step before straightening. "What did you do that for?"

"I asked for your name, thief."

Ciaran rubbed at the side of his face, bound hands close together, and looked searchingly at Malik. "Ciaran," he said finally. Malik could see something else was on the tip of his tongue, but Ciaran bit it back.

His jaw muscles began to tick and he clenched his teeth down hard. The arrogance of this stranger coming here and using that beloved name. His hand itched to lash out again. This wasn't his brother. His Ciaran died. This man was a ghost, a shell of the person he once adored. The hurt on Ciaran's face only made him angrier.

He waved his hand at the guard and barked, "Take them all out." Then, pointing, he glared at Ciaran. "Leave him."

"But, Sir?"

"Out!" he roared.

The guard didn't hesitate twice. The room was quickly emptied. Thorpe left last with a sharp nod, closing the door behind him.

Satisfied, Malik turned back to Ciaran, eyes narrowing as he moved in a half-circle. He watched his brother shift under his assessing gaze. He'd learned so much from his years under Kava. How to make a captive worry, keep him off guard, make him wonder if the next breath is his last.

"Mal," Ciaran tried again, "Don't you remember your own brother?"

Malik moved before the thought to do so fully formulated in his brain. "Don't!" he spat, eyes blazing into the matching blue ones before him. "Don't say that!" He forced Ciaran back several steps until his back slammed against the wall, Malik's forearm pressing hard against his throat. Letting everything he felt in his heart fill his eyes, he watched his long lost twin for a long moment before speaking slowly and distinctly. "I have no brother."

Chapter Three

The cell was filthy. That was the only word to describe the stench and grime that overlaid everything in sight. The rags covering the cot looked disease-ridden at best, but the floorboards looked worse, so Ciaran sat down and waited.

It was a much longer wait than he expected.

Two and a half days later, he finally heard a familiar voice singing his name from down the corridor. He listened as footsteps grew louder until the light shifted and he knew Malik was standing just outside the iron bars of the cell.

Earlier, Ciaran might have immediately sprung up in anger, but now he just glanced over, surveying his brother from the dust on his boots, to the fitted black coat that reached past his thighs, on up to the thin line of his lips. So familiar--the face, the voice, the set of the shoulders--and yet so utterly different. Had Ciaran really been so arrogant as to think he could come here to save his brother from the monsters? His brother was one of the monsters.

"What kept you? I've only been sitting here for three days."

Malik took the keys from the guard and waved him away. "You'll get used to it."

Hope shriveled in Ciaran's heart as he swung himself upright. So, the scene in the courtroom couldn't be blamed on temporary insanity. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Doing this." Ciaran gestured around himself.

"This is what I do, Ciaran. This is who I am."

"You stupid bastard." It wasn't the best he could do by way of curses, but it felt good to start somewhere. "I came here to see you."

"Oh? What exactly did you come here to see? To see that the sickness didn't kill me too? Did you finally get word that I made it through and come back to finish the job?"

On his feet, the bars clanged when Ciaran gripped them. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't fucking care why you're here, Ci." Malik's tone was slow and measured. "You're nothing more than a thief in my land."

"Your land?"

"Do you know what we do to thieves here?"

"I don't care, Mal! I gave up everything to come looking for you. Do you understand? Everything!"

"Don't." Malik's lips turned down in disgust. "Don't fucking make this about you losing your soft bed and your live-in maids who wake you up with a fucking blow job every morning."

For a moment Ciaran could only blink; then the full meaning of the accusation hit him, and a chill settled into his gut. "You knew," he said softly, not wanting to believe it. "All this time, you knew where I was."

A small smile of triumph spread over Malik's lips. "Of course I knew. I'm not

stupid, Ci."

Ciaran took a few agitated steps around the tiny cell. "All this time I thought you were dead."

"Well, I wasn't. Happy now?"

"They told me you were. They said there was a body!" Anger and hurt crushed his heart in equal measures. He looked accusingly at Malik. "You could have told me. I've spent years thinking you and the rest of the village were all--"

"Shut up!" Malik roared. His hands suddenly snaked out and grabbed Ciaran by the collar, surprising him with their strength and pulling him in so his cheek was pressed against the cold metal. Malik's breath washed over the side of his face. "Don't ever talk to me about that. Ever!"

Pain sliced through Ciaran's head, stabbing at the spot in his mind where the feeling of his brother had always resided. He cringed as a fresh wave of nausea sapped his strength. "Fuck you," he spat, trying to make the words more powerful than they felt.

Malik shoved him away, laughing softly. "Fuck me. Brilliant, Ciaran. Actually, it's more like *you're fucked*. Do you know what we do with thieves here?"

"You asked me that already," Ciaran muttered, checking the side of his lip for blood.

"We send them to the mines." The left corner of Malik's lip curled up. "If I choose to make it so, you'll spend the rest of your life in darkness, pulling stones from the earth."

Ciaran made a disgusted noise.

"But as it happens, I'm in need of a slave. It seems you've come at just the right time."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"But I didn't even *do* anything!"

"You have a choice to make, *brother*." Malik's face darkened, promising pain should his temper fail to hold. "The mines or slavery. Either way, you're mine. No one else knows who you are here. No one else cares."

"Go fuck yourself," Ciaran muttered again, too tired to think of anything more original, and lowered himself back down on the cot. He crossed his ankles and covered his eyes with one hand. *Fifteen years and my brother's gone insane*. It was the only explanation.

"You have an hour to decide."

Ciaran held his breath until Malik's footsteps faded away.

Chapter Four

Malik didn't hesitate before opening the door and moving into the Great Hall. Hesitation was for the weak, yet another lesson learned the hard way at Kava's hand. Inside, people were milling around with no real reason to be there but no other place to be. Several of his men lined the wall and guarded the exits, watchful of each and every person. He nodded to them as he passed.

With Ciaran's ring, which the jailer had reluctantly provided when pressed, it had been easy to dig up all the information on the prominent Vash family. And the lie about knowing Ciaran's whereabouts all along had come far easier to his tongue than Malik had liked. Whether Ciaran had known if Malik lived or not, he certainly hadn't come looking, and that was all Malik cared about.

It felt colder inside the hall, away from the sunlight; but the chill could just as easily have been caused by the sparseness of the decor. A single tapestry lent color to one wall, and small high windows marked off every ten feet along the sides. There was an absence of any other furniture in the gray expanse of the room; Kava had always insisted on keeping the imposing room as free of comforts as possible. The large throne-like chair at the far end of the space had a smaller chair beside it that was reserved for visiting dignitaries or, occasionally, Malik himself.

The desk where Kava's secretary normally sat was empty, the man's nasal voice hushed and whispered from another corner of the hall. Malik kept walking, turning only after passing the last large column and stopping at a heavy and ornate door. He knocked twice, waiting until he heard the answering shout of permission to enter.

Kava's private office was as opposite from the outer room as night was from day. Rich luxurious colors and textures covered every surface, and soft places to sit abounded. But Malik knew the comfort the room seemed to exude was a lie. Even silk burned if applied correctly to the skin.

"There you are, my son. Come here and sit with me." The deep baritone of Kava's voice came from behind silken veils which separated the opulent bed from the rest of the office.

The insides of Malik's stomach started to churn as he approached, memories of all the days and nights he'd spent in this room with Kava climbed through his consciousness and he panicked, wondering if Kava was alone. He spied a small figure beside Kava's larger form behind the white gauze and relaxed.

Moving aside the curtain, Malik looked down at the figures on the bed. Kava was propped up on large red pillows, his robe open and his legs spread out, one knee bent with a ledger of some sort balanced upon it. He was still a handsome man, as large and solid as he was in his youth, but age had taken its toll. The scars on Kava's body spoke of years of war and violence, his once black hair was now streaked with shots of silver. On his other side, there was a young man, no doubt barely of legal age. He was skinny and tanned deeper than Malik could remember any of the regular slaves being. Usually Kava liked them small and pale. *They look weaker that way*, he once said.

The boy was busy sucking and, in some moments, choking on Kava's cock. He lay on his stomach, his hands held behind his back with a thin strip of black leather, and his legs parted and bent at the knee. Each ankle was tied with more of the black leather and then looped up and tied off to the leather at his hands. Hogtied. A position Kava particularly liked because the slave had no real leverage if he were tipped and forced deeper on Kava's cock.

Tearing his eyes from the sight of the gasping youth, Malik met Kava's amused expression.

"Wish it were you, boy?" Kava's eyes were full of gleeful malice. "It can be arranged."

Malik bowed his head in submission, leaving it to the other man to decide his fate.

After a long moment, Kava grunted and smacked the boy on the back of his head. "Watch your fucking teeth or I'll have them pulled out," he growled. "What do you need, Malik?" he asked, pushing the boy's head down and holding him there.

Malik forced himself to stand loose-limbed and calm. "You once told me that if ever I found the need for a slave of my own, I was to tell you."

Kava's eyes lit up and he nodded, waiting for Malik to continue.

Malik stilled himself, he had to get this right. There could be no mistakes. If he was to keep Ciaran, he had to say it exactly right. "Today brought someone. I wish to see how long it will take to break him."

"Does this creature have a name?"

"Ciaran."

"Idiot!" Kava bolted up and threw the boy to the side, using his foot to push him completely off the bed. "What did I tell you about your teeth!"

Malik forced himself not to wince at the pained whimper from where the boy went over the side. Instead he looked steadily into Kava's eyes as the bigger man rubbed his wet cock. "Fine. Take your slave, Malik. I'll expect you to present him at court when he's been properly trained."

Malik bowed his head. "Of course, my lord."

A brisk knock at the door announced another visitor, effectively ending their meeting. Kava waved vaguely. "Enjoy, Malik."

Malik nodded again, permitting himself the smallest of smiles before turning on his heel and leaving the room.

Chapter Five

Much to Ciaran's disappointment, Malik didn't return to his cell within the promised hour. Several more days went by without his seeing anyone other than the ragged old man who came once a day to bring food and empty the small pail in the corner. Ciaran tried to speak to him, but the conversation was always one-sided.

Though always hungry, on the whole Ciaran didn't feel as ill. His body had easily recovered from the time spent traveling, and he wondered if it was the time to rest, or the proximity to Malik that did it.

He considered Malik's offer, but it hardly seemed like much of a choice. Manual labor in a cold dark place where he'd quickly be forgotten was out of the question. Someone would come looking for him eventually, and he'd rather be someplace he was likely to be found. Of course, there was still the chance Malik would come to his senses, but Ciaran couldn't afford to hold his breath.

Slavery, as he understood the customs of the land, was more like indentured servitude. He'd seen a lot of servants since he crossed Kava's borders. They were everywhere. People were sold into it, suckered into it or just born into it. They usually ended up staying, not because escape was impossible, but rather because they just had no place else to go; and once they were marked, few would hire them anyway.

Ciaran wasn't crazy about the 'marked' part, but he tried to look on the bright side - or he would look there as soon as he figured out what that might be.

Finally the tedium came to an end. He was moved and given a hot bath. The clean clothes he was provided with told him Malik had made the decision for both of them. The arrogance of it grated at him even as it gave him hope. Perhaps his brother couldn't bear to send him away after all.

The walk from the prison area was cool, the air breezy. The simple cotton pants and shirt he'd been given offered Ciaran little protection against the chill of the coming fall, but he was happy to feel the fresh air on his face again.

Despite the chain that bound his right foot to his left, the guard still insisted on maintaining an annoyingly tight grip on his elbow as they followed the stone path leading up the hill and away from the buildings that made up the town's center to the larger, more ornate buildings above.

Ciaran reluctantly admitted the stonework of the largest building was at least as ornate as something he might have seen at home. The quality of the furnishings inside surprised him as well.

Malik's office was bright when Ciaran entered it. He squinted at the sun pouring in through the tall windows behind where his brother sat at his desk, studying paperwork. The rich burgundy carpet felt pleasantly soft under the thin soles of Ciaran's new shoes, and he risked jerking his elbow away from the guard, only to find

it gripped more tightly.

He wanted to ask just what it was Malik did here that had earned him such luxurious surroundings. He seemed to have made out almost as well as Ciaran; both orphans, and both in positions of relative authority by the time they'd reached thirty years of age. Perhaps the God Father Owen always talked about had watched over them equally.

He regarded the stiff set of Malik's shoulders. Perhaps not.

He waited quietly for Malik to speak first, hoping to gain more by silence this time around.

"Is he clean?" Malik asked, glancing up from his scribbling.

The guard nodded. "He's been washed and checked completely."

At those words, Malik turned his head to gaze at Ciaran, looking for any sign of what he had thought of that particular procedure. Nothing. *Interesting*.

Malik dismissed the guard with a wave of his hand, turning his attention directly back to his desk and the papers neatly stacked on it. He let the silence stretch until it became uncomfortable. He had hoped the words would come to him as soon as Ciaran walked in, but now he found they were all locked in his throat.

The sound of the chain rattling brought his focus back to Ciaran. He drew a deep breath and finally gave his long lost twin his full attention, checking him over carefully, noting the changes. They'd cut his hair and the sunburn he'd had on the tip of his nose was peeling. The clothes he'd been given were new; Malik had made sure of that. Overall, Ciaran looked wary. Something else was there too. Anger? Malik hid his smile. Yes, he supposed he would be angry, were their positions reversed.

"Are you hungry?"

Ciaran's jaw dropped open. "Is that all you have to say?"

Malik pushed back from the desk with a loud scrape of his chair and moved away from the desk, past where Ciaran was standing, to a bowl of fruit by the door. He grabbed two apples and then returned to stand beside his brother, holding one up to Ciaran's face.

"Are you hungry?" he asked again.

Ciaran's hand twitched a fraction and stilled. "Yes."

The movement was not lost on Malik. "Take a bite."

When Ciaran still refused to budge, Malik put the apple within range of his lips. "Don't be stupid, Ciaran. I'm not going to starve you."

Still nothing.

Exasperated, Malik pulled the apple up to his own lips and took a loud, juicy bite. "Perfectly safe. And quite tasty." He held the fruit up to Ciaran's face again while he chewed. "Take a bite."

The sweet smell hung in the air between them, until finally Ciaran raised a hand slowly to grasp the fruit, fingers careful to avoid Malik's. He yanked it away before

biting off a small piece.

Satisfied that Ciaran would eat in spite of his anger, Malik returned to his desk and sat down on the corner. He bit into his own apple, watching as Ciaran did the same. The silence stretched again, the only sound being the loud crunching of their fruit.

It occurred to Malik that this was the first meal he'd shared with his brother in a long, long time. It felt nice, and he almost opened his mouth to say so before he thought better of it. Why give Ciaran the satisfaction? A flick of his wrist and the half eaten apple was flung into the trash can by the side of his desk.

"The guard will take you to my house. You will be shown your room and someone will explain your duties to you." He picked a quartz paperweight up off his desk, letting it drop from hand to hand while he spoke, not looking over at Ciaran at all. "You will be expected to accomplish all your chores and see to my comfort before you retire for the day."

Ciaran said nothing at first, seeming resigned to his fate. Another empty moment passed. "Why?"

Malik turned his head, eyes hard. "Because that's the way I want it to be."

He moved to the window and looked out over the courtyard. "No one knows who you are and I want to keep it that way. There will be no more talk about what's happened before. No reference to our past, or to who you really are. You're a slave now." He glanced over his shoulder. "My slave."

Ciaran started to interrupt but Malik stopped him with a raised hand. "I don't care to hear your version of what happened after you left. That life is over." Unwelcome images of warm days lying in the tall grass, sharing secrets and stories with his brother flashed through Malik's mind. He thrust them aside like the useless things they were. "Mention the past again and I'll use my whip on you. Is that clear?"

Ciaran blinked in surprise, betraying a hint of fear. Good. It was good to know he feared something.

"If that's how you want it," Ciaran said finally. "But someone will come looking for me eventually. I wasn't as unloved as you would have me."

At that Malik crossed to the desk again. From the top drawer, he retrieved a small, folded piece of cloth and held it up between them. He waited until Ciaran's eyes met his before unwrapping a shining ring of gold with the Vash family crest engraved in black stone. "You *were* loved, Ciaran."

There was a rustle as Malik shook open a piece of paper in his other hand. "Dear Sir," he recited, "I regret to inform you that the body of a young man identified as your son, Ciaran Vash, was found last week by one of our border guard. I am sending his effect to you with my deepest sympathy."

The look he received was one of sheer hatred and Malik's resolve wavered for a brief moment. "They deserve better," Ciaran told him.

Malik shrugged and turned away. "What they deserve is unimportant to me." He tucked the ring back into his pocket. "I'll be home by seven this evening. I expect you to join me for dinner."

Sitting back down at his desk, he picked up his pen and resumed the appearance of writing. After a moment he looked up, "You can go."

Chapter Six

Malik was cold and he needed to piss. The twine wrapping around his wrists was too tight and he wondered if there was anyone around he could ask to loosen it. He wouldn't run. Couldn't, as much as wouldn't. Everyone was dead. There was nowhere to go.

A high wavering cry escaped from behind his tightly clenched teeth and he forced it back down hard. He couldn't think about the past. Think about right now, Mal. Deal with everything else later. What's right now?

He had to pee. That was pretty fucking now.

A rank smell emanated from the back corner. He guessed the last occupant must have used it as a toilet. The thought of peeing in the corner of a small room, a room he had no idea how long he might be in, made him sick to his stomach. He couldn't. He wouldn't.

Closing his eyes, he tried to will his body to relax and forget about the pressing pain on his bladder.

"You've a bladder the size of a pea, brother!"

Malik smiled at the ghost of Ciaran's voice, but just as quickly, his face twisted and fell. He didn't want to think of Ciaran. Not here, not in this horrible place. Still, he was unable to stop the memories from creeping into his mind.

It only took two months for everyone in the village to die. The sickness spread faster than anyone expected. Father Owen had said they would have time. Time for Ciaran to get back with the needed medicine, but day by day the hope of that died a little bit more.

At first he tried to keep up with the burials, working with one of the nuns or the villagers until it was just him and his shovel and a few words he remembered from Father Owen's preaching. He might have gone a little mad, living first in one house and then another, eating the food that remained until it was gone or spoiled so badly it made him sick to eat.

When the men on horses came thundering into the village, he'd barely had time enough to dive into a pile of refuse before they set about pillaging and burning. The stench of rotting vegetables almost drowned out the smell of smoke rising from the monastery. It was his weeping that finally gave away his hiding place.

A door slammed down the hall and pulled Malik back from his memories. He still had to piss and pressed his legs together hard, biting almost completely through his bottom lip with his teeth. He would not piss himself! Not here, not where it could be the end of whatever pride he had left. He'd rather die.

Stomach twisting at the scrape of the iron door to his cell opening, he scrambled his feet against the floor until his back pressed against the stone. The rough surface poked at his bones, the cold of the wall leaking through the thin fabric of what was left of his shirt.

"What's this one's name?"

Malik looked up and kept looking, the man speaking was huge. Bigger than Father Owen even, who until a few minutes ago, had been the biggest person he knew, and for the first time Malik started to really fear what was to come.

"He hasn't said. Actually, says here he hasn't said anything at all. He's from the last village we went through. Found him hiding in the trash heap." The second man was smaller than the first, with a long jagged scar bisecting one cheek. Malik watched the scar contort with

each word spoken. "Think he's dumb?"

Red hot anger burned through him and he jerked away from the cold wall, wincing when the movement wrenched at his chaffing wrists. "I'm not stupid! I can talk!" he scowled, hatred shooting from his dark eyes.

The big one chuckled. "It speaks. A little spitfire, isn't he?"

Scar nodded. "Could be more trouble than he's worth though, Kava."

The big one, Kava, stroked his chin with large meaty fingers. "True, but there's something about him."

Malik kept his back straight and his eyes steady as Kava moved closer, pinning him to the cold floor with a colder stare. "Are you trouble, boy? Am I going to regret keeping you here? Or will you run away the minute I free you from your bonds."

Malik thought of Ciaran smiling and waving goodbye as he left the village, the sunlight making his golden hair glow and the soft breeze lifting it off his neck. He remembered the feeling of complete despair when the connection he'd always shared with his brother sputtered and went out several weeks later.

He was alone. There was no one left.

"I would have nowhere to go." Malik offered softly, defeat and defiance together. His gaze fell to the floor.

"Hmph. Clean him up, Timmor, take him to my household. We'll see what he turns into."

Chapter Seven

Malik's assessment of the day was dirty. Actually, dirty and windy. Grit and grime were stuck to every part of him, embedded into his skin and clothes. A bath and then supper were all he desired. And perhaps, to see his brother.

As soon as he entered the house, he called for Ciaran.

His twin had been on his mind all day, flitting in and out of his awareness during routine meetings and drills, including a brief but uncomfortable audience with Kava.

He wondered how Ciaran was settling in. Did he like Malik's house? Did he see the small touches Malik had made to it to make it his own? Would he get along with the servants? Surely Ciaran had a history with dealing with servants from his former life in the City.

Today marked Ciaran's second full day in the house. Dashi, the enthusiastic young slave Malik had inherited from Timmor, had been showing him all his responsibilities. Malik chuckled to himself at the thought of Dashi's eagerness overrunning Ciaran's irritation.

All of the slaves in his house had been Timmor's. The man whose scarred face had once frightened Malik speechless had eventually come to be his mentor. When Timmor passed on, his possessions were given to Malik, by Kava's decree, along with the position of Judge and Jury.

The harem quarters alone housed over thirty slaves, many of whom were too old to be desirable any more. Then there were the household staff of seven or eight--it always seemed to Malik that there were one or two working on the grounds that he did not recognize, but he paid little attention. Long ago, Malik gave control over the harem to Daniel, the harem master, and appointed Jared, Timmor's head of house, to run everything else.

As long as he wasn't bothered with the mundane details, Malik was relatively happy. The home was much more spacious than his previous residence, and it afforded him the privacy and peace he craved.

Pulling off his coat, he threw it onto a chair as he navigated through the main hall and towards the back rooms. "Ciaran!" he called again.

Nothing.

A moment of panic gripped him, accompanied by a vision of Ciaran making his way through town in an effort to escape.

Surely not.

Then the sounds of chains rustling and muffled grumbling reached him from the kitchen and Malik relaxed. Ciaran was still with him.

He turned the corner to take in the view of his highly irritated brother, stopping just outside the entrance to the kitchen, one hand on the wall, the other scratching at the skin around his ankle shackles. It would almost be amusing if it were another time and place, but Malik wisely kept his laughter to himself.

Ciaran glanced up, not stopping his fussing over his chafed skin. "I didn't realize you were back."

Malik considered how to reply, seeing as his yelling had to have been heard throughout the entire house. But just then the door swung open and Jared rushed out of the kitchen, a stack of linen in his arms blocking his view. Taking the corner too sharply, he bumped Ciaran on the shoulder which sent them both tumbling over amidst a pile of linens.

Immediately, the old slave turned on Ciaran. "Clumsy oaf," he scolded, the wooden staff he used to keep the other servants in line raised and ready for the downward blow. "Look what you've done! A full day's laundry, ruined!"

Ciaran flinched like someone already well acquainted with use and force of the implement, and Malik found he did not like the look of that one bit. In a flash, he lunged forward, grabbing the old man's wrist in a punishing grip, staying his hand before it could inflict any damage. "This is my personal slave, and I would take it," he said in a low and dangerous voice, "as a direct attack on me if you laid so much as an eyelash upon his person."

"But my lord!" Jared protested with all the indignation of a slave of his status. "He is lazy and must be corrected!"

Malik's grip on the older man's wrist tightened still more and he almost expected to hear bones cracking and shattering as Jared crumpled and began to whine, his staff falling to the ground opposite Ciaran. "You are no longer needed in my house."

"My lord?" Released, Jared scrambled to stand up. "I have served you well!"

"Not well enough." Malik pointed to the doorway. "Go."

Eyes wide, the man scuttled away. Malik waited a beat before looking down and offering a hand to Ciaran. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," Ciaran muttered, ignoring the gesture and pushing to his feet.

Hurt, but not surprised by the cool response, Malik turned his attention to his dust covered clothes. "I'm in need of a bath. Did Dashi show you where that is?"

Ciaran's dark stare lingered on him long enough for Malik to worry what might come out of his mouth next, but finally Ciaran nodded. "I'll go ready one," he said, departing blessedly without argument.

Malik watched him go, a wry smile twisting his lips. Two days and his brother had already gone and made him lose his chief household servant. He groaned inwardly at all the mundane decisions he'd be asked to make now and wondered if Dashi might be up to the task.

By the time he walked into the bath house, his skin was practically itching. He wanted the clothes he was wearing off, and he wanted to start a very long soak.

Ciaran, he noticed, was making himself appear busy with the towels. Malik wondered how much training his brother had been given. "Come here."

Ciaran tensed at the command. His lips set in a thin line of resignation as he crossed the room, skirting around the edges of the pool to where Malik stood. His expression made it clear he knew full well what was required of a bath slave. "I can't do this, Malik. You're my *brother*."

A clinch of his jaw was the only reaction Malik allowed himself to that word. "No, Ciaran. You're my slave. You have to start..." he trailed off, suddenly exhausted.

It was just the second day, he told himself. Ciaran would learn.

He sighed deeply, letting the anger flow out of him and disappear into the vapor of the hot room. "Fine, stand over there in the corner and just..." He rubbed his hand against his tired eyes. "Do you think you can be quiet for an hour?" He started to undress, not looking to see if Ciaran moved or stayed where he was. He was tired and dirty and he needed this soak. Needed to relax. Needed the silence.

Bemused when the expected argument didn't come, Ciaran shrugged at Malik's indifference and took the easy way out, moving to the corner and sinking down onto his heels. It was frightening how quickly his brother's anger had flared in the kitchen, and equally strange how quickly it could dissipate.

In the low flickering of the lantern, he was able to make out the scars and foreign tattoos that marked his brother's body as he undressed, the evidence of all that had happened while they were apart. His eyes lingered on a long black mark flowing down the left half of Malik's back like a serpent.

The water lapped the edges of the pool as Malik settled into it and found a seat on the ledge between the bottom and the surface. Tired lines marred his forehead even as he rested, and something akin to sympathy bubbled up in Ciaran's chest. Sympathy. But not guilt for the crime Malik had convicted him of. Ciaran hadn't known. He couldn't have known.

"They talk about you," he said softly, disturbing the uneasy silence. "They say you hardly let anyone near you."

"*They* should mind their own business."

Ciaran had to stifle the urge to move closer, certain it would only lead to trouble. "They say that I must please you greatly, because in all the time you've lived here you haven't taken a slave of your own." The words echoed in the cavern of a room. They represented but one of the curious things Ciaran had learned over the last two days. He kept the more graphic stories to himself, not sure how far Malik expected to carry this charade.

"Then they can see I've picked the fairest in the land," Malik replied with a mocking smile. He cupped his hands full of water, then splashed it on his face and ran his hands through his hair. "They told you about the...other duties." Ciaran's nod was as bland as he could make it, but Malik still scowled at him. "I'm not a monster, Ci." He reached for the clay jar of fragrant soap, but Ciaran had placed it too far from the lip of the pool, and his fingertips just missed it.

"I'll get it." The offer to help was instinctive. Ciaran regretted it, however, when he remembered that simply getting up with the chains around his ankles was an annoying task. They'd already argued over that point, however, and Ciaran had resoundingly lost.

He stooped down and picked up the jar, holding it out to Malik, the desire to touch his brother hitting him hard and unexpectedly. They'd been within inches of one another several times now, without a single caring touch between them.

Malik reached for the jar and carefully slipped it free from Ciaran's fingers. The rich herb smells escaped when he twisted open the jar and he poured a generous amount into his cupped hand. Ciaran looked on in silence, watching each muscle shift beneath the skin as Malik washed himself, unable to help wondering what it would feel like to touch them.

"I won't touch you, Ci. But there has to be some sort of..." Malik paused, thinking of the right word. "Illusion. Your position is traditionally one of seeing to my every comfort. Everyone must assume you are doing so."

"Why should I help you maintain such an illusion?"

"Help me?" Malik laughed. "I'm not asking you, Ciaran. I'm telling you. It's this or the mines. There is nothing else. I'm willing to give you time to adjust, but I'm only so patient."

Ciaran's control snapped. "Don't give me that nonsense about the mines. You were never going to do that. Where's the fun in abusing someone if you can't watch them suffer?"

"You stupid, pampered child." Malik's eyes blazed, water rolling off him as he stood. "This isn't some joke. This is your life now."

A lancing pain sliced through Ciaran's left temple just as Malik winced from some discomfort of his own. Abruptly, his brother snatched up the jar of soap and hurled it across the room. Ciaran jumped as the clay crashed against the stone.

"Get out," Malik said in a low voice. "Get out before I forget I once cared for you."

Ciaran didn't have it in him to argue. They'd done enough damage to each other for one day.

The next few days passed without mention of the incident. The chains still didn't come off. Perhaps that was Malik's way of being petty. Ciaran couldn't tell for sure.

He slept in a small room adjacent to Malik's suite. It was sparsely furnished and not really much of a bedroom at all, but personal slaves were supposed to sleep inside their master's quarters, if not in their master's bed, as Dashi repeatedly informed him, so Ciaran accepted the room as the gift it was.

The second time he prepared his brother a bath, he simply waded into the water without a word and took up the soap and cloth. He left his clothes on. Malik was surprised but said nothing, just permitted himself to be washed. All in all, it was better when they both said nothing.

Other tasks Ciaran took to well enough. Malik's room was kept clean, his meals delivered on time each morning and evening. If requested, Ciaran also sat and talked to him. He listened to everything Malik said, and then, when it was his turn, smiled and

fetches more wine, biding his time.

Chapter Eight

A soft knock at his office door caught Malik's attention and he shushed his brother's latest series of complaints. "Enter."

A very pleased and blushing Dashi opened the door and allowed a very handsome man in uniform to pass him. It was fairly obvious from the bruised red state of his lips that Dashi had recently been kissed, and kissed thoroughly. His eyes never left Dex's tall form as he strode into the room.

"Dex!" Malik smiled, the visit an unexpected but welcome surprise. He circled the desk to grab hold of his friend and they clapped each other on the shoulders just as they'd done since they were boys struggling to become soldiers. "When did you get back?"

"Just yesterday. I found the countryside a bit too tame for my liking, needed to come home and see what hell you were raising without me."

Malik shook his head fondly and turned to Ciaran with his firm smile. "We're done for now." Ciaran gave him a dark look but left swiftly enough. He rarely spoke more than absolutely necessary when others were present, a trait that suited Malik just fine. He noticed Dashi still hovering uncertainly near the door and chuckled. "We'll be in need of your services to welcome Dex home properly later, Dash."

Dashi nearly vibrated out of his skin at the promise of 'later'. "I will be ready to do my part in welcoming him home, my lord."

"I have no doubt you will."

With an endearing squeak, the young slave departed, leaving the soldiers to share an amused look. "Everything has been solidified along the western borders," Dex said, "Lord Kava should be satisfied."

"Good," Malik nodded. With Kava's latest flurry of requests out of the way, hopefully they could all relax for a while. "Some wine?"

"Please." Dex took his customary seat on the sofa, away from the desk. Malik smiled. Back when he and Dex would visit Timmor in this very office, Dex would always sit to the right, resting his boots with their usual shine up on the leather ottoman. His friend was nothing if not consistent.

Malik handed him a glass and got a mischievous look in return. "So I leave and miss all the excitement?"

Malik felt his face redden in a rare blush. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about." He dropped to the sofa beside his friend, shaking his head with a rueful smile.

"The Great Lord Malik takes an interest in a common slave! Pulls him from prison even."

Malik laughed, embarrassed by the teasing. "There's nothing common about this slave, Dex." He took a deep drink of his wine.

Dex's brows shot up a fraction. "So, the rumors are true. The one that was just here, I'm guessing?"

Malik sighed. "That would be the one."

"Oh, I don't know. He looked common enough to me," Dex teased. "Plain clothes, Malik, you've got to dress them up a bit."

It was a familiar argument. "If it were up to you, every one of my slaves would be wearing gold bands and blindfolds." Malik leaned back and rested his head on the back of the sofa. "Not that I'd mind all that much."

"Well, it would certainly be a start." Dex nudged his foot against Malik's calf. "So, will we see that one with you at court?"

Malik groaned, wondering not for the first time exactly how much gossip there'd been about Ciaran. "I don't know, Dex. I can't really see..." He rubbed a finger around the rim of his glass, thinking about his brother in Kava's court. Ciaran could hardly deliver the mail without complaint, he couldn't fathom the havoc he'd create in Kava's strictly run court. "I don't think he's ready for it."

Dex laughed and rolled his eyes. He slapped Malik on the knee, doing his best Timmor impression, "That's why you train them, my boy!"

"Right." Malik couldn't join in the laughter. He longed to unburden his mind, but as liberated as Dex's thinking was, Malik wasn't sure how he'd take the news that his slave was really his brother. Not that he was pushing anything sexual on Ciaran, not yet, but lately he'd been allowing himself to hope. Which he knew was more than foolish.

Dex frowned. "Not easily charmed?"

"No. Not easily." Malik pulled a pillow out from behind his back and threw it to the chair next to them. "He's been less than happy to find his situation has changed. There are times I'm sure I've done the wrong thing by insisting..." he trailed off with a sigh and scratched fingernails through his hair. "I can't give up on him."

"So you do fancy him then." Dex sounded annoyingly pleased with himself.

"It seems I find myself obsessed with him." Malik got up to pour a new glass of wine. It was easier to walk while he talked about Ciaran than it was to sit.

Dex tracked his every move with a curious glint in his eye. "Obsessed is a strong word for you, Mal."

"Yes, it is." Malik took another swallow. Then he laughed. "Or, I could just be coming down with a cold. Who knows?"

Dex grew serious. "If anyone deserves peace, my friend, it's you."

Malik nodded, unable to comment.

The air grew almost solemn for a moment, and then Dex raised his glass. "Send him to me!" he offered, "I'll train him."

Malik's retort was cut off by a faint knock on the door, and he scowled, irritated by the interruption. "Enter."

The cause of all Malik's current turmoil pushed open the door and took two steps into the room. "Your dinner is ready, my lord." Hands clasped before him, Ciaran gave Malik a stony look, as if sure he'd been the subject of discussion. "Would you like me to serve it here?"

Ignoring the question, Malik looked pointedly at Dex, who was, damn his hide,

smiling like a mad man.

"Ciaran, come here." Malik gestured to a spot to his right and waited for his brother to decide it was an order worth following and come forward, chains at his feet clinking softly. "This is Dex," Malik gestured to the soldier, noting with amusement the way Ciaran scowled at both of them, "and he thinks he could train you to be a better slave than I could. What do you think of that?"

Ciaran blanched for an instant and then hid the surprise behind a wall of contempt. "I wouldn't know, my lord."

"You see, Dex? He has potential, but I don't know."

"I see." Dex hid his smile behind his glass.

Malik cupped Ciaran's chin. "He's pretty enough." His palms traveled down Ciaran's arms, squeezing gently at odd intervals. Then he circled behind him and continued the assessment, feeling Ciaran stiffen more with each touch. "Good bones, good posture. Someone obviously took care of him before he came to our fair country, but he's too soft, and too obstinate to ever be a good slave. He lacks the necessary skills." Malik circled back around and met his brother's glare with practiced detachment.

"If you want another slut for your harem, my lord, I'm sure you can find one easily enough."

Malik almost smiled. There. There was the fire he was expecting. "I'll decide what you are and aren't qualified for in my house, boy." He could have stepped away then, probably should have, but instead he inched closer until the anger vibrating off Ciaran bathed his skin. Unable to resist, Malik brought his fingers back to Ciaran's chin, knowing full well Ciaran only stood for it because they're weren't alone.

He wasn't sure what might have happened if Dex hadn't come up behind him. Firm hands settled easily on Malik's hips as a soft mouth pressed a kiss to the side of his neck. "Let me see him, Mal, this boy you're so taken with."

Malik let himself be steered away. He'd all but promised Ciaran immunity from the sexual contact expected from a slave of his status, but Dex didn't know that, and Malik couldn't help his curiosity. Ciaran's cold demeanor only fueled his desire to push him further. No, if he didn't touch Ciaran himself, then it didn't count.

He sipped his wine and watched Dex move into Ciaran's space like it was nothing. "You look at me, slave," Dex ordered. "And only me."

The muscles of Ciaran's jaw bunched as he clenched down on a retort. Malik remembered that look, the same one Ciaran used whenever someone would try and come between them when they were younger. Pure defiance. It didn't deter Dex in the slightest.

"Widen your stance and put your arms out to the side." Dex lifted Ciaran's arms, finding them rigid, hands clenched at the ends of his sleeves. He only smiled. "Yes, like that." He proceeded to run his hands over Ciaran's face and neck, chuckling and glancing over his shoulder when Ciaran growled at him. "Oh, I see why you're so taken with him."

Gently, he rubbed his thumbs against Ciaran's nipples until, Ciaran was flushed

with embarrassment, and the little nubs peaked under the thin material of the shirt.

Malik found himself unable to move or speak. His fingers dug into the armrest. Just as Dex's hand perused lower, Ciaran took an involuntary step back, his expression one of pure outrage. "I'm not going to be anyone's whore!"

Malik held his breath. If he took steps to protect Ciaran from Dex it would make him look far more attached than he preferred to appear.

"Be still, boy." Dex didn't seem at all surprised. "No one is going to fuck you today. I'm simply taking a look at you. But move again and I'll take a whip to your lily white skin." Ciaran turned a desperate eye to Malik before Dex caught his chin and turned his face towards him. "You look at me, slave. I won't remind you again." It took only a moment for Ciaran's eyes to fall to the floor.

Malik loosened his grip on the sofa and smiled woodenly as Dex laughed. "I can see where your problem lies. He's a fighter, this one."

His head was spinning slightly and he was extraordinarily grateful when Dex decided he'd had enough and pressed Ciaran's hands back down to his sides. Malik extended his arm in invitation and welcomed Dex to sit and lean against him in a familiar embrace. "So you see my dilemma then?"

"I do. I do. But he has potential, Mal." They both stared at Ciaran for a long moment, taking the time to appreciate how beautiful and erotic a picture he presented in his defiant stance, loose cotton leaving just the right amount up to the imagination as it flowed over his body.

"He's worth it, Malik," Dex whispered softly in his ear.

Malik smiled a moment, and then nodded to Ciaran. "We'll have dinner in the dining room. Inform Dashi he is to attend to us there." He waved his hand in dismissal.

Dex waited a full second after the door closed before softening into Malik's side. "Malik," he said, stretching the name out playfully as his hand slid up Malik's thigh, "What exactly was that all about?"

"Nothing." Malik closed his eyes and let his head fall back.

"That was far from nothing. What aren't you telling me?" Dex had the tone of a man who wasn't going to give up on his line of questioning.

"He's--" Malik sighed and shook his head. It was too soon for confessions. "He reminds me of someone I once knew."

"A lover?" Dex guessed, brushing the back of his hand gently against Malik's cheek. He peered into Malik's eyes as if reading leaves at the bottom of a tea cup. "No, an almost lover."

"Something like that." Malik sighed, deep and weary, and ran his fingers through Dex's dark hair. "No more questions now."

Dex shrugged. "How about a kiss then, for old time's sake?" A shadow of a remembered pain passed over Malik's face, and Dex soothed it away with a whisper, "No one can touch us here, Malik. Trust me."

"I know." Malik's hand was already moving over his friend's thigh with familiarity as he leaned in. "Welcome back, Dex."

Chapter Nine

Kava, Malik quickly learned, ruled over all the land east of the City. Malik didn't really grasp how big that was or what it exactly meant, but he did know they traveled almost three whole days from the village to get to the place he would be calling home.

Becoming part of Kava's household was a challenge from the very start. After his meeting with the big man, Malik found himself swiftly moved from the dank dark of the cell blocks to the huge airy house on the hill. He only caught a glimpse of his new home before being shoved into a bath and stripped. He started to protest, but barely had time to utter a word before he was nude and dunked into a wooden tub full of slippery soap suds.

After several washings, and the hacking off of his hair by a forceful woman with scissors, Malik was shown to a smaller room containing a single bed and a small window high up near the ceiling. The door to his room was slammed shut and locked from the outside.

That was when he started talking to Ciaran again. He imagined that even though he could no longer feel Ciaran in his head, his brother was still out there somewhere, struggling to get back to him. He told himself that once Ciaran arrived, they'd leave this horrible place and go somewhere far, far away. Somewhere like the village, where they could hide from the world.

Malik spent weeks locked in that tiny room, coming out once a day for various bouts of training and evaluation to see where he would best fit into Kava's household. Kava's staff of servants, body slaves and private guards bustled around him constantly. Surely, that was the only word to describe it. They bustled around so much that the noise and activity after days of only deathly stillness started to hurt Malik's head. He began to look forward more and more to the long stretches alone in his locked room.

After a sufficient amount of time had passed, they allowed him more freedom in the house, setting him first in the kitchen scrubbing pots. A thick chain linking his feet together and then running down to a ring on the floor prevented him from leaving his assigned area. He was told it would only be there until he could be trusted. He learned that a job well done got him an extra slice of bread with the evening stew, and a poorly done job got him a swift beating before bed. After a week straight of extra bread, the chains were removed.

Malik met with Kava once during his first month. When the big man summoned him to his office, Malik stood there, hands clenched at his side as Kava popped grapes into his mouth and looked him over.

"How do you fare in my house?" Kava asked.

"I am...adjusting."

"Are you well?"

"Well enough."

Kava didn't touch him, not physically at any rate, but his eyes peeled the clothing from Malik's body and claimed him just the same.

The next day he found himself in the care of one of the body slaves. The man's oiled skin and painted body parts were clearly visible under a shimmering gauze shift. Embarrassed, Malik averted his eyes at first, Father Owen's voice ringing in his ears, lecturing on modesty and decorum. But the slave's proud posture and demeanor practically shouted out his importance and status in the household, and Malik soon realized that to survive in his new world, he would

need to adopt a different way of thinking. Change or become just another in the mass of beautiful but empty eyes of Kava's harem.

Chapter Ten

It had been one week since Dex's visit, and in that time Ciaran was sure he'd become the surliest slave Malik had ever seen. And yet, each time he tried to vent his anger over being dangled in front of Malik's friend and fondled like a piece of meat, he found his feelings coldly deflected. Malik refused to discuss what happened, except to repeat that Ciaran was a slave now and that he must learn to act like it.

Ciaran found himself dwelling on the matter. If he had defied Dex and moved again without permission, would Malik have stopped the promised whipping? He felt decidedly uneasy about the answer.

The rest of the slaves made no effort to hide their disapproval of him, shunning him as someone who would only bring trouble upon them. Even Dashi, who'd been the nicest to him by far, refused to sympathize. The young slave instead rose up to his full height and proceeded to scold Ciaran for trying Dex's patience.

The injustice of it all simmered beneath the surface of Ciaran's skin.

At midday, he collected the day's mail from the doorstep. He secretly enjoyed this task because it gave him a glance into Malik's life. He would rifle through the envelopes, studying the writing on them and holding each up to the light. Accustomed to being left to fend for himself in boredom for most of the day, he was deciphering the fancy script on a pale yellow envelope when he unexpectedly came upon Malik in his office.

Ciaran froze in the doorway, but the jangling of the infernal chains still binding his ankles gave his presence away. Malik glanced up from his writing. "I didn't call you."

"No."

"What do you want, Ciaran?"

Shuffling in front of the huge oak desk, Ciaran tossed the letters towards his brother. They smeared the ink on the page when they landed. "Your mail."

Malik regarded the mess and took a deep breath, exhaling softly. "Your mail, Sir," he corrected. Ciaran glowered at him. "Pick it up and do it again," Malik said, "This time, properly."

Pursing his lips to keep from letting an insult slip through, Ciaran picked up the envelopes, lined them up neatly and smacked them down on the edge of the desk.

Malik arched an eyebrow and a hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Better. Again."

"No," Ciaran said coldly.

"Yes."

Without another word, Ciaran's hand swooped down, snatched the letters and threw them. They hit Malik in the chest and then fluttered in different directions.

With a sigh, Malik stood, gathered them up and placed them back on the desk. "And Father Owen always called you the smarter one. Pick them up and do it again, or they'll be no dinner for you tonight."

"I'm not a child, Mal."

"Then I suggest you stop acting like one. Do it again."

Ciaran clenched his teeth until they made a grinding sound. Only the thought of ink spilling onto the carpet kept him from using an arm to wipe all the contents of the desktop onto the floor. He already knew first hand, from three days previously, exactly how hard it was to get ink stain out of the carpet.

"No."

Malik circled the desk slowly, a slight smile on his lips. A blur was all the warning Ciaran got before the back of Malik's hand connected with his face and laid him out on the ground. Ciaran paused to verify that the wetness on his chin was, in fact, blood and to register the dispassionate expression on Malik's face, before he scrambled back up and lunged into Malik for all he was worth.

Too easily, Malik side stepped the attack. Foolishly, Ciaran repeated the process. The second time, Malik caught his hands in a simple twist and began to drag Ciaran towards the door.

"What are you doing?"

Malik's grip was like iron around his wrists. Ciaran struggled half to keep up with Malik's pace and half to get away, but his feet were hopelessly twisted in the chains and they kept slipping out from under him. It was embarrassing how weak he was compared to his brother, weaker physically, weaker emotionally.

"If you can't learn yourself, then I'll have to teach you."

"Let me go, Mal."

"The correct way to address me is, my lord."

"You ungrateful, bastard," Ciaran growled, twisting his wrists savagely to pry them loose. "Do you realize what I went through? I thought you were dead!" Malik's forward motion continued unimpeded. "You goddamned--" Ciaran spluttered. Curses never were his strong point. "You goddamned, son of a whore!"

That seemed to merit some attention, for Malik stopped and hauled Ciaran to his feet, pinning him to the wall with a hand clamped over Ciaran's mouth. For the first time Ciaran noticed Anika, a house slave from whom Ciaran had never found much sympathy, standing by them, eyes wide. No doubt she'd never heard her master referred to as such, and Ciaran used the moment of distraction to kick at Malik's knees, only to find himself pressed a moment later, full body, against the wall.

"Come here, girl." Malik spoke with a kindness so incongruent to his iron grip that Ciaran thought to strangle him in his sleep. "Give me your scarf."

Malik pressed his other hand to Ciaran's lips and reached out with a smile. The girl gave him the scarf and then, at his nod, backed away until she disappeared around the corner.

He turned back to Ciaran, lowering his voice as he wadded up the bright red material in his hand up, "Shut up, Ciaran. I told you, I didn't want to hear this. None of it. Ever." The hold shifted from Ciaran's mouth to his throat. "Now, are you going to be quiet, or am I going to gag you?"

Ciaran looked from the scarf to Malik's face. "You wouldn't."

Malik pressed tight against him until their mouths were almost touching. "I will."

Ciaran hesitated at the odd sensation of Malik's breath on his face and then shoved hard at his chest. "Go fuck yourself," he spat, "I'll tell everyone here about your little secret, tell everyone how you keep your own--"

Ciaran found his mouth full of fabric faster than he could think. The scarf was scented with some sort of perfume; the taste was vile. In his struggle to push the dry cloth out with his tongue, Ciaran barely resisted being dragged further down the hall until finally a door was opened and he found himself shoved sideways.

The room was small enough to be a closet. Ciaran stumbled in the dark, hands falling to his knees as he coughed up the gag. Too soon it was roughly pushed back into his mouth with a tie added, circling his head and holding the fabric in place. His pants slipped off his hips and he realized Malik had used the drawstring that held them up.

Ciaran fought but Malik knew the room and its contents better than he did. Within minutes his face crushed against the floor and his hands bound behind his back.

"I told you," Malik was saying, "I won't have it."

Fueled by weeks of pent up frustration he was finally free to express, Ciaran protested with every part of his body he could still move. He barely noticed the sound of fabric ripping, but the chill got his attention. Malik had systematically torn all the clothes from his body.

His muffled screams grew louder, as he twisted around to look up at the shadow of his brother in the doorway with sheer fury. Malik's face was grim. He disappeared and returned with blankets over his arm and a pail of something Ciaran guessed was water from the way he carried it. He set it in the corner then set a matching empty pail in the other corner. He lay one blanket out next to Ciaran over the stone, but Ciaran kicked at him when he moved close, so the second one was deposited in the corner next to the pail.

"I warned you," Malik said, the set of his shoulders tired but determined.

Ciaran heard the door's lock slide into place. With the door shut, the darkness was complete. No crack of light leaked under the door, but there was a small glass square near the top. Ciaran continued to yell muffled insults and threats through the gag until his voice was gone, but no one returned.

The little cell was dead silent when he finally quieted. It was a good place for slaves who'd lost their minds. Shove them away and don't think about them. But Ciaran hadn't lost his mind. He was all too sane. Which seemed to be the problem.

It seemed like hours before the door opened again. Ciaran's stomach told him it was long past lunch time, probably near dinner.

He squinted over his shoulder and groaned when he realized it was Dashi who'd come to see him. The situation was humiliating enough without having to be seen this way by the others.

"So difficult," Dashi tsked as he stooped down beside him.

The gag kept Ciaran from answering.

Light spilled in from the hall and reflected off the gold at Dashi's neck. He grinned when Ciaran noticed it and splayed his fingers over his throat. "Isn't it wonderful? It's new!" Ciaran could only assume it meant something significant given the way Dashi showed it off, seemingly unconcerned that Ciaran was tied up naked on the floor. Ciaran grunted at him in annoyance.

Dashi's deep brown eyes remained placid as he checked Ciaran's bindings over, fingers dancing over the side of Ciaran's face and down to the wrists bound at the small of his back.

Ciaran grimaced, imagining Malik giving the order with a dismissing wave of his hand, *Dashi, go make sure he hasn't hurt himself*. Did he really care so little for him? His brother

Finding nothing broken beyond the cuts where the ropes bit into Ciaran's skin as he struggled, Dashi rolled Ciaran onto his side, helping him bend his legs at the hip and knee for balance. "I don't know why he wants you. You're so poorly behaved." He ran a playful hand over Ciaran's flank, blithely ignoring the resulting glare. "I'm being sold to a new master because of you." He teased a knowing finger over Ciaran's genitals, laughing when Ciaran growled. "A new, handsome master who will let me serve him properly."

Dashi was at the end of his training to become a pleasure slave and he would frequently babble on at great length about the many pleasure oriented rituals he was learning. Ciaran had blocked most of Dashi's descriptions out in distaste. Where he was from, if you wanted a man or a woman for such services, you paid for them. And paid well.

Dashi dipped a cloth into the bucket in the corner. He squeezed the liquid over Ciaran's mouth, wetting the gag, and then wiped Ciaran's face carefully. "You embarrass him, acting like this. People say he tolerates your insolence because of his infatuation for you. You make a fool out of him."

Unable to speak and therefore protest the obvious flaw in Dashi's logic, Ciaran stared pointedly at the wall.

Despite his gentle way, Dashi's eyes showed little forgiveness as he stood. "Malik is a good master. Better than many, and yet you give him none of the respect he deserves. You embarrass us all, Ciaran."

There was a sense of finality when the door closed and Ciaran was alone again. Dashi's parting words left a cold and uncertain feeling in his stomach. He hadn't considered his disregard for this culture's values would have negative repercussions for Malik. He certainly would not have meant to disturb Dashi's private mental utopia. But how could he feel guilt when his life wasn't even his own? He was tied up on the floor for fuck's sake. No, he had every right to be angry. His anger was all he had, and he clung to it as he wriggled off the stones, finding a more comfortable place on the blanket.

The garden looked different in the evening. Not that Malik had much of a daytime reference for it anymore. He barely had enough time during the day to accomplish all his tasks; wasting time in the garden among the flowers and trees would hardly be productive. Attending to his own sensibilities always came in last on his very long list of responsibilities.

A small fire glowed in the stone hearth as the last bit of sun set on the horizon. Usually he found time spent in the garden in the evening to be restful, but nothing about it seemed peaceful tonight. He couldn't get the image of Ciaran glaring at him as he closed the door to the cell out of his head.

He poured himself another glass of wine, the crystal glass winking at him in the firelight as he filled it.

He shouldn't have lost his temper, shouldn't have let Ciaran get so far under his skin that the stupidest thing pushed him to do something like this.

The memory of ripping Ciaran's clothes from his body, of tying the gag tightly across his mouth, the utter and complete violence that had sparked at him from his brother's eyes... It all sat unsettled in him, refusing to allow him enough peace to relax.

Then there was the faint prickle of desire as he'd run his hands over Ciaran's naked body, a half awakened memory of something old and forgotten. He refused to entertain it. The situation was already too complicated.

After dinner, he'd sent Dashi to check on Ciaran, to make sure he was well and safe and not hurt. Malik chastised himself, knowing he should have gone himself, but he couldn't face Ciaran again so soon.

Coward.

The door opened hesitantly and Dashi's lithe form emerged from the shadows. "My lord?"

"How did you find him?" The wine slipped easily down his throat as he waited for the answer.

"He is angry, my lord, but well." Dashi walked forward and picked up the carafe to fill Malik's glass once more.

Malik allowed it, for once craving the numbing haze the alcohol would give him. But he wasn't too far gone to fail to notice the necklace that must have been a welcoming present from Dex. "You leave for Dex's house tomorrow?" His free hand came up to brush gentle fingertips against the delicate filigree gold.

Dashi nodded, a wide smile expressing how pleased he was, but eyes remained hooded with something Malik couldn't quite identify. Regret perhaps? "You will be good for him, I think." A tender smile and Malik leaned in to press gentle lips against the slave's. "Dex will care for you, better than I ever could, little one."

Dashi nodded. "I wanted only to please you," he said softly.

Malik shushed him with a soft brush of his thumb against petal soft lips. The young slave really was quite beautiful and from the very first, Dashi had held a special place in his heart. But he saw the looks pass between his best friend and the young

willowy slave. There was something there that Malik didn't want to get in the way of. "You did. You do still. You will always be my bright star, Dashi. And I expect to hear Dex rave about your many talents." Malik smiled at the loud purr that poured from the slave's throat.

"I will give him *such* pleasure, my lord. You will be proud. This I promise."

Malik nodded, satisfied, and gave his slave one last kiss before dismissing him for the night. As the door closed, he made a mental note to give Dashi a suitable going away present in the morning when Dex arrived to gather him.

After, Malik sat and watched the flame burn low, enjoying the mildness of the autumn evening. Twice he added more wood to the fire and more wine to his glass, gradually losing himself in thoughts with no substance to worry over.

The fire popped and dragged Malik's thoughts back to Ciaran. Hours had passed and Malik almost felt the rays of morning on the horizon. Perhaps Ciaran was asleep. One look wouldn't harm, he decided. It had been hours since Dashi checked on him.

Silently, he walked back into the house and down the long hallway, realizing it was the proximity that had kept him from going to bed, his own room being in the other wing of the building.

The house was quiet. It was too early even for the cooks in the kitchen to be stirring. He pulled a key from the pocket of his robe and opened the heavy door.

It almost broke him to see the still form lying on the floor, his mind rushing back to the countless broken bodies in their village from so long ago, and with breath caught in his throat he bent down, checking to be sure Ciaran was still breathing.

A soft murmur of sleep stopped him before he actually touched his brother and relief flooded him. He held his position, kneeling, hovering over Ciaran, a hundred thoughts and a thousand confessions gathering on his tongue.

Instead, he carefully pushed a lock of hair from Ciaran's forehead. "Goddammit, Ci. Can't you just do what you're told?" Soft words in the low light, softer still as he bent low, hands pulling at the extra blanket and folding it firmly over Ciaran's bare skin. "Please, don't make me do this again."

Nothing more to keep him there, he stood, hoping by evening Ciaran would be in a better mood to obey. Something inside him doubted that it would take hold so soon. His brother had grown into a proud man.

He turned before closing the door completely and thought he caught a gleam from Ciaran's eyes. But looking closer he saw nothing and, with a tired smile, he closed and locked the door once more.

He could get an hour of sleep before he met his men for their morning drill. Depositing the key into his pocket, he walked down the long hallway to his bed.

Ciaran was beginning to think his arms would never feel the same again. He leaned against the wall and wiggled his fingers behind his back just to make sure he still could. His world was fast boiling down to breathing and holding as still as possible.

It was when he moved that his body remembered the fight from the day before, as well as the bindings that still hadn't come off. Sleeping on the floor didn't help matters either.

It was all right when he woke. At first he felt almost held, before he remembered where he was. The blanket Malik had given him in the night kept him warm and the sleep-filled memory of the hand on his face had given him hope. But getting to the pail in the corner to relieve himself had been agony. And every moment since then had been one more he wished he weren't awake for.

Every now and then he thought he heard someone coming, but then the sound would fade. The little light that seeped in from the hall through the tiny window was steady, not flickering, like firelight. This told him it was daytime, but it was impossible to tell more than that.

Time passed slowly. His desire to kill his brother ebbed, replaced with nothing beyond the desire to feel his hands again.

He thought about home, strangely scattered thoughts about standing on the docks watching the ships come in, about the music lessons his mother pushed on him that he never fully took advantage of, and about the peach cobbler that Millie, the cook, always made on alternate Sundays, just because it was his favorite.

His stomach rumbled again. Maybe better not to think of food.

The faint rattle of keys filtered through just before the door creaked open. The brightness that followed hurt his eyes, but he recognized the shape of his brother's body instantly.

Malik was alone, and Ciaran was grateful for that. His eyes were barely adjusted well enough to register the flash of the knife before Malik pulled him forward and cut the gag away. Ciaran pushed the fabric out of his mouth and swallowed. His throat was sore from all the screaming he'd done.

"Drink this." Stooping before him, Malik held up a cup of something to Ciaran's face.

Ciaran blinked past it and stared dumbly at the way the fabric on Malik's arm shone in the light. It looked like silk. He squinted at the rest of Malik's outfit, easily as fancy as anything one would find at one of his mother's dinner parties, despite the strangeness of the garment's cut.

It must be evening again, he realized. A whole day had passed.

The cup moved in front of him, recalling his focus, but he shook his head, stubbornly not wanting to give his brother the satisfaction.

Malik took a sip, then drank again, deeply. Belatedly Ciaran realized it was probably more than just water, probably tea mixed with honey. His stomach growled plaintively.

Malik said nothing, simply set the cup down on the ground beside them.

Ciaran's patience, what little he had, fell apart then, and with it, the promise he'd made to himself that he would be civil. "Is this how you torture all your slaves?" he rasped.

Malik's eyes darkened, the words apparently taken as an insult, but his tone was

patient. "This is a quiet room. If I wanted to hurt you, Ciaran, it would hurt."

Ciaran frowned. He bit back the questions he knew wouldn't be answered. Like whether Malik would ever tell him what happened to turn his happy go lucky brother into the cold unfeeling creature before him now. Instead he cast his eyes down. "I can't feel my arms."

When there was no answer, Ciaran looked up to find his brother's brows raised in question. He didn't want to ask for it, shouldn't have to beg for what ought to be his by common decency, but then, he didn't want to feel naked and dirty and pained any longer either.

"Please untie me," he said, choosing the words carefully.

"Say it again, properly."

Ciaran forced his body to relax, swallowing as much of his pride as he was able to in order to Malik in the eye, "Mal--" He hesitated and looked down again, "My lord, please untie me."

Malik, bastard that he was, took a moment to consider before cutting the bindings off, bending Ciaran forward to allow him access. Ciaran hissed at the pain of just dragging his hands to his lap and let them rest limply there, not caring to cover himself up even now that he was able to.

Malik ignored his winces and rubbed Ciaran's neck and shoulders until he cried out in pain. Then he stopped and briskly massaged the muscles of Ciaran's arms, forcing the biting pins and needles pain down to his fingers.

"Ow," he said.

Abruptly, Malik let him go and sat back on his heels. "Are you ready to behave yourself now?"

Ciaran blinked, unprepared for the sting he felt at the coolness of the tone. It hurt to breathe.

"I won't let you go if you can't behave yourself."

Suddenly Ciaran was more exhausted than he'd ever been in his life. He fell slowly down to the right and rolled onto his back, knees bent, arms limp at his sides. "Then don't," he choked out.

Malik sighed. "You're doing this to yourself, Ciaran."

Ciaran nodded, and turned his head towards the wall. Malik could think whatever insane thoughts he wanted to think. Ciaran was never going to change them.

Later that night, having made a better bed out of the two blankets now that he had the use of his arms, Ciaran slept curled up on his side, resting his head in the crook of his elbow. He dreamt about Malik at a fancy party in his fancy clothing. In the dream, he stood off to the side where no one noticed while Malik smiled and laughed with others in his elite crowd. Malik failed to notice him. Ciaran woke feeling empty.

Often he still felt Malik's presence in his head, just as it has been since the day he stepped out of the City that had been his home for fifteen years. It was easiest to sense

when it was dark and still. He turned his attention to it and leaned into it, barely able to remember what it had been like all those years without it. Lonely, he imagined, but he wasn't sure. It was possibly lonelier now, with Malik refusing to acknowledge him.

Malik visited again. Ciaran didn't know how late or early it was. He thought it must have been near dawn. He heard his brother enter, and pretended to be asleep, making his breathing regular, waiting to hear whatever might spill forth from Malik's lips, hoping for an apology, or barring that, at least something that would inspire his sympathy.

For several minutes there was nothing. Then the sound of Malik turning to leave.

"I had friends, Mal," Ciaran whispered, taking refuge in the relative safety of the darkness. "I had a job, responsibilities. People depended on me." Well, that last bit might have been pushing it, he thought ruefully. He had no children, no lover, no family of his own to support.

"None of that matters," Malik's said stiffly. "You're a slave now."

Ciaran didn't doubt that, but it wasn't the point. "Would you just for once acknowledge it? That I had a life!"

"Fine. You had a life. Now you have the life I give you."

"Fine!" He said it without thinking.

Malik was very still for a moment. "Then you accept your place?"

Ciaran hesitated, but ultimately he knew it would be better to give in. For now. He was sure his insolence could easily outlast Malik's patience, but where would that lead them? "I can't fight you forever." Soon the chains would come off and, if Malik still seemed not to care for him, Ciaran would simply disappear and not look back. "Tell me one thing. Were you responsible for this?"

"Responsible?"

"Did you have me arrested? That day in the square?"

There was a long pause, and Ciaran thought Malik might leave without answering. "No. But be glad it was my hands you fell into," Malik said, "Most would not have put up with you for this long."

"Must mean you care," Ciaran muttered.

"We'll talk about it in the morning." And with that he was gone.

Malik only had to wait a few hours before Ciaran was shown into his office, cleaned and freshly dressed, looking much like he had three days before, when this whole mess started. He had a strong sense of déjà vu, watching Ciaran cross the sun drenched carpet in the same outfit, casting the same small shadow, with the chains at his ankles making the same soft noises.

The haunted look in Ciaran's eyes was new, however, and it made Malik almost wish he'd found another way to punish him. But really, there were only so many choices he had available to him.

Malik dismissed Ciaran's escort with a nod and regarded his brother silently. He

was striving to find the words to say when Ciaran spoke first. "I won't embarrass you any longer."

That was a surprise. "I know."

"But I want--"

Malik raised one hand. "Hush, Ciaran. Let me speak first."

Ciaran's jaw clenched, but he stilled himself.

Approval shone in Malik's eyes as he moved from his table and bent down to inspect Ciaran's ankles. As he'd suspected, the cuts and abrasions were angry looking and would eventually lead to infection. He couldn't allow that to happen. Slipping a key out of his pocket, he unlocked both of the heavy iron cuffs and let them fall to the carpet.

"Show me you can behave, and they won't go back on." He stood and searched Ciaran's eyes. "Tomorrow, the smithy will come to fit you with a token. That one *will* stay on. Is that understood?"

A mixture of confusion and gratitude washed over Ciaran's features. "As you wish."

Malik was reminded of when he'd been caught in the same chains. He remembered not only the physical pain of wearing them, but the mental pain of feeling so utterly helpless with them on.

"Go get--" Malik stopped. Dashi was gone now. "Go to the harem, one of them will see to your cuts."

Ciaran didn't move. "My lord?"

Malik braced himself for another argument. "What is it?"

"About the other day with that man, your friend."

"Dex."

Ciaran nodded, stumbling over the words. "I can't...do that."

"I know."

"I need to know you're not going to--"

"I'm not."

Ciaran looked at him a moment, then nodded. "All right."

Malik offered his brother a small smile "Go. Rest. Tomorrow is a new day."

Part II

Chapter Eleven

Malik was not having the best of days. Thankfully, he had never been one for taking his anger out on those beneath him, not like Kava. Never like Kava. Instead he chose to train with one of his best men, hard and brutal. They'd started with swords, and ended fighting hand to hand.

It was late in the evening when he stumbled home, almost too tired to see straight as he made it in through the door. Muscles aching, he could feel a burn across his upper arm where his opponent had sliced through the armor on a lucky strike.

"My lord?" He turned to see Alma, the cook, appear out of the darkness of the hall. "Traders have come 'n gone without leaving my order of new linens, no one has seen to the digging of a new well, the water what is coming is gonna be dirty and that won't be my fault from here on out."

"Alma." He gave her a harsh look, his head just starting to pound.

She was undeterred. "If you would, my lord."

"Yes, Alma, all in due time. Now leave me in peace."

She arched an eyebrow at him, a promise of burnt dinner looming in her scowl, and disappeared back the way she'd come. Thankful to have escaped so easily, Malik turned down the opposite hall and found himself confronted with three more slaves and three more problems. Silently he cursed having sent Dashi off to Dex two weeks before. If only Dex could have fallen for another slave, one of the anonymous faces of the harem, one that he didn't rely on. After listening to them all squabble, each demanding his attention at once, he silenced them with an aggravated wave of his hand and bellowed for Ciaran.

It was less than a minute before Ciaran padded softly in from the kitchen. "Yes, my lord?" He stood quietly, hands folded in front of him, as well behaved as Malik could ask for since their recent compromise. And yet Malik couldn't help feeling faintly as though he were being mocked. Was it amusement that lurked behind Ciaran's blank features these days? Or judgment? Perhaps both.

He kept his temper in check, or at least tried his hardest to make it appear so. "What in the hell," he started, accusingly. Then stopped himself, grinding his teeth and clenching his hands into fists at his sides. He'd never actually instructed Ciaran to take over Dashi's responsibilities. Not directly to him at least.

He cursed silently and gestured to the group of confused slaves behind him, each no doubt in need of an answer to keep them from failing in their duties. "Can you go *deal* with that?"

Ciaran took it all in with little more than a glance and nodded once. "Shall I attend to you after?"

Malik paused mid-turn. His first response was to angrily throw a 'no' back over his shoulder, but something in him realized how nice it would be to have a few quiet

moments with his brother. Just to talk freely with him. The previous weeks had been so hard, and he didn't feel like he'd been able to spend the time he wanted to with Ciaran. Truth be told, he missed the calmness that seemed to exist whenever his brother was near him, mockery or no.

Realizing he hadn't answered, he quickly nodded, not meeting Ciaran's eyes as he walked away.

Once down the hall and safely behind the heavy door to his private rooms, Malik sighed long and deep. The fire was burning in the hearth and on the table there was a tray of bread, cheese and fruits laid out. Ciaran had remembered these things every day for him, which pleased Malik to no end.

He sunk heavily into the chair, wincing as he bent down to unlace and remove his boots. Then the dancing of the fire bewitched him and he sat staring for a long while until a knock at the door stirred him from his reverie. Ciaran didn't wait for permission before entering.

Someone's cut his hair, was Malik's first thought, absently appraising Ciaran's silent form. When he was young, he'd envied Ciaran his golden hair. In the summertime it would turn white blond and it was the one thing that most distinguished them. Like an angel, Ciaran always lacked Malik's darker features.

If Malik had taken a true personal slave, he would be awash with caresses right now, strong fingers rubbing his tired feet. Were it Dashi, Malik would no doubt also have half his clothes off and be enjoying grapes fed to him by hand while a mouth sucked at his cock. But Ciaran stood still, waiting, doing only what instructed. With a scowl, Malik pressed up from the chair.

Before the dresser mirror, he slipped his jacket off his shoulders, twisting to regard the reddish-brown stain that, together with the cut in the fabric, marred the arm of his white shirt in the glass. He tapped at the dried blood. The cut didn't feel deep, but he couldn't see to be sure. Either way, he wasn't looking forward to ripping the edges of the fabric away from the dried blood of the wound.

A frown broke through Ciaran's blank exterior as he took the jacket away. "Do you want me to send for a healer?"

In testament to how tired Malik truly was, the question didn't make sense until it had circled through his mind several times. He wondered if Ciaran was feeling ill before he realized his brother was referring to the cut on his arm.

"No, this is nothing." He offered a small smile as he fumbled with the small silver buttons. Usually he would just pull the shirt over his head and leave it to Ciaran or another slave to see to, but he was feeling clumsy and uncoordinated.

"Let me do it," Ciaran chided softly.

Malik stilled, confused. Ciaran had never shown any interest in helping him undress before, but Malik hardly protested as Ciaran's warm fingers replace his own on the buttons. His brother's features were so focused, so concerned, eyes bent on the task until the last button was free. By the time Ciaran slipped the shirt from his shoulders, Malik was dizzy from more than exhaustion but he pushed Ciaran's hands away when the fabric held fast to his wound, preferring to pull it free himself.

"Idiot," Ciaran muttered, slapping Malik's fingers away. "You'll just open it back up." He took a cloth from the dresser, dipped it into the waiting basin of water, and pressed the moisture into the juncture of fabric and skin, repeating the process a few times, before gently pulling the shirt free and cleaning the remainder of the blood away.

Ciaran was so intent on his task that he didn't notice Malik watching until he looked up. Startled, he let his hand fall away. "You need to take better care of yourself, brother," he said, echoing a familiar chiding from long ago.

"I missed you looking after me," Malik whispered. The confession escaped out of his mouth before he'd thought it through. "I relied on you so much, it's a wonder I survived at all after you left me."

A hint of pain flashed across Ciaran's face. "You sell yourself short."

The hard ache in Malik's chest told him he should step away, should end this and put the cold distance back between them. He didn't want to remember the past fondly. It hurt too much.

"Maybe," he agreed. He smeared a dab of ointment from a jar on the dresser over the cut, ignoring the way Ciaran hesitated by his side.

He loosened his belt, then dropped onto the bed and leaned against a pile of pillows, a glass of wine in his hand and the tray of food pulled up beside him. He broke off a hunk of cheese, and sighed at Ciaran's still serious expression. "So, how did you entertain yourself today?"

Ciaran pulled a face as he reluctantly perched on the cushioned bench at the foot of the bed and recounted the details of his day. He sounded about as excited as he had when they'd recited prayers when they were young.

"Is that all?"

Ciaran's gaze finally lifted up from his hands and he shrugged. "I looked through your library."

Malik raised an eyebrow at that. The library was a small room adjacent to his office that consisted mostly of Timmor's collection of books on warfare and tactics. "And?"

"And...you have unusual taste."

Malik gave into the impulse to roll his eyes, but stopped short of throwing a piece of fruit at his brother. Exasperated, but not ready to give up, he sipped his wine and tried again. "Tell me about your father?"

"My father?" Ciaran was visibly surprised. "Why?"

Delighted at getting a reaction, Malik settled more fully back into the pillow before answering. "Call it my naturally curious nature."

For a moment Ciaran seemed ready to reply, but then his face darkened. "My father is none of your concern."

It wasn't the answer Malik had been hoping for, but then he wondered at the folly of such a question anyway. Even so, he ignored the warning in Ciaran's voice. "It's a simple question, Ciaran. I'm curious about your family."

"You said you didn't want to talk about the past. I've honored that."

"Fine," Malik set his glass down on the bedside table with a clatter. It was silly

that he was hurt by Ciaran's refusal to launch into a long and most probably painful description of his loving family. Stubbornly, he folded his arms over his chest. "What book did you read?"

"Something about war. People killing one another."

"Did you enjoy it?"

Ciaran shrugged again, picking at a string on the hem of his shirt.

Malik yawned. The conversation was exhausting. No, Ciaran was exhausting. After the day he'd had, all he wanted was to rest. He let his eyes fall closed for a long moment.

When he opened them again Ciaran was gone. His heart clenched and he looked quickly about until he located his brother by the closet, straightening up. The discarded clothes from earlier had been cleared away.

"Were we talking about the book?" he murmured thickly, his thoughts drifting away before he could get a decent grasp on them.

He wanted more wine, but that would mean he'd have to get up and walk to the cabinet. Far more effort than he wanted to expend. Unless of course, he ordered it from Ciaran... With a longing look at the decanter, he relaxed back, pushing the pillows out of the way and staring at the ceiling.

"It's late." Small talk again. He despised small talk.

"Yes." Ciaran was suddenly beside him, looking down, his face covered in shadows. It would be so easy to brush the back of his hand against Ciaran's thigh, just to make sure he was real. Ciaran wouldn't even notice.

"You seem tired, my lord," Ciaran said, the honorary title falling easily from his lips, even though he must know that Malik didn't care when they were alone. "Can I get you something else? Or shall I leave you to your rest?"

Malik thought of the empty glass. "I'm thirsty," he said slowly.

The back of Ciaran's hand brushed against his forehead. "I think you need to sleep." Eyes closed, Malik grunted at him, and Ciaran chuckled. "I'll help you," he soothed and began removing Malik's socks with warm, gentle fingers.

Malik sighed as he drifted into sleep. He could feel Ciaran moving around him. Touching here and there, soft words impinging on his consciousness, filling him with a nostalgic desire to return to a time when everything was simple and easy; a time when they were children, and they were free.

It was dark when Malik woke. Out of habit, he remained perfectly still and stretched out with his senses, checking his surroundings by using sound and feeling. It was something Timmor had taught him long ago, a soldier's way of life.

Satisfied that he was alone, he rolled over onto his side and realized two things at once. One, he'd been undressed, and two his stomach was rumbling. Getting out of bed, he poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher and drank it all down in one long swallow.

Ciaran must have gone back to his room; as usual, the pallet in the corner of the room hadn't been touched. Malik sighed and pulled on a robe. The urge to go and check on his brother was almost overwhelming, but he fought it, going instead to stand out on the stone patio overlooking the garden and taking some of the leftover bread and cheese with him.

It was a cool night. The stars were out and shining so brightly that there was no need for Malik to light one of the lamps that stood guard around the patio. He remembered nights like this back in the village, remembered sitting out under the stars with Ciaran, pointing out odd formations and making up strange names for them. He turned all around, searching until he found a particular grouping of stars. "Umustpeealot," he chuckled. Even with all of their grown-up responsibilities, they'd been allowed to be children there, if just for a little while.

For a moment he allowed himself to ponder what life would have been like if they hadn't been separated. What if there had been no sickness? Would Kava have still come? Would he have conquered their village even with everyone still alive? He shuddered at the thought of Kava's hands on Ciaran's young body and wrapped his arms tight around his middle to ward off the resulting dread.

The urge to see his brother rushed over him again and this time Malik gave in to it, slipping inside and down the darkened hallway until he found himself outside Ciaran's door. The door had no lock, of course, and it swung soundlessly inward at his gentle push.

His brother was on his side, his back to the door and his breath causing him to move ever so gently against the thin blanket covering him. Moonlight fell softly onto the bare skin of his shoulder.

Frowning, Malik looked around for a thicker blanket. The last thing he needed was for Ciaran to become sick. The pale, gaunt look Ciaran's face had had when he first arrived was not something Malik desired to see again. But a brief search of the small room turned up nothing. There was only the bed, a small table with a lantern set on it and a chair in the other corner. Ciaran's clothes hung from a series of nails on the wall, uniform in their plainness, and his shoes were neatly placed at the end of his bed.

Where did Ciaran read the books he claimed to borrow from the library? Surely not here, amidst this emptiness. Perhaps Malik could buy him something beautiful to decorate the room. He racked his brain for something Ciaran might like, but sadly he realized such a gift would likely either encourage Ciaran to remain separate, or worse, be flatly refused.

Abandoning the idea, he stared for a while and wondered what Ciaran would say if he woke up to find himself being watched. Would he be embarrassed? Angry? More likely he'd glare and then go back to sleep. Oddly, that made Malik smile.

After several minutes of watching his brother's sleep, he told himself he needed to get back to bed. His instinct was to crawl in with Ciaran, but there was barely room enough for one on the tiny cot. After a last look, Malik left, quietly closing the door behind him.

After the request that he 'deal with things', Ciaran took over the role of running the house. It was not an initiative he would have taken on his own, but it turned out to be more interesting than wandering the grounds aimlessly and reading his way through every book in Malik's library.

It was not an immense amount of work. Since he had no interest in fighting, he let everyone continue to do as they pleased, coming up with an answer or a solution whenever there was a problem, and of course, promising to get Lord Malik's opinion or approval when necessary. Mostly, however, he answered any questions pretty much whatever way he felt like, fairly certain that Malik wouldn't notice the difference as long as his room was warm and his food was prepared on time.

In his darker moments, he amused himself by flirting with the idea of abusing his new power. How lovely would it be if shellfish, a delicacy Malik never quite took to, would make more frequent appearances on the menu? Or perhaps the florist could suddenly run out of every flower but those Malik detested. And also apple pie could be more readily at hand, simply because it was Ciaran's favorite, whether it pleased Malik or not.

As a side benefit to his 'promotion', Ciaran's relationship with the rest of the staff improved dramatically. Even Alma was pleased, despite having often deplored the meager effort he put forth in making friends. "Too much pride is not good for a slave," she would tell him again and again.

The whole house seemed to breathe more freely now.

Malik probably took Ciaran's improved mood as a sign that he'd adapted to his new life, and Ciaran didn't discourage him. It gave him a quiet satisfaction to take care of his brother. He refused to look like he enjoyed it, but he'd gradually taken on all the responsibilities of a personal slave, save for the ones he refused to perform. He was there when Malik dressed and undressed, he was there when he bathed and ate. So long as Malik didn't ask for anything Ciaran didn't feel inclined to give, things were well between them.

Soon it would be easy to leave if he chose. With every merchant and delivery girl he greeted at the door, he built a new relationship. Already he knew he could find a way to get a letter to his father. To explain that he was not dead. But he feared for his brother. How could he ever explain the rest?

Ciaran was not prepared to choose between his brother and his family. Not yet. Eventually Malik would see reason.

Chapter Twelve

That first week after Malik completed his training with the body slaves, he was called to Kava's bed nearly every night. He found his new position both easier and more difficult than he expected.

Kava was bigger than any of the men Malik had been with, and behind his gruff manner lurked a fierce temper, but Malik learned quickly enough what soothed his master best, falling back repeatedly on the skills that were drilled into him day after day.

When Kava was in a good mood, the experience was almost pleasant. Malik's pleasure was usually seen to, and he was happy, at least, to sleep next to a warm body. Then there were the luxuries that accompanied his status - clean sheets, daily baths and better meals, often with rare delicacies added for dessert.

He began to think he could be all right there, but on the morning after his sixth night in Kava's personal service, everything changed. Again.

He woke at the first hint of sunlight and slipped from Kava's bed, wandering out into the private gardens adjacent to the room, seeking a bit of fresh air before having to go back and attend to his master.

It was almost summer and the flowers were in full bloom. He frowned at the way such beauty could live alongside such perversity. Perhaps the flowers bloomed for Kava on command, much like he did.

"Well, well." A voice called from one of the shady corners of the garden, a man's voice that felt oily and slick against Malik's skin even before Malik saw him. The man in question was not as big as Kava, but he was still larger than Malik.

"Today is lucky for me, ain't it?" The man tossed an empty wineskin to the grass behind him, walking unsteadily forward, a look in his eye that chilled Malik down to his very bones. "What's a delectable fuck pot like you doing so close to his Lordship's quarters?"

"You would be wise to leave this place." The bravado in Malik's voice made up for the way his knees knocked together in fear. He had seen what could happen when the soldiers were allowed to play with slaves from the harem as a reward for good service. The men were often brutish with no respect for the art of fucking.

The guard laughed, a loud braying noise that Malik was sure would wake Kava, but no one came.

"Come then, slut. Bend over that bench so that I can finish my shift in your tight ass." His hands lowered to the rough material of his breeches, quickly undoing the buttons and pulling out his thick, flaccid manhood, alternately holding and bouncing it in his hand.

Malik cast about for a weapon, anything he could use to keep the guard at bay, but he found only a pile of discarded trimmings from the nearby bushes and flowerbeds. Hoping for something, anything, he bent down, never taking his eyes off the guard, and grasped what he could. The bite of thorns against the soft skin of his palms calmed him. He stood and brandished the thin, thorny stick in front of him. "I'm warning you only this time. Leave. Now."

The burly man growled an obscenity and swung one huge meaty hand out at Malik's head.

Malik hesitated, he couldn't run, but he couldn't let himself be pushed out of there either.

If Kava woke to find him gone, he'd receive more trouble than this man was worth. With a fierce yell, he struck, catching the guard full on the face with the wicked branch.

The man's hands flew to his face, cupping his eye as he screamed, a long and awful sound. But once he'd started, Malik didn't stop. He continued lashing out, pouring into each strike all the frustration of the previous months.

Blinded and unable to defend himself against the small ball of rage that Malik had become, the guard crumpled to the ground.

Kava walked onto the patio just as Malik finished, a trickle of blood dripping from his clenched hand. He quickly moved atop the fallen man, a foot crushing down on his windpipe. His voice was strong and firm. "This is the House of Kava. I will kill you for touching what is his."

Malik pushed the hair from his face and looked up at his master. Kava eyed him strangely as Malik stood there panting. He said little, simply ordered Malik to clean himself up and return to bed.

Grateful to have escaped punishment, Malik did as he was told.

Chapter Thirteen

It was well past dark when Malik arrived home. Even though he had sent word he'd be late, he still permitted himself to be furious that Ciaran was not there waiting for him.

The trials of the day wound their way around his muscles, clinging at him. He growled as he jerked off his coat.

"My lord?" Marcus's soft voice greeted him, the kitchen slave appearing out of the darkened hall.

"Where's Ciaran?" Malik snapped.

Marcus gestured behind him, taking a step back. "I'll fetch him."

"No. Wait." The last thing Malik needed now was more of Ciaran's sanctimonious attitude. "Fetch Aedam for me. And tell no one I've returned."

"Alma has dinner ready for you, my lord."

The boy looked frightened out of his mind. A smile softened the hard line of Malik's jaw. "Bring it. And then fetch Aedam."

"Yes, my lord."

On Malik's twentieth birthday, Kava gave him the gift of oblivion. It came in the shape of a long pipe and grey green buttons of leafy material. Kava sat him down in a pile of lush, comfortable pillows and taught him how to inhale deeply and hold the smoke in his lungs until his head swum and he felt mellow and relaxed enough not to struggle when Kava turned him over and forced his large cock inside him.

Malik developed a love of the smoke, but was careful not to indulge on a regular basis. Having seen the effects of long term use, he knew he could never allow himself to be addicted to such a thing.

Reclining in front of the warm glow of the fire, Malik ignored most of his dinner and brought out the pipe Kava had given him long ago. It occurred to him as he lit up that Ciaran would probably not approve.

He inhaled and almost immediately the concerns weighing on him begin to lighten. He put the thoughts of his earlier meeting and Kava's latest ravings out of his mind.

When the knock came he half wondered if it was Ciaran, then he smiled, realizing Ciaran wouldn't wait for an answer.

"Come in," he called, pleased to see Aedam glide in and close the door behind him. At twenty years old, Aedam was two years older than Dashi. He was also the closest thing Malik had to a regular slut. Though Malik shared the wealth of Timmor's harem with guests, he generally abstained from its delights, save this one.

"My lord," the slave stood proudly before Malik and let his robe slip from his shoulders. Bathed in firelight, Aedam's red hair flamed and his pale skin shimmered, highlighting the perfect angles of his sleek form as he turned in a slow circle for Malik's

enjoyment.

Malik smiled and parted his own robe in invitation.

Alma cackled as she raked her winnings from the center of the table. Around the table there was a collective groan from all but Marcus, the soft spoken, nineteen year old slave who Ciaran often saw helping in the kitchen. Marcus quietly petted his stash, eyes flicking around the table as he compared it to the rest.

Ciaran tipped his glass and the last sip of ale slid down his throat. It was bitter, just like the first sip had been, but it had a nice afterglow. He had understood about five minutes into the game that he was way out of his league, but the others were tolerant as he steadily lost all the coins in his possession. It wasn't much of a loss, seeing as he'd found the money just that day, deep in the pockets of an old coat he'd borrowed for a walk outside.

There were more coins as well, in the top drawer of Malik's desk, for next time. He was as sure that they wouldn't be missed as he was that no one else would dare take them.

He shook his head when a gleeful Alma started to deal a new hand. "I think I'll go check on 'Himself'."

Alma laughed and gave him a knowing look. "He won't be needing you tonight." An uncomfortable chuckle spread round the table at Ciaran's perplexed look. "Daniel sent him that boy he favors."

Ciaran blinked. He recognized Daniel, the harem master, but what boy? Dashi had led him to believe Malik scorned all attempts to see to his pleasure; but knowing more about Dashi now, Ciaran realized that could easily have been an exaggeration. "When?"

The cards rippled between Alma's fingers as she shuffled. "Oh, a little while ago."

"It was Aedam," Marcus said in his usual quiet way.

Ciaran didn't recognize the name. On his infrequent visits to the harem, he'd seen a few slaves young enough for Alma to refer to them as boys, but he'd been so discomfited by their leering glances that he'd avoided looking too closely.

"I'll check on him all the same," he said, aiming for a measure of pride. Malik hadn't called for anyone from the harem since he'd been there, at least, not that he knew about. That should count for something.

No one argued with his right to fulfill his responsibilities and he took his leave.

The halls were dim, the lanterns few and far between at this hour. Ciaran tried to ignore his irritation. Malik could sleep with whomever he chose. And yet his nails dug into his palms at the idea of someone else getting so close to his brother.

Lost in his own thoughts, he all but bumped into a warm body kneeling before Malik's door, one eye lined up with the keyhole. Malik was attracting all kinds of attention tonight.

"What are you doing?" His words sounded louder in the gloom than they really were, and the shadowed form jumped and spun round, making to leave before Ciaran snagged an arm.

Anika. He remembered the girl Malik had smiled at so sweetly before he'd shoved her scarf in Ciaran's mouth. His fingers tightened and twisted.

What was this? Some misbegotten crush? A tormented longing for a master who mistreated her? Or maybe she just suffered from a wretched pining for a life she'd never have. Either way, her presence irritated him beyond measure. She yanked her arm away, but he refused let her go. "What are you doing here?" he repeated.

The innocent confusion on her face faded. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"It looks like you're spying."

She tossed her long hair and nodded towards the door, a smug smile curling at the corners of her mouth. "And it looks like you've been replaced."

Ciaran slapped her, flat across the face, without even thinking. "You shouldn't want what you can't have," he hissed.

Her eyes widened in surprise. For a moment, Ciaran thought she might call for help, but she just gave him a black look as she wrestled her arm free from his grasp.

He let her go and turned to the door, fingers hovering above the knob as he shook off the jitters left by the encounter.

No sounds reached him through the thick of the wood, but he could see the faint flicker of firelight playing beneath the crack at the floor. He knocked softly. No answer. But surely it was his place to open the door without permission. He did so every morning before Malik woke and every afternoon before Malik returned home.

Still, whatever Malik was doing was private. Ciaran rubbed his hands together. He'd be damned if he were going to stoop to peeking through a keyhole. Before he could change his mind, he turned the knob and opened the door.

The fire in the fireplace had died down, but still crackled softly. A haze of smoke filled the room, but from its sickly sweet smell, Ciaran quickly realized the smoke was not from the fire. He could tell without even looking that Malik was not in bed; that half of the room was dark and still.

His bare feet made no sound as they trod over the wood floors to the rich carpet, circling to see his brother's elbow and foot poking out to the side of the deep armchair by the fire.

A few steps closer and the feet of a slim, oiled body kneeling between Malik's legs came into view. Ciaran crept closer until he had a clear view, and froze at the sight of the head bobbing at Malik's groin, the quiet slurping noises reaching his ears.

The lazy way Malik's hand cupped the side of Aedam's head suggested this was not a new hobby for his brother. And Aedam, naked but for some glitter and a bit of decorative string tied round his hips, seemed utterly at home.

The image was erotic in every way that seemed wrong to Ciaran; but before he

could sneak away, Malik's eyes opened. They blinked and settled on him almost as if Malik wasn't sure he was real.

Ciaran cleared his throat softly. "I wanted to see if you needed anything else this evening, my lord." He tried to keep his focus studiously above Malik's lap, but picked up the stiffening in Aedam's body nonetheless. The slave's toes curled in surprise at his voice.

"We weren't expecting you," Malik said in a lazy drawl, reaching for his pipe.

Ciaran watched his other hand tighten in Aedam's red hair, and he realized with a start that no one else would have dared open that door. His brother was not himself tonight.

"He's very pretty, don't you think?"

A dull panic spread up from the base of Ciaran's spine. "I..." He took a step back.

"No, stay. I want you to see this." Malik waved him forward. "Answer me. Do you think this boy is pretty?"

"Pretty?" Ciaran had to clear his throat to get the word out, his body caught between his instinct to flee and the morbid curiosity that kept him in place.

Malik pulled another lung full of smoke into his chest, letting his head fall back as he held it and then let it go in one long stream. "Yes, Ciaran. Pretty. Do you think he's pretty? Do you like him?" He twisted Aedam's head, forcing his face towards Ciaran. "Look at him. Tell me you find him pretty."

The contempt on Aedam's features was clearly meant for Ciaran despite the rough grip Malik had on his hair. Ciaran thought about Dashi and wondered if Aedam came to Malik's side as enthusiastically as Dashi would have.

"He's very pretty, my lord," Ciaran said carefully, unsure what kind of effect the drug would have on his brother's temper.

"Could you love a boy like this, Ci? Now that you know what he is, what he does?" Malik tilted Aedam's face towards his own, gazing at him as he spoke. "Could you care for him? Could you ever respect someone like him?"

Ciaran's head started to throb, beyond what could be blamed on the sickeningly sweet smell of the smoke. Malik flinched when he looked up and Ciaran knew he felt it too.

"Come here," Malik ordered, rage flirting at the edges of his voice.

Ciaran took a hesitant step forward.

"No, here, behind him." He pointed to the floor a few feet away. "Kneel down behind him."

"Behind..." Ciaran blanched, stopping mid-step. The smoke made his head swim. "No, Mal."

"No?" Confusion clouded Malik's face. Aedam's clever fingers strayed up to brush over a nipple and he moaned softly around Malik's prick. The grip on the slave's hair eased into a petting stroke.

Ciaran risked a step back. "I'll leave you to your pleasure, my lord."

Malik rubbed the tip of the smoking pipe against his bottom lip. "If I were you, slave. I would do as you're told."

"Malik," Ciaran protested, helplessly aware of how useless logic would be. "You'll regret this."

"Tomorrow's regrets matter not to me. Seeing you on your knees tonight does." Malik's smirk turned to a scowl. "What's the matter, Ciaran? Isn't he alluring enough for you?" He slapped Aedam's head to get the slave's attention. "Show our guest how much you want him, slut. Show him what a good whore you are for your master."

With a throaty moan, Aedam dramatically widened his legs, tilting his ass towards Ciaran. It was enough to make the queasiness in Ciaran's stomach surge anew.

Malik looked pleased. He closed his eyes and relaxed back into the chair. "Get on your knees, Ciaran."

Unsure what else to do, Ciaran sank down to the floor. His eyes rolled off Aedam's bare backside. He could smell the strange perfume that the harem slaves wore. He had no interest in learning first hand just where they put it.

Malik's eyes flicked open, full to the brim with lust at Ciaran's obedience. He gasped and arched slightly, his gaze rolling up. "Scared," he whispered. "You're scared to touch him. Aren't you, Ci?" Malik grunted as his hips begin to thrust up in a desperate need for more.

Ciaran's name fell from Malik's lips several more times. The pipe landed softly on the rug, as Malik pressed both hands to the chair arms, bracing himself for a final arch upwards. "Oh god, Ciaran!"

Ciaran lost the battle with his insides then and had just enough presence of mind left to get to the basin on the dresser before he threw up what was left of his dinner, retching and coughing up smoke for several minutes after.

Slowly, to put off looking behind him, he took the basin to the small washroom and cleaned up. When his heart stopped racing, he returned, only to find Malik passed out in the chair and Aedam still in his place between Malik's spread legs, his cheek resting against Malik's inner thigh.

Aedam smiled smugly, curling his hand possessively over his master's knee.

"Get out," Ciaran ordered.

"My master hasn't dismissed me."

Ciaran answered the boy's simpering pout with a look of pure malice. "You'll get out if you know what's good for you." He thrust a finger towards the door. "Now."

Aedam frowned, then sighed airily, rising to his feet. He took a long moment to recover his robe and tossed it over his shoulder as he left.

Ciaran ran to the nearest window and shoved it open, letting in the cold fall air and gulping down lungful after lungful until he could no longer stand the chill.

When his mind was clear again and his body calm, he methodically set about tending to the room. He added more wood to the fire, turned down the bed, picked up the pipe, all before permitting himself to look at the armchair where Malik still sprawled, robe wide open.

He was tempted to leave him that way for the night. Let him stay there and wallow in his own filth. But, of course, there was no filth to speak of. Aedam's efficient tongue had taken care of that. Ciaran suffered a renewed wave of hate and disgust.

It took the better part of an hour, most of which he spent pacing about, but eventually, his heart yielded. He manhandled his brother's sleeping body into the bed, even taking the trouble to flip the covers over him before leaving him to his drug-filled dreams.

The next morning, Ciaran woke Malik at the usual time. Aside from being grumpier than usual, Malik didn't acknowledge the events of the night before. As they were well accustomed to not talking much, it was easy for Ciaran to carry out his usual duties and send Malik on his way without saying a word.

Later, he waited for a chance to talk to Alma alone, begging for a snack to give himself reason to be hanging about her kitchen. She caved easily.

"Does he do that a lot?" Ciaran asked, nibbling on an extra piece of bread.

"What's that?" Alma asked. The gap where one front tooth was missing showed when she grinned. "You didn't think much of the young Aedam?"

"No," Ciaran shook his head, recalling the slave's pouting gaze with distaste. He hoped never to have to think of Aedam again. "I meant the pipe."

"Ah," she nodded and continued her bustling about the kitchen. "Not so often. Lord Kava keeps him well stocked, but Lord Malik, he doesn't like the herb so much."

"Kava gives it to him?" Ciaran asked, interested. He remembered the man from the picture in the newspaper clipping with Malik in the background.

Alma looked at him sharply. "That's Lord Kava to you."

"Lord Kava," he murmured obediently.

"That's right." She proceeded to cluck at him, chest puffing up, like a mother hen doling out the facts of life. "And you do not want to meet him, you hear? So you just behave yourself and don't go poking your nose around where it doesn't belong."

Ciaran nodded and schooled his features into a look of contrition.

Satisfied, Alma let him off the hook. "You're just lucky you're as old as you are," she muttered as she went to check on the day's deliveries. "Pretty face like yours."

Ciaran frowned, unsure what that could mean. Aedam was younger than him and clearly blessed with a pretty face, at least according to Malik. Yet he didn't seem to be in any danger. If anything, Malik was in danger from Aedam.

Ciaran shuddered at the prospect of finding the oiled slave in Malik's room every night. If Malik was still trying to punish him, this was the most effective way so far.

Chapter Fourteen

Malik arrived home to find Ciaran already had his bath ready. There were even several small candles around the lip of the pool in place of a lantern. He wondered what the special occasion was, but kept his thoughts to himself. The silence between them was too pleasant to disrupt.

He held still and permitted Ciaran to remove his clothing with sure and gentle hands. His brother wrinkled his nose at the smell of sweat and work, and Malik bit back an irritated comment.

"How was your day, my lord?" Ciaran asked softly, avoiding his eyes. The question was part of the ritual.

He groaned as he stretched up, allowing his undershirt to be pulled over his head. "The only thing that could have made it a worse day is if it rained."

Ciaran nodded, face unsympathetic, and undid Malik's belt next with a flick of his wrist. "I'm sorry you were not pleased."

Malik stepped out of the remainder of his clothes and rubbed at his temples before stepping into the water. "Ciaran, it's been a long day and my head is killing me, so could you just...be quiet?"

"Serves you right." Ciaran muttered, easily pulling off his own clothes and getting into the pool beside him.

"What?"

Ciaran reached for the jar of soap and cloth, the warm water sloshing around his waist. "Nothing."

"Don't tell me 'nothing'. What did you say?"

"I said 'serves you right'." Ciaran enunciated each word, splashing his hands in the water and rubbing at the wet cloth to work up a good lather. "And what I meant was-- Fuck. Never mind."

"No." Malik leaned against the side wall of the pool, arms crossed. His eyes narrowed to slits. "Say it. Whatever it is, I want to hear it come out of your mouth."

Ciaran wisely remained a few steps away. "If you're going to drug yourself senseless, you can't expect to feel good the next day."

"Senseless?" Malik frowned, quick fury brewing hot and sour against the back of his throat. "You're talking to me in this...*fashion*, because I smoked last night?"

"Do you even remember last night?"

Echoes of the night before flashed through Malik's mind, but he was unable to make any of the images seem real. Aedam's mouth on his cock, Ciaran at the door, Ciaran on his knees, fucking Ciaran's mouth, his hand in Ciaran's hair. Fuck, what had he done?

"Nothing happened last night," he muttered, refusing to believe the hazy memories, and sank down to rest on the shelf beneath the water.

"Right." Ciaran peered down at the cloth in his hands as if he couldn't remember what it was for. When he looked back up his slave persona was firmly back in place.

"Would you like me to leave you alone, my lord?"

Malik scratched at his head and hair with blunt fingernails and sighed loudly. "Fuck sake, Ciaran." How did his brother manage to make the title of respect sound like a dirty word? "Just do your job and then get out."

Silently Ciaran came closer. He took one of Malik's hands and started with the fingers, cleaning the dirt from beneath each fingernail, running the cloth over every inch of skin.

Soon Malik's eyes were closed and his breathing steady. He let himself recline against the pool's edge, putting up no resistance as Ciaran continued up his arm, across his torso and down the other arm.

Ciaran paused only to apply more soap to the cloth, then picked up Malik's leg, holding the foot in one hand he eased the cloth between the toes.

After several quiet moments, Malik found himself hoping to catch Ciaran's eye. "There are thousands of men outside that depend on me to lead them and keep them from dying in some senseless battle. I'm responsible for them, Ciaran."

Ciaran merely raised a disinterested brow. Malik didn't know if his brother had any way of understanding how huge the responsibility was that rested on his shoulders, or if he even cared. "Last night and nights like it give me a chance to forget. Even if it's just for a little while."

Ciaran scrubbed the calf in his grasp harder. "You put me in a difficult position last night," he said finally. "Do I let you hurt me when I know you're not thinking clearly? Or do I resist until you force me, and in the morning the damage becomes just another memory you have to hate?"

Malik let that sink in. He should feel ashamed at how he acted, but not apologetic. Ciaran's own actions put him here. Anything that happened to him was payment for crimes committed. Malik owed him nothing.

But still, looking at his brother washing him in the dim candlelight, even with Ciaran's refusal to fully submit to him, or perhaps because of it, Malik couldn't escape the sensation of brotherly love that poured over him in waves. A small, still voice in the back of his head whispered for Ciaran's release, but Malik refused, again, to heed it. He could no longer afford to let Ciaran go. "I would live with it," he said, "Like I do all the rest."

That was apparently not the response Ciaran was expecting. He turned thoughtful as the thumbs rubbing the muscles along the soles of Malik's feet slowed. "Why do you stay here?"

Malik shrugged. "Where would I go? I have no one, and no place but here."

"You have me."

Malik ignored that. He arched back, stretching like a cat. "And then there's my responsibility to Kava."

Ciaran's brows furrowed. "Surely he would relieve you of it."

Malik laughed, cupping water in his hands and letting it fall out through his fingers. "No, he'd kill me."

The massaging fingers skidded to a halt. "I suppose I would try to escape that

too," Ciaran said quietly, resuming his washing.

Malik accepted the concession for what it was, though he doubted Ciaran fully appreciated the truth of the situation. For a while, the gentle sounds of the lapping water fill the space between them as Ciaran finished his task.

"So," he said, eager to change the subject, "what has Alma made us for dinner this evening?"

"Ha," Ciaran laughed and handed him the cloth to attend to his private washing. "Your favorite."

"I have a favorite?" Malik scrubbed himself clean and tossed the cloth away. He dunked his head as Ciaran retrieved the sweeter smelling shampoo from the lip of the pool.

"Don't you remember peas with liver?" Ciaran expertly lathered his hair, careful not to let the soap run down his face. "I told Alma how much you used to like it and she was more than happy to make it specially."

Malik blinked in surprise. "Peas and..." He turned round. "You wouldn't dare."

Ciaran stuck out his tongue, mischief flirting behind his eyes. "Already did."

With a shout Malik grabbed Ciaran around the waist, wrestling his slippery form until he'd dunked his brother's blond head under the water with a triumphant yell. Ciaran twisted free a second later, grinning and sputtering as he broke the water's surface.

"If you have, Brother," Malik warned. "If you have, I'll force you to eat all the onions in the house!"

Ciaran lunged at him with a grin, catching him full across the waist with one arm and dragging them both under water. The ensuing struggle splashed water over the floor and extinguished half the candles. Breathless in the near dark, they finally settled, each heaving against the stone side of the pool.

"If I have onion breath all night, you'll be the one to suffer." Ciaran laughed, quoting the familiar joke from when they were children and slept close to one another.

The smile slowly faded from Malik's face and the constant ache returned. In all the days since coming to live with Kava, he'd never felt it as strongly as he did now. A sudden and deep desire to be alone took hold of him.

"No danger of that happening." He pushed away and dunked his head once again to make sure all the soap was gone before climbing out of the water. He grabbed his towel and paused at the door. "I'll expect dinner in an hour. I don't want to be disturbed before then."

Ciaran watched Malik go. His moods changed so quickly. It was impossible to keep up.

Sighing, he rubbed his temples and tried to decipher which of his brother's words had been true and which had been merely intended to hurt. The situation was more confusing to him than ever. It was hard to imagine Malik as much a prisoner in

this place as he was.

He sulked in the bath until his skin pruned up and he dared not delay any longer. Leaving the mess for someone else, he dressed himself in the plain cotton clothing that Malik permitted him and went in search of his brother.

Chapter Fifteen

Malik stamped his feet when he entered Kava's private office, knocking some of the thick mud off his polished black boots. The weather was definitely taking a turn for the worse and Malik almost smiled when he realized it matched his mood.

New orders had come just before morning drills. He'd been walking past the barracks, listening to his lieutenants go over improvements and orders for the week when they slowly ceased their questions and complaints to stop and stare at an interloper in their midst. Thick black eyeliner rimmed the tall slave's eyes, and he clutched a golden cape around him to ward off the chill of the air as he waited quietly.

Malik felt his stomach twist as he quickly excused himself, going forward to take the folded paper held out to him. He read over the words carefully before nodding to the slave, dismissing him.

It wasn't the first time Kava had sent orders to march to battle by way of one of his sluts. Perhaps it was meant to remind Malik of his place or, more likely, the concept of war no longer held any real significance for Kava.

Whatever the cause, Malik knew it couldn't be allowed to happen. Letting Kava have his new war would weaken their position at home. And that was something Malik would not allow. Not for the men who trusted his leadership. Not for the villages that relied on him for their safety. And especially not now that he had Ciaran again.

Kava's scribe looked up from the books in front of him and Malik nodded his head, hands clasped in front of him. "I need five minutes, D'ane."

D'ane's brow furrowed and his lips pinched together as if he'd just remembered something highly distasteful. "Himself doesn't *have* five minutes." He sniffed dramatically into the large white cloth he kept forever in his right hand.

Soft cries reached Malik's ears from behind the door leading off to the left. He worked hard at hiding his distaste at the echoing slap of a hand meeting skin. The door opened and a slave, one Malik didn't recognize, rushed out of the door, face red from Kava's hand and clothes, such as they were, clutched against his thin chest.

"Send him in."

Kava's irritated voice startled the scribe, but D'ane recovered quickly. He waved his hand, the white handkerchief fluttering in Malik's direction and trailing off towards the now open door. "He'll see you now," he added unnecessarily.

Malik entered Kava's lair cautiously, locating him over by the large wall of windows, closest to the one that looked out at the room D'ane was still sitting in. He dropped the curtain back into place. "He's stealing from me, you know. I want him executed in the morning."

Malik's eyes widened a fraction. "Yes, my lord." He wanted to remind Kava that D'ane had been with Kava for 40 years. The man had always been, and was still, a faithful servant. But D'ane's fate wasn't what had brought him here, and he swallowed the death sentence in lieu of saving more than just one man.

"My liege," he began. "There is something..." A rustling over by the bed

distracted Malik and he turned to see another slave bound there.

This one he knew. The boy's blond hair and boyish good looks had been all the rage when he had first finished his training and appeared in Kava's court. Now he was spread open against rumpled white sheets, mouth slack with pleasure, hands tied with red rope above his head to the post at the head of the bed. Between his legs, another slave worked. Malik couldn't tell who, only that he was on his knees, sucking the first boy off in a quiet but consistent rhythm.

Red slashes marred the second boy's ass and legs, and Malik took in a deep settling breath. He looked pointedly at the two boys, but Kava waved his hand and moved to the small table which held glasses and a tall carafe of red liquid. "No, they stay."

"Sir, about the orders for the men, the northern borders..."

Kava offered Malik a goblet of wine. "What about them?" A distracted grumble didn't bode well for where the conversation was headed.

When Malik reached out to take the glass, thick fingers extended to caress Malik's wrist as he took it. He held the cup steady, careful not to react to the touch.

Kava sighed dramatically and dropped his hand away. "You are more worried about the Northern borders than you should be, my sweet." He turned and poured another glass for himself, before wandering towards the bed where the two boys were straining and groaning softly in a sensual haze. "The borders will take care of themselves."

Malik swallowed carefully as he mentally scrambled back to the slip of paper from this morning. The marching order had been clear and written in Kava's hand.

"My Liege," he began cautiously. "You've ordered the army out to the border today. You've pulled from six outposts. We'll be vulnerable to attack if--" He halted when Kava turned, confusion etched in his eyes for the briefest of moments before it was replaced by rage and something else, something that scared Malik to his bones.

"You dare talk to *me* in this manner?!" Their master's bellowing startled the two boys and they stilled their movements to look over at the drama unfolding beside them.

Malik held himself still as Kava rushed him, moving in until no space remained between Kava's body and his own. "Sir, forgive me if I--"

"Don't patronize me now!" Kava's hand cracked across one side of Malik's face, then caught the other cheek with equal force.

Panic and anger boiled in Malik's stomach. This was not the reaction he was expecting.

Kava turned to roar at the two slaves on the bed. "Why have you stopped! Fuck him! Fuck him!!"

Malik's intake of breath shifted Kava's focus back to him almost immediately and Malik knew of only one way to defuse what was fast rolling out of control.

"My lord." He lowered his voice and bowed his head, waiting a long minute before daring to look up through his eyelashes.

Interested, Kava stilled, tilting his head to one side. Malik slowly dropped to his knees, hands moving to clasp at the small of his back as his legs widened to an open

stance, just as he'd been taught so many years ago. "Master," he whispered. He had to do this, his men were depending on him.

He felt the threat of Kava's gaze as it wandered over his body.

"Tell me, *macan*." Kava's fingers slipped under Malik's chin and tilted his head up and back until he was looking into a madman's overly bright eyes. "What are you willing to give me for them this time?"

* macan = little son

Chapter Sixteen

The barracks were empty in the late afternoon. Malik took advantage of the stillness, mentally preparing himself for the evening to come. Ten years of experience in Kava's service, both as a soldier and a whore, had taught him that taking extra care now could save him a beating for missing something later on.

Kneeling, he composed himself in a meditation, carefully measuring his breaths, letting all thoughts slip away, until he could delay no longer. With a deep sigh of resignation, he pushed off his narrow bunk to open the chest at the foot of the bed. Inside were the proofs of his slavery, items that no other soldier had amongst their belongings, because no other soldier began their service in the harem.

It had been sheer luck that had turned him into a soldier. That fateful day in Kava's garden, Malik had fought his would be attacker with everything he had. He hadn't meant to kill the man. The very next week he'd found himself with new clothes, new quarters, in training to be one of Kava's personal guards.

The life of a soldier suited him, giving him full reign to pour out his hurt and aggression, but he quickly found he was no ordinary soldier. Even after Timmor took an interest in him and trained him to be his second, Malik still found himself called to Kava's bedside. It didn't happen often, given the endless supply of fresh young faces that paraded in and out of Kava's harem, but often enough to give Malik little hope of ever rising above his status.

It was Timmor who first suggested Malik treat his private interludes with Kava as opportunities to curry favor. Over the years Kava's temper had grown worse, paranoid outbursts were not uncommon; Timmor said Malik's circumstances were special. He was special.

Scowling, Malik selected the articles he wished to wear that evening, a subtle variation on something Kava had liked in the past. He closed the trunk and took everything to the bath house.

The communal bath was a circular pool almost four feet deep on one end and twelve feet in diameter, filled with water from the naturally warm spring that flowed under the hill. Expecting to find it empty at this time of day Malik was surprised to find Kava's personal bath attendant waiting for him. He recognized the slave at once, Liam, the one with the curious fingers.

The boy's sneer barely passed for a smile. "Master sent me to assist you."

Malik wondered if this were done on purpose; Kava knew he disliked being touched. "Thank you, but I don't require assistance."

"I'm sorry, sir." Liam shook his head as he shrugged off his robe, eyes filling with an innocence Malik didn't believe for an instant. "Master sent me to prepare you."

A feeling of distaste filled Malik's gut; there was no way to dismiss the boy without causing problems. Resigned to his fate for the evening, he closed his eyes briefly. "Complete your task then." He stepped into the bath and let the boy wash his body, hoping to get away with only that.

At the beginning there was only the slide of the wet cloth over his skin, but as if the younger man could hear the echo of Malik's thoughts, a slippery finger with a sharp fingernail found its way too close to Malik's balls for comfort and he growled, baring his teeth. "Only what

is necessary," he bit out.

"Master wants you ready," the boy simpered, and Malik hated him. Hated that he had to allow this creature to touch him.

He jerked forward in the bath, warm water sloshing over his shoulders and wetting his hair. "Take care of what you do." How he longed to wrap his fingers around the boy's neck and twist. "Or there will come a time when not even Kava will be able to save you from me."

There must be something in the glitter of his eyes that spoke the truth because Liam drew back as if burned. He fumbled behind him for the clay jar full of fragrant oils. "I do only what my Master requests of me."

After a long glare, Malik turned his back to the younger man, crossing his arms and resting them on the lip of the bathing pool. Under the cover of the water, he spread his legs, tilting back with his hips, knowing that he must now submit to this degradation. Before, he would have taken the time to ready himself. Kneeling on soft fur he would have reached back between his legs to press in and linger in the sensation, find pleasure in the act.

There was no pleasure in this.

Feeling the pull at his ass cheeks, he forced himself to relax as the small, oil-slick fingers move up and inside his body

Biting his lips, he closed his eyes. The boy was good, Malik would give him that. Another finger added and Liam began a rhythm, twisting and pressing against Malik's prostate. Unwanted feelings of arousal slowly started to wind and crawl in his belly.

"Hurry up," he growled, fingernails biting deep into his palms.

The boy scissored his fingers and Malik felt a second of discomfort as Liam stretched him too fast, too soon. He knew if he relaxed it would be easier. He exhaled a long stream of air, forcing his body to accept the third finger that pressed for entry. Almost done, he thought. Done with this and then the boy would leave him to finish his preparations by himself. Alone.

"I am finished." Liam drew away, but Malik's sigh of relief was cut off at the next words. "But Master would like one more thing of you this evening."

Slowly, face drawn down into a fierce scowl, Malik turned. "What else would Kava want of me?" He was already taking the rest of the day to be Kava's plaything. What more would he be required to do?

"Master would like you to come before him already..." Liam lowered his eyes demurely, looking bashful and meek. Malik immediately saw why Kava has been captured so completely by him. "...satisfied."

He was unable to hide the bolt of shock from crossing his face, but the look of malevolent joy shining from Liam's eyes was enough to convince Malik he'd heard right. Kava meant to break him tonight.

Resigned to his fate, Malik hoisted himself out of the pool and lay on his back, legs spread obscenely wide. Tonight would be long, and hard, and probably painful. He had no choice but to get through it as best he knew how.

"Why?" The question escaped and he cursed slightly at the display of weakness.

The boy shrugged, rubbing oil into Malik's belly with firm circling strokes. "He and Timmor had a fight. He can't beat Timmor, so he needs," Liam smiled and licked his lips, "a replacement."

The replacement sighed, long and heavy and laid back again, head pillowed on his arms.

Chapter Seventeen

Malik was brooding again. At least, that was how it looked to Ciaran when he came upon his brother sitting in the garden, a blanket wrapped around his hunched shoulders.

With the ground frozen over, the garden was lifeless, its branches bare. The view down the hill was beautiful in its scope and austerity, the village below easily visible through the barren trees. It wasn't like Malik to be sulking alone outside in the cold, and Ciaran considered sneaking away before he was noticed. He'd never run into Malik outside the house. Actually, it occurred to him that his brother might have some foolish idea about his not being allowed to *leave* the house at all. Better not to give him any ideas.

A sudden gush of wind lifted the flaps of the old coat Ciaran wore for his walks around the property. He'd appropriated the garment from the back of the closet. It was a little too big for him, but long enough to keep all of him warm. Malik barely shivered in the cold.

"You're not at work," Ciaran said, approaching against his better judgment.

Malik jumped in surprise. His hunched shoulders contracted inward and his gaze, when it landed on Ciaran, was far from welcoming. "No."

"Oh." Ciaran watched his breath puff out, just barely visible in the crispness of the air. "Aren't you cold?"

"If I were cold, I would go inside."

"Right." Ciaran tried not to acknowledge the disappointed feeling that settled in his gut. He turned and kicked a stray pebble across the stonework on his way back to the house.

"Wait," Malik called, gazing out at the horizon. Ciaran waited several seconds before Malik deigned to continue. "Do you play chess, Ci?"

"Chess?" The game had never been high up on Ciaran's list of enjoyments. His father had enjoyed it enough for the both of them. "I know how, if that's what you mean."

Malik frowned at him, his dark brows knitting together in disapproval. Ciaran braced himself for the expected chastisement and was only a little surprised when it didn't come. Neither of them seemed to know what was worth arguing over anymore.

"I want to play." Malik pointed at tiny table that was surely for decorative purposes only. "There's a set in the bedroom. Bring it out here."

"Out here?"

"Are my words confusing to you?"

Shaking his head, Ciaran backed away. Playing the obedient servant had its benefits. If Malik was looking for a fight, he'd have to look somewhere else.

Ciaran had never seen a chess set in the bedroom. It took him a while to dig one out from the bottom drawer of a disused cabinet. A few minutes later he was setting up the marble pieces between them, white lining Malik's side, black on his. White always

went first, he remembered that much.

The chill was a lot stronger sitting still, but that could have been because he was hardly dressed underneath the heavy cloak. There were no boots his size in the closet and his pants were thin as lace paper. He drew his slippered feet up under him. "Mal," he began conversationally, ignoring the instant hostility that emanated across the table, "It's fucking freezing out here."

"You're cold?"

"That's what I said." Ciaran slid the last piece into place. Then frowned. Was it the castles on the outside edges, or the little horsemen?

Malik signaled to the house and a moment later Marcus started a fire in the hearth. The chairs and table were moved closer to the warmth.

"Tea, Marcus," Malik ordered as he fixed the positioning of the chess pieces.

Ciaran let his hold on the cloak loosen, catching Malik looking curiously at the lapels as he did so. "Is it yours?" he asked. It was the first time Malik had really looked at him in two days. "I found it in the entry closet." He'd learned it was far simpler to just take whatever he needed.

"It was. I inherited something newer when Timmor passed."

"Oh." Ciaran was still fuzzy on the exact nature of Malik and Timmor's relationship, but it wasn't really high on his list of things he wanted to know. The man was dead, after all.

"Don't wear it beyond the grounds," Malik warned, almost as an afterthought. "It's meant for a ranking officer."

Ciaran blinked. He hadn't been beyond the grounds since he arrived! It didn't seem worth the trouble to point that out; he'd have to start exploring further. He gestured to the waiting board. "Whenever you're ready."

Malik grunted, adjusting the blanket on his shoulders as he leaned forward to make the first move.

"Did you solve your problem?" Ciaran asked after they'd settled into a rhythm. Everyone in the house knew Malik had paid a visit to Kava that morning.

"My problem?"

Ciaran frowned, trying to remember the words Malik used in the bath. "The troops you were worried about the other day after the-" he mimicked holding a pipe to his lips and inhaling. "You look more...relaxed."

Malik's glance was sharp and piercing. Worry seeped into the corners of Ciaran's heart. Had he messed things up already? Were five minutes and a single question all it took?

After a long moment, Malik seemed satisfied. "I did."

There was a ring of finality to the answer, and Ciaran let it go. He didn't mind that Malik would rather not discuss his day. It was no doubt as boring as the books in his library, a waste of their brief moments together.

The game went by in a blur with Ciaran parrying Malik's moves reflexively, not trying to win, but paying enough attention to get a feel for how hard he'd have to try if he wanted to. Clearly, too hard. Chess was never his game. Strategy was all well and

good, but he lacked the patience for long-term planning.

"You're not even trying," Malik growled when Ciaran lost.

Ciaran raised an eyebrow. "How can you tell?"

Malik ignored the question. "I didn't ask you out here because I wanted some mindless puppet." Malik waved at the board. "Again."

Ciaran drew a steadying breath and replaced each piece on its assigned square.

The next game went a bit better. He played conservatively and felt the tactic frustrate his brother. Still, Malik would have much less reason for complaint when he won again. At least, that was the plan.

"Do you hate me so much, then?" Malik snapped.

Surprised, Ciaran reset the board with little more than a glance up. "I don't hate you at all."

Malik snorted. "Right."

Ciaran shrugged.

"I locked you in a cell."

"Twice," Ciaran pointed out, slipping the bishop next to the horseman.

"Without food."

Ciaran nodded again. It was strange that he never thought about that anymore. "Both times, I believe."

Malik sighed and fell back in his chair. "Lord's sake, Ciaran."

A little boy smile flashed across Ciaran's lips. "Thou shalt not seek divine aid in anger, but always with an open heart."

The reprimand brought a slow grin to Malik's face. A second later laughter bubbled up from his chest. "Father Owen would turn over in his grave if he knew how we perverted his prayers."

"Probably." For a moment, nostalgia was almost tangible in the air. Marcus reappeared to refill their cups. The tea was steeped with honey, and the first sip burned Ciaran's tongue. "Are we playing again?"

Malik shook his head, drinking his own tea. The faraway look in his eyes was back, with Ciaran the new object of its indirect focus. The stare went on so long Ciaran began to fidget, brushing the bangs back from his temple. Malik no longer had bangs like he'd had when he was young, the ones Ciaran had loved so much. Soldiers apparently kept their hair short, but he had wisps that would fall across his forehead, if not into his eyes.

"Give me your hand, Ciaran," Malik said, reaching forward.

Confused, but still in obedient mode, Ciaran put his chilled fingers into Malik's palm. When Malik pulled, Ciaran followed naturally, moving up and leaning over the table.

The sensation of Malik's lips on his own rendered him dizzier than he would ever have expected. He barely noticed when the edges of his cloak knocked several of the pieces over.

The kiss lasted only a moment, the briefest of eternities. When it was finished, Ciaran sat back down just as easily as he stood, more confused than ever but with a new

warmth in his chest.

"I've wanted to do that since I first saw you."

Annoyance crept unbidden into Ciaran's tone. "Why didn't you?"

As usual, Malik chose to ignore the question. "I wondered if you still tasted like you used to."

"And?"

Malik touched his lips thoughtfully. "And you do."

Marcus ran carelessly up to Malik's side, interrupting the moment. He murmured that Malik's guests had arrived, including Dex and several other soldiers.

Ciaran's heart sank as he watched the mask Malik maintained for others slip firmly back into place. He stood and cast off the blanket. "I won't need you tonight, Ciaran. Do whatever you'd like with your time."

Disappointed, Ciaran watched him go. No doubt there would be a parade of slaves of Aedam's caliber to handle the party. He touched his fingers to his lips. Maybe Malik would taste them all and compare. He'd have to ask him later.

Chapter Eighteen

Winter arrived with a light snowfall. Disliking the cold, Ciaran spent more and more time moping around the house while Malik was gone. He'd become bored with the written word, having read over half the books in the study, and instead wandered around straightening some things and poking at others.

Perhaps he could write his life story. Veil it loosely as a parable and give it to Malik for winter holiday. That might be fun. For a moment.

Three days had passed and no more kisses. His thoughts kept returning to the brief moment on the patio. Had Malik meant something by the kiss? Did he wish them to become lovers, not as a slave and master with all the ridiculous conventions that seemed to go along with that arrangement, but truly lovers?

Or was it only that Malik had felt like a kiss, and so he took one.

Years before, Father Owen had caught them in a less than brotherly embrace. For two solid hours the priest did his best to put the fear of God in them, preaching about the sins of the flesh and the salvation of their souls. They'd never seen the old man so distressed.

Now Malik had a whole harem at his disposal. What would Father Owen make of that?

Occasionally Ciaran visited the denizens of the harem, bearing treats from Alma or gossip, if he had any. The older women, left over from Timmor's time, would moon over him. They would lure him eagerly into their rooms where they'd offer him tips, secret techniques to 'hold the master's interest', and the occasional tool or potion. Ciaran would always politely refuse their offerings. The inevitable reddening of his cheeks provided them satisfaction enough.

At times, Ciaran wondered if maybe he'd had it wrong all along. Perhaps debasing himself would have been the better way to Malik's heart.

What if it were the only way?

The doorbell chimed and Ciaran raced to answer it, anxious for any distraction. He rushed past Anika to reach the door first, enjoying her scowl.

He turned the golden knob and swung the door open to find Dex standing on the marble steps, looking very official in his officer's cloak and snow encrusted boots.

Ciaran's wasn't sure who it was he expected to find. A messenger or a delivery boy, perhaps. If he'd known it was Dex, he certainly would not have hurried, or indeed made himself available at all.

For Malik's sake, and certainly not because of the whipping Dex had threatened him with when they first met, Ciaran kept his tone simple and polite. "Malik is not at home, my lord."

"And a good day to you too, sweet boy," Dex said. His gaze swept up and down Ciaran's form, a twitch of his cheek hinted disapproval at his state of dress. He brushed past Ciaran, handing over his thick gloves and twirling off his outer cloak. "Do you expect him soon, Ciaran?"

Ciaran fought the urge to roll his eyes and look terribly bored. At least the man had remembered his given name. If Malik ever took to calling him 'boy' like that, it would be far more than he could tolerate.

He glanced at the wrought iron clock that decorated the far wall. "He almost always returns by one o'clock." Malik had lately been good about coming back to the house for lunch. Whether he simply didn't enjoy eating with the men or just liked it when Ciaran waited on him, Ciaran couldn't say.

"Will you be staying for lunch, my lord?"

One o'clock was but twenty minutes off and Ciaran knew Dex would elect to stay even before he found the cloak thrust upon him with a smile. "Yes, I believe I will. Serve it in the study. You'll tell Malik I've arrived?"

Ciaran forced a smile. He'd meant would Dex like lunch with Malik, not would he like a meal served just for him.

Dex regarded him with obvious amusement. "And bring me wine, at your convenience." He finished with a mock bow in Ciaran's direction before taking off for Malik's office.

Ciaran frowned at the soldier's swaggering stride. Would it be too obvious if he sent Marcus with the wine in his place?

He waited as long as he dared before he slipped, bottle in hand, into the study. Dex was warming himself by the low fire, his back to the door, and Ciaran snuck glances at him as he poured the wine, curiosity warring with envy in his heart. The things Dex must know about Malik. Things Ciaran would like to know.

Dex smiled his thanks when Ciaran handed him the glass. His eyes zeroed in on Ciaran's gold slave bracelet--the token Malik had given him in exchange for removing the chains around his ankles. As promised, it didn't come off, and Ciaran sometimes wondered how long he'd be stuck with it, should he ever get away.

"Well, isn't that a pretty thing," Dex said softly. "I never would have thought he'd do it."

Do what? Ciaran wondered. The bracelet may be beautiful, but it could hardly be described as much more than proof of ownership.

"I take it from your new bangle, you and Malik have come to an agreement then." Dex looked as if this thought amused him completely. Ciaran wondered how Malik could stand the man.

"An agreement," he repeated, absently running his thumb over the engraving of Malik's initials. "That's one way of putting it."

"May I?"

Frowning, Ciaran held up his wrist for inspection, trying not to think of how odd it felt to have someone touch him. Not that a touch on the wrist was intimate, he insisted to himself, or even worthy of feeling odd about.

"I thought so," Dex smiled, "I recognize the work. It's from the finest metal worker in town." He let Ciaran's hand slip from his fingers and turned back to the fire. "That's quite an honor, you know. It shows his affection and commitment."

Ciaran stood by uncomfortably as Dex grew absorbed by the dancing flames. He

hadn't fully forgiven Dex since their last encounter, but in the interest of avoiding another like it, he wondered if he ought to ask permission before leaving the room.

"I've known Malik since we were both boys in the army," Dex murmured, taking another sip of wine. "He's never had an easy life, never had anything given to him that he didn't have to fight for. He's a good man, Ciaran."

Ciaran held his breath as Dex spoke about his brother. There was so much he still didn't know and didn't understand. He was silent, aching to hear more.

"He obviously cares about you a great deal," Dex finished, and took a sip of his wine.

"Cares for me?" Ciaran considered the meaning of the word. "Perhaps you have me mistaken for someone else." The weight of Dex's frown slipped from the fire and settled on him, heavy with disapproval. Ciaran dug in his heels. "If he were such a good man, he would let me go."

"Idiot." Dex eyes flashed with a promise of violence. "You really have no idea, do you?" With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the remains of his glass into the fire and turned on Ciaran. "Perhaps it would be better if you did disappear. He deserves someone who will care for him as much as he obviously cares for you"

Ciaran stumbled backwards a step away from the man's looming shoulders, but refused to back down. "I take care of him!" he insisted. "As much as he lets me."

Dex's eyes narrowed to pinpoints. "Then act like it. I hear the whispers, and if they have come to my ear, then it's given that others have heard it. How he allows you to embarrass him, how he is besotted with you."

"Besotted?" Ciaran practically choked on his laughter. "He barely lets me near enough to--"

"Ciaran!" Malik's voice, calling from the hall, interrupted them. Ciaran barely had time to put a respectful distance between them before the study door swung open and Malik entered, cheeks pink and hair tousled from the cold wind outside. "There you both are!"

Ciaran shifted uncomfortably under Malik's welcoming smile, stretching ear to ear. Since when had his brother seemed so happy to see him? Then Malik walked right past him to clap Dex warmly on the shoulders. Oh.

"Were you waiting long?"

Ciaran caught Dex's eye, but the man's earlier intensity had given way to something else.

"Not long," Dex replied. "Your Ciaran and I were just having a chat. I see you took my advice about upgrading his dress. Or, at least, his jewelry."

After a moment's confusion Malik's gaze alighted on the bracelet around Ciaran's wrist. His smile was warm. "It does look good on him, doesn't it?"

Self-consciously, Ciaran clasped his hands behind him, away from their prying eyes. "Would you like me to go check on lunch, my lord?"

"No. Alma will send someone when it's ready." Malik collapsed into the leather sofa. "Sit here with us."

Ciaran hesitated. The last time he'd seen the two of them on the couch, there'd

been no room for anyone else; but Dex merely chuckled and fell into the nearest chair as gracefully as his large frame would allow.

Malik patted the empty space beside him, and Ciaran reluctantly perched on the spot indicated. "So," Malik asked, "what were you and Dex talking about?"

Dex looked expectantly to Ciaran, damn near brimming with that cursed amusement of his.

"He was just appreciating your token, my lord." On impulse, Ciaran placed his hand on Malik's knee, displaying the bangle. He matched Dex's amusement with an equal amount of stubbornness. Dex barely batted an eyelash.

"I was telling Ciaran I recognized the work. Have you taken him into town, Malik? He might enjoy looking through a few of the shops."

Ciaran looked pointedly at his brother. "I would enjoy visiting the shops, my lord." If he had to stay here and pretend to be his brother's wife, he might as well get a chance to spend all of his money.

"Hm?"

Malik seemed distracted coming up with a response, and Ciaran regarded him curiously before following Malik's eyes down to his hand--the hand on Malik's knee. He grinned and squeezed gently. "My lord?"

Dex discreetly cleared his throat, and Malik jerked himself back to attention. "Yes, town. We'll go." He frowned then. "But not this week. There is...too much to do."

Ciaran raised an eyebrow, but Malik only covered his hand with his own, curling his fingers into Ciaran's palm. He turned to Dex. "I'm loath to leave the warmth of the chamber today, my friend. Perhaps the men won't mind if we linger over lunch a bit longer than usual."

Dex answered with an indulgent smile. "I haven't heard a complaint yet."

Chapter Nineteen

Malik crouched by the fire, poking the logs with a long iron rod, trying not to think of his brother pulling the covers down on his bed behind him. The day had been good, made more so by finding Ciaran and Dex talking before lunch. His heart had filled with something unfamiliar to him when he saw them, the two people who meant the most to him, together. And then Ciaran had placed his hand on his knee.

It had been a good day.

He glanced over his shoulder, watching as Ciaran piled up the extra pillows at the foot of the bed. The wind howled and rattled a nearby window.

"The night is cooler than usual," Malik said, "You'd be warmer if you stayed here with me, instead of going back to your room."

With a little more than a glance in his direction, Ciaran moved to the window and latched it securely. "If you need a body to warm your bed, I can fetch someone for you."

Malik sighed long and loudly as he stood. "Ciaran, your room will be freezing tonight, I was only offering..." He rubbed his hands against his face, watching the fire burn. Evidently things weren't changing between them. "Why do I even bother?"

Ciaran was suddenly behind him, efficiently turning him and then unbuttoning his shirt. "Dex thinks I don't attend to you well enough."

"Is that so?" Malik wasn't sure if he was amused or annoyed that Dex had been instructing his slaves once again. Still, Ciaran's wounded pride was a good sign. "Dex has different ideas on what makes a good slave than I do."

"Does he," Ciaran said flatly.

"It is your good fortune to be mine, and not his."

Ciaran laughed, as if Malik had made some sort of joke and not spoken the honest truth, then shook his head. "So I am repeatedly reminded."

Malik's heart leapt. Gods, he'd missed the sound of Ciaran's laughter, didn't realize how much until that moment. "It's too cold, Ciaran. Stay here tonight." He swallowed a lump in his throat and added, "I'll not touch you, if that's what you're worried about."

Ciaran only nodded and continued to strip off the last of Malik's clothes. He helped Malik into his robe and started taking the discarded clothing away. "Is that what you wish you could have from me?"

"It's what is generally expected of people of your station." Malik tried to will Ciaran to look at him, gazing steadily in his direction as his brother dealt with the laundry. "You are...different, Ciaran. And I know as boys we--" Lord, help him, he didn't know where to go from there. He forced himself to relax. "I'm trying to give you time to accustom yourself to our ways, Ciaran."

"But that's what you want eventually." Ciaran's displeasure was obvious as he dropped into a chair. "What you wanted from the beginning."

Surprised and hurt by the weight of Ciaran's sigh, Malik didn't answer.

"Well, isn't it?"

Malik looked at him helplessly, no longer sure what it was that he'd hoped to gain by keeping Ciaran like this. Ciaran looked away in disgust.

Risking a few steps closer, Malik brushed Ciaran's cheek with the back of his hand. "There was a time when even Father Owen's promises of hell couldn't stop us," he offered softly.

"Stop it, Mal." Ciaran jerked away from the touch, eyes closing. "You wanted a servant, not a lover. I can't be both."

Malik laughed a soft, bitter laugh. "I've spent a lot of years wanting many things, and I'm too tired tonight to pretend otherwise." He bent his knees, stooping beside Ciaran, and reached out to stroke his brother's face again. This time Ciaran tolerated his touch. "Stay tonight, Ciaran. Not as a servant, not as a slave. Just stay because you want to."

He held his breath, not daring to move, until finally Ciaran's head tilted down a fraction.

Malik took that as a yes. He got up before Ciaran could change his mind. Methodically, he turned off each lantern, leaving the room bathed in the glow of the dying fire, then shed his robe and climbed into the soft bed. He left the covers turned down on the empty side.

At length, Ciaran joined him, eyes unreadable in the dim light as he removed his clothes and curled up under the thick blankets, his back to Malik.

The bed seemed so much smaller with Ciaran in it. Malik rolled onto his side so he could watch Ciaran's sleep. He counted each breath Ciaran took. When he reached a high enough number, higher than he'd ever reached when they were young, he reached out and let his hand hover over Ciaran's shoulder, running it an inch over where his brother's arm lay beneath the covers.

Ciaran shifted, and Malik froze.

"Just pretend we're twelve," Ciaran murmured in a sleepy voice, reaching blindly behind him for Malik's hand.

Releasing the breath he'd been holding, Malik let Ciaran draw him in close, until he was wrapping his arm around his brother's waist and gasping at the sensation of his bare skin pressing against Ciaran's from chest to toes.

"Twelve," he whispered and closed his eyes. Something deep in his heart loosened and stopped hurting.

He was still lost in that feeling when Ciaran turned in his embrace. Malik tried not to breathe as his brother's lips meet his, pressing, urging Malik's lips apart.

Ciaran's eyes remained closed. Malik thought that wasn't fair, but the kisses became stronger, more insistent, until at last he kissed back.

This isn't right, he thought. This was too easy. He wasn't ready to forgive yet. But all resistance was drowned out by the sweet pressure of his brother's body against his own. When Ciaran's hand snaked between them and found Malik hard and wanting, his own hand followed.

It took less time than it did when they were kids, semen spilling out in mere

moments and mixing together like their panting breaths.

Uncertain what this all meant, Malik wiped his hand on the bedclothes behind him, waiting for Ciaran to open his eyes and explain it all. Ciaran merely settled his hand on Malik's hipbone, preventing him from rolling away, and bent his head forward as in prayer, sideways against the pillow.

"Go to sleep, Mal," Ciaran murmured.

It was all Malik could do to lie still and remember to breathe.

Ciaran woke up to the warm embrace of Malik's down comforter. Everything felt so warm and right that, for a moment, he forgot where he was. Even his four poster bed at home had not been as comfortable as this.

Home. He sighed. The word had no meaning anymore.

Malik was gone. Ciaran could tell without moving to check. The room was still, no life other than his own.

The night's dreams had been a tangle of memories--touches, intakes of breath, the happy shriek Malik used to make when Ciaran would sneak up on him and push hay down his shirt. Nostalgia put a smile on Ciaran's face. It was his to keep for as long as his eyes remained closed.

Stretching cautiously, because this wasn't his own bed, he rolled onto his back, fingers sliding out until they hit the roughness of a dried stain, hard evidence that the previous night was not just a dream.

Abruptly, he got up and pulled the sheets off the mattress without looking too closely. The slaves would all be gossiping before mid-afternoon, if they hadn't started already. How long had Ciaran been asleep? Surely they missed him at breakfast and Malik--

How had Ciaran not noticed him leave?

He shrugged, suddenly irritable. If he was a lousy servant then Malik could just get another one that suited him better.

If he was home right now, his real home, he'd be knee deep in work, people to see, contracts to sign. Real, purposeful work, given to him by people who trusted his judgment.

He left the bed for another to make up and threw the soiled sheets in the laundry, feeling dirty and annoyed at having been left lounging in his master's bed like some pampered possession. If he'd held any leverage with his brother, it was surely gone now.

And yet, it had felt so good to be touched and kissed... Almost loved.

He pushed the thought away and resolved not to get back into the bed. He still had some semblance of pride left. Not everything in the house needed to belong to his brother.

Chapter Twenty

Malik skulked down the hallway of his own home, lonely in his avoidance of his brother. Ciaran had inexplicably gone back to his cold and distant self, as if the fevered groping beneath the covers a few nights back had meant nothing. To have had Ciaran so close to him and then suddenly found him gone again--it was more than Malik should have had to put up with.

Perhaps he could have dragged Dex into town, let himself be plied with alcohol and friendship for the night. But that would have been easy.

Instead, he stumbled morosely through the halls, so absorbed in his own misery, he almost missed Marcus's lithe form moving about the room reserved for entertaining, a dust cloth in one hand. Marcus's hips were not unlike Ciaran's, Malik observed, and his cock twitched in agreement. One night of restrained passion and his body was already craving what it could not have, or rather, what he could have if he could only bring himself to take it.

"Marcus." Malik's voice was loud in the quiet. Startled, Marcus froze, then a happy smile graced his face when Malik held out his hand. The slave came obediently, allowing himself to be drawn close.

"Yes, my lord?"

Malik took his rightful liberties with the slave's person. Though Marcus was not a trained pleasure slave, and lacked their grace and demeanor, his body was firm and pleasant to the touch. "Is everything ready for my guests?" In a few days, Dex and Dashi would be coming for a dinner party. It would be Dashi's first time back in his house. Malik was curious to see how the little pleasure slave had blossomed in his absence. To have given the slave to Dex was like giving sun and water to a fledgling plant.

Marcus smiled shyly as Malik's hand smoothed down his side to settle at the curve of his ass. "Yes, my lord."

"Would you like to join us?" Though the boy was too plain to take out in public, he had always enjoyed being dragged into the fun when Timmor would entertain. And an extra warm body was always welcome.

Marcus's eyes lit up. "I would like that, my lord."

Malik tilted the slave's chin up and kissed him, tongue darting playfully in and out of the slave's mouth. He pulled the slender hips up snug against his growing arousal, and with just a little more encouragement, Marcus began to rub against him. "Oh, master!"

"Oh, charming." The sarcasm cut through the scene like a knife. Both master and slave stiffened, turning to see Ciaran appearing out of a darkened corner.

Malik held Marcus to him. "Wish it were you, Ci?"

"One really is just as good as another to you."

"Don't press me, Ciaran. Not today."

"Are you going to fuck them all now, my lord? Is there some schedule I should

be aware of so we all know when it's our turn to bend over and spread ourselves for your enjoyment?"

Reluctantly, Malik released Marcus's warm pliant body. He wouldn't want to hurt the wrong slave accidentally. The next moment, he had Ciaran pinned to the opposite wall by his throat. It was almost too easy. Ciaran didn't even try to defend himself.

"You know nothing," Malik growled.

"I know you."

Malik slid one knee forward, forcing Ciaran's legs apart until Malik's thigh was pressed snugly against Ciaran's groin. He smirked at the startled intake of breath. "You judge me, but you know nothing."

He crushed his brother's lips beneath his own, a surge of pleasure shooting through him when he felt Ciaran's resolve waver, his muscles start to relax. But one look into those mocking blue eyes told a different story.

He thrust his brother aside in disgust. "Get out," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

His brother had the arrogance to hesitate. Malik's hands clenched into fists. "Stay where I can't see you, Ciaran. Or I won't be responsible for what I do to you."

Chapter Twenty One

Ciaran stumbled into the kitchen long past dinner time.

"Took you long enough," Alma favored him with a wide toothy grin and set a cold plate of meat and bread down in front of him. "I was beginning to think you weren't ever coming up again."

"Very funny." His glare was mitigated by the grateful grumbling of his stomach.

Daylight had long since faded and Ciaran hadn't seen any of it. For two days he'd been shuffled from one pathetic menial task to another, the latest of which was cataloging and cleaning the wine cellar, a dark and musty place filled with aisle upon aisle of bottles and flasks of various shapes and sizes, ninety percent of which, Ciaran was sure no one would ever care to find again.

Apparently it was Malik's new way of punishing him. Or maybe his brother had finally given up on him. Either way, Ciaran was quickly realizing just how easy he'd had it before.

"What's that for?" He nodded at the tray of sweetmeats Alma was laying out with her pudgy fingers.

"Lord Malik has guests."

Ciaran frowned. A dinner party? Of course, he had forgotten. Evidently no one had wanted to remind him.

It had been a big deal that he'd finally spent a night in the master's bed and an even bigger one that Malik had barely spoken to him since.

He chewed his stewed meat and potatoes, eying the tray of delicacies with detached interest. "Who's here?"

"Dex," Alma answered. Ciaran stifled the urge to roll his eyes. Tuch disrespect was not safe around Alma. "And he brought Dashi with him," she added fondly. Ciaran wondered which of the treats were made especially because they were Dashi's favorite. Probably all of them.

She hoisted the tray awkwardly onto one hand.

He blinked. "You're taking it?"

"And what of it?"

Ciaran looked at the flour marks on her kitchen apron doubtfully. How long had it been since she'd actually had to serve food?

She caught him looking and set the tray back down, moving her hands to her hips. "You're no sight neither."

He touched his hair, brushing over something sticky. Probably a cobweb. "Have Marcus do it."

"Marcus, that little imp, fell off the back ladder earlier."

"Oh?" Apparently he'd missed all sorts of excitement while trapped in the cellar.

"Said he was trying to clear the dust from the eaves. The eaves, for godsake." She brushed at the flour marks.

Ciaran tossed the crust of his bread into his bowl, unsure if he was feeling

generous or just plain foolhardy. "I'll take it," he said, "Malik already hates me. Won't matter if I'm a mess."

"Hmph," she arched a brow and eyed him up and down. "It most certainly will."

He knew it was pointless to argue with her. He dragged himself off to his room for a change of clothes. "But save my dinner for later!"

Warm light flowed out from under the sitting room door. As Ciaran approached, balancing the tray on one hand, he could hear the bubbling laughter of several voices.

Malik used this room expressly for entertaining guests. Decorated with colorful pillows, small and large, the room featured a lush carpet and low sofas surrounding a short square table in the center.

Just outside the door, he snagged an extra bottle of wine, then pushed it open with his foot. Ciaran saw Dex first, lounging on a sofa in a deep blue velvet robe. The garment was open slightly at his chest, forming a vee shape, the bottom of which was eclipsed by Dashi's head moving gently in his lap, face turned in. Dashi didn't appear to be wearing any clothes at all.

Ciaran's stomach tightened. It was no wonder Malik didn't want him there. Why, oh why, did he not learn to listen to his brother?

He searched the table for other signs of his brother's favored method of debauchery, but found only more food and wine. Perhaps he reserved the pipe for his bedroom.

Quietly, Ciaran slipped forward and set his tray down. He kept his eyes low, hoping to get in and out without incident. So long as he didn't speak, he would be fine. He checked next to see if Malik's glass needs refilling and froze at the sight of Aedam curled in Malik's lap. Like Dashi, the pleasure slave was barely clothed at all. His brown skin looked at home amid the crimson satin folds of Malik's robe as his tongue flicked over the expanse of Malik's chest.

Ciaran felt a twinge of satisfaction at the flicker of surprise in Malik's eyes. "I was expecting Marcus." Malik carded his fingers through Aedam's hair as if daring Ciaran to speak.

Unable to help himself, Ciaran's gaze wandered over to where Malik's other hand disappeared between the boy's legs. He shook his head to clear it. "Marcus had an accident."

Aedam looked up at Ciaran's voice. The same smug secretive smile that had graced his lips in Malik's bedroom reappeared. Ciaran entertained an idea of tearing him off of Malik and throttling him right there.

"That is unfortunate." Malik looked across the table. "Wouldn't you say Dex?"

Dex nodded agreement and sipped at the amber colored liquid in his glass. "We'll have to adjust our idea for entertainment now."

A round of chuckles filled the room. Ciaran's uneasiness increased tenfold. He was especially discomfited by the way Dex was smiling at him. "I'm sorry you are

displeased, my lord."

He almost left then, without tending to the wine. If he had turned on his heel and run from the room, Malik might just have let him go. But Aedam chose that moment to writhe delicately and resettle in Malik's embrace, and Ciaran forgot all about the bottle in his hand, bristling instead at the possessive, impertinent hands roaming across his brother's skin.

Dex laughed out loud. "Your slave has every appearance of a boy scorned, Malik. One would think he was jealous of young Aedam." Casually, he tugged at Dashi's hair, lifting the boy's face long enough to smile at him adoringly, thumb grazing Dashi's cheek. Dashi smiled and took a long breath before being pushed gently back down into Dex's groin.

"I hadn't noticed."

"Could it be you've finally broken through the ice that surrounds him?"

"I doubt it." Malik regarded Ciaran "Even in passion, the boy is cold."

"I regret that you were so dissatisfied with my performance, my lord," Ciaran barely held onto his temper. "But better someone cold and loyal in your bed than that false creature you're holding."

Aedam's snort was heard by everyone in the room, and Malik slapped at the young slave's head in disgust. "Shut up, slut." The snort was replaced by an artful whimper.

"Loyal, you say?" Malik held out his glass to be filled, wanting, perversely, to bring his brother closer to the source of his discomfort. "Pray tell us then, why you dislike our Aedam."

"He doesn't have your best interests at heart, my lord."

Malik noted the fine tremor under Ciaran's skin as he filled the glass, pleased to know that, at least in this, Ciaran had strong emotions.

"Perhaps. But, regardless," Malik smoothed a hand down Aedam's hair, watching the slave arch his back, eager for every caress, "My party this evening requires his particular touch. So unless you'd like to take his place..." Ciaran refused to reply and Malik turned back to Dex with a smirk. "You see? Cold."

"Pity," Dex said, sipping his wine. "He would have been a good replacement for Marcus."

Malik grinned, leering. "How very true. He's just the right size."

At that Ciaran hastened to take a few discreet steps backwards. "If that's all, my lords..."

"Running away again, Ciaran?" Malik shook his head sadly at his friend. "You see what I have to put up with?"

"How very tiresome for you."

Malik was beginning to think it might be best to be rid of Ciaran altogether for the evening, his brother sucked the mood out of everything. But then Ciaran lifted his chin. "I'm not cold," he said.

Malik couldn't resist turning the challenge in Ciaran's stance against him. "Prove it," he ordered, "Get on your knees."

No one was more surprised than Malik then, when Ciaran, after a moment's hesitation, squared his shoulders and sank down to stand on his knees.

Malik released the hold he had on Aedam to lean forward, stopping himself at the last moment from reaching out to Ciaran. How could his brother make such a simple task seem so erotic, even with the defiance etched in every part of his body? Or maybe because of it?

"And your shirt," he pressed.

Ciaran lifted the hem of the plain cotton tunic, eyes raised in question.

"Remove it."

Amazingly, Ciaran again complied without question.

"He's learning his manners, Malik." Dex's soft voice broke the uncomfortable silence.

Malik tore his eyes from the fine layer of goose-flesh on Ciaran's bare skin to look over in Dex's direction. Dashi had turned his face to watch, his hand still moving around Dex's erection, hidden by the folds of cloth. "Some of them," Malik conceded. He turned back to Ciaran, intent on praising him for obeying, but the look of steel in his brother's eyes changed his mind. "When he puts his mind to it."

"My lord, send the whore away," Ciaran requested, his tone more formal than usual. "You have me in his place."

"No."

Ciaran blinked as if he couldn't have heard correctly. "No?"

"Aedam stays where I want him." Malik rested his arm on the back of the couch, ignoring Ciaran's glare and turned back to his friend. "He goes down on his knees so well, you'd think he'd done this for someone else."

Dex murmured his agreement. "Perhaps a lover?"

Ciaran lowered his eyes, but not quick enough before Malik registered the flash of hurt that made it through his brother's defenses.

"Have you, Ciaran? Did you leave someone behind?" He kept his tone even and interested, but not overly so. He couldn't chance letting anyone in the room know how desperately he wanted to know the answer.

Ciaran shook his head, hiding his eyes.

"No one?" Malik challenged. "Ever?"

"I've had lovers."

Malik nodded, pride required that answer. Ciaran was nothing if not proud. "What do you think, Dex? I'll bet you a new foal out of my stable that says he's only had pussy until he came here."

Ciaran's jaw fell open. Malik only narrowed his eyes. "Well?"

Ciaran spluttered. "No."

"No, what?"

He cast about for some other way to answer and then sank back on his heels. "There was a man, once."

Dex laughed, delighted. "I'll expect the foal tomorrow, my friend."

Malik nodded absently, not taking his eyes off Ciaran. A lover? A male lover?

The idea of it ate at him. *Idiot, did you think he'd always live as the boy you knew? It's not as if you've remained chaste yourself.*

Aedam, no longer content to languish ignored, pawed at the folds of Malik's robe. "My lord, make him leave. I am anxious for the games to begin." Reluctantly, Malik turned his attention to the slave, pulling him over his lap, ass up. He smiled when Aedam instinctively opened his legs. Ciaran looked positively uncomfortable.

Malik stroked the smooth, pampered skin of Aedam's ass and watched Ciaran try not to look. "What was his name, Ciaran?"

"Who?"

"Don't play with us, Ci. Your lover."

Ciaran bowed his head. "His name was Ian."

"Ian," Malik echoed. "That's a nice name. A good man?"

"Very much." Ciaran's tone made it clear what he thought of his present company.

Malik let the insolence slide, punishing Ciaran by casually pressing his fingers against Aedam's oiled opening. The boy squirmed and whimpered in what Malik guessed was supposed to be a passionate manner. "Tell us about him." *Was he blond like you? Or dark like me? Did he treat you well? Did you love him? Did he love you?*

Hesitating, Ciaran's eyes flicked to where Dashi watched, a rapt look on his face, and Dex stroked Dashi's hair with detached interest. Then he fixed Malik with a firm stare. "He was beautiful."

"That describes a lot of people, Ciaran."

"He was one of the most beautiful people I've ever met, and he loved me."

"Is that so?"

"Yes!" Ciaran's hands balled up into fists at his sides. Malik gave him an indulgent smile, which had the desired effect of infuriating him more. "He was everything to me!" Ciaran insisted. "He laughed and he smiled a lot, and he had these long dark bangs that would hang in his eyes." His fingers swiped across his forehead to illustrate. "He reminded me so much of--" Ciaran halted mid-confession, a mixture of embarrassment and fear on his face.

Frozen, Malik tried desperately not to reach up and brush his own dark bangs from his forehead.

"Who?" Dex prompted when Malik failed to do so.

Distress creased Ciaran's forehead. He looked helplessly at Malik.

"Who, Ciaran?" Dashi this time, blessedly calm and soothing Dashi.

"My brother," Ciaran said at last. The words tumbled out awkwardly into the expectant silence.

"Oh." Dashi made a small, defeated sound.

"He died when I was young."

"Oh, that's terrible! You must have missed him awfully--"

"Dash," Dex warned.

"Oh, Dex, but I want to hear about it! Imagine, finding a lover that reminds you of your--" Dashi cut himself off as the implications of the confession sink in. "Oh."

"Did you fuck him?" Malik's voice sounded strained and painful even to his own ears. "Did you fuck this beautiful boy with the long dark bangs?"

Ciaran shook his head, defeated. "We weren't together long enough."

"Long enough?"

"Not everyone rolls right into bed like common whores," Ciaran snapped.

Dex coughed on his sip of wine. "Is that what he thinks of us?"

"Perhaps he means he was in love," Malik said, his stroking of Aedam's bottom becoming more like clawing. "Is that it?" he demanded. "You didn't fuck your lover because you were in love with him?"

"No." Ciaran rubbed his face. "I don't know."

"You don't know if you were in love? Or you don't know if you didn't fuck him?"

"He went away."

"Away? Like a bird? Did he flap his arms or disappear in a puff of smoke?"

"No!"

"What then?"

There was a long pause before the answer. "My family paid him to leave."

That brought Malik up short. "They what?"

Ciaran shrugged. "I was becoming an embarrassment." He tried to leave it at that, but all eyes in the room stared at him expectantly. "I couldn't escape my brother's ghost."

Dashi chirped up before Malik could respond. "How old were you when he died?"

A faint smile graced Ciaran's lips when he looked at Dashi. "Fifteen. Maybe almost sixteen."

"What happened to him?"

Dex cuffed Dashi for his eagerness. "That's enough, pet."

But it had already gone too far for Malik. "You can't stop there, Ciaran." His voice sounded thin to his own ears. "You have to tell it all. What happened to your brother?"

Malik thought he saw Ciaran's lip start to tremble but it was impossible to tell for sure. "There was a plague. Everyone died."

"Everyone, except you? That seems..."

"Fortunate?" Dex offered.

Ciaran shot Dex a hateful look, and Malik hissed for his friend to be still. He wished suddenly that everyone would leave. He needed to know the full story once and for all, even if it killed him. "How did you survive?"

Ciaran swallowed. "I was sent to get help. Our church had ties to a larger one in the City. They had medicine." His face softened, becoming younger with each word, almost helpless. Not at all the capable brother Malik remembered, nor the one he'd become accustomed to. "It was further than I thought, so I traveled at night to move faster, but it was so dark. I fell."

There was a lump in Malik's throat and he was having a hard time swallowing

over it. An image of his brother, alone, scared and in pain consumed him. "How long before they found you? Surely just a few days. You must have gone back for him."

Ciaran blinked and wiped the corner of his eye with his hand. He shook his head.

"Your brother lay dying of sickness and you were frolicking in the City?"

"Frolicking?" Ciaran seethed with contempt, "Yes. Frolicking. With a broken leg and bruises everywhere."

Judgment poured off Malik. It was as he'd feared in the deepest darkest places of his mind. His brother never came back for him.

"They wouldn't let me leave!" Ciaran cried. "Don't you think I tried?"

"Only the weak 'try', Ciaran." When Ciaran didn't answer, Malik stood, pushing Aedam off his lap. "You abandoned him."

"No." The protest was barely a whisper.

"He was depending on you and you abandoned him."

Ciaran turned his face away, eyes pressed tight. Malik felt a sick twist of satisfaction in his chest when a wet teardrop slid down Ciaran's cheek.

"Malik," Dex chided, voice gentle, but Malik waved him off. This was his family. His business.

"You failed them all," Malik accused. He moved to tower over his brother's kneeling form. "Are you even sure he died? Did you see the body?"

Pursing his lips together, Ciaran shook his head the tiniest bit. A horrified gasp escaped from Dashi and was quickly stifled. "They said he was dead."

"What if they were wrong?"

"Malik." Dex was suddenly standing, laying a hand on Malik's arm. "That's enough."

Malik shrugged him off. "No, I don't think it is. Not quite. Tell me, Ciaran. What if your brother waited for you all that time? What if he trusted you to come back, no matter what? Did you think of that?"

Ciaran choked on a sob.

"Answer me, Ciaran!"

"No!" Tears streamed down Ciaran's face when he finally lifted his head. "I didn't. Not once. Is that what you want to hear?" Malik struck his cheek, the back of his hand connecting with enough force to knock Ciaran over, but not enough to shut him up. "I believed them, Mal," Ciaran hissed, voice dropping low. "When they said you were dead I *believed* them!"

Malik raised his hand again, intent on erasing every ounce of pain and accusation he saw reflected on Ciaran's face; but Dex grabbed his arm and held him fast. "You'll regret it, my friend."

"I already do," Malik whispered bitterly.

Chapter Twenty Two

Lying on his bed, Ciaran only resisted a little when Dashi took a damp cloth to his tear stained cheeks. In truth, he craved the attention.

Dashi had chided him severely when he realized Ciaran was still staying in the tiny room, and not sleeping at least on the palette next to Malik's bed. Ciaran almost burst out laughing. It seemed Dashi completely missed his earlier slip, announcing Malik as his brother. Dex was probably the only one close enough to catch it

Ciaran groaned and wished for a medicine to make it all go away.

"It's not so bad," Dashi was saying.

He cracked open an eye. "It's not?"

"Well..." Dashi seemed to reconsider. He dipped the cloth in the water again in place of answering.

Ciaran smiled when he recognized the neck piece Dashi wore as the same one he been wearing the night he'd visited Ciaran in his cell weeks ago. Somehow, Dashi seemed to have grown into it. "You're happy."

"Of course I am."

"He loves you." Ciaran cringed at the neediness in his own voice.

"Dex is a very good master." Dashi lovingly fingered the red jewel in the center of the gold band that rested loosely around his throat. "You know, you're not so unattractive," he announced, having cleaned Ciaran's face to his satisfaction.

"Uh, thanks."

Dashi pulled at Ciaran's shirttails, tugging the cloth up his body. "Why do you hide yourself in front of your master?"

Because I can get away with it, and you can't? Ciaran reined in his reflexive irritation with a small amount of success. "If Malik wanted me that way, I'm sure he'd insist."

"But how can he want you at all, dressed like this?"

Exasperated, Ciaran pulled his shirt back down. "Dashi, we're not the same, you and I."

Dashi's brow furrowed. "I could teach you things that lord Malik would--"

"No," Ciaran interrupted, "That's not what I mean. We're not the same," he repeated the words slowly, willing Dashi to understand.

Dashi frowned; he opened his mouth as if to say something, but turned his focus to straightening out a wrinkle in the blanket instead.

Ciaran sighed and turned away, rolling onto his side so that only a tiny bit of space remained between the wall and his body.

Dashi didn't take the hint. Either that or he took an entirely different hint than Ciaran intended. He lay himself down on the tiny bed behind Ciaran, sliding close, one hand resting against Ciaran's hip in a delicate embrace.

Reluctantly, Ciaran gave in and relaxed. He wasn't likely to get between Dashi and the completion of his task, even if he wasn't sure he desired to be the object of the task in question.

"You still miss him, don't you?"

"Who?"

"Your brother."

Ciaran tried not to laugh.

Dashi rubbed his shoulder. "You have to let him go and learn to be happy here." His soothing touch moved down Ciaran's side, slowly working its way around to his front. "Lord Malik is a good man."

Ciaran's stomach fluttered hopefully as warm fingers slid under his shirt and across his belly. Dashi really did possess those skills he'd always carried on about. A real pleasure slave.

"He'll be good to you too," Dashi promised.

Something Ciaran's father once told him about men and degrees of evil sprang to mind. Perhaps 'good' was exactly what Malik considered himself to be. Then those knowing fingers slipped into his pants, and he moaned softly, his emotions dissolving. He covered Dashi's hand with his own, and held it against him, feeling his cock swell as Dashi squeezed him gently.

"See? We are not so different," Dashi whispered.

Ciaran could hear the pleased smile in Dashi's voice. He said nothing, letting the weight of all of Dashi's training in pleasure and seduction work its magic on him. Without consciously deciding to, he found himself turning around, seeking out the comfort of Dashi's lips as well.

Chapter Twenty Three

"So you'll fuck anything that moves," Malik accused, pacing before Ciaran. "Is that it? As long as it's not me?"

Ciaran sat forward on the edge of his bed and rubbed a hand against his forehead to avoid looking up. His skin still prickled beneath his clothes where the flush had left it. It hadn't been much more than pleasant foreplay but Dashi had him tingling all over. Funny, he would have expected Malik to be happy about finding him in an embrace of that kind.

"Look at me, Ciaran."

Ciaran sighed and lifted his eyes. "What do you want from me?"

"You're mine. I want you to *act* like it."

"I let you humiliate me in front of your friends, isn't that enough?"

"That's your penance, Ciaran."

"Penance? I wait on you all day. I stay here," Ciaran gestured to the shabby bed coverings, "without complaint while you rest in luxury every night."

"Your choice, not mine." Malik had the gall to sound smug.

Ciaran stared at him in sheer amazement. "Fine," he said, standing and pulling off his shirt. "You want a sex slave? You want me to degrade myself for you until there's nothing left?"

Malik hissed as Ciaran shed the rest of his clothes, anger lending a jerky quality to his movements. "Like this?" he asked, dropping to his knees and crawling the few feet over the hard floor to his brother's feet. He parted the red folds of Malik's robe and looked up. "Is this what you want from me?"

"Yes." Malik's soft cock bobbed within inches of Ciaran's mouth.

Ciaran switched tactics, turning round to fold his head to the floor and push his bare ass up with little grace. "Or is this what you need me to be?" He peered over his shoulder, satisfied to have finally rendered Malik speechless. He shook his ass in his brother's face. "Well, is it?"

"Ciaran..." Malik sounded unsure for the first time all night.

"Just do it, Malik! Show me my place!" Ciaran arched his back, edging his knees further apart.

"Ciaran, stop this." Malik's voice was thick with emotion. Or maybe that was just Ciaran's imagination.

"What? Can't you do it? What's stopping you? Come on, brother. Fuck your slave." He bucked his hips up and back.

"Ciaran..."

"Take me!"

"No!" Malik shoved him away with a shout, and sank slowly down to the floor, back pressed to the wall, eyes firmly averted from Ciaran's naked body sprawled next to him.

"Why not?" Ciaran couldn't help but rub it in now. "It's what you wanted."

"What I wanted?" Malik's face clouded. Pain radiated off of him in tangible waves. "You left, Ciaran. You left and they all died."

Ciaran dropped his head back on the floor. "I know."

"One by one, they died. So fast, I couldn't...I couldn't bury them fast enough." Malik's hands opened and closed on his robe covered thighs.

"I'm sorry." Ciaran knew how inadequate the apology sounded. But what was there to say? He wasn't there, he didn't see it. "I didn't want for that to happen to you."

"Then why didn't you come back?" Malik's anger rushed back, almost blinding Ciaran with its venom. "You abandoned us so easily once you were inside the City! Did the lure of wealth and safety seduce you so quickly? Each day, Father Owen would say, 'Don't worry, Ciaran will come today.' And each day, *each day*, Ciaran, someone else died because you never came. And once they were all...once they were all dead. I waited *still*. I stayed because I didn't want you to come back to ghosts. I waited!" Malik's voice cracked.

Ciaran sighed. He crept closer and wiped a stray tear from under Malik's eye. "I'm here now."

"But I have to know why, Ciaran. How could you leave me so easily? Didn't you want to come back?"

"Leaving you wasn't easy." Ciaran forced a smile through the ache in his chest and cupped Malik's cheek in his hand. "I told you the truth of it. They told me everyone was dead. And I couldn't sense you any more. I thought that meant you were dead."

Malik turned his head into Ciaran's palm. "I want to believe that."

"If I'd known, Malik, if I'd known... Nothing would have stopped me."

Malik stared long and hard into Ciaran's face. "You would have come, if you thought I was still alive?"

Ciaran nodded, brushing away another tear. "I did, didn't I? I came as soon as I found out."

A smile wavered across Malik's lips even as his tears fell freely. "All those years, Ciaran. If only..." He seemed to notice Ciaran's nude body for the first time, and he flinched, pulling away and looking around the room as he cursed.

Confused, Ciaran pulled a thin blanket from the bed and wrapped it around his shoulders. Malik pulled the edges close together. Ciaran chuckled, looking down at his brother's hands. "Am I that bad at this pleasure slave thing?"

"No!" Malik protested, but then his smile betrayed him and he reluctantly nodded. "Yes, you're awful at it."

Ciaran snorted.

Malik's smile slowly faded. "But this isn't your world, Ci." He cast a furtive look towards the closed door. "You can't stay, you'll never be safe here. I'll make plans for you to leave tonight, Dex can cover my absence. I'll have enough time to give you back to your family and return here before Kava discovers I've left—"

"Whoa, slow down." It took a few minutes to decipher Malik's stream of words. "Oh no," he said firmly when he figured it out. "I'm not leaving without you."

"There's no other way, Ciaran. Kava will never let me go."

Ciaran scowled at the mention of Kava. "I don't understand that."

Malik's face pinched up. "It's complicated. I am...indebted to him."

"Indebted? You owe him money?"

"You don't understand." Malik stood and started to pace. "It would be an insult if I left. He would come after me wherever I went."

"But the City is protected. You would be safe there."

Malik paused long enough to give him a patronizing smile. "They believe they are impenetrable, but there are ways, Ciaran. We've always had our spies in the City."

Ciaran was surprised to hear that, but then he'd never had much use for politics. "It doesn't matter."

"No, you must go," Malik continued, "And when the time is right, I will join you."

"How? You say you can't even leave his side for more than a day."

A muscle in Malik's jaw worked furiously and he threw another cautious look towards the closed door. "I am allowed closer to him than anyone. There will be a time and an opportunity..."

A chill stole across Ciaran's heart. His head began to throb in an alarming way. "No. We'll go somewhere else."

"There is nowhere else."

"No, I won't lose you again."

"You won't, I told you." Malik's face was set in stone, but a strange pain shone in his eyes.

"I will. Look at you. Something's not right when you talk about him."

"Keep your voice down!"

Ciaran lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. "I don't want you killing anyone."

"It's too late for that, brother," Malik laughed wryly. "If you wanted to be my protector, you're years too late."

"Malik--"

"No," Malik pushed himself to his feet, wiping his face with his sleeve. "You'll leave just as soon as I can arrange it."

Ciaran was steadfast. "I won't go."

"Ciaran, please--" Malik snapped, but then stopped himself, sighing heavily with his hand on the doorknob. His voice softened. "Please, just this once. Do what I tell you."

"No." Ciaran shook his head. "I didn't put up with all your foolishness these past few months for this."

Malik opened his mouth, and then seemed to think better of it. "We'll discuss it tomorrow."

Ciaran let his silence speak for him. Malik held out his hand. "Stay with me tonight? I can't stand thinking of you sleeping in this room another night."

Ciaran replaced the blanket around his shoulders with his robe and took Malik's hand. "This isn't over."

"Okay, okay. But no more tonight. Please?"

Ciaran smiled and brushed his lips across Malik's cheek, a movement that was as natural as it was new. "Okay."

Part III

Chapter Twenty Four

The next morning, Ciaran was relieved to find there was no more hinting about killing people. It was almost as if the weirdness of the previous night had been just a dream, but Malik was still obsessed with the idea that Ciaran shouldn't remain in the house, or even the region.

"No," Malik insisted.

"Malik," Dex's tone was ever reasonable as he explained for the twentieth time why it was not a good idea for Ciaran to suddenly disappear. "There will be too many questions. Too much unwanted attention."

Dex and Dashi had spent the night in one of the guest rooms, and much as Ciaran was reluctant to be near Dex again so soon, he was pleased to have support for his opinion. Slouched down in the middle of the couch in Malik's office, he'd been watching the two of them spar back and forth for the better part of an hour. He gave up trying to get a word in edgewise twenty minutes before.

Dashi sat on the floor before him, head tilted back, and waited patiently for Ciaran to feed him another of the grapes from the bowl brought in with breakfast. There was no strangeness between them this morning. Perhaps if Ciaran had slept alone there would have been, but as it was he slept all night firmly ensconced in his brother's embrace, and the easy way Dashi rubbed his cheek against Ciaran's leg seemed like perfectly normal contact.

Ciaran teased him, moving the grape back and forth until Dashi made a silly face. Dex chose that moment to turn to Ciaran and inform him, "Your brother, is a stubborn bastard."

"Keep your goddamned voice down," Malik grumbled from across the room, his shoulders square and tense as he stared out the window.

"Well, it doesn't matter," Ciaran said, looking pointedly at Malik's back. "Because I'm not leaving."

"I see." Apparently pleased, Dex took a seat on the chair. He tapped his fingers against his chin and slowly looked Ciaran over from head to toe. "So, what are we to do with you then?"

Ciaran frowned down at his clothing, wondering what was there for Dex to seem so interested in. "What do you mean?"

"Perhaps it would be best to create an illusion--"

Before Dex could finish, Malik spun back around, his face a mixture of amusement and ire. "No. Absolutely not."

"It's the only way, Malik."

"Like hell it is."

"Well, it's the best way then," Dex said, exasperated.

Ciaran looked back and forth between them.

"The only way for what?" Dashi asked eagerly. Dex must have informed him of the true nature of Ciaran and Malik's relationship the previous night for he seemed much more tolerant of Ciaran's clothing and behavior at breakfast that morning.

"He's not the type, Dex," Malik said. "And I wouldn't ask him to."

"Nonsense, a little work, he could do it." Ciaran felt his skin prickle as Dex eyed him again. "Alright, a lot of work, but you have a competent staff, Malik. And quite frankly, they've been expecting it of him for weeks now."

Malik snorted. "You've *seen* him. He can't. And besides, he doesn't want to."

Being talked about in the third person was starting to aggravate Ciaran, but he was far too busy trying to decipher the code they were speaking in to complain.

Dashi caught on first. "Oh yes, Ciaran!" He scrambled to his knees on the floor. Now there were two sets of eyes looking Ciaran over like a specimen in a laboratory; Dashi was just more hands-on about it. He pushed up Ciaran's shirt and purred his approval at the muscle tone he found. "We'll have to cut your hair a little. And you'll need more jewelry, not to mention new clothes." His nose wrinkled up.

Ciaran's eyes widened, jumping from the gold rings in Dashi's ears, to the subtle smile on Dex's face, and finally over to Malik's scowl. He sat up taller. "Oh, no. No."

"You see?" Malik said with a smug smile. "Exactly what I said."

Dex waved him off. "If you stay, Ciaran, you have to make everyone believe that you've accepted this life. We can't have the attention on Malik if he's to plan a *suitable* way for you both to leave." He paused to give Malik a hard look, then turned back to Ciaran. "Everyone in town is watching to see if he finally wins you over."

Ciaran's mouth fell open but no words came out. He wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it. Dex brought his point home with a pat to Ciaran's knee. "They have to be watching something else."

"And Malik could train you," Dashi chimed excitedly. "He learned from the best."

"Dashi, quiet yourself!" Dex cut Dashi off with a fierceness that made everyone jump.

"The best what?" Ciaran asked, but Dashi didn't answer, his body wilting at the sharp rebuke.

"Let it go, Ciaran."

Dex's warning was very soft but Ciaran refused to be swayed. "No, I want to know. Malik learned from the best what?" Ciaran looked from Dashi to Dex and finally to a furious Malik.

Dex took a breath. "Your brother was a slave once," he began, speaking slowly as if choosing each word carefully. "A special kind of slave."

"Dex!"

"He needs to know, Malik."

"I don't understand." Ciaran watched as Malik gives Dex a disgusted shake of his head, and then slowly, he put the pieces together. "Kava."

Malik nodded once.

"But how?"

"How do you think?" Malik snorted. "When he came to the village, I was the only thing he was interested in. Everything else, he burned to the ground."

The horror at his brother's fate, combined with unbidden amusement at the thought of Malik dressed up in glitter and jewelry, was almost too much for Ciaran to take in. "Then how did you...?" He gestured feebly at the dark, military color that made up Malik's current outfit.

"It's a long story."

Dex was no more forthcoming, now leaning back in his chair. Ciaran searched his mind for all the clues he'd missed. "You said you could get closer than anyone else."

"There are still days when he requires my special talents," Malik grimaced. "After he's...finished with me, he sleeps."

Ideas of what those special talents must have been quickly soured in Ciaran's gut. "Why haven't you killed him already if it was so easy?" Malik wouldn't meet Ciaran's eyes.

"Easy?" Dex made a disgusted sound.

"That's enough, Dex," Malik said.

"He must plan safely," Dex continued, ignoring the warning, "Nothing rash, that would only get him killed. Wait and then leave quietly. And if you want to remain..." The preferred option hung, unspoken, in the air.

The room fell silent for a while, only Dashi seemed undisturbed, tapping Ciaran's knee and opening his mouth for another grape. Absently, Ciaran fed him one. "How long?" he asked.

Dex shrugged. "A few months, perhaps a bit more to put all the pieces in place."

"And what are your...customs about new pleasure slaves." Thoughts of Dashi being passed happily around a room full of men paraded through his mind. Dex cocked his head in question, and Ciaran sighed, purposely avoiding looking at his brother. "Sharing of slaves, necessary rituals, public displays of...sex."

"Oh." Dex stroked his chin and considered. "No man need touch you save the one who owns you, if that is his wish. There are...occasions when Malik may need to appear in public. It would be expected that his preferred slave would accompany him."

"Accompany him?"

"Sit by his side, fetch him things, look enchanting," Dex rattled off a list that omitted several things Ciaran had already seen Dashi do. He peered at the soldier until Dex rolled his eyes. "If Malik chooses to keep your pleasure to himself and behind closed doors, it would be...unusual, but not unacceptable."

Ciaran nodded. So, possibly naked in public, but not necessarily subjected to anything too humiliating--save the part where he'd be naked in public.

"Of course, there would need to be evidence of consummation." Dex lifted his shoulders in a careless shrug. "But it need not be anything elaborate."

"Consummation?"

"Preferably on a very regular basis. Say every night for the first--"

"Gods!" Malik interrupted, pushing away from his desk with enough force that every item on it wobbled. Malik tugged at the waistband of his pants, rearranging his

attire in the ensuing silence. "I need some time," he announced. Then, not waiting for acknowledgment, he strode out of the room.

Ciaran looked to Dex, who simply shrugged and settled back, resting an ankle on his knee. "He needs some time."

Malik was still quietly radiating frustration as they all sat again in the room where Ciaran made his confession the night before. The couches were pulled back and they sat on pillows, one on each side of the low square table. Marcus served lunch, his bad ankle causing him to limp slightly. He slipped Ciaran a secretive smile, glancing appreciatively at Malik. Ciaran was pleased he managed not to blush. If he chose to remain here, in accordance with Dex's plan, he'd no doubt be getting many more looks like that.

The room felt different in the daylight. The sun streaming in through the tall windows had a cleansing effect. Even the colors of the pillows they sat on were healthier shades of red and orange.

Ciaran amused himself by watching Dashi flirt with Dex across the table. He was reluctantly finding himself more agreeable towards Dex. He blushed when the soldier caught him looking. "Dashi" Dex said with a knowing smile. "Come, sit by me."

Dashi gave up his meal readily, setting his fork down beside his plate before crawling around and kneeling back on his heels beside his master, hands in his lap. The slave's usual ebullience quieted into a focused obedience.

"That's a good boy." Dex cupped the slave's jaw, pressing his thumb deep into Dashi's mouth, until his head tilted back. Dashi remained attentive and still, save for whatever movement Dex made for him. "You see, Ciaran?" Dex said, arching an eyebrow at Malik's smirk. "This is what a pleasure slave should look like."

Ciaran held his breath, watching Dex bend Dashi's head back until it clearly couldn't bend any further. Dashi's body started to lean backwards. His eyelashes fluttered, but otherwise he made no outward sign of discomfort. If anything Ciaran felt strangely relaxed just watching him.

At last Dex let him go. He took a fig from his plate and popped it into Dashi's mouth as a reward. "We should show him, my sweet little slut, just what you can do."

Dashi's eyes flicked once to Ciaran and then back to his master. He smiled.

"Would you enjoy that, pet?"

Ciaran sensed the question was rhetorical. He couldn't imagine Dashi ever saying no to sex.

Dex glanced once at Malik, who gave him a bemused look but inclined his head in agreement, then turned his attention fully to Dashi. "Stand," he ordered, the sudden firmness of his tone startling Ciaran. "Remove your clothing."

Dashi never wore all that many clothes as far as Ciaran was concerned, but he did wear more at the dinner table. He removed his shoes, the slim vest, and the cloth wrapped around his waist, folding them and setting them on the floor before turning

back to kneel again for his master.

From his seat across the table, Ciaran had a clear side view of the boy's cock and the shiny gold band that bound it and his balls together. The flesh appeared to be growing heavy, and he felt a moment's sympathy for the boy's plight followed by intense curiosity. Had Dashi been wearing the ring all day? Ciaran remembered the way the slave had squirmed in place earlier with each grape Ciaran lazily fed him. Had the game meant something entirely different to him?

"Good." Dex waved a hand and Dashi turned and folded himself over in one smooth movement, presenting his ass to his master, his head lowered to the floor. Dex ran his fingers down the crack between the cheeks. An inspection, of sorts.

Ciaran found the scene strangely erotic. There was something odd about the path Dex's fingers traveled, but he couldn't see more without moving, something he wasn't prepared to risk just yet. He slid a glance towards Malik who was looking on with interest, a smile playing at his lips. Ciaran relaxed, grateful for anything that took Malik's mind off their earlier argument.

A soft command that Ciaran couldn't quite make out sent Dashi around the table to Malik. "Do I please you, my lord?" he asked. Standing still with legs slightly parted, his groin was parallel with Malik's head, his hands clasped behind him.

Malik smiled a soft, almost wistful smile, unlike anything Ciaran has seen before. "Yes, Dashi, you have always pleased me very much." He fondled Dashi's bound genitals with a casual directness, then pulled gently on Dashi's arm until they were close enough to kiss. Ciaran watched their tongues dance in the slight separation between them. It seemed Malik always kissed everyone with tongue.

Malik nodded towards Ciaran. "Go," he said, and Dashi smoothly rounded the next corner of the table, eyes straying to Dex once for any more silent commands.

Ciaran's lips parted as Dashi came near. There was a faint shine to the slave's skin that he hadn't noticed before, probably because it had rubbed off on the clothes Dashi had been wearing. And there was a thin angular design marked just below his naval. Like wings, Ciaran thought.

Dashi looked down at him with his usual impish grin, not at all the look he gave to Dex or to Malik, and with an inward muscular flex he bounced his soft, but swelling cock in front of Ciaran's face.

Ciaran laughed nervously, eyes drawn to the gold band. He wanted to touch it, wondered what it felt like. Dashi's cock bounced again.

"Cheeky little show off," Dex murmured affectionately.

Ciaran suddenly wondered if it was custom for all the men at the table to touch the slave, but before he could really think about it, Dashi turned and knelt, presenting his ass to Ciaran, just as he had for Dex.

Ciaran stared at the object he couldn't quite see before. A metal plug rested between hairless cheeks that shone with the same oil he'd seen on the rest of Dashi's skin. The flared base was engraved with a symbol on it that Ciaran could only assume had something to do with Dex's status, or perhaps his name.

"You can touch him," Dex said.

Ciaran belatedly realized his fingers were already hovering over the smooth metal. He stroked the outline of it and slowly slid his fingers off to touch the surrounding skin. Dashi shivered and then gave a little wiggle.

Dex laughed. "That's enough. Come here, pet."

With a last smile over his shoulder, Dashi moved gracefully on his hands and knees until he was once again kneeling before Dex.

It was decidedly easier for Ciaran to breathe with Dashi gone. He wet his lips, one hand straying to his groin, hidden, he hoped, beneath the table.

Dashi purred as Dex ran his fingers through the young slave's hair. "Would you like to see more, Ciaran?"

Ciaran looked to Malik, finding him relaxed back against the soft cushions, a platter of fruit at his side. Malik held out a hand in invitation. "Come here, Ciaran. Let Dashi show you some of his many talents."

Taking a deep breath, Ciaran nodded, unable to help his curiosity now that he'd opened up to the idea. He pushed to his feet, faltering a moment as he wondered if he should have stayed on his knees, then walked the few steps to sit down beside Malik.

"You need to answer Dex." Malik reminded him.

"Right," he breathed. He looked back to where Dashi waited, knees wide, hands loose atop his thighs.

Dex's raised brow suggested his patience was not eternal, and Ciaran found his voice. "Yes, show me."

Dex inclined his head a fraction. Smiling, he stood and walked slowly around his slave, fingertips brushing against the pale skin, loving touches falling against Dashi's cheek, shoulder and chin.

After regarding the boy for a moment, Dex bent down and whispered in Dashi's ear, his hand sliding down Dashi's back as he spoke. Whatever it is Dex said, Dashi apparently agreed. He turned slowly so that his body was open to where Ciaran and Malik rested.

Dex stepped aside, remaining in Dashi's peripheral vision. "Listen to me Dashi, only to me."

"Yes, master." Dashi's eyes grew a little hazy, and Ciaran marveled at the way his skin already shimmered with a light sheen of sweat.

"I want you to bring yourself to orgasm without touching yourself," Dex said. Dashi's tongue flicked out, touching against both lips in turn, then his teeth raked over his thick bottom lip. "Can you do that for us, pet?"

A fluttering of emotions drifted across Dashi's face and then washed themselves away, revealing an eager determination. His hips rolled forward, hands moving behind him, bracing himself as he widened the vee of his legs and arched his back, letting a long breath out. "For you, master."

"Can he do that?" Ciaran whispered into Malik's ear.

Malik smiled and rested his hand against the inside of Ciaran's leg. "Watch."

Dashi again rolled his hips forward, his cock growing even larger despite the gold that circled it, until it jutted out in a solid length. Perspiration beaded across his

brow. Dashi gasped, "Master?"

Ciaran fervently wished he were closer. He leaned forward, envying Dex's fingertips as they stroked down the middle of the slave's chest one moment and scratched lazily across a nipple the next.

"What is it, my beautiful boy?" Dex purred.

"Master...please, the band?"

"Are you asking your master to be free to come? Can you not come with it on, my little imp?"

Dashi's body twisted towards his master's voice, his head coming up, pure lust flowing from his eyes. "My lord, my master, I will do what you ask." He undulated until he'd turned his body around, grunting as he came onto his hands and knees, his firmly plugged bottom pointed now towards his audience.

Ciaran was unable to tear his eyes away from sight. The muscles of Dashi's ass and back and legs all worked together in smooth harmony. He was using the plug somehow to accomplish his task. What secret did the metal possess that would grant the wearer an orgasm without a single touch?

"Dashi, back around."

Dashi groaned and obeyed. Ciaran gasped as Dashi's cock came back into view. It had grown into a deep red, the head wet and dripping with pre-come. Dex knelt beside him, fingers lightly tracing around the band as he whispered words Ciaran couldn't hear.

Dashi's body jerked and his muscles tensed, one hand coming up to claw and fist in mid-air. Ciaran tensed, silently willing Dex to flick the clasp and remove the cock ring; but Dex merely uttered a quiet word and Dashi whimpered, his body slowly relaxing again before Dex returned to his teasing.

"I can take it off of you. I can give you release, Dashi."

"Yes, Master. My pleasure is yours. Only yours."

Dex pressed and the ring popped free. With a sharp cry for his master, Dashi's body began the erotic dance of his orgasm. Knees wide, back arched, supported by his hands behind him, Dex's fingers trailed down Dashi's chest as his hips worked rhythmically. "Come for me, Dashi my pretty. Show me."

Ciaran gasped when Dashi came, semen spurting up to cover his chest, without any further manipulations save Dex's kiss to his shoulder.

Malik rubbed Ciaran's arm, and Ciaran fell back against him, slumping against his brother's steady warmth, exhaling a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. It had been difficult watching, not knowing if Dashi could complete his task. "What if he failed?" What if Dex hadn't removed the band?

"Dashi displayed his willingness to serve and obey, even knowing there was no chance to succeed in his task." Malik's arm was warm and reassuring around Ciaran's waist. "He knew that as long as he did his best to obey his master, he could not fail."

Groaning, Ciaran pulled his feet up, bending his knees. "I can't do that," he whispered, but the words were swallowed up by another one of Dashi's moans. Dex had pressed Dashi down to the floor and was devouring him in a deep kiss, his hand

moving down to pull on Dashi's soft cock. A soft groan escaped Ciaran's throat as he watched their mouths move against one other. He closed his eyes and gave into his desire to rub at the insistent throbbing between his legs.

Malik was talking to him softly, or to Dex, Ciaran didn't know, or care. When he felt soft hands touch his legs, pulling them apart, his eyes popped open to see Dashi beaming at him.

Dex smiled down at him. "Dashi would like to show you another, less strenuous task of a pleasure slave."

Ciaran squeaked, unsure, as Dashi's fingers set right to work unfastening his pants. He started to block their path only to have his wrists caught in Malik's strong hands and pulled out to his sides.

"Now, Ciaran." Malik admonished gently while Dex smirked. "Be good and let Dashi work."

Dashi emitted a deep purr of appreciation when he discovered the sizeable erection Ciaran had been nursing. Ciaran flushed, having only a moment to be embarrassed before being enveloped by the warm wondrousness of Dashi's mouth. His head fell back into Malik's chest with a guttural cry, pulling his hands against Malik's grasp as the slave sucked on his cock.

The thought of both Malik and Dex watching him inspired Ciaran's cheeks to burn a brighter shade of red. Malik was one thing, but Dex... He was helpless to do anything but writhe until Dashi quickened his pace, head bobbing up and down, letting Ciaran's cock rub the back of his throat until Ciaran finally came, hard, his release flowing out in long thick spurts.

After he was grinning like a fool, giddy as he pressed his cheek against Malik's chest and rubbed his face in his brother's scent. Malik released his hands and Ciaran immediately curled his fingers around Malik's thighs and squeezed.

Malik chuckled. "Well, that went well."

"Quite."

Ciaran cracked an eye open at Dex's sardonic tone. Dashi was leaning against Dex's leg, Dex's hand running through his hair. Dashi glowed with pleasure, and Dex spared Ciaran another glance. "It is not so very difficult."

Embarrassed, Ciaran scowled and began to pull himself back together. He could imagine Dex's idea of difficult.

Dashi made a small noise and looked up beseechingly at Dex. His cock had started to rise again, and he rubbed his cheek against his master's hip.

"No more today, pet."

Dashi's face fell into a brief pout, but then to Ciaran's amazement, he crawled directly to where the gold band lay discarded on the floor. Skin still slick with sweat, he picked the ring up with his teeth and brought it back to his master.

Dex took the ring and snapped it back in place, making Dashi hiss as his cock and balls were squeezed back into its restriction. Ciaran couldn't imagine how uncomfortable it must be. He turned to Malik. "Why?"

Amusement shone in Malik's eyes. "Why don't you ask his master?"

Bewildered, Ciaran turned to Dex.

"Because it pleases me," Dex said simply. He dropped back onto his pillow at the table and popped a piece of fruit into his mouth. Dashi crawled straight to him and curled up with his head in Dex's lap.

Ciaran tried to discern how Dashi must feel about this, but the boy just nestled himself closer to Dex, earning more strokes and pats. "But the band," Ciaran protested, "It looked...painful."

Dex laughed. "He knew he was to be wearing it, he did not have to get so excited."

Dashi's impish smile returned. The slave gave a full body wiggle. "I always have to get so excited."

Malik laughed out loud. "All right," he said, standing and pulling Ciaran up off the floor behind him. "I believe I've had enough fun for today." He inclined his head towards Dex and pulled Ciaran against him, the bulge at his groin indicating that Ciaran wasn't the only one affected by Dashi's show of expertise. "You know the way out when you're ready, my friend?"

Dex smiled. "Indeed."

"Excellent." Malik gave Ciaran a lascivious look. "There are things I must attend to."

As Malik led him out of the room by the hand, Ciaran thought he knew exactly what a pleasure slave must feel like.

A cool breeze wafted through the bedroom, probably from the open door out to the garden, but Malik had no desire to get up and close it, not when he was wrapped up with his brother in his arms. Malik had wanted to insulate himself from the antics of Dex and Dashi, which, though entertaining, were misleading. He needed to get Ciaran alone and make sure his brother really understood what would be required of him.

"It won't be as easy as Dex would have you think," he whispered, his arms tightening around Ciaran. "I can still make you disappear."

Ciaran swatted at him. "Don't be an idiot."

"I'm serious, Ciaran. It's not something you want to take lightly. If you do this, it has to be all the way."

"I'm not taking it lightly," Ciaran growled, twisting around to hover over Malik.

"You'd have to take the training."

"How hard could it be?"

Malik didn't answer that. "And you'd have to obey me." He cocked his head on the pillow. "And I mean completely. It'd be dangerous if you don't."

"I can manage."

Malik didn't think Ciaran really understood what dangerous meant. So fair and soft, how could he? Brushing Ciaran's bangs back from his forehead, he lost himself in his brother's blue eyes. "So beautiful," he whispered. So fortunate Kava never found

him.

Ciaran snorted and rolled away. "It's just for show, Mal."

Malik's stomach clenched, but he forced a smile. "Of course."

Chapter Twenty Five

Ciaran was spending the day with Dashi, doing exactly what, he wasn't quite certain. So far, Dashi had only succeeded in teaching him the correct way to apply eye liner and lecturing him on recent trends in fashion for pleasure slaves and soldiers alike. Now Dashi was giving him a look through a considerable stash of cock rings, the range of which had Ciaran wondering just where they all came from.

"Isn't that one painful?" he asked, picking up a small golden ring with spiky looking nubs on the inside of it. Or was painful the point?

"It is, which is why I never wear it." Dashi shuddered and took the ring from Ciaran's fingers to twirl it between his own. "It was given to me as a gift before Timmor died. I don't know why I keep it. Maybe to remind me of what could have been."

"What could have been?" Ciaran wondered who would give such a thing to another man's slave, especially one so young as Dashi must have been.

Dashi shrugged. "Timmor didn't need another pleasure slave. He could have sold me to anyone. Not everyone is as kind to their possessions as Dex and Lord Malik."

"But I thought you finished the training just before you were given to Dex?"

"Oh, that was just a formality. I grew up in the harem."

"You grew up there?"

Dashi was unfazed by Ciaran's shocked expression. "Mmhmm." He set the spiked ring on the shelf next to the others and lined up any that had strayed out of place. "My mother was one of Timmor's favorites. She died a few years ago."

"I'm sorry."

Dashi only shrugged again. "Timmor promised her he'd take care of me afterwards, but who knows what could have happened."

"So, he didn't give you that?" Ciaran pointed to the wicked ring.

"Oh, no." A delicate shiver ran across Dashi's shoulders. "That was Lord Rantek. He used to come to the house often. Always leering at me."

Ciaran never considered Dex had any competition when it came to Dashi, but he supposed Dashi would have been considered quite a prize. "What happened to him?"

"He died, I should hope." Dashi cast a quick glance at the open door. "Dex liked him, but I never did."

"Oh." Ciaran frowned, not sure what else to say.

"But let's talk about you!" Dashi looped his arm through Ciaran's and steered him to a pile of cushions that made up the main seating area of the dressing room. "Still sleeping on the floor?"

Ciaran spluttered. "I was never sleeping on the floor!"

"Cot, floor," Dashi smiled sweetly, "Neither one is really a bed."

"Pleasure slaves sleep with their masters," he recited demurely. "Or didn't you know that?"

Dashi made a delighted sound, and Ciaran had to look away so he didn't turn completely red. It'd been a week since he consented to go along with Dex's idea of masquerading as a favored slut. He had no idea if the act had so far changed public opinion in any way, but if the atmosphere in Malik's house was anything to go by, it probably had. Already, people looked at him with more respect, even Alma scoffed at him more gently.

"It is nice," Ciaran admitted, tentatively, "Warmer at least." Sleeping in Malik's room, just sleeping there, was a great improvement. They were still adjusting to the constant closeness of it. "As I'm sure you know."

"Oh Ciaran," Dashi laughed, "I don't think I've slept alone in a bed for years."

"Years?"

"Why should I?"

Ciaran considered that, calculating exactly how long 'years' might mean to Dashi. "Did you sleep with Malik then?"

"Sometimes." Dashi's tone was somewhat reserved. "More often I entertained."

More dinner parties, Ciaran imagined. He wondered what sort of fun was scheduled for the party he'd crashed some nights before. He wanted to ask if Dashi ever felt forced, obligated in his slavery, but the question would likely only earn him another queer look or even a reprimand. He took a deep breath. "I'm sure you pleased him."

Dashi nudged Ciaran's knee with his own. "You can ask about him. I don't mind."

Ciaran swallowed. He couldn't deny a curiosity about all that went on between Dashi and his brother, but he wouldn't stoop to asking after lurid details. He could always get Malik to confess to such things later. There are other things Malik was less likely to share. "Tell me about Kava."

A shadow darkened Dashi's usually happy features. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because no one will tell me anything." A hint of exasperation seeped into Ciaran's voice, and Dashi frowned, picking up one of the smaller pillows to bounce between his hands. Ciaran pressed him, "What kind of relationship does Malik have with Kava?"

"I don't know very much."

"But you know something."

Dashi sighed. "Everybody knows something."

Everyone knows more than I do. "I mean more than that."

Dashi started slowly. "Once, several months after I was allowed to wander freely in Timmor's rooms, I was called to sit with Timmor in his chambers. Lord Malik was there. He and Dex were frequent visitors, they'd come for dinner or epic chess games... Timmor favored them. But there was something different that time. He didn't look himself."

"Go on," Ciaran prodded.

Discomfort marred Dashi's face. "He was holding himself carefully, like someone who was hurt. Timmor told him that he should be happy Kava did to him

what he now wouldn't do to the army. I didn't know what that meant, it just seemed to hurt Malik to hear. I tried to help him."

They both fell silent for a moment. "How did you help?" Ciaran asked.

Dashi laughed a humorless laugh. "I said I tried. Once Timmor left the room to gather some maps Malik requested, I tried to help him to a chair, but he wouldn't let me touch him. Wouldn't even look me in the eye. I wouldn't have known truly that he was hurt if I hadn't seen the bruises."

"Bruises?"

Dashi nodded, his eyes closing against the memory. "Curling up around his neck, like someone had held a rope around it. He was so painfully polite when he asked for a glass of wine and apologized for the trouble he was causing."

"I see." Ciaran remained still, but on the inside his guts were churning. Later he'd have to corner Malik and get the whole truth out of him. "I appreciate your telling me."

"I shall tell you secrets now," Dashi changed the subject. Excitement filled his eyes at the task. "Things he is rumored to prefer."

Laughing, Ciaran shook his head. He had no interest in bringing special techniques home like a good little puppy. It was true, Malik had been good to him lately, but not that good.

Dashi frowned. "Don't you enjoy sharing his bed?"

"Yes," Ciaran admitted, "But it's mostly for show, Dash."

Dashi pushed away from the pillows, opened a drawer beneath the cock ring shrine, and pulled out a set of thin chains with jangling bells. Ciaran couldn't make out exactly what it was until Dashi slung it around his waist, over his low riding silk pants. "For dancing," he said with a shake of his hips. All the bells jingled at once. "They make you feel *very* sexy."

Amused, Ciaran sat back, hands behind his head. "What else have you got?"

Never one to turn down an audience, Dashi pulled out trinket after trinket. A strip of cloth, red and silky, which he wrapped around his head, covering his eyes. Then a slender curved piece of ivory which even after a full explanation, Ciaran still had trouble understanding the use of. He laughingly turned down an offer to have the item demonstrated.

"Oh, and there's also this!" Dashi exclaimed, clapping his hands before picking up a small black jar with a golden lid. He held it open beneath Ciaran's nose.

Ciaran sniffed too deeply, not expecting the strong pungent scent. His eyes watered. "What is it?"

"It's called Amit-Tal," Dashi giggled. "Oh, Ciaran. You must ask for it at least once. It's divine!" He lowered his voice. "It's also banned, officially. But it's used by everyone. The rumors say Kava uses it on his slaves all the time."

Ciaran frowned. Anything Kava enjoyed couldn't be good. "What is it, exactly?"

"Well, it comes from the nectar of a flower that only blooms once every two years. Mixed into wine or water it can give you a nice relaxed feeling and make everything that happens to you feel good, or, if applied directly onto your skin..."

Dashi's shoulders rippled with an orgasmic shiver and a huge smile spread across his face. "Of course, it was banned after that particular use of it was abused, but that was ages ago and everyone uses it, just no one says so."

"No one says what, Dash?" Dex chose that moment to walk in. His eyes flicked to Ciaran, registering neither a great deal of interest nor surprise, and he nodded politely.

"Dex!" With a great squeal, Dashi threw himself into Dex's arms.

Dex laughed and pulled his young lover in for a deep kiss. They exchanged a few words, too soft for Ciaran to hear, but the love shining in Dex's eyes was enough for him to understand what was said.

"We were talking about Amit-Tal," Dashi said, latching onto Dex's arm and drawing him further into the room.

Dex picked up the open jar and inspected it, frowning. "Malik's never going to let Ciaran come over to play if you fill his head with things you shouldn't, Dashi."

"Oh, Dex. Don't tease."

Dex threaded his fingers through Dashi's hair, pulling his head back and giving it a gentle shake. "I'm not teasing, pet. Lord Malik will not appreciate you telling Ciaran about things of this nature. Now say goodbye to our guest and attend to your duties."

Ciaran watched Dashi's master leave. "Are you in trouble?" he asked, feeling vaguely responsible.

Dashi collapsed next to him. "I don't think so. Something probably happened and he's upset."

Ciaran only nodded, trusting Dashi's judgment about such things. "I should go."

Dashi hopped up and pulled Ciaran to his feet, suddenly eager to get away. "Do you know the way out?"

Ciaran smiled. "I think I remember."

"Ask Malik about the drug. I'm sure he'll tell you all about it." With a quick kiss against Ciaran's cheek, Dashi took off in search of Dex.

Chapter Twenty Six

Malik stifled a chuckle as he walked into the bedroom. It might not be best for Ciaran to see exactly how amusing he found this latest situation.

Ciaran had been conspicuously absent when Malik returned home, but a run-in with Daniel, the harem master, a few minutes later, explained everything. Despite Malik's request that Ciaran's training go slowly, it was apparently a disaster. He shook his head at the list of colorful adjectives Daniel had thought to use.

He found Ciaran resting, no, sulking from the looks of it, on the over-sized window ledge, looking out into the winter darkness. The fire burned warmly in the fireplace, adding to the light of a lantern by the bed.

Ciaran looked up when the door clicked closed, a grin spreading across his face as he rolled off the sill and rushed to Malik's side. "Oh Master!" Ciaran cried, his voice pitched higher than usual as he pawed Malik all over. "I missed you so.

Malik forgot to be irritated that Ciaran had not been at the door to meet him when he arrived. "Have you been smoking my herb?" he teased.

"Of course not." Ciaran frowned severely at Malik for a split second and then started grinning again, laying a dramatic hand on Malik's cheek and batting his eyelashes for effect. "I'm just so glad you're home! Can I get you something? Food? Wine? Pleasure slave in training?"

Malik stilled his brother's wandering hands with a chuckle. "You've really got to start taking this seriously," he said. "Daniel's heart just about gave out right in front of me while he was telling me about your day." The normally unflappable harem master had been so upset, he'd actually sputtered.

With a huff, Ciaran dropped the pretense and shoved Malik away. "I can't take it seriously!" He flopped, belly down, across the bed. "I might go mad if I do."

"I thought we had an agreement."

Ciaran heaved a sigh into the stark white comforter. "We do. But can't we start with something a little less...naked?"

Malik frowned, "I'm not sure there's a 'non-naked' part to it. I suppose you could learn to dance, but that eventually entails you pulling off your clothing and sucking my--" No, that would be definitely too much to start with. "Has Daniel mentioned training you in sensual massage?"

"He can teach me that?"

"Of course."

Ciaran wriggled onto his back and inspected the ceiling. "That doesn't sound terrible."

"Well, that's a relief," Malik said wryly. "So what did you do today?"

"Oh, Sasha was showing me how many things there are to wear besides actual clothes."

Sitting to remove his boots, Malik watched as Ciaran wrinkled his nose and lifted the plain cotton shirt he was wearing to peek down at his chest. He couldn't help but

wonder what was there on Ciaran's skin. Glittering powder? Scented oils maybe?

"Don't you like Sasha?" Ciaran asked.

Malik frowned. Which one was Sasha? Then he remembered the shy, slip of a thing hovering behind Daniel when he'd brought Ciaran to his first lesson. He glanced up to see Ciaran peering at him. "Daniel seems to approve of his services. Why?"

"He's young, like Aedam."

"So?"

"So, have you ever taken him to..."

"To bed?"

Ciaran nodded.

Malik narrowed his eyes as he approached his brother. "Not that it's really your business, but no."

"Why not?"

Malik stifled a growl. Had he not just said it was none of Ciaran's business? "Why the sudden interest?"

"It's not sudden," Ciaran told him, looking back up to the ceiling. "It's just that Aedam is so...distasteful."

"True," Malik agreed, reluctant to explain that he preferred Aedam exactly for that reason. "But he has a very talented mouth."

Ciaran frowned at him. "I don't know why you pay so much attention to him."

"Well, when it's your harem, you can sleep with whichever slut *you* choose." Ciaran fell silent, suitably chastised for the moment. In need of a drink, Malik turned away. "I thought Dashi was going to show you what to wear. He was excited about you coming over to see his collection of jewels."

Ciaran groaned. "Is there any part of the body Dashi doesn't have jewelry for?"

Malik chuckled and agreed. No doubt Dex spoiled Dashi rotten. But with a slave as insistent and delightful as Dashi, Malik could see no other option.

He collected his glass of wine and the small tray of fruit set out for him. "So, just what do you have against being naked? You have nothing to be ashamed of." He leered in Ciaran's direction. The last few nights his brother has spent with him, almost naked beneath the covers, had been more than Malik expected. When properly motivated, Ciaran could be far less frigid than he appeared on the outside.

"I'm not ashamed."

"What then?"

Ciaran shrugged. "I just don't appreciate the lack of privacy."

"Growing up a soldier, you lose that real quick. You eat, sleep and shit with a hundred men."

"I'm not a soldier."

Malik smiled, trying to imagine his brother following a chain of command. No, certainly not a soldier.

He sat down next to Ciaran's head and dangled a grape over his brother's lips. Ciaran accepted it with an amused glint in his eyes, and Malik was amazed at how simple things could sometimes be between them.

"Do you dislike that *strangers* see you naked? Or anyone?" Malik asked. "Anyone being me."

"You want to see me naked?" Ciaran asked, surprised.

Malik just smiled and picked up a berry, brought in especially from the south. He bit off the bottom before rubbing the exposed fruit against Ciaran's bottom lip, teasing back and forth, watching the sweet juices coat the surface. "Don't hide your sensuality, Ciaran. Sex is power. Flaunt it, use it."

Ciaran licked the sweetness away, a hint of sadness clouding his features. "My family would very much disagree with you there."

"Your family?"

"Does it bother you for me to call them that?"

Malik considered, wanting to give the question the proper weight it deserved. "No," he said finally, "Your family shaped you, made you who you are. It makes me happy to know you grew up with people who loved you."

Malik smoothed the wrinkles out of Ciaran's shirt. "Don't you like anything about the training at all?" He thought back on his own training. Embarrassment had been a constant companion, but so had a sense of survival. Succeed and live. Fight and die. "The clothes, the jewels, the pampering...any of that?"

"No," Ciaran replied without hesitation. "None of it matters to me." He reached out and laid his fingers against the silver buttons of Malik's white shirt, no longer the crisp cotton that it had been that morning. "But I'll do it for you."

Malik stilled, even the lightest touch from Ciaran still gave him pause. "Then do it," he challenged. The more comfortable Ciaran felt in his own skin, the more naturally the rest of the training would come. "Take off your clothes for me."

Ciaran seemed to consider the merits of the request and then, with an impish smile, he sat up. "Whatever you desire, my lord," he said, pulling his clothes off piece by piece. He tossed them all off the side of the bed and fell back unabashedly, one knee bent, the opposite hand resting on the smooth expanse of his stomach. He didn't even flinch as Malik's gaze roamed up and down his body with interest.

Malik stroked the smooth, hairless skin of Ciaran's chest. "Did they tell you to shave here?"

"Yes."

So, Ciaran could do some things without a fight. Perhaps there was hope.

Malik lay down on his side next to Ciaran, trailing a single fingertip across his ribs. "As a pleasure slave, people will look at you as if you are some rare treat they could feast upon. They'll watch how you move and how you perform and they'll compliment me. As if I have something to do with your innate grace."

Ciaran gave him a dubious look. Malik pressed his lips to Ciaran's arm. "They'll ask you to dance so they can watch your body twist and bend. They'll throw money on the ground at your feet."

The doubt turned to visible discomfort. "Dance?"

"Dancing is not...required," Malik murmured. He placed his hand flat on Ciaran's stomach, brushing against Ciaran's fingers.

"But how do you get used to being touched by so many people?"

Malik swallowed his sympathy. "You learn." He swung a leg over Ciaran's body and straddled his hips, hands placed on either side of Ciaran's head as he swooped down and captured Ciaran's lips in a deep demanding kiss. When he found the kiss returned, he deepened it even more, snaking his tongue further into his brother's mouth.

Ciaran warmed and came alive beneath him. The buttons of Malik's shirt were undone one at a time. Ciaran reached for his belt next, but Malik pulled away. He was used to being in control in the bedroom. With everyone but Kava. But Ciaran was something different. Cold one minute, undressing him the next. Malik was never sure who was leading and who was following.

"Was that a subtle request for my clothes to come off as well?"

"I thought it was pretty obvious." Ciaran reached again for his fly. "Unless that's a problem."

Malik batted away Ciaran's hands and stripped of his shirt. "There's no problem."

Ciaran fiddled with a fold in Malik's pants. "It's true what Dashi said? That you were once like him?"

Malik's belt slipped slowly through the loops until he'd pulled it free. "I think Dashi is incapable of lying," he said carefully. "But I've been a soldier for most of my life here."

He unfastened his pants before lowering himself down onto Ciaran again, enjoying the simple pleasure of skin against skin. Ciaran's hands tentatively took their place on his back again. He laid a kiss on Ciaran's collarbone and the touch became stronger.

"Tell me your side of what happened today. I heard it from Daniel, but now I want it from your lips." Malik nuzzled Ciaran's neck, lapping and biting lightly at the skin, pleased with the quiet gasp his efforts elicited.

"I don't understand why he was not happy teaching me again how to prepare your bath or lay out fresh blankets," Ciaran complained, arching up for more. "I could have learned that for at least a few more days."

Malik growled low and nipped again.

"All right!" Ciaran laughed. "He was demonstrating the application of powders and oils on Sasha, and we had an argument over whether or not I should remove my pants as well as my shirt for the lesson."

"And?"

"And I politely refused."

Malik frowned at the amusement in Ciaran's voice. "Why are you lying to me?"

"You said you already knew!" Ciaran protested. "Besides, I did try politely refusing at first."

Malik had to admit, the image of Ciaran actively resisting physical attempts to rid him of his clothing had a certain appeal, but that was beside the point. Sasha had no doubt suffered Daniel's wrath for his failure to get Ciaran out of them.

"If you were any other slave, I would be forced to beat you for your disobedience." He worked his way down to Ciaran's chest.

"Oh?"

"In fact, Daniel mentioned it might help him with his teaching if he were allowed to use a stick on your ass." It had taken amazing control for Malik to not beat the man to the floor after that statement.

Ciaran squirmed. "I doubt I could hold still for that."

"Either someone would hold you still, or you would be chained to something." Malik took a nipple between his lips and sucked intently.

"Ohhh." Ciaran threaded his fingers through Malik's hair as he groaned. "Can you afford to not beat me this time?"

Malik glanced up at his brother's closed eyes. "If I don't, can you look suitably chastised and undeclothed tomorrow without causing a problem?"

While Ciaran hesitated, Malik deftly rolled the nub of the other nipple between his fingers while continued to tease the one below his lips. Abruptly he pinched them between fingers and teeth.

"Oh!" Ciaran gasped, back arching. "I...I'm not sure, actually."

Well, at least his brother was honest. "Then we could have a slight problem." Malik scratched lightly at one abused nipple and then quickly covered it with his lips, soothing the slight pain away with wet kisses. The growing bulge of Ciaran's arousal pressed against his abdomen. "What will help you over this fear?"

"Fear?"

"Yes, Ciaran. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not..."

Malik gave him a look designed to dispense with any further nonsense, and Ciaran let out an exasperated sigh. "It bothers me knowing where they want to stick their fingers eventually."

Puzzled, Malik frowned. His brother was talking like a virgin but that couldn't be true. Ciaran had mentioned a male lover, hadn't he?

"Ciaran?" he said softly. "Why does it bother you? Is it more than just a stranger touching you?"

"Isn't that enough?!"

A reluctant smile crept over Malik's face.

"I've had sex before, if that's what you're thinking!" Ciaran protested. "Plenty of times."

Malik's face turned predatory. He licked his lips like a wolf, and Ciaran all but scrambled out from under him.

"All right, just with women!"

Grinning, Malik slid his hand down between their bodies, reaching past Ciaran's cock and between his parted legs to seek and then rub against the pucker hidden there. Ciaran jerked under his touch. Malik pressed him back down to the mattress. "And here? Did your women fuck you here?"

Ciaran turned his face away. "No. Not exactly."

"Not exactly?"

"Not at all. All right?"

"Ciaran, if you're a virg--"

"I'm not a virgin!"

"Yes, you are," Malik said. "I'm sure Daniel will be much more patient with you when he learns of it."

Ciaran's eyes widened in horror. "You wouldn't."

"He needs to know," Malik said firmly. Though, the old man had almost certainly figured it out for himself.

Ciaran wriggled out from under Malik's hold. "Why can't you have a harem full of women like a normal warlord?"

Malik slung an arm around Ciaran's waist and pulled him back, his breath hot against his squirming brother's ear. "This is normal here."

Ciaran stilled with a sigh. "I'm a long way from home, Mal."

The words left their mark on Malik's heart. He pressed his forehead against the back of Ciaran's head. "I'm your home."

The next morning, as Ciaran and Malik walked down the long corridor that led to the harem rooms, Ciaran allowed Malik to hold his hand, and obediently walked a half step behind his brother. Instead of his usual cotton pants and shirt, which Malik had insisted he had to stop wearing, he was dressed in a thin robe of scarlet silk. He felt naked just wearing it out of the bedroom. Malik, by contrast, was fully dressed.

"Remember, Dashi is coming for you at noon for lunch," Malik told him. "If anything you aren't comfortable with is going on, let him know, he'll know where to find me."

Ciaran smiled at the concern, but he had no plans to run and hide behind his brother. "I'll be fine."

"I know you will be, but just in case." Malik sighed and stopped them just short of the harem entrance. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable any more. Not for this."

Ciaran stifled the instinct to roll his eyes. His brother was insane, of course. How could one not be uncomfortable for something like this? But he smiled and took Malik's hand in his own. "It means something to me that you care."

"I know what it's like, Ciaran. I know how hard it is in there, but I also know the rewards that come from it."

Ciaran forced smile did nothing to hide his disbelief. What could he say? Malik seemed convinced sexuality was both a trial and a pleasure. Ciaran had never thought of it as more than a pleasant game two people played in the dark. Here it was practically a public spectacle.

Malik rubbed his arm. "My hope is that you'll move quickly to what pleasures you can find and explore."

"And you wish to explore them with me?" Ciaran teased, surprised to see the

color on Malik's cheeks deepen.

"Yes." Their eyes met for a moment, full of hope and vulnerability. "Are you ready?"

Ciaran nodded, putting Malik's nervousness out of his mind. Together, they pushed open the door to a familiar small chamber adjacent to the main harem entrance. The room was flatteringly lit and richly decorated in golds and yellows. Malik steered him into the center of the carpet with a hand at Ciaran's back. Ciaran let himself yield to the sense of safety and protection his brother was offering.

Daniel was already waiting, a ready scowl on his wizened features, the familiar stick clasped in his hands. Sasha knelt beside him, scarcely clothed in a scrap of fabric across his groin, beautiful brown eyes downcast. A faint mark marred the skin of the young man's side, and Ciaran felt a shred of guilt. No doubt it was his disobedience that earned Sasha that stripe. But he had to think of himself here. Himself and his brother. There was no room in his heart for anyone else.

"Daniel." The command in Malik's voice startled Ciaran. He wanted to turn and marvel at this version of his brother, so different from the one blushing in the hall moments before, but he kept his eyes forward.

"My lord?" Daniel answered with a short bow. "I did not expect you to escort the slave this morning." His nervous gaze flitted from Malik back to Ciaran.

"His name is Ciaran. I would greatly appreciate your proper use of it."

"Yes, my lord." Daniel's head dipped in acquiescence.

Malik placed his hands firmly on Ciaran's shoulders and drew the robe slowly back. It was like being unwrapped. Nerves fluttered in Ciaran's stomach as he loosened the tie at his waist and allowed the soft material to slip off his body and pool down around his feet.

"Ciaran, kneel." Malik pressed on his shoulders, and Ciaran's knees bent automatically. Once down, he tilted his head back, smiling as Malik stroked his lips with one finger. "You will behave for Daniel today."

"Yes, my lord," he managed to say it without a trace of mockery.

Malik ruffled his hair. "Good." He turned his attention to Daniel. "He shouldn't be a problem for you today."

Ciaran maintained a look of innocence under Daniel's suspicious gaze. He felt a sudden, ridiculous urge to ask Malik to stay, but Malik was already at the door behind him. "And Daniel, Ciaran is important to me," Malik said, "His happiness is very important to me. You will teach him like every other slave, but if you insert so much as a finger inside him before I tell you to, I will relieve your body of every important appendage and take great joy in doing so."

Daniel's eyes widened in horror. Ciaran could only imagine the look Malik was bestowing on him, and it was only by tearing his eyes away from the poor harem master that he kept from laughing.

It was downright endearing that Malik wanted his virginity for himself, under the circumstances. Daniel probably found it less so. After all, a poorly trained slave was just that, poorly trained. But Ciaran was oddly pleased.

Chapter Twenty Seven

A series of trails weaved through the woods behind Malik's house. Malik sometimes chose the back path to the village when he wished not to be bothered, which was often enough.

The day's judgments had left him in a sour mood, contrary to the unseasonably warm and cheerful weather they'd been having. He rounded the corner, lost in thought, and was startled by Ciaran's surprised yelp.

"What? Where did you come from?" Ciaran asked, catching his breath.

Malik smirked at him and pointed behind him. "From there." He looked around at the deserted path, then back to where Ciaran sat on a jagged rock, his shrugged off robe offering more of a cushion than the thin silk of his pants. "What are you doing out here in the cold?"

Ciaran smiled and leaned back, bare chest angling towards the sky. "Enjoying the view?"

Malik's eyes narrowed. "Please tell me you haven't run off from Daniel again."

"Perhaps well behaved slaves get let out of school early."

Malik tried not to grin. "Ciaran..."

"Maybe well behaved slaves drive their harem masters crazy by being so annoyingly well behaved." He climbed down off the rock, thrusting his arms back into the robe.

"You have to be patient with Daniel, Ciaran."

"Me? With him?"

Malik's forehead creased and he drew a breath for patience, but Ciaran only burst into laughter. "No, really. He let me go for the day."

"Truly?"

Ciaran took his arm and steered them towards the house. "Truly. I've been so well behaved for the past two days he barely knows what to make of me."

A smile twitched at the corner of Malik's lips. He placed his hand over Ciaran's where it rested in the crook of his arm, pleased with the way they fell into each other's pace as they walked down the narrow path. "Well behaved slaves are rewarded, you know," he offered softly.

Ciaran merely shrugged. "Since I escaped punishment when I behaved poorly, why don't we just call it even."

Malik was disappointed in the answer, but he kept his displeasure to himself.

"Tell me about your day. Why are you skulking about back here?"

Malik scowled. "I'm not skulking. How can I skulk on my own property?" Technically, it was Kava's property, as everything was Kava's, but it was more his than any other's.

He nodded back the way they'd come. "There's a path that leads down to my office where I was unfortunately in the middle of judgments." He sighed heavily. "Part of my job I sometimes wish would go away." Dex, for instance, would be much better

suited to that role than he was. Nothing bothered that man for long. Though, Dex would also probably have been too smart to accept it.

"Did you sentence any poor abducted souls to slavery today?" Ciaran teased.

"At least three," Malik answered with a completely straight face. He smiled at Ciaran's cautiously wondering expression. "Actually, there is a particularly difficult case I'm hearing now and I'm afraid there's no easy answer for it."

"Death and dismemberment for all, I say." Ciaran waved his hand in a grand gesture.

Malik snorted. "Those were the earlier cases. The rest are harder." They paused as a fox scampered across their path and back into the thick of the woods. "There will be music and dancing in the village tonight. Would you like to go?"

Ciaran's face was pure surprise mixed with wariness. "Wait, what kind of dancing?"

Malik smiled up at the sun, then squinted at the clouds nearby that seemed tinged with gray. There would be rain by morning. "The kind where people stand up and twirl around. Surely they had dancing where you were, Ciaran."

"Well, yes that kind of dancing," Ciaran said. "Though everyone was usually fully clothed, unless they were very, very drunk."

"We don't have to go. I just thought it would be a nice change from another evening of chess."

"I didn't say I wouldn't go," Ciaran protested. Malik could see his brother's mind calculating the relevant factors before coming to a decision. "I would love to."

Ciaran sprawled naked on the bed, watching Malik dress himself after his bath. He would clothe himself as well, but it wouldn't do for their performance. A pleasure slave in his master's bedroom did not hide his body.

"So why can't you just let them go?" he asked for the third time. The details of the judgment Malik explained earlier in the bath still mystified him.

"Because it was wrong, Ciaran. They need to be taught a lesson."

Ciaran let loose an exasperated sigh. "But they're practically children. Let their parents deal with it."

"The barn was completely destroyed; people could have died in the fire, not to mention the economic cost to--"

"Oh, just stop."

"If you would just recognize for a moment that--" A knock at the door interrupted the coming tirade. "What!" Malik barked, fastening his belt buckle.

Anika poked her head in. "Your supper is ready, my Lord." She wrinkled her nose at Ciaran's naked form.

"We'll have it here," Malik ordered. "And arrange for a carriage tonight."

"Yes, my lord." The slave closed the door behind her.

"She doesn't like you," Malik said, amused. "Have you been making trouble

again?"

Ciaran stretched atop the bed and purred, "She's jealous."

"Really?"

"You hadn't noticed?"

Malik went to tend to the fire. "I rarely notice the staff in my house." He poked at the logs, throwing another one on and watching the fire blaze back to life.

"That's good, Mal, because they're all a little bit jealous. Well, except maybe Alma."

Moments later, Anika returned with a feast laden cart. Her eyes studiously avoided Ciaran, but lit up a bit too obviously up when Malik approached. He quickly sent her away.

Ciaran crawled to the edge of the bed, eyeing a bowl full of stew. He snatched the roll Malik offered him with a smirk.

"What? Why are you smiling?"

"Because you're so oblivious." Ciaran took a bite, and pointed to the soup.

Shaking his head, Malik handed over the bowl.

That evening, Ciaran complained about taking a carriage to the village when it was just a short walk away.

"It's different at night," Malik explained. Someone of his status, accompanied by his slave, took a carriage. That was that.

Ciaran drew a deep breath and was just about to start in with another comment about the strangeness and hypocrisy of their customs when Malik shut him up with a sound kiss. It proved a very effective strategy.

Soon strains of music reached their ears, and Malik rapped twice on the side of the carriage. A moment later horses slowed to a halt.

"What, already?" Ciaran asked. "We just got in."

Malik rolled his eyes, hopping out and reaching a hand back for Ciaran. "On the way back I'll take you on a lovely tour of the swamp over there. Would that be far enough for you?"

Down the hill, small fires light up the village square. People milled about everywhere, some dancing off to the right. "What kind of people are these?"

"The regular kind, I imagine." Malik replied, vaguely insulted.

Ciaran lowered his voice. "I mean, how am I to act?"

Malik looked out over the group of happy people, hands waving in the air, voices lifting in laughter over the lively music. "Just be yourself, Ciaran." His gaze fell on the golden ownership collar he'd insisted Ciaran wear over the plain village clothes he'd given him. "They won't care if you have perfect manners."

The carriage pulled away as the music changed into a slower song. He pulled Ciaran into his arms and set them to dancing in the shadows at the edge of the square. "And enjoy yourself."

After a rough start, Ciaran learned how to follow his lead. "You're not half bad at this."

"Neither are you."

When the song ended Malik reluctantly let his brother go and looked over the throng for a place to sit. "There." He pointed towards a table off to the right and took Ciaran's hand, weaving a path through the crowd. Most of the villagers did not recognize him, but some nodded respectfully and stepped aside for him.

As soon as they sat down, a waitress set two tall glasses of frothy amber liquid in front of them. Malik pulled Ciaran close to his side, noticing his brother's peculiar smile. "What?"

"It's just so...normal."

Malik laughed out loud. "What did you expect?"

Ciaran shrugged. "I don't know. Naked slaves wrapped around each other. Maybe in harnesses."

"Not every party is like that," Malik told him. "These are just average people, Ciaran."

Ciaran frowned. "It's not my fault you hardly ever let me out. How was I supposed to know you're not all insane?"

Malik rolled his eyes and downed the rest of his pint, then waved to the waitress for a refill.

"Lord Malik!" a deep voice exclaimed. "I'm surprised to see you down here with the riff-raff."

Malik turned to the well dressed man, knowing who it was without needing to look. "And yourself, Lord Daphine." He smiled indulgently. The man was known for his excursions into the lower class establishments, despite his wife's vocal disapproval.

"Oh, just taking the air." Lord Daphine said, sniffing at the night breeze. He ignored Ciaran completely; the golden ownership collar causing Ciaran to simply not exist.

"And Lady Daphine?" Malik inquired politely. The woman's dogs were again a subject of his judgments today. If they weren't eating people's lambs, they were wreaking some other sort of other havoc. Sometimes he wished he could take the little menaces out himself, save all the fuss.

Daphine made a sour face. "No doubt nattering on about something or other." He pet Malik's arm affectionately. "Excellent judgment work today, my boy. Excellent. We fully support you."

Malik forced a smile to his lips and nodded. "I'm sure it's for the best."

"Quite right. Vandals! They'd burn us all out of house and home if allowed to run loose." Daphine tipped his hat. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

The man was barely away before Ciaran's anger was hot in his ear. "You said you hadn't sentenced them yet," he accused.

"Did I?" Malik rubbed his chin. "Well, it was you who said, 'Death and dismemberment for all.'"

"I was kidding!"

"I wasn't." Malik could see a sulk coming on and squeezed Ciaran's hand. "Let's not let it ruin the evening. It's just the way of things right now." He drew his reluctant brother back to the dance floor. The music was slower this time.

As he held Ciaran close, Malik could almost feel the gossip twining around them. It was not unusual for men to bring a favored slave out with them for companionship, but news of this particular slave, clearly had reached far more ears than he'd thought.

"People are staring," Ciaran whispered.

Malik held him to the rhythm. "Perhaps they're just jealous of your beauty."

Ciaran snorted and set his head on Malik's shoulder. "I'm not beautiful."

Malik's thoughts turned to the way Ciaran's hair shimmered in the firelight when it fell just above his cheekbone. "You have no idea."

Ciaran laughed. "Men aren't beautiful, brother. Women are beautiful."

Malik considered that. "And Dashi?"

Ciaran sighed and laid his head back down. "Dashi is...an exception."

"There are many exceptions."

"You're trying to turn me into a woman. No, a girl."

That surprised Malik. "You think Dashi's a girl?"

"You know what I mean."

Malik stilled their swaying and pushed Ciaran to arm's length. "No, I don't."

Irritation creased Ciaran's forehead. "Well, neither do I, exactly."

Malik sighed and drew his brother back to him. "If I wanted to sleep with women, I would sleep with women." Ciaran's body remained reluctant in his arms, their steps disjointed. "Sex is sex, Ci," he says. "Men, women, it's not that different."

Ciaran groaned, "Maybe my virgin ass begs to differ."

Malik laughed and squeezed him tight. "Your ass is simply uninitiated," he said wickedly into Ciaran's ear, "but not for long." He was close enough to feel the blush warm Ciaran's cheek, but even more delightful was the way Ciaran clung to him until the music changed.

The men were already drilling formations when Malik arrived the next morning. He glanced quickly over the assembly, too many distracted men on the field today. Strange.

He was so intent on the drills, he didn't see Kava until he almost walked into him. "My lord!" Malik bowed his head in respect. "I am sorry. I did not see you there." In truth, Kava rarely left his quarters anymore. Seeing him out on the field was unsettling.

"I had a moment free. I came down to inspect the army."

Malik blinked rapidly, "Yes My lord." He matched Kava's pace as they walk towards the field.

"I hear rumors."

"My lord?"

"Of your new slave. He is quite the trouble maker."

Malik's jaw fell open. That rumors had reached Kava's ear was frightening to say the least. "Nothing I can not handle, my lord."

"So I hear, my boy, so I hear. Still, perhaps I should send over my personal trainer to assist in some of the more important elements. You never were very good at the details, Malik."

Malik's stomach clenched. He forced himself to keep walking. "I assure you that won't be necessary, my lord."

"He will be trained enough for the Spring Festival?"

"I... Yes, I have full confidence he will be presentable."

Kava stopped, his hands pushing into his deep pockets, his eyes sweeping the mass of drilling men. "He must be quite an energetic fuck. You seem tired this morning. Late on the field. You're to set an example, my son. If your slut is too much for you, I'm sure I could find something to occupy his time."

Everything inside Malik contracted. The urge to tear Kava's throat out with his hands was nearly overpowering. But there was nothing he could say. He could only stare at Kava before lowering his head in submission.

Kava laughed, slapping a large hand on Malik's shoulder. "I'm sure you won't let it happen again."

Malik quietly thanked the gods for the reprieve. "It will not, my lord."

Kava's eyes turn to steel. "Good," he spat out. "Now, your left flank is acting like a group of blind idiots. Drill them until they drop dead or get it right." With that, he turned on his heel and left the field.

Chapter Twenty Eight

The training room was dark when Ciaran woke up, with only a dim light coming in from beneath the heavy curtain that acted as a door to the rest of the harem.

He lay still for a minute, trying to gauge what time it was by listening to the sounds of the house. From the low, faraway murmurs and laughter he guessed dinner time for the men and women in the harem, which meant Malik had probably long been home from work.

Rubbing at his face, he sat up. He really had become lazy since he and Malik started getting along.

Straightening the robe he'd been allowed to put back on after Daniel finally left him, he stumbled to the kitchen. The nap had done him well, but his body was still tired. Daniel had channeled his dislike for Ciaran into keeping him in a constant state of arousal for what seemed like forever.

At first they went over how to kneel, Ciaran having learned well over the last couple of weeks that there were several ways to do it. There were also several ways to stand, as well as sit. Understanding exactly when to sit or stand or kneel, and which way to do it, was still a mystery. And it was precisely with this that Daniel took the greatest issue. Apparently, Ciaran was meant to be as proficient at mind-reading as he was exhibiting his naked body.

When Daniel tired of that torment, Sasha had lain with him, touching and teasing his skin from head to toe, until Daniel again assessed every sensitive place and its accompanying response. Any attempt Ciaran made to return the affections bestowed upon him or take control of the situation was met with a sharp rap of the old man's ever present stick.

His blushing and embarrassment had waned over time and was barely a concern now, but patience still eluded him, particularly when it came to criticism.

Finally he'd reached a point where he relaxed completely, surrendering to Sasha's unending teasing, no longer caring if he got to come. He'd clung to the pillows as the boy's mouth again covered every erogenous zone. Then without warning Sasha had sucked Ciaran's cock deep into his throat, swallowing until Ciaran came so hard he saw stars.

Daniel had looked at him critically and tsked. "You must ask for permission."

Ciaran had frowned up at him, uncomprehending, until the man turned away with a look of disgust and left.

"He means you can't come unless you're told," Sasha, still sitting by Ciaran's side, pointed out helpfully.

Ciaran had heard that line before, though frankly things rarely progressed far enough for it to be an issue. "But I couldn't help it!"

Sasha's eyes twinkled with pride at his own technique. "That is why you must ask early."

Ciaran gave up then. He'd always been good at following directions, but it was

another matter when he didn't even know what the directions were.

He groaned and rolled away. Sasha, thankfully, had left him to fall asleep out of sheer exhaustion and confusion.

The kitchen was empty when he reached it, but he found Alma and a few others eating in the small adjoining room where they often played cards.

"And where have you been?" Alma asked as soon as she saw him, her usual welcoming smile replaced with a scowl.

"I fell asleep," he said weakly, ignoring the muffled laughter from around the table. "Dinner?"

"Lord Malik had dinner in his room tonight. If you're lucky he might give you something." Though, she clearly had no idea why he should be so fortunate. "Now shoo! And for heaven's sake, clean yourself up first."

Reluctantly, Ciaran left the kitchen and sniffed at himself. What he needed was a bath, but there was no time to take one. He found a basin and washcloth and did the best he could, putting the robe back on afterwards. All his clean clothes were in Malik's room.

He kept an eye out for Anika as he made his way silently through the dark halls. After he'd caught her spying he'd taken the lock off the door and placed a small metal scrap inside that couldn't be poked out through the keyhole. Malik didn't need to know; he never used the lock.

A dull ache took shape and began to throb in the back of his head. He instantly associated it with his brother.

The sweet traces of Malik's favorite drug reached his nose as he opened the door. Ciaran seriously considered retreating. It would be such a waste to let Malik destroy what they were building together in a moment of weakness, but it was too late, Malik had seen him.

"Ciaran!" Malik called cheerfully from the bed, the pipe within reach on the bedside table. Ciaran determined that Malik was alone, with no sign of Aedam, before warily closing the door behind him.

Malik waved him closer, his eyes a tad bleary looking, but not quite as unaware and vacant as they had been the last time Ciaran found him like this.

"Come, come," Malik said, his tone like that of a King beckoning a reluctant villager. His shirt lay crumpled at the foot of the bed, his pants partially undone but still snug around his hips. "I looked for you," he said, rubbing his bare chest with one hand. He squinted playfully, a smile curling around his lips. "Were you hiding from me?"

Ciaran chuckled in spite of himself and sat on the tiny space of bed between Malik and the edge. "No, I fell asleep," he said. "Did you miss me?"

Malik nodded, staring intently. He slid the back of his hand against Ciaran's arm. "Did you have a good day in school?" He giggled at his own joke and reached for the pipe again.

"Yes." Ciaran drew the word out, watching Malik take a deep drag, hold the breath in, and then let the smoke out. The sickly sweet smell clung to the insides of his stomach, but he managed to hold back the hacking cough that would have liked to

escape.

When Malik abandoned the pipe to the table again, Ciaran crawled over him to the other side of the bed, hoping to lure Malik away from the smoke before his mood had a chance to sour. "Do you need a bath, my lord?"

Malik closed his eyes. "Mmmm, that would be nice. But I took one when I got back. Was dirty." He frowned then, so deeply that grooves etched themselves in his forehead. "Tell me what you did today."

It was on the tip of Ciaran's tongue to complain about the practice kneeling and standing, but he didn't want to end up having to demonstrate. Instead, he teased, "I kissed another man."

Something dark and dangerous flashed behind Malik's eyes, but as quickly as it was there, it was gone. "Was he a good kisser?"

Ciaran nodded.

"Better than me?"

Warmth spread across Ciaran's chest. He'd never considered the fact that Malik might be jealous. He shook his head and pet Malik's bottom lip with a fingertip.

Malik purred deep in his throat. "Show me. Show me how you kissed him."

Ciaran met him halfway with a soft brush of the lips, and then a simple, almost chaste kiss. He angled Malik's chin with his fingers, lips parting slightly more as they kissed again, mouth getting a little wider with each repetition until there was room enough for his tongue to break through, dipping between Malik's lips, tasting the strange ashen taste from the pipe.

Malik's hand moved slowly against his hip, each slide moving the fabric of his robe just a tiny bit more. As the kiss deepened, he took on a new urgency, yanking up the silk in rough handfuls until the smooth skin of Ciaran's hip was bared to his rough fingers.

Ciaran moaned softly, pulling Malik closer until their teeth clacked softly. He fumbled past the open belt at Malik's waist and over the buttons, groping blindly until he discerned the outline of Malik's hardening cock. A surge of self-satisfaction coursed through him.

Malik ground up against Ciaran's hand, fingers tangling in Ciaran's hair. "Did you only kiss him? Did you do anything else?"

"I let him touch me." It was the only other thing Daniel had allowed him.

"Touch," Malik's voice was thick with arousal. "Touch you here?" He rubbed and pinched Ciaran's hipbone, then let his fingers slide past that, down towards the soft flesh of Ciaran's ass cheek. "Here?"

Ciaran nodded at every point Malik's hands paused, sometimes uttering a breathless, "Yes," between eager licks at Malik's lips. Heat curled deep inside him, growing stronger as the rough pads of Malik's fingers skated into the crease between his ass cheeks until at last one finger presses firmly against his entrance.

"Here, Ciaran?"

He gulped and squeezed Malik's cock, still throbbing in its confines. "Yes."

Malik's index finger kept moving, only incrementally slower now, around and

around, then pressing inward, just breaching. Ciaran's sharp grunt of surprise filled the room and aroused them both. His hips ground forward.

With a gasp, Malik pushed him back, eyes sharply focused and bright. "Take it off, Ciaran." He tugged the tie in the front of Ciaran's robe free. "Off, now." The commanding tone of his voice left little room for argument, not that Ciaran had any desire to offer one.

He scrambled to remove the offending cloth from his body, thrusting it over the side of the bed, before slipping back into place beside Malik, hands going straight to the remaining buttons on his brother's pants and slipping them free.

Malik helped, lifting his hips so the pants could be pushed over them. Then Ciaran was on his knees, over his naked brother, eyes roaming over the lines of muscle and bone that made up Malik's body. Checking each scar, delving into each shadow.

Malik didn't tolerate the perusal for long. With a growled, "Ciaran," he gripped Ciaran's upper arms and pulled him down to his chest, tongue thrusting up into Ciaran's mouth, foreshadowing what he meant to do. "Ciaran," he breathed again. The remnants of the drug made his eyes glow in the firelight.

Ciaran swallowed a breath, heart racing. "Yes."

Then Malik was suddenly pushing him up, pushing him back, his hands seeming to be everywhere, twisting Ciaran around, forward. "Show me how Daniel made you kneel. Legs apart. I know he did it, I know. Show me." Voice urgent and low. "Show me."

A shudder ran from Ciaran's neck straight down to his tail bone. He craned his neck around, wanting more kisses as he pushed his knees apart. Malik had one hand slung low around Ciaran's belly, kneading the soft flesh, pulling Ciaran back to him.

Rough hands encouraged Ciaran's knees to spread further and further, until his back arched, hyper-extending for balance. He pushed the hand holding his stomach downward, wanting to feel it curl around his cock. Malik allowed the direction, his hand sending delicious sparks through Ciaran's groin with each stroke.

Ciaran wriggled and purred, trying to satisfy his need for touch by gripping the strong thighs behind him. He thrust into Malik's hand only to be held fast with an arm across his chest.

"Don't move."

Confusion clouded his thoughts, but the hand on his cock continued to move. He dug his fingers into Malik's thighs and moaned plaintively as he'd seen Aedam do.

Malik abandoned his cock to press behind his balls.

Ciaran grunted and squirmed.

"Don't move," Malik said again.

He panted and screwed his eyes shut, trying not to move as Malik's touch sent small waves of pleasure into his body.

Fingers nudged at his mouth. "Open up," Malik breathed against his ear, and Ciaran's lips parted, strangely obedient, as if Daniel's teaching had actually started to take hold. He did best with his tongue.

Too swiftly the fingers were lost, and then he felt them slide, wet, against his

pucker. "Let me in." Ciaran swallowed and obeyed again, curiosity and desire blotting out everything else. Malik wanted this. Ciaran wanted what Malik wanted.

It didn't hurt when the wet finger slipped inside him, only burned in an odd, uncomfortable way. "So tight," Malik whispered hoarsely. The words still felt sexy even if the touch did not. Malik nibbled Ciaran's neck, encouraging his cock with his other hand, fingertips dragging against the underside as his thumb played with the head. "Trust me."

Sweat broke out over his skin, the passion heating his flesh was momentarily dampened by the strangeness of the invasion, but Ciaran yielded, doing his best to relax his ass, let Malik in deeper. This was Malik's world. He needed to understand everything that meant.

Malik pushed inside him, pulled out, then pushed again, deeper, probing. The second finger caught Ciaran by surprise and he stiffened, the muscles of his ass clenching around Malik's fingers, for the first time realizing exactly how much more he'd have to take.

"Do you feel that, Ciaran? Your body wants something, knows it's missing something only I can give you." Ciaran groaned again as Malik stretched him, certain now that Malik had always been crazy. He jerked when the burn seemed to become too much, tossing his head back against Malik's shoulder, turning it back and forth until Malik stilled him with a soft. "Shhh... I want to fuck you, Ciaran."

Ciaran shivered and bent at the hips, trying to crawl forward, out of Malik's arms. He needed to relax, needed to lie down, just for a minute. The movement tilted his bottom up, bringing with it such a full burst of pleasure, he gasped and arched.

A low chuckle behind him and the sensation happened again, sending thrills down his legs. And then again. The third time he realized it was connected to the way Malik's fingers were moving inside him. The sweet pressure in his groin built until he was certain he was going to come. He was just as certain that if he did it would start to hurt again.

"Stop!" he gasped, "Don't want to."

"Then don't," Malik growled, his other hand tightening around the base of Ciaran's cock. "I haven't given you permission."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Ciaran rocked his face against the covers, keening softly. Malik stroked him more gently. "Breathe, Ciaran." He slowly let Ciaran's cock go, still scissoring his fingers inside. Ciaran sucked more air in.

"I can make it easier. Remember the ring around Dashi's cock?"

Ciaran nodded, shame and curiosity coming alive at the thought of the device. He'd so wanted to touch it.

Malik pulled his fingers free, sending Ciaran reeling with the sensation of abrupt emptiness. Then his wrists were pulled straight out from his body. He recognized it as one of the position's on Daniel's rotation. His ass stayed raised, 'for his master's pleasure'.

"Stay," Malik ordered, licking at Ciaran's neck before pulling away, leaving Ciaran's skin to cool.

Malik retrieved items from the bedside table. Ciaran couldn't see. When Malik returned to the bed, he pulled Ciaran's hips higher, reaching around to fasten the restraint around his cock and balls. It was surprisingly flexible, like leather, but more than tight enough.

A whimper escaped him before he could suck it back. Malik's lips brushed against his bottom. "Malik..." He needed more distraction.

"Shhh."

Wet fingers, pressed against him, much wetter than before, moving in slow, sensuous strokes around the outside of his hole. His hands balled up into fists. "'s cold," he complained, but it wasn't the temperature that worried him.

"I'll make you warm again," Malik promised. "I'll make you burn." He thrust in, finding the pleasure spot from before, and Ciaran gasped, neck arching.

As if on command, his body writhed with each stroke. This time, with the band around his cock, the pressure became so much *more*. He started to panic, needed to get through what must come next. "Just do it," he grunted, stretching his hips as far back as his spine would allow.

Abruptly he found himself on his stomach, the sound of air being forced out of his chest in his ears.

"Don't push me, Ciaran." Malik's hands were solid on Ciaran's back, his breath hot and wet against the side of Ciaran's face. The blunt knob of Malik's cock pressed into his crease, and Ciaran shuddered. "I could take you now, but that would only be fun for me."

Ciaran felt his legs being spread wider. He closed his eyes. His balls ached and the blood was pounding in his cock, but he wasn't hurt. Not yet. And Malik *wanted* him. He felt the pulse of his brother's cock against his skin. "Sorry," he offered.

"Shhh." Malik shushed him, but the hard line of his body softened with approval.

Ciaran felt his hips pulled back into position. Malik's body was all around him. Teeth sank into the juncture of his neck and shoulder, and he gasped, tensing and then relaxing as the biting turned to sucking. Then the bright sharp pain of Malik's thick cock breaching his body, and the intractable weight of his brother holding him down as his body jerked.

"Relax." The word was barely audible over the blood racing in Ciaran's ears. "Push against me."

Ciaran groaned, not sure if the order meant what he thought it must. Maybe he should have let Daniel teach him more.

"Do it, Ciaran."

Cheeks burning red, he forced his muscles to bear down on Malik's cock, gasping when it slipped further in. It was at once large and invasive, and he wasn't sure that he liked it at all.

Malik kept still, waiting for Ciaran to stretch and accustom himself to the feeling. "So tight," he muttered under his breath.

Ciaran could feel his brother shaking with the effort not to begin thrusting. He

bit his lip and pushed back.

Malik groaned, "Ciaran, don't."

Ciaran pushed back again. "It's all right."

Then Malik moved, inside. The feeling encompassed all of Ciaran's thoughts. Malik inside him. Moving. A pleasure different from any other bloomed within his breast. They were connected in a new way now.

Then Malik started to fuck him and Ciaran lost track of everything.

"Do you want to come, Ciaran?" Malik panted, minutes later, hours later?

Ciaran's ass had melded into part of Malik's body, moving when Malik moved him, going where Malik wanted him. Fingers brushed against his cock, leaving a burning trail in their wake.

Ciaran nodded shamelessly, head spinning as Malik snapped his hips in harder. "Yes."

The leather strap fell away, almost painful, as the blood surged back in. Malik jerked him off with a smooth and completely unnecessary stroke.

"Now, Ciaran," Malik urged, hips thrusting urgently.

Ciaran lost all conscious thought as his body surrendered.

Malik cleaned them both before placing Ciaran under the covers and curling up behind him. His fingers felt unusually clumsy against Ciaran's skin. "Are you hurt?" he asked again. "Did I hurt you anywhere?"

Ciaran shook his head, eyes closed. "Does this earn me the day off from Daniel tomorrow?"

Malik considered that. The idea of anyone else's hands on Ciaran so soon, or ever again, still galled him. "I might even remain at home myself," he decided, "to be sure you don't exert yourself."

Ciaran's body vibrated as he laughed. "I'm not some delicate flower, Mal."

Malik tried to swallow the immediate flow of feelings, but found he just didn't want to. He hugged Ciaran closer. "You are," he whispered, "My delicate flower."

Chapter Twenty Nine

Malik picked up one plate, leaving the other on the cart, and returned to the bed where Ciaran was leaning against the headboard, a blanket across his lap. With one hand Malik drew the blanket away and sat, cross legged and naked in front of his brother, the plate balanced between them.

"Hey!" Ciaran grabbed at the blanket. "It's cold."

Malik frowned. "It's not cold, besides, you'll not get food on my bedding." He scooped a spoonful of something mashed and smelling of butter, bringing it to his mouth. "Mmm, s'good." He scooped up another bite, offering it to Ciaran who scowled at him, arms crossed, and leaned back away from him until the bed frame creaked.

Malik sighed and put the spoon down on the plate. "What now?" he asked in a long-suffering tone of voice.

"Do you want me to be your brother or your slave?" Ciaran asked, his posture rigid. "I can do it either way. I just...if you want me to eat from your hand I need to understand which one you're expecting."

Malik set the dish onto the bedside table, wondering how he could possibly explain something that he'd been struggling with himself for days.

"Can't you be both?" He leaned back on his hands, stretching one leg out sideways on the soft linens. "If you were my brother, you'd be on your way back to your family by now."

He could see the protests well up and silenced his brother with a wave. "If you were my slave, you would have been beaten for your actions many times and spread out under me for my pleasure."

Ciaran's jaw clenched. "Having me spread out before you that way would not have given you pleasure," he said tightly. "Even if I were Aedam, or Sasha, or any other slave in your harem. You're not like that."

Malik tilted his head to one side. The intensity of Ciaran's stare was disconcerting, but if anything it meant Malik still had the upper hand.

"You think not?" he challenged. "I've forced you to become a slave, a pleasure slave. I've lied to you, to Dex. I've had men beaten, killed, I've killed them with my own hands. I've done things..." There were too many to list.

"I didn't say you hadn't done those things," Ciaran amended, "I said they didn't give you pleasure. You don't want those things."

Malik's smile faltered. *I've never wanted anyone the way I want you*, he thought. The realization took him by surprise, and yet here he was endangering the only person he ever loved. "I never should have let you talk me into letting you stay here," Malik said, irritated with himself. "There's nothing for you here."

"And I'd like to leave. But you have to come with me."

"Ciaran, I can't."

"Why? Why not? What are you so afraid of?"

Frustration rolled over Malik in waves. "I've told you! Kava will never allow it."

Ciaran made a rude noise. "Kava again."

"Yes! Yes, Kava again. Kava always. I gave him my oath. I can't leave."

Ciaran's eyes blazed. "You were loyal to me first!"

"Ciaran, please."

"Please what? You tell me this man wouldn't hesitate to kill you and yet you owe him your life?"

"It's complicated. You wouldn't understand."

Ciaran crossed his arms, managing to look authoritative despite sitting buck naked on Malik's bed. "It's time you enlightened me, brother."

Malik knew he was right. He couldn't hide what he was from Ciaran forever.

"It's complicated." He swallowed, afraid the whole desperate story might come spilling out. "I don't know where I would start."

"Start at the beginning, Mal."

The order was soft, but strong. The last of Malik's defenses caved in the face of it. "You know the start of it, they found me in the ruins of the village, I was barely alive."

"They?"

"Kava. Or, it was Timmor, actually."

Ciaran's features solidified into an unreadable mask. Malik took a long drink of wine before continuing.

"I don't know why they didn't just kill me and leave my body with the others. When Kava picked me for his personal staff, I felt like I had fallen down a hole and into a different world. One where I didn't know any of the rules or expectations."

"I had heard the rumors of Kava, that he was different than the other men. I watched the parade of young men, barely of age, going into his private chambers. I tried to stay out of his way, but there was only so long that someone like me could stay out of the reaches of someone like him."

"Someone like you?"

Malik grimaced, unsure how to respond to that.

"Then what happened?"

"I was trained." Malik shrugged. "I spent weeks learning how to please my Master. And when they felt I was ready, I went to him."

A sickening feeling curled in his guts. He took another sip of wine. "It seems I had an aptitude for being a slut. He called me back for several nights until... There was a guard, drunk in the garden. He tried to..." Malik frowned, the memory is cloudy, "I attacked him and Kava saw it all. I think he might have been proud of me in that moment. He sent me to train with the soldiers after that."

"Your pleasure slave career lasted only one week?"

Malik didn't want to keep going. Didn't want to share the shame of what he was with anyone.

"He waited just long enough for me to feel like I was safe. I thought I could melt into the ranks, become just another soldier. And then he called for me again. And I went; I didn't know I was special. I had no way of knowing he never asked any of the other soldiers to his bed. I had no reference; I was only doing what I was told."

"Well, that's what soldiers do."

Malik nodded and pulled his legs up to his chest, wrapping one hand around to anchor them there. "When I found out I was the only one. I felt sick and embarrassed. I didn't want to believe Kava would make a mockery of me. Couldn't believe Timmor wouldn't have warned me. So I refused to obey." The pain and confusion of that night still felt raw inside him. "I refused."

Ciaran kept silent save for the brush of his toe against Malik's leg. The touch made the corners of Malik's eyes burn.

"I wasn't the only one punished that night." He lifted his eyes to Ciaran's. "I learned never to make that mistake again. I go when he calls. I fight when he tells me to fight. I submit when he tells me to submit. I think he uses me to keep the others in line. That they could be pulled from their cozy worlds and shamed in front of their peers at the snap of his fingers..." The shame of it burned through his whole being. "I'm his whore and he'll never let me go."

He drew a deep breath. "I've never told anyone the whole story before."

"Surely Dex must know."

"Some. Not all. He doesn't know I was the reason he and the others were beaten that night." He shied away from Ciaran's eyes. "I never told him."

Malik rubbed at his face, feeling the rasp of a day's worth of growth on his chin scratch against his hands. He didn't fight it when Ciaran lifted his chin and kissed him.

"It wasn't your fault."

Malik pressed his lips together and nodded, not wanting to argue about it.

Ciaran pulled him over, down into the bedding and twined their limbs together like children. "Tonight, I think I will be your brother," he said.

Tears leaked from the corners of Malik's eyes. He was grateful to be done talking for the night.

Chapter Thirty

"Jealous, the lot of them," Dex once told Malik when they were drunk off their asses in the wine cellar of his family's estate. "You are far better with a horse than any of the others, and far better with a sword, which is the important thing."

If Malik was a member of Kava's elite guard by some perverse twist of fate, Dex would grin and admit that he was there solely by the grace of his father's good name. His family enjoyed enough money to buy whatever they pleased, and a position for their son that was much safer than the regular army had been high on their list.

That Dex liked Malik was a surprise to everyone, Malik included. Surely that was the only real thing anyone had to be jealous of. Everyone wanted to be Dex's confidant. No one wanted to be Kava's.

One afternoon, after they'd been carrying on for a couple of months, Malik deigned to give Dex a blow job. It was good, at least Dex seemed to think so. Of course, Dex had more lovers than a cat had fleas.

"Impressive," he said.

Malik rolled off and sprawled next to him. He didn't try to hide the bitterness. "I'm a bit rusty, I know. I don't get much chance to practice on a true variety."

"Really?" Dex was never one to miss an opportunity. "You mean I just got the customized blow job for a king?"

Malik snorted. "Pretty much." He'd been catering to Kava's very specific preferences for so long, it was all he knew. How he moved his tongue, how long, how fast...

Dex grinned. "Kinky."

"Watch your manners, boy," Malik slapped him playfully across the chest, "Else I'll take payment out of your mouth."

"Oh yes, my lord!" Dex laughed, writhing on the bed, voice pitched like a girl's, "Anything you desire."

Malik knelt over Dex's face, trying not to giggle. Sometimes with Dex, he almost felt happy. He arched an eyebrow. "Anything?"

Dex didn't reply, it would have been impolite with his mouth full.

Chapter Thirty One

"So, your merchant trade comes mainly from neighboring areas? What about trade from the City?" Ciaran walked closely beside Malik, as the crowd bustled around them. The gold of the ownership collar glinted in the sun.

"We allow only those from the City who have agreed to register with us. Lord Kava is mindful of spies." Malik kept his voice pitched low enough that he had to lean in to speak to Ciaran, pressing his lips against his brother's ear. He did so to be sure they were not overheard, but also because he knew it tickled.

Ciaran shook his head to rid his ear of the residual vibration and smiled. "And how many subject themselves to your silly laws?"

Malik laughed and caught Ciaran's hand. The crowd was getting denser as they got closer to the heart of the market. "So now they're silly?"

"They've always been silly, Mal."

A commotion off to the side stole Malik's attention. Once he satisfied himself that a nearby soldier was watching the situation closely, he turned back to find that Ciaran had slipped away.

He whipped around, his hand going to his sword as he saw his brother talking to a man dressed in rags. With two quick steps, he placed his hand on Ciaran's arm.

"Here, this is all I can give you," Ciaran said kindly, dropping a copper coin into the beggar's hand.

"That's enough, Ciaran." Charities existed to help the poor; there was no need for them to beg in the streets when food and shelter were given to them freely. He began to call the soldier duty to come and take the man away, when he turned and Malik caught sight of the face half hidden behind the hood.

His breath caught in his throat and he tightened his grasp on Ciaran's elbow. "Liam." Once the favorite of Kava, now he was no better than a shadow walking the streets. A warning to everyone how quickly the fortunes of those near Kava could turn. He thrust Ciaran behind him, putting himself between the two.

The beggar's face twisted into a sneer. He pulled the hood closer around his face, hiding the long scar that bisected his cheek and blind eye, and ran off, losing himself in the seething crowd.

"Who was he?" Ciaran asked.

"No one. A ghost." He squeezed Ciaran's hand. "Come, there's much more to see, and Dex and Dashi are probably growing tired of waiting for us."

Dex was teasing Dashi with a spoonful of something creamy, the color of burnt sugar, when Malik and Ciaran came upon them. The table was close to the street, in the open air area of the tavern.

The air was brisk, but nice enough to warrant being outside. Wrapped up in a

sleek purple robe that shimmered when he moved, Dashi contrasted nicely with the somber formality of Dex's cloak. He squeaked when Malik patted his back, only momentarily deterred from landing his lips around Dex's spoon.

"I thought for sure you'd gotten lost down some dark alleyway," Dex growled.

Malik directed Ciaran into a chair, and took his own seat across from his friend. "Just enjoying the many wonders of our fair marketplace."

"No doubt."

Malik laughed and rested his booted foot on a supporting rung of Ciaran's chair, angling his body to put himself between Ciaran and the crowd. Seeing Liam had spooked him; he never had gotten the full story of how Kava's beloved bath slave fell so far from his master's grace, but he tried to put the encounter out of his mind. There was no point in everyone sharing his unease.

Dex turned his attention to Ciaran, who was looking with interest at everyone who passed by. "And how do you find it? Is this first time Malik's let you out among the common?"

"Second," Ciaran said with a bright smile. "Dashi and I came once to buy," he colored, hesitating, "Things."

"Ah," Dex nodded, digging his fingers into Dashi's side until he elicited a giggle. "No doubt useful things."

Malik smirked, remembering the bill he'd received. He'd almost regretted putting Dashi in charge of their shopping spree.

"Oh, Master. *Very* useful things." Dashi emphasized with a firm nod. He went on to detail the clothing and devices they'd sampled, much to Dex's delight and Ciaran's chagrin. Malik watched his brother curl into himself with embarrassment and laid a hand on the back of Ciaran's neck to calm him, taking pleasure in the softness of his hair.

"But he flat out refused to go into Loudon's shop to help me find a new jewel plug," Dashi finished with a flourish. Everyone laughed. Even Ciaran cracked a smile, despite his very pink cheeks.

Dashi turned for another bite of Dex's custard and was met with a spoon tapping against his nose.

"Dashi, why don't you take Ciaran across the way," Dex said. "Show him what you have your eye on for Spring Festival. Maybe he can help you make up your mind."

Dashi's pout over his lost dessert was eclipsed in an instant. "Oh, yes! Ciaran, you must see this new thread they have. It's simply perfect!"

Malik ignored Ciaran's panicked expression. "Maybe you'll find something for yourself as well. The festival is quite an event, everyone is dressed--"

"Or undressed," Dex interrupted.

Malik shook his head at him. "--in the very best."

"You dare let me choose for myself? Or is Dashi to make sure I choose something scandalous enough?"

"Scandalous. That sounds extremely promising. Maybe you could get several like that."

"Oh, I know just the thing!" Dashi exclaimed, grabbing Ciaran's hand. He tugged until a reluctant Ciaran stumbled off with him.

Dex's chair creaked as he stretched his long legs under the table, watching Dashi and Ciaran disappear between the many stalls. "Well?" he asked, with a mischievous smile.

Malik relaxed back into the hard curved wood of the chair. "Well, what?"

"Is it all you hoped it'd be?"

"What?"

Dex rolled his eyes and waved at the waitress, calling for two more mugs. "Having a pleasure slave of your very own."

Malik lowered his voice. "Dex, you know it's not like that."

"Do I?" Dex's face betrayed nothing. He gave the waitress a charming smile when she arrived with his ale and raised his glass to Malik. "Cheers, my friend."

Malik drank in turn. "Do you think we have enough time to get him ready before the festival?"

"If he can't pick it up in another month, then he can't pick it up at all." Dex cast his eyes back across the market street. "How's he doing?"

Malik tried not to let his panic show through. "Well enough, I'm sure. He's learned how to move and seduce, it's not hard." He snagged the spoon from Dex's dish and licked at the traces of the custard. "If I can learn it, Ciaran can."

Dex tossed his napkin onto the table. "Anyone can learn it. But to be convincing as a slut you do not have to beat regularly," he paused to give Malik a wry look, "He'll have to at least pretend to enjoy it."

Malik tapped the end of the spoon against his lips. "Perhaps I'm not the best one to teach him."

"Don't tell me you're teaching him yourself."

Shrugging, Malik tossed the spoon back onto the tabletop. "No, not all. But he's uncomfortable with having people touch him." His eyes flickered past Dex's shoulder to where two men stood huddled, talking, hands flying around their heads as they gestured and argued.

"Not unlike someone else I remember."

Malik ignored the remark. "I don't know who else to trust him to. I don't know how he'll react to others." A thought drifted through his mind and he smiled, commenting on it before thinking it through. "Maybe I need to send him to you."

"Me?" Dex's eyes widened in surprise. "If you'll remember, I've always preferred my lovers eager and well behaved."

Malik leaned forward, elbows on the table. "He's my brother, Dex," he said in a low, fierce whisper. He searched his friend's expression before finally dropping his gaze to table. "I shouldn't have asked. Forgive me."

"Winter months are quite brisk, you know. Perhaps he'll fall ill and save you the worry."

Malik shook his head. "I'd rather chance him being lost in the crowd of others than singled out in an intimate party afterwards to make up for the absence."

"You seem overly concerned with this. Has something happened?"

Malik looked away. "I'm afraid, Dex. He's not meant to be here and each day he stays is a day too long for my taste."

Dex focused on wiping the condensation off his mug. "It's only temporary."

"He's not ready. He fights against any suggestions I give him and he detests Daniel and his instructions. Our lives, possibly even yours and Dashi's, hinge on his being able to do this, without thought, without effort. There can't be a single clue that it isn't all completely real for him." Overwhelmed by the helplessness of it all, Malik fell back into his chair.

Dex remained unconcerned. "You're too hard on yourself, Malik. It's clouding your reason."

The assessment did little to lift Malik's spirits.

"Ah, here we are."

Malik looked behind him to see Dashi's radiant face approaching, with Ciaran a step behind, weighed down with bags in each hand.

Dex chuckled softly. "Send him to me then," he said, with an air of finality. "I'll tell you if your fears are warranted."

Before Malik could accept, a jubilant Dashi plopped down on Dex's lap, demanding a kiss. Ciaran quietly brushed a kiss of his own over Malik's cheek, a proper greeting for his master. Out of the corner of his eye, Malik saw Dex cast a critical eye over his brother and felt a brief stab of jealousy.

"What's wrong?" Ciaran asked.

"Nothing." He shook his head, forcing a smile back onto his lips. He drew his brother onto his lap. "Now, show me what you bought that's scandalous."

Chapter Thirty Two

"You want me to sleep with him?" Ciaran looked horrified as he pulled back the covers, folding them down into a perfect triangle on Malik's side of the bed. Sleeping with Dex wasn't the last thing on Ciaran's happy list, but it was quite a ways down there.

"That's what I said." Malik's fingers yanked at the buttons on his shirt in order from top to bottom.

"Mal, he doesn't even like me."

"That's all in your head, brother. Get over it."

"He's your best friend."

Malik's belt landed with a cushioned plop in front of him. A second later his shirt followed suit. "I know that."

Ciaran returned his brother's smirk with one of his own and picked up the clothes. "Well, as long as you know."

"You're impossible," Malik growled, slipping beneath the covers. "Now come to bed."

Ciaran laughed away some of his jitters, standing in Dex's foyer. He felt awkward and out of place in his new clothing. Formal wear for slaves, he decided. Malik had thrust it at him, in a fancy wrapped box, before leaving that morning.

As it happened, Dex was late, or at least not at home when Ciaran arrived; but Dashi greeted him, bubbling with excitement, and drew him into the adjoining sitting room. It was obviously not a room for entertaining, full of stiff, overstuffed furniture. He wondered if Dex left guests he disliked in this room, just to make them uncomfortable.

Dashi, however, was right at home, half dressed in shimmering red-orange pants that set off the gold and white waves of decorative paint rising up from his naval to his sternum. The design seemed more intricate than Dashi could have managed on his own, perhaps the work of an artist whiling his time away in the harem. At least, it only made sense Dex would have a harem; Ciaran wasn't sure. Dex's house was smaller than Malik's, or so it seemed from the outside. He knew very little about the inside.

Dashi helped him out of his coat, purring in obvious approval that the usual drab clothes were gone, replaced by an embroidered vest in shades of green and gold, with emerald pants to match.

"It's very pretty, Ciaran." Dashi fingered the embroidery and peeked under the vest to see the undecorated, though well prepared with scented oil, skin concealed beneath.

He pushed at Ciaran's shoulders, sending him back into a chair with a surprised huff. Before Ciaran could ask what that was all about, Dashi climbed onto his lap,

pulling something out of a pocket that Ciaran wouldn't have guessed those shimmering pants were likely to have.

"Hey!" he cried, jerking his head back when Dashi came at his eye with a pointed object.

"Don't move!" Dashi ordered, one hand pinning Ciaran's head back over the back of the couch, his brows furrowed in concentration.

Surprised into stillness, Ciaran was chagrined to realize the stick in Dashi's hand was nothing more frightening than charcoal eye pencil.

Dashi outlined one eye, using his fingers to soften the effect. "You must look your best," he explained, switching to the other eye.

There was no mirror when it was done, but Ciaran looked at the dark smudges at the corners of Dashi's eyes and assumed the effect must be similar. It was a small thing, but he already felt profoundly more off center than he had just a few moments before.

Delighted with his handiwork, Dashi jumped up to see how it looked with the rest of Ciaran's outfit. Ciaran was saved from any further adjustments by Dex's appearance in the doorway.

"Making him feel at home, Dash?"

Dashi's face lit up even before he spun round. "Dex!" he cried, scampering into Dex's arms.

Dex greeted him with a soft, open-mouthed kiss, then raised his left hand, shaking it side to side, fist closed, in a teasing motion.

Dashi pounced with both hands, giggling as he tried to pry Dex's fingers apart. "Oh, please!" he pleaded after several unsuccessful seconds, and at last Dex's fingers opened. Dashi's head swooped down and he turned, proudly, to display the marble sized green candy caught between his teeth.

Dex laughed, ruffling Dashi's hair and pushed the candy in with this thumb. "Go ready me a bath," he ordered, "And wait there." The softness to his expression disappeared quickly when his slave was gone, but he still grinned broadly at Ciaran. "You come with me."

Ciaran's heart started to thump in his chest. He wasn't sure if he had been expecting more of a greeting, but Dex moved at a brisk pace and he found himself hurrying to keep up.

At the end of the hall there were two ornate doors leading to the bedroom. Dex thrust them both open and went on ahead. The room had none of the austerity of the sitting room. It was decorated in browns and greens; and everywhere there were pillows--on the bed, on the floor, on the couch. The effect managed not to look cluttered, but rather luxuriously arranged. Obviously Dashi's influence.

"Well, this is different," Ciaran murmured, staring.

Dex shrugged off his jacket, tossing it on the bed. "Don't tell me Malik still keeps his bedroom bare as a soldier's bunk."

"I wouldn't say quite that." Though, the only thing of Malik's that matched the luxury here was the bedding, and even that, though luxurious in feel, was a clean and simple white.

"I'm glad to hear he's softening some." Dex's eyes were full of the familiar amusement that Ciaran found so unsettling. "Now then, remove your clothes."

Ciaran blinked at the suddenness of the order. Jitters spun around his stomach, rose up past his chest and got stuck in his throat. He complied, albeit more slowly than he'd promised himself he would when he imagined this scene.

For lack of instruction he folded the clothes and put them on the floor beside him.

"Good, now hands on your head, feet apart."

He performed faster this time, edging his heels out to hip distance.

"Better," Dex looked pleased. He took a visual inventory of Ciaran's form, smiling faintly as his eyes lingered a moment on the color around Ciaran's eyes. "You're here as my slave for the evening, not my guest."

Ciaran nodded, his mouth gone dry. "Yes, my lord." The last time he'd endured Dex's inspection there were clothes to protect him from the scrutiny. He still hadn't forgotten the threat that day.

With Daniel, Ciaran had found a way to empty his mind, so that the positions, or even Daniel's ubiquitous stick no longer phased him, no matter how mortifying the request. Now however, it was more difficult. Something in Dex's demeanor stirred Ciaran's pride far more than was good for him. He felt it puff up his chest and couldn't help bristling when Dex tilted his chin up with a finger. "Many would take your attitude as a challenge, something to be beaten out of you."

The fear must have shown in Ciaran's face because Dex softened some. "But I'm not your enemy," he promised, dropping his hand on the interlaced fingers atop Ciaran's head and pressing downward with an insistent heaviness until Ciaran relaxed and stopped gripping his scalp. "You'll see."

He began to circle slowly, not complaining when Ciaran followed him as far as he could with his eyes. Ciaran tried not to flinch, but the touches were random and spread out, a caress here, a pinch there; he wasn't always successful at remaining still. All his knowledge and preparation for this moment seemed distant and unavailable.

Dex stopped behind him and cupped his ass, sliding his hand beneath Ciaran's body, his middle finger slipping into the crease of his cheeks. Ciaran forced his feet to remain flat and not lift himself away. "I don't know what Malik said, or the extent of what there is between you." His touch probed further, promising things to come. "But you may think of this as a test, of sorts."

"Yes, my lord." Ciaran's voice was barely a whisper.

Dex released him abruptly. He came to stand before Ciaran again, surveying his naked form once more before lifting Ciaran's hands off his head and placing them back down at his sides. "Good. Now, let's go." The twinkling amusement was back. "Dashi's tongue should be completely green by now."

Ciaran felt afloat in a soft, welcoming pool of comfort. Without even opening his

eyes he could tell it was Dashi's arm draped across his chest and his soft breath on his shoulder. He sighed, relaxing deeper into Dex's bed. It was bigger than Malik's, as if sleeping three abreast were a common occurrence.

For a while, in the hours before, he was sure he lost track of where he began and Dex ended. And then there was Dashi, ever present. Dashi, sweet and encouraging, but who belonged, totally and completely, to Dex.

The distinctive scrape and swoosh of a match being lit broke into his awareness, followed by the familiar acrid smell. He opened his eyes to squint at Dex, watching him set fire to a stick of incense by the bed and then blow the flame out, leaving a steady stream of scented smoke.

"Come," Dex commanded when he noticed Ciaran peeking. He nodded at Dashi. "Let him sleep."

It took a minute to extricate himself from Dashi's sleeping form, then Ciaran slid off the bed and padded over to the couch where Dex sat, his robe untied and askew, revealing the strong, muscular body that had demanded so much of Ciaran's attention earlier. The lanterns had been replaced by candles, spaced out on the long table, next to two half filled glasses of wine. Ciaran hesitated, not sure where he was supposed to sit.

Smiling, Dex opened his arms. "Come here, Ciaran." He settled comfortably back into the soft cushions. "I promise I won't bite. Again."

Ciaran folded one leg beneath him as he sat down. He was still naked, but he barely noticed it now. He let his master for the moment pull him closer, sinking against him until his head rested on Dex's shoulder. "Did I pass your test?" he asked softly.

Dex idly fingered his hair. Ciaran could feel him nodding. "Yes. You did very well. Malik will be quite pleased, I think."

A sound came from the bed and Dex turned his head. "Shh," he soothed. Readily the slight form under the blankets stilled and the soft snoring returned.

"Did I pass yours?" he asked as he turned back to Ciaran.

"Mine?" Ciaran squawked, surprised. But he supposed he'd been reserving judgment on Dex for some time now. "Yes," he admitted.

Dex grinned and gripped a little harder at Ciaran's hair, giving it a gentle tug. "Good."

They sat quietly for a while. Ciaran was unsure what to say in the middle ground between master and slave, as just two people sitting on a couch. "He's a good man. Malik," Dex said at last. "Despite what his situation here has done to him."

Ciaran's heart ached at the mention of his brother, full of feelings and worries he hadn't known were there. His head slipped off Dex's shoulder and settled onto Dex's lap. He untwisted the rest of his body to lie flat on the cushions. For a second he worried the move was too presumptuous, but Dex seemed pleased. He petted Ciaran's hair in approval and Ciaran pushed aside his embarrassment at his sudden craving for attention. Pleasing Dex had been rewarding in ways he hadn't imagined; he couldn't resist wanting more.

"My brother..." He trailed off, looking away at the patterns of shadow the candles cast on the ceiling. "What happened was all my fault."

If the admission surprised Dex, it didn't show. His fingers continued stroking Ciaran's face, peaceful and relaxing. "How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

"He wouldn't be here if it weren't for me."

"He's here because Kava raided your village. That would have happened with or without you there with him."

"No." Ciaran shook his head, insistent. "If I hadn't left him it would have been different."

"How could you have changed it, Ciaran?"

Ciaran chafed at the patronizing tone. He shrugged, sorry that he'd brought it up. Dex was right. Two boys of fifteen years would have been no match for a company of men. "I'm surprised they took him at all," he muttered. "You'd figure they'd have been afraid he was sick like all the others." Thoughts of Malik, pale and alone, in some dark corner filled his mind. "And do you know where I was?"

Dex shook his head at Ciaran's upturned eyes.

"I was having my every need seen to. I had a life every orphan dreams of, with just one exception."

"Your brother?"

Ciaran nodded, looking miserable. "I even had things we never could have dreamed of."

Dex's brows lifted in question, but how could Ciaran explain that he'd never known what wealth was, or imagined that chocolates could come in so many different shapes and sizes? The idea of having more than two sets of clothes was preposterous when he was little, and yet his adopted mother bought him three pairs of shoes the very first week she took him home, one for school, one for play, and another for when they were to do something very fancy.

Each thought depressed Ciaran more.

Dex suddenly ceased his petting, and Ciaran's chest tightened. He looked up, worried that he'd wearied Dex's patience, but he was met with an enigmatic smile.

"Give me your hands," Dex said, pushing Ciaran up to a sitting position.

Ciaran dutifully held them out despite his uncertainty that more sex, if that was what Dex had in mind, would help this situation.

Dex merely took each wrist and turned them so the insides faced up, and the faded, but clearly discernible imprint of his previous hour's bondage showed. The sight made a tendril of something delicious and unexpected curl in Ciaran's belly. Dex caught him looking. "Do you like the marks?"

Ciaran blinked. He'd never really thought about those types of bruises one way or the other. "I liked getting them better than I ever have before."

Dex grinned. "Progress."

He held both Ciaran's hands loosely in his grasp, looking around for a moment before spotting the tie to his robe, almost hidden behind a cushion where it had been lost earlier. He pulled it free.

"Keep still," he growled, though there was no need. Ciaran wasn't going anywhere.

Dex made quick work of tying his wrists together and then lifted the bound hands above Ciaran's head. With a smile that promised much to come, he pushed Ciaran back until he was laying flat on his back, Dex kneeling over him.

Ciaran's breath came out in a long slow shudder. It was so much simpler to surrender here than with Malik. Dex had a raw sensuality that made it easy.

Dex leaned over him and perused his chest with his fingertips, flicking at each nipple as he came to them. "The past, Ciaran, is the past."

Ciaran exhaled with a tiny sigh, barely noticing his worries slipping away. He moaned softly when Dex's fingers swung low and fluttered over his pubic hair, teasing, and there was an answering rustle from the bed.

Dex smiled, "It's not polite to eavesdrop, Dashi."

Ciaran craned his head to see the little blanket covered lump still resting on the bed. He wouldn't have thought Dashi could be so still and quiet and be awake at the same time.

"I wasn't!" piped a not so sleepy voice from amidst the covers.

"You're not to move from that spot, Dash. No matter what you hear or see." Ignoring the small squeak of displeasure, Dex turned his attention back to Ciaran. "Malik doesn't blame you for any of this, Ciaran," he whispered before lowering his head and taking Ciaran's soft lips in a deep kiss.

Ciaran kissed back, aware for an instant of nothing more than a hot desire to lose himself to Dex again, but a deeper part of him rebelled. He'd let Malik down. Dex couldn't take that away with kisses and false promises.

"Don't," he gasped, turning his head away,

Dex ignored his protest. "He doesn't blame you, you can't blame yourself." He pushed his hand between them, capturing Ciaran's cock. His strong, rough fingers stroked the length of it with unexpected gentleness.

"I couldn't..." Ciaran whimpered with each stroke, his skin still sensitive from their games a few short hours before.

"Couldn't what? Couldn't save him?" Dex demanded. The weight of him crushed Ciaran into the cushions. "Do you think you could have?"

Ciaran nodded, eyes squeezed shut tight.

"Little fool." Dex pushed Ciaran's legs apart and his questing fingers slipped into Ciaran's still slick body and found the over stimulated pad of nerves.

Ciaran gasped and twitched, making a desperate attempt to push Dex away and bring the sensation down, but Dex pinned his bound wrists with his free hand, and suddenly Ciaran found himself drowning in something far too acute to be pleasure. "Stop it," he protested.

"Slaves don't make requests."

Ciaran shook his head. "I'm not a slave."

"Yes, my pet. You are."

"No!" Ciaran tried to wriggle free.

"What else do you think would have happened if you'd been with him?"

"No, it wouldn't have been like that," Ciaran gasped, desperation creeping into

his voice. "I could have protected him, us..."

Dex growled and, in a move that made Ciaran's head swim, flipped him over on his stomach, spreading Ciaran's legs and pressing the knob of his cock against Ciaran's opening. "You couldn't have done a single thing, Ciaran. You would have been forced to watch each other drown in this world. Maybe worse." Despite his struggles, Ciaran found himself pinned down by a firm hand between his shoulder blades. "Malik might have still become a soldier. But you, Ciaran, with your blond hair, your blue eyes, and your soft skin. What do you think would have become of you?"

He squirmed in earnest as Dex moved the hard ridge of his cock against him, not entering, just sliding, taking his pleasure against the slick hot skin of his well used body. Tears stung at his cheeks and he gulped back a sob. "It should have been me."

"Maybe," Dex growled.

The truth of it speared Ciaran's chest. He bucked his hips, willing Dex's cock to finally plunge in and take him, obliterate the pain and emptiness.

"But it wasn't." Dex hovered over him, poised. "Don't abandon him again to drown in your guilt."

Ciaran hiccupped into the couch as Dex spread him open. When the thrust finally came, the burn was a welcome penance. His breath came in hot gasps against the side of his arm, one for every stroke, until Dex maneuvered his hips up with one hand and snaked a hand beneath him to grip his cock. His moans turned to pleas of desperation, the punishing thrusts continuing until Ciaran was sure the imprint of Dex's body on his own would endure forever.

It was the soft mewing of Dashi watching from the bed that finally precipitated the end and sent Dex tumbling into his own pleasure. "Come now, slave," he grunted as he spent himself inside Ciaran's body, and Ciaran came instantly, collapsing down onto the cushions beneath him.

He barely felt Dex straighten himself soon after. He curled up, shivering, mind empty, until the calming circles at his lower back weren't enough, and he fumbled, one leg trapped beneath Dex's weight and his hands still tied, wanting to get closer.

"Shh," Dex whispered, helping Ciaran up. Anxiety miraculously easing on command, Ciaran didn't protest when his bound hands were ignored and he was led back to the bed where Dashi's loving arms and lips were waiting.

Dashi kissed and licked him all over, leaving Ciaran barely able to do more than lay there, trembling under the full force of the pleasure slave's unfettered adoration. His eyes welled up with tears. Dashi kissed those away as well.

Later, when Dex returned to bed, Ciaran snuggled into his side like a puppy against its master, burrowing his face into the warm smell of him. He was asleep in moments, leaving the two lovers to kiss and speak quietly around him.

Ciaran woke to Dashi humming a tune, propped up on his elbow, peering down at the pale hairs on Ciaran's forearms with interest.

Ciaran stretched down to his toes. He glanced around at the otherwise empty room. It was hard to tell how late it was from the light filtering through the curtains.

"Dex?" he asked.

"Gone," Dashi answered. Ciaran nodded and closed his eyes. Dashi went back to humming. After a minute, he spoke, "He said I should please you in whatever way you desire."

Ciaran couldn't imagine Dex actually said that, but he smiled all the same. Dashi took it as an invitation, and Ciaran had to hurry to catch the hand running down his torso before it got to his groin. "I think I'm too sore for any more pleasing."

Surprise flashed across Dashi's features, but he recovered quickly. "He also said I should give you a bath before you leave."

Ciaran laughed and wondered what it was that Dashi did all day without Dex. "All right," he said, watching the slave's eyes light up. "A bath it is."

Chapter Thirty Three

Malik barely beat the rain home, large drops falling on his broad shoulders as he closed the door behind him. He didn't expect to be met by Ciaran, in fact his absence was something he'd been bracing for most of the afternoon. He didn't want to admit how much he'd missed Ciaran the night before, not even to himself. He'd never mention how many times he'd walked to his front door, intent on proceeding directly to Dex's house and demanding Ciaran come home. Home where he belonged.

The whole experience made for a more than sleepless night. He'd wandered the halls of his house, practiced close combat fighting against his own candle lit shadow and did push-ups in the chilled air of the garden until he almost passed out from sheer exhaustion.

Thankfully, his path hadn't crossed Dex's today. He was afraid of the questions he might find himself asking, even more so of the answers he might receive.

It was a strange feeling, this powerful jealousy. He'd mostly grown up in a world where passing a pleasure slave around was not unlike sharing a bowl of candy. But this was Ciaran. His brother, his twin.

The atmosphere of his home felt different the moment he stepped through the door and it took a second for him to realize what it was. For the first time all day, he smiled.

Within moments Ciaran appeared, hands folded in front of him as he lingered obediently in the hall, but his smile was not at all slave-like, and neither was the way he kept his eyes level.

Something lightened in Malik's chest. Ciaran looked at ease. In fact, he looked wonderful.

A swirling design of red and gold was painted over the planes of his shirtless torso. Charcoal smudges darkened the corner of each eye. "Welcome home," Malik greeted him softly, holding out his hand.

Ciaran's grin widened as he approached. Their lips met in a kiss, and Ciaran yielded like a good slave, letting himself be bent backwards until Malik had taken his fill.

"I'm going to smear you," Malik laughed as he broke off the kiss to survey what damage he'd done to the design decorating Ciaran's body.

Ciaran tucked his chin in as he glanced downward. "I think it was a present from Dashi. Do you like it?"

"Yes, I like it very much. This too?" he asked, brushing at the outer edge of Ciaran's eye.

Ciaran shook his head a fraction and smiled. "No, that was me."

Malik grinned. "That was you," he repeated, softly.

There was a discreet cough behind them. Malik frowned at the intrusion and turned to see his cook standing hesitantly behind him. "What is it, Alma."

"Sorry to disturb you, my lord. A message arrived earlier from Lord Kava."

She looked as uncomfortable as she probably felt, and Malik forced himself to be kind. "Where is it, Alma?"

Alma took a step forward, pulling a pristinely white folded piece of paper from her apron pocket, and held it out. Once delivered, she gave them a quick nod and departed as quietly as she came.

Malik's frown deepened. He placed a finger over Ciaran's lips, poised with questions. He'd rather not deal with this right now. "Come."

Malik placed the letter carefully on the bureau without opening it. It was painfully white and obvious there on the clean dark surface, but he turned round and, after pulling the coverlet back, half threw, half pushed his willing pleasure slave onto their bed.

"My lord!" Ciaran teased, squealing like the most adorable of young sluts. "Don't you wish to bathe first?" His arms fell apart to let Malik inspect the body paint carefully before leaning in and smearing a streak in it with the side of his chin. "Or perhaps some dinner?"

"I want only you in my mouth," Malik growled and nipped at Ciaran's throat.

Ciaran laughed and yanked the starched white fabric free from Malik's pants. Malik groaned as a smooth hand soon slipped through the opening in his pants and cradled his cock. "Ciaran," he murmured as he slowly let his eyelids fall closed. Ciaran started to stroke, gently, but firmly. "God, yes."

"I want you to come on me," Ciaran whispered boldly, the flat of his hand dragging up over the paint from his solar plexus to his sternum. "Here."

Malik felt a warmth curl and explode in his chest and belly, the tendrils of it slipping down and tightening in his groin. "Help me," he whispered. Ciaran's pace quickened.

Malik barely had time to warn his brother before he shot his come across his brother's chest, grunting Ciaran's name. His breath slowed and he opened his eyes to see Ciaran's wide and aroused eyes looking back at him. Deliberately, he ran his fingers through the white mess, mixing it into the intricate design on Ciaran's chest.

Ciaran craned his head up to see the picture swirled away. "Again," he whispered.

Lost in thought, Malik fingered the white envelope. The door opened and Ciaran scurried in with a tray heaped with bread, cheese, fruit and slices of meat. He set it down on the bedside table and shed his robe before climbing back into the warmth of their bed.

"Aren't you hungry?" he slid his fingers over Malik's knee, offering a thick slice of bread with cheese and some chicken.

Malik shook his head. He'd felt like food when he asked for it, but now his concerns had once again chased his appetite away. "I don't want to open it." He tapped the envelope against his lips.

Ciaran proceeded to eat half his sandwich before pausing for breath. Malik wasn't sure if he appreciated his brother's discretion or secretly wanted him to badger him about it.

"What is it?" Ciaran asked finally.

"A summons." Malik was almost certain of what the paper contained. He's seen more than one in his life. It wouldn't be for sexual favors, but sometimes an audience with Kava could be worse. "Never mind. It's nothing." Dropping the paper between them, he reached over and grabbed a hunk of cheese. "Nothing."

Ciaran picked it up and held it up to the firelight, trying to peer inside until Malik plucked it away, laying it on the bedside table. "I said it's nothing."

"It means Kava wants you?"

Malik sighed and gave up on the food. He hadn't wanted it anyway. He grabbed his brother instead, pulling him down to his chest as he fell back into the pillows. "It means Kava wants me," he confirmed. He maneuvered his legs between Ciaran's and gripped his brother's ass with both hands. "And I want you," he added, grinning.

Ciaran grinned back and kissed him soundly.

"So," Malik said when they paused for breath. Time for the dreaded question. Almost as dreaded as another meeting with Kava. "Tell me about your night."

"Which night?" Ciaran asked, an impish smile brightening his face. "This night? Because I think it's been pretty good so far."

Malik laughed, charmed. "This night is by far, one of my favorites in recent memory. But I speak of last night." His fingertips traveled in long slow strokes down Ciaran's back.

Pulling his knees up on either side of Malik's thighs, Ciaran sat up and gingerly set his weight down on Malik's groin. "Ah, last night," he said with a vague smile. He scratched away a speck of body paint left on his now otherwise clean abdomen. "It would have been better if you'd been there."

Malik searched Ciaran's face, seeing nothing but happiness shining back at him. "I would have, I wanted to, but that would have defeated the purpose." His hands played over Ciaran's hips, restless. "Was it...I mean, did you enjoy yourself?"

The strange smile remained on Ciaran's face as he nodded. "Yes."

Malik swallowed, the insecurities of the day returning. "You don't sound sure."

"I did enjoy it, but it was hard." He worried his lip between his teeth and then refocused on Malik. "I wouldn't want to do it again."

"I'll do everything in my power to make sure you won't have to."

Ciaran said nothing, only curled forward with a sigh of pleasure and lay down on Malik's chest. Malik's arms automatically closed around him, one hand cradling his brother's head where it was tucked under his chin.

"Was it better having Dashi with you?"

"Dashi?" Ciaran sounded surprised, and Malik worried for a moment that Dex

had sent Dashi away for the night. The thought of Dex and Ciaran alone was, to his utter surprise, quite disturbing. But Ciaran soon started talking again. "I suppose it was better."

"Does it make you uncomfortable? Me asking about what you did with Dex?"

"No."

Malik detected a note of uncertainty in the answer and gave Ciaran a gentle squeeze. "It's okay if you enjoyed yourself, Ci. It's okay if you liked the way he made you feel."

Ciaran shifted himself off Malik's body, pushing one leg straight and resettling into Malik's side. "He's in love with Dashi, you know. I could tell from the way he looked at him when he arrived."

Malik grinned. "Desperately in love," he agreed. "I don't think he realizes how much."

"Is it common? To fall in love with a slave?"

"No, not as such...but it happens sometimes." He twisted his head just enough to kiss Ciaran sweetly. "Dex is a very good lover."

"Yes," Ciaran sighed his agreement, playing with the curve of Malik's ribs under the skin. His hand stilled. "Wait, you were lovers?"

Malik studied the ceiling, thinking. "A long time ago. And not for very long. Mostly we sought occasional mutual comfort with each other." He smiled. "He's a good friend."

Ciaran again had no response, though Malik sensed a pensive quality take hold of him. "Tell me what else happened," he prompted.

Ciaran drew a breath. "Well, I helped him bathe. Dashi watched me like a hawk the whole time." He laughed at the memory. "And then there were lots of orders. Dex is very focused on details." He hummed to himself for a moment, studying Malik's chest. "It was strange, really."

"How was it strange?"

Ciaran shrugged. "I wanted so much to please him." He shook his head. "No, I wanted him to be pleased with me. I've never felt that."

Malik drew his fingers through Ciaran's hair. "Dex is a very good lover," he said again.

"It wouldn't have been the same for you though," Ciaran murmured.

"No," Malik agreed, remembering the raging hormones of young lust tempered with the fear of so many things. He remembered nights wrapped in the strength of Dex's embrace, the fierceness of their lovemaking. "It was probably much different." He was grateful when Ciaran didn't press for details.

"I think I gave him a hard time at first."

Just imagining that brought a chuckle to Malik's lips. "Good. He needs to be shaken up once or twice." He closed his eyes, feeling the rhythm of Ciaran breathing. His brother was a comfortable weight on him. "Are you sore?"

"No," Ciaran shifted a little, taking inventory. "Not really." He lifted his head and smirked, meeting Malik's eyes. "Unless it would get me another day off from

Daniel. In which case, definitely yes."

Malik smiled, knowing just what Daniel would think of that.

"If you're up to it, then it has to be done. No sense in drawing attention to ourselves."

"Until the Spring Festival," Ciaran mumbled. Malik had already explained the importance of their attendance and Ciaran's being ready to pass as an exemplary slave.

"Right."

They fell into a restless silence. At length, Malik reached for the envelope on the bedside table and broke the seal.

The summons read pretty much as he expected: *The pleasure of your presence is requested at a dinner in the honor of Lord Kava, Thursday of next week.*

Handwritten at the bottom was a postscript, insinuating his "slave" would be a requirement for attendance. So much for waiting until the Spring Festival.

"What does it say?"

Without a word, Malik passed the invitation to his brother and waited.

After a moment, Ciaran folded the paper and reached over Malik to place it back onto the table. "Well, now we know."

Malik smiled, betraying none of the growing unease he felt in his heart and gave Ciaran a kiss on the forehead before closing his eyes. "Yes," he replied, "Now we know."

Chapter Thirty Four

"Okay, let's go over it one more time."

Ciaran threw up his hands and fell face forward into the bed, his bare bottom raised appealingly in the process. "For godsake, Mal. I know what to do, you've drilled it into me for the last two hours! We don't need to do it again!"

Malik frowned, refusing to give in to Ciaran's tantrum. Yes, they'd been going over all the small details of the coming dinner for a few hours, but this was important. If Ciaran made a wrong move--no, he refused to think about that.

"Then this time will go much faster, won't it?" he replied. When Ciaran refused to look up at him, Malik bent low and placed a light kiss on the side of his brother's cheek. "Please, Ciaran. One more time, for me?"

Ciaran sighed, long and dramatically, something he'd more than likely picked up from Dashi. "Ooookay."

He pushed back up into the kneeling position in the middle of the cushions, hands resting obediently on each out-turned knee. Malik smiled his thanks and stood, arms crossed at the foot of the bed, looking, studying.

"When you are shown into the room, where do you go?"

"I walk slowly, with my head down and eyes averted to the small stools at the edge of the room."

"Good. When I come into the room, what do you do?" Malik started to pace back and forth.

"I wait for a signal from the head...guy. And then join you at your bench."

Close enough, Malik nodded. "I'll be sitting to the left of Kava, and you'll be sitting to the left of me. Never look at him, and never--"

"Yes, I know, and never get between you and Kava. Ever."

"It's important, Ciaran."

Ciaran crawled over to the edge of the bed, waited until Malik came close and wrapped his arms around him. "I know, I don't mean to make light of it. I'll be careful, and I won't embarrass you, I promise."

Malik squeezed him tightly, his emotions churning inside him. "I know, Ci. You'll do fine." He placed a kiss against Ciaran's hair. "I'm sorry I'm being a bastard about this."

Ciaran chuckled softly against his shoulder. "Yes, a terrible, terrible bastard." Then, with a low growl, Ciaran pulled at him until they landed in a heap on the soft, welcoming covers. "Now make it up to me."

Ciaran made his way behind Malik, sandaled feet sliding quietly up the path from the carriage to the main door of Kava's home. The massive stonework building was illuminated by lanterns hanging along the outer wall.

Malik's boots crunched ahead in the trampled snow, making Ciaran feel lighter, almost invisible in comparison. The warm cloak he wore was purchased expressly for this occasion. Made of a foreign bluish fur, its inner lining was soft velvet, soothing his nerves as it caressed his body.

The equally new outfit he wore beneath allowed for too much bare skin in Ciaran's opinion, but Malik insisted that he had nothing to be ashamed of. Of course, shame wasn't really Ciaran's problem with the ensemble, but that wasn't worth arguing over.

"Watch your step." Malik caught his hand and led him up the steps to the door. He felt like a girl, or a lady from back home. Girl. Lady. Treasured slave. Maybe it really was all the same.

Once inside the hall warmth surrounded them from fires burning in several large fireplaces. Malik pulled off his great coat then helped Ciaran out of his, before handing them both to a tall slave who held out his arms for them.

A small man, old and bent slightly at the waist, toddled in front of them and, in a voice bigger than he would seem able to produce, announced that dinner would be in the great room. Malik nodded in the direction of a heavily carved door. "Is he expecting us now?"

The man merely smiled and waved them on with a gnarled hand. Malik's grip on Ciaran tightened and then, without warning, he released him altogether, leaving Ciaran to trail the required two steps behind.

Following, Ciaran bowed his head at the exact angle Malik showed him. Perhaps this was not so much like a girl, after all. Servant girl, maybe. Treasured slave, servant girl-- He was distracted from his musing by a booming voice.

"Malik, my boy," Kava roared. A large man, all smiles, waved them over. Malik reached back, and Ciaran scooted closer, keeping his eyes to the floor.

Malik held Ciaran's hand until they almost reached the long table, maneuvering them neatly around a small woman laden down with a tray full of fruit. He released him as they came fully into view of the small group of slaves sitting on mounds of pillows by Kava's side. "Sir," Malik said respectfully, bowing his head.

Ciaran risked a glance up to see Kava stand and throw a genial arm around Malik's back, laughing, "You're late! We thought we'd have to start without you. Didn't we boys?" The young slaves around their feet all tittered behind pale, slim hands.

"My apologies, my lord. I'm afraid there were last minute duties with the men."

Kava waved his hand, the light catching the jewel in his heavy ring. "Nonsense. Don't lie to me, boy." He peered around Malik's shoulder at Ciaran. "But who is this then? Tell me this is what has held your attention and kept you from doing my bidding."

"This is Ciaran." Malik's hand was instantly at Ciaran's back.

Ciaran lifted his eyes part way and found his knees bending. Godsake, he was actually curtsying. "My lord," he murmured. His cheeks were warm and flushed from the earlier chilled air, but Kava seemed to take it all for shyness as he lifted Ciaran's chin and appraised him with a scrutinizing eye.

The smell of wine and sex became stronger the closer Kava leaned in. "He'll do, won't he," Kava smiled, showing all his teeth to Malik.

Malik gave him a strained smile.

"Daphne and her idiot husband will be joining us." Kava held out his half full wine glass for a passing slave, in gold shimmering threads, to refill. "Sit, sit," he gestured to a pile of pillows. Just then the idiot husband must have appeared, because Kava's attention was suddenly drawn away, his booming voice again fills the room, "Janus, you scoundrel!"

Ciaran turned to look, only having a second to recognize the man as the one they'd met in the village the night Malik had taken him dancing, then Malik was grabbing him by the elbow and steering him away to a low couch upholstered in a plush red fabric against the far wall. There were no stools like they had discussed, and Ciaran had a sinking feeling all their planning and rehearsing was for nothing.

Malik pushed the embroidered vest, which was hardly a full vest at all, off Ciaran's shoulders and set it aside. A thin gold neck piece, much more slender than the collar he'd worn in the past, was all that decorated his torso.

He sat obediently at a gesture and loosened the straps of his sandals with one hand, pushing them off and under the couch. The sheer pearl silk of his pants left little else to the imagination. He curled his legs under him and waited for orders.

Pride shone in Malik's eyes and he leaned in to give Ciaran a kiss, but a slim female hand, bedecked in jewels, clutched his arm. "Lord Malik, I wanted to thank you, personally, for handling such a worrisome matter." One arm gestured wildly, flailing so far out to the side that Ciaran had the urge to duck.

"It was my pleasure, my lady. Perhaps if a trainer could be with the dogs when they go outside your territory, they wouldn't feel the need to eat any stray lambs they might--"

"I wouldn't hear of it! My dear boys need their protein! Besides, with you in charge, why ever would I have to bother with it?!" She smiled brilliantly and flounced over to where a large copper bowl of water was waiting on a stand for her to wash her hands in.

Ciaran puzzled over that, vaguely remembering something about lambs and dogs. Oh yes, the poor man who stood next to him, hat in his hands, at the court room. It felt like ages ago. "Who is that?"

With a quiet snort, Malik turned back to him. "The irrepressible Lady Daphne."

"Her dogs eat sheep?"

Malik groaned. "As her family possesses almost a third of the land and wealth here, yes, her dogs eat whatever they damn well please."

Curious, Ciaran opened his mouth to ask about the two thirds.

"Kava," Malik grimaced, as if the very word has a sour taste to it. "The rest belongs to him, plus of course, control of the army."

"Of course," Ciaran echoed.

The level of sound in the room increased as more servants entered with trays of sweet breads and fruits. Lady Daphne spoke more loudly than everyone else

combined, and Ciaran found it easier to tune her out altogether as he familiarized himself with the room. Surrounded by pillows, the table was low to the ground, and already groaning with the weight of the food placed on it. There were only four empty plates set out, which led Ciaran to believe he wouldn't be sitting anywhere close to it.

He remembered something Dashi had said about waiting to be fed, or waiting until it was over. He had a feeling that Malik would choose to feed him. At least, he would if he wanted Ciaran to warm his bed later.

With Kava momentarily occupied with an earful of Lady Daphine's opinion on the latest gossip, Malik turned his back to him. He shoved a hand into one pocket and retrieved a small shiny cylinder that popped open when he squeezed the sides. "I wasn't going to do this," he muttered. "Stick out your tongue."

Ciaran frowned at the dab of powder on Malik's forefinger. "What is it?" Trepidation edged into his voice, but the bitter taste flooded his mouth before he had time to worry. Malik removed his finger slowly, rubbing the excess off on Ciaran's lower lip.

Ciaran stared, open mouthed, as Malik hid the vial away again. A smooth warmth was spreading quickly throughout his limbs.

The powder was some sort of drug. The one Dashi had told him about? The one Kava liked so much? "You don't trust me," he accused.

"It's only enough to relax you." Malik brushed his thumb across the side of Ciaran's cheek, and all his anger seemed to ebb away. "Trust has nothing to do with it."

"Do you see those slaves?" Malik's head tilted a fraction to the side, indicating the few oiled bodies resting on pillows a respectful distance from the table. Waiting to be called upon. Ciaran suddenly felt overdressed in his silk pants and gold necklace. Surely, he was warm enough to take them off now.

With a nudge at his chin, Malik called Ciaran's attention back. His voice was stern but not unkind. "That's what you're going to be for me."

Ciaran blinked. "Okay." He could feel the tension emanating from his brother, but couldn't seem to care. Perhaps Malik could use some of the powder as well.

Malik smiled and took his hand, leading him to the table just as the others were sitting. Almost at once servants appeared to fill their glasses. Thirsty, Ciaran wondered what would happen if wine were added to his already intoxicated state. He really wanted to find out and would have tried to sneak something if his arms weren't already so warm and heavy just the way they were.

It was a cozy table, he and Malik sat cross legged on one side, with Lady Daphine to the left of him and Kava to the right. The man Kava had called Janus reclined across from them.

The dark haired slave beside Kava had a silver chain attached to a ring around his neck. It dangled down his body and pooled in his lap. Ciaran tried at length to catch the slave's eye, but his face remained empty and down turned.

The first course passed quickly with talk of politics that Ciaran found boring. He was quite unable to pay attention, despite a nagging feeling that the information could be useful when they made their get away. From time to time Malik's left hand strayed

to Ciaran's lap, curling around his thigh. It startled him at first, but Malik didn't look his way, or even pause in his conversation, so Ciaran relaxed and let his brother fondle him at will.

The fondling grew more persistent and his breath grew short. Without warning, he found himself staring at Lady Daphine's leering face as she snuck a peek over the edge of the table and into his lap. The hard length of his cock along his thigh was plainly visible through the sheer fabric.

"So responsive, Malik," she purred, the softness of her tone a marked contrast to her usual bluster. Eyes on Ciaran, her hand strayed to her own slave lying beside her, her many bracelets jangling and rings clack clicking as she did something to make the slave jerk and moan. Apparently she and her husband did not share; he had his own. "Did he come like that, or do you have a technique you could share with my trainers?"

To Ciaran's surprise, Malik didn't cease his caresses. He laughed, offering a response Ciaran missed as he fell back to lean on his hands behind him. He barely kept himself from rubbing his hips into Malik's cupping hand.

Then abruptly Malik let him go and turned his attention to his food. Ciaran's skin crawled, craving more stimulation. Blood rushed in his ears, and he pressed his face to Malik's arm and breathed. It didn't even occur to him to touch himself.

"Yes, yes, very nice indeed, Malik." Ciaran's eyes flit across the small table to Janus. The man's face, beneath the graying hair, displayed polite approval. It was a relief from his wife's ravenous eyes.

Suddenly Ciaran found himself thinking about Kava, even though Malik had expressly forbade it. *Don't so much as think about him, Ci*, he'd said, *He'll sense it. He'll know.*

Ciaran tensed, as if already feeling the intensity of the man's attention. He looked down into Malik's lap before risking a glance up and finding Kava's gleaming eyes right there to meet his. Ciaran's breath stopped in his chest. A slave was draped across the big man's lap, and Kava's meaty fingers were wrapped around one leg, thumb moving back and forth. A burst of heat shot through Ciaran's groin and he wondered if he would look that way draped across Malik's lap.

Malik absently petted his leg, making conversation, unaware that Ciaran was caught, unable to take his eyes off the monster who controlled his brother. As the moment stretched on, the cold chill of fear spread through his guts, churning where it met the heat of his arousal. Thanks to the drug his body remained achingly hard.

Holding Ciaran's gaze, Kava pushed his slave's pale legs apart and pressed in between the cheeks of his ass with a thumb. Ciaran's fixated on the spot where the thumb disappeared, wondering what that must feel like, having something so thick and stubby pressing inside him. He nearly crawled over Malik's thighs and spread himself for a demonstration.

He watched, transfixed as Kava accepted a small bite of food from another slave and smiled around the mouthful. Finally Kava tired of their little game. "Show us your prize, Malik," his voice boomed abruptly. "Let us get a proper look at him."

Malik stiffened as if struck. His throat contracted as he swallowed his last

mouthful and then carefully blotted his mouth with his napkin before setting it aside. "Of course."

Ciaran couldn't help his excitement at finally having his brother's attention. Limbs warm and pliant, he stood and removed the remainder of his clothing on command. Malik's strong hands touched his body, stroking him all over, making him tremble, and then spun him round and bent him forward, spreading his ass so that others could see and appreciate the hairless oiled pucker. Desperately hard, Ciaran hoped he'd be made to come like this.

His eyes fluttered over to Kava, who seemed less than pleased. Lips pursed, Kava raised his hand, fingers wet and slick with oil from being inside his own slave and gestured at Ciaran to come forward. Ciaran faltered as he stood back up straight. Daniel had always said he must obey his own master above all others. But that couldn't count for Kava, could it? He looked to Malik for direction. His brother merely nodded, tight lipped.

With a tremor in his gut, Ciaran left the safety of his brother's side to kneel before the man Malik hated and feared. He felt the physical threat of the man looming in those large hands that seem as likely to strike him as to caress him.

Later, he would be frightened at how easily it all came to him, wetting his lips, forgetting his brother, ready to bend to the wishes of his master for the moment. Did Kava desire his mouth? Would his come taste more sweet like Malik's, or more salty like Dex had tasted? He was eager to find out.

All conversation ceased. It seemed that the only sound was that of Ciaran's heartbeat. After a long moment and Kava waved him away with a contemptible snort, his willingness and arousal rejected. "I prefer mine with more spirit," he man said with a sneer.

"Ciaran," Malik said sternly, "come."

Confused and hurt, Ciaran crawled dutifully back to his brother's side. He shivered at Lady Daphine's open glances at his rigid cock. She would not have rejected him, but God only knew what she would have done with him. Malik's hand closed over his thigh again, just above the knee, and tightened. Ciaran stilled, hands in his lap. Had he done too much? Acted inappropriately?

"I hear, Lord Kava, that another of your court has petitioned to join with his slave." The amusement in Lady Daphine's voice was tinged with sadistic glee, as if she knew the trouble she was about to cause. Ciaran's performance was promptly forgotten by the group.

"Dex." Kava grunted.

"No sense in it really," Janus slurred, the liquid in his cup sloshing over the side as he gestured. "But no real harm. 'S not like the damn sluts can have children. Enough bastards diluting our kind as it is."

Ciaran soothed the rage brewing in his brother's body, petting the inside of his thigh. Malik smiled and covered Ciaran's hand with his own.

"The young will do what they will. Next, young Malik here will tell me he's in love with his horse!" Kava laughed, slapping his knee and dislodging the slave curled

up in his lap.

After dinner, the table was cleared, the lights dimmed and more slaves brought forth, both men and women this time, to dance for them. The drug was beginning to wear off and an ache was forming in the back of Ciaran's head. He hadn't eaten anything at dinner, and hadn't missed it. But now the hunger back with a vengeance.

Malik picked up on his irritation and thrust his glass of wine before Ciaran's lips. He held it until Ciaran had downed it all, then stretched his arm out. A servant scurried forward to refill the glass. Ciaran smiled back, letting his brother wipe traces of wetness from around his lips. Malik's kiss was soft and gentle in the firelight. Then he bid Ciaran to lie against him while they watched the remainder of the show.

Chapter Thirty Five

Malik's smile couldn't be stopped. Not even the headache from too much wine pulsing through his skull could slow down this good feeling. He'd left Dex sleeping peacefully, naked and gorgeous in the morning sunlight, and got his thoroughly pleased ass to his duty station on time.

Being with Dex was unlike...anything. Better even than being with Ciar-- No, don't think about that. Even if it is true. He grinned. Dex was... Dex was everything.

"Hey, Mal!" Demian's deep voice rang out from across the courtyard.

"Yeah?" Malik grinned and shielded his eyes against the sunshine with one hand.

"Get your ass over here."

Malik trotted across the square, one hand dropping to the hilt of his new sword, keeping it steady. He stopped at Demian's look of concern, frowning when he saw Jesepth and Micah come up behind him, all three of them looking somber. "New orders?" he asked, cautious.

"I'm gonna need your sword, Mal."

Malik took an inadvertent step backwards. "What's this about?"

"Orders." Demian looked uncomfortable, stepping towards him, hand extended. "Just hand it over."

A sinking feeling crept down the walls of Malik's guts. His eyes flicked past the men and risked a glimpse behind him. Too far to run. He was in the center of the concourse for fuck's sake.

"I'm sure we can work this out," he said. But in his heart, he knew it wasn't a case of theft or mistaken identity.

"Yeah, maybe." Demian replied, though his eyes held little hope.

Malik knew it must be bad then. Couldn't imagine what it is, but then Kava's temper didn't lend itself to rational imagining. He considered fighting anyway. Best case scenario he got skewered before Kava saw him, a quick death, no more torment, no more defiling himself.

"Your sword." Micah this time, gruff as always.

Malik reached across his body and drew the blade from his belt, hesitating only one last beat before handing it over. He might survive a fight. And that just wasn't worth the risk.

It was nearly dark by the time Dex arrived in Kava's receiving room. The hall was otherwise deserted and Malik had been letting himself hope that maybe it had been a lie. Maybe Kava's promise to bring Dex into this had been forgotten in the heat of anger.

But he was wrong.

Through the drugged haze he heard Dex arguing with the guards about weapons. Of course, he wouldn't be allowed to bring them in.

Sitting lazily on his throne, Kava stroked the back of Malik's head and pulled his face between his spread knees. The musky smell was dark, overpowering, and Malik's body took over when his mind failed, mouth opening obediently, taking Kava's thick prick between his lips.

"Dex, my boy." Kava greeted. The jovial smile on his face was a lie as well. "Right on time. Your father always said you were a timely gentleman."

"My lord." Dex's tone was so respectful. Malik couldn't imagine what he must look like, his clothes in tatters, marks everywhere he had skin to mark. Humiliation coursed through him and he whimpered softly.

"My Malik tells me that you were teaching him the wonders of whoring."

"My lord?"

"Don't toy with me, Dex. My spies tell me the two of you have been seen every night this week at the Celestial. Are you saying you've only been there for the wine?"

"Of course not, my lord. I merely thought it would smooth relations with the rest of the men if he learned to be more...social."

"How very astute of you." Kava's fingers tightened in Malik's hair. Malik sucked more deliberately until the man groaned and relaxed. "I hope he learned what he needed to from you, Dex. Or rather, I hope you weren't too disappointed by his decided lack of graces."

Silence hung in the air. Malik tried to turn his head just enough to catch sight of his friend and lover. He would tell him it was okay, to just do what was asked and then run away. Far away. But a sharp slap landed against his ear and a thick fingered palm turned his face back. "Idiot. I told you to be careful."

Such things had happened to Malik too many times before to make his response any more apparent than a flinch.

"If you could bring me that rope, Dex. This dog can't remember the simplest of commands today."

Silence again. Malik's heart twisted at the thought of the whipping Dex would receive if he ignored a direct order. But then he detected a soft shuffle of movement and a coil of rope appearing out of the corner of his eye. "My lord."

Kava made no move to accept. "Bind him."

Oh Dex, I'm sorry. So sorry. I didn't know he would....

"Bind him?" Dex's voice lost that beautiful baritone, it was flat and lifeless.

"His hands," Kava clarified. "He can't seem to remember where he isn't to touch."

Dex's touch was cold, his fingers trembling against the skin of Malik's wrist. He was close enough now to smell the sickly sweet smell of drugs on Malik's body, and Malik jerked away, not wanting to sully Dex's hand with his filth.

"Please, Malik." The grip on his wrist was firmer the next time, a cracked whisper urging him not struggle. "Please hold still." He did.

When the bindings were set and Malik's wrists joined at his lower back, Dex's presence left him. It was worse than if Kava had fucked him in front of a million followers. Worse because he'd surrendered.

"Is that all, my Lord?"

Please, please let that be all. I can't stand anymore. Please...

"I found him in a garbage heap, you know," Kava said softly, making the devastation complete. "He comes from nothing. And he is still nothing." Malik began to cry,whimpering softly, twisting against the bindings, body hunching in as if expecting a blow. Kava trailed a finger across his cheek and he calmed with something between a groan and a sob. "I'm sure you'll find one of your own some day, Dex."

"Yes, my lord."

"You may go."

Chapter Thirty Six

They didn't speak when they arrived home.

Ciaran walked straight to the large chair by the fireplace and curled up, his feet tucking in and his arms holding his legs close to his chest. The servants all seemed to have disappeared.

Malik shed his coat, watching his brother from behind hooded and troubled eyes. Dinner with Kava had gone well, but it had taken its toll on both of them.

He started to suggest a bath, but the set of Ciaran's shoulders suggested he needed time alone. "I'm going to bathe. Join me, if you like." Hesitating another moment, Malik clenched his jaw in frustration, then turned and left the room.

A small candle flickered on a low bench, but it offered enough light for Malik's needs. He stripped off his clothes and gratefully lowered his body down into the warm water. Bending his knees, he let the water close over his head for a long moment before standing again and feeling behind him for the ledge so he could sit.

The dinner *had* gone well. Everyone present had been treated to Ciaran's perfect slave-like manners. Even at Kava's request, Ciaran had performed without a single hesitation. Bending when Malik had touched him, displaying himself on command.

It had hurt Malik to watch, knowing how much Ciaran hadn't wanted to do any of it in the first place, but it also made him so proud of his brother's strength.

Malik tilted his head back against the edge of the pool and closed his eyes, trying to ignore the guilt coiling inside him. He was the one who had insisted Ciaran stay. He was the one who had trained his own brother to become his slave. It hadn't been Ciaran's choice and yet, he'd done it and done it well. He was no better than Kava.

The game couldn't continue much longer. The look on Ciaran's face after the drug had worn off had been a spear to Malik's heart. He decided to meet with Dex tomorrow and step up their plans. One way or another, they'd leave this place and find a haven of their own.

Satisfied that there was no more he could do for the moment, he sighed, almost missing the sound of the door opening. Ciaran's feet barely made a sound as he walked to a low bench and slipped off his clothes before making his way to the bath. His eyes met Malik's once just before he stepped in, a mutual acknowledgment of sorts.

"You look tired." The urge to draw Ciaran into his arms was strong, but Malik restrained himself.

Ciaran dunked his head and pressed the water away from his eyes. He looked to the jar of soap next to Malik's shoulder on the lip of the pool and hesitated before finally reaching for it.

Malik could see the war going on behind Ciaran's eyes--slave or brother, brother or slave. He felt it too.

"Wait," he said, holding up his palm. "Let me." He could do for this Ciaran, take care of him, wash the smell of Kava's house off his skin as he'd done so many times in the past for himself.

After only a short blink of confusion, Ciaran tilted the jar letting the soap slide into Malik's palm.

Malik gave Ciaran's shoulders a slight push, turning him until he could smooth the soap along the back of Ciaran's neck and shoulders. His thumbs pressed into the muscles along the bone.

"That feels nice." Ciaran's words were soft. Malik had never been more relieved to hear them.

He rubbed Ciaran's neck until his brother's head lolled forward. It was a task he had performed countless times before, but there was something soothing to it this time. "You're in luck you know, I'm a bit of an expert at this." He worked the soft soap down Ciaran's spine, avoiding any ticklish spots, then cupped water in his hand and let it dribble over Ciaran's skin. "I can also fence, kill you with my bare hands... Oh, and I bake a spectacular pie."

A short laugh broke through Ciaran's stupor. "You can not."

"Which?"

"You've never baked anything in your life."

Malik uncorked another bottle from the ledge, sniffing at the contents before pouring some onto his palm. "Nonsense, Alma herself has declared my pie to be the far superior one in this house," he teased, gently rubbing the fresh soap into Ciaran's hair.

"And I thought she was the only one who didn't play up to your ego."

The smile was back in Ciaran's voice. Malik wanted to scoop him up, hold him tight and not let go, but Ciaran moved, sinking down into the water. His feet came up and he floated in the pool. Malik found himself cradling Ciaran's head in his hands.

"Well," he said softly, gazing down in the low light at the peace in Ciaran's face. "I'm an important man. People tend to be nice to people in charge." He made each movement slow and sensual, supporting Ciaran with one hand while he carefully removed the soap from his brother's hair with the other.

When there was no trace of soap left, he fetched more. Moving around Ciaran, keeping one hand under his back, Malik washed the rest of him.

At length, he pulled Ciaran's back against his chest and held him. Ciaran sniffled slightly and refused to speak for a long while; when he did, his voice was free of emotion. "Was it okay, do you think? Our performance?"

Malik nodded. "I think everyone believed what we wanted them to."

"That I'm a common whore."

"You're not a whore, Ciaran." Malik said fiercely. "And you could *never* be common. If I hadn't known better, I would have believed you were exactly what you portrayed. A beautifully submissive slave."

Ciaran snorted derisively, and Malik had to fight to keep himself quiet. This should be the last thing they argue over.

"I can never go home again."

"No, Ci, we will leave. Soon, I have only--"

"You don't understand." Ciaran shook his head. "I can never go back, not after doing something like that. My family, my father...would not understand."

Malik frowned. He didn't understand. Not at all. "Don't think about it." He turned Ciaran around to face him, keeping his long body pressed against his own. "Not here."

Ciaran merely shrugged, looking away.

"Do you want to go back?" Malik asked carefully. Going to the City had never been a part of his plan. He wouldn't fit in there among Ciaran's adopted people, besides, Kava would find them so very easily there. He'd always figured they'd find a new place. Their own place.

Maybe he'd been wrong. Again.

But Ciaran was shaking his head again. "No, not really."

"Your father understands nothing. He thinks like a businessman." Malik knitted his brow, thinking of the countless times he'd turned Kava from destruction. "There is power in what you did today. Submission isn't weakness, Ciaran."

"Tonight was different from before," Ciaran protested. Malik barely caught the swallow of emotion in the gloom. "I was different."

"Different how?"

"I don't know!" Ciaran splashed the water in a burst of irritation, his tone loaded with disapproval. "I was so, god...*willing*. It wasn't like before. Before, with Dex, I made a choice. Tonight I just did it, whatever was asked."

Malik didn't know how to answer that. The vision of Ciaran kneeling before Kava was still too fresh in his memory.

Lost in thought, he almost missed the whisper of, "It was too easy." He closed his eyes and swallowed back years of understanding.

"You were well prepared," he said finally, reaching a tentative hand out to Ciaran's arm. When there was no resistance, Malik pulled him back. "And conditioned with the powder."

Ciaran looked hopeful, as if he'd forgotten the drug altogether. Malik laid a chaste kiss on the side of his face. Then another, closer to his lips. A whole line of them, until Ciaran was kissing him back.

He smiled and guided them gently toward the steps. "If you fell too easily into the role of slave, it was because I was a good teacher." He picked up a towel, intent on drying every inch of Ciaran's pruned up skin.

"You?" Ciaran snorted, patient beneath the towel. "Daniel must deserve the credit, maybe, or Dashi or even Dex--"

"No." Malik turned Ciaran to face him, wrapping him in his arms. He smiled. "Me. Mine."

"So, no more training?"

Malik walked Ciaran backward towards the door, not bothering to cover his own nudity with a towel. "I think I feel the need to give you a few more years fine tuning before I'm ready to--"

"Mal." Ciaran rolled his eyes.

Malik merely sidetracked, pushing Ciaran against one wall, hands going to either side of Ciaran's head. He lapped at the sweetness in Ciaran's mouth. "You were so beautiful today, Ciaran. I was proud of you."

Ciaran shivered a little. His fingers slipped out of the towel to touch Malik's stomach. "Private lessons from now on then?"

Malik nodded, a sudden need to feel Ciaran's heat overtaking him. But not here. Not out in the hall. He pressed a kiss to Ciaran's temple as he directed him to the bedroom. "Just you. And me."

Ciaran stretched, utterly spent, and let out a long sigh. Malik sprawled beside him, little better off. The house was quiet. It was not quite dawn, but there was still a faint glow from the fireplace.

Malik grunted as Ciaran reached out and moved the damp strands of hair from Malik's forehead. "I have a confession to make," he said. It was enough to make Malik crack an eye open. "I actually like washing your hair."

Malik grinned. "I'm glad it wasn't all bad." He bit at his lip, then added, "I like it, too."

"Who did it for you? You know, before?"

"Before you?" Malik asked, and Ciaran nodded. He curled onto his side so his nose was just inches from Ciaran's. "I often bathed alone."

"I would have thought Dashi...?"

"Dashi, yes." Malik couldn't hold in his smile. "He did try. But he never quite mastered the art of silence."

Ciaran was relieved to hear that his wilder fantasies of Malik's previous life were little more than that. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course." Malik rubbed Ciaran's nose with his. "Anything."

"Do you still feel me?" Ciaran placed a finger at Malik's temple. "Here?"

Malik moved Ciaran's touch back a few inches. "It's more like here."

Ciaran's eyes widened. "I didn't think..."

"I know, I'm sorry." Malik pressed Ciaran's fingers to his lips. "I tried not to feel it for the longest time, blocking it out just became...habit."

Ciaran drew a deep breath, relaxing with the glowing flicker that had always been Malik in his head and his heart. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Ciaran woke to an empty bed, but it felt warmer and more snug than it ever had before. It took him a while to notice the envelope on Malik's pillow and the silver chain beside it. Threaded on the chain he found his father's ring, the crest looking exactly as it

always had.

He frowned and tore open the envelope, pulling out the folded ivory stationary.

Ciaran,

I didn't want you to believe I could be that type of man. I never sent it.

- M

At first, he couldn't identify what he felt. He would have to return it himself. Someday. But for the moment, it would be safe with him. He slipped the chain around his neck, pulling on a shirt to hide it. Later he'd tell Malik to put it back, it wasn't safe with the amount clothing he generally was required to *not* wear. But for now, the small weight of it against his chest gave him a warm sense of satisfaction as he took off in search of breakfast.

Chapter Thirty Seven

It had been a long time since Malik had felt this good. He and Dex spent hours settling plans, gathering maps and taking note of how many supplies they would each need to appropriate before setting their plans in motion. Dex and Dashi would go first, on a holiday to his family's holdings near the northern lake. Dex's invitation to his mother's homestead had been public knowledge for several weeks.

Malik would go to the Northlands, taking his chances with hiding himself and Ciaran from not only Kava, but from the warring clans that tended to kill anyone who trespassed into their territory. They made plans to meet up again at the edge of Dex's family property.

With a definitive plan finally in place, Malik felt like he could almost breathe again. He was happy enough with the day's work that he could push the sudden low-grade pounding in his head away from him. Nothing could spoil the day. Not even a headache.

Pushing open the front door, Malik pulled off his heavy coat. He threw it toward a chair in the corner, and in an uncharacteristic move, took a white-faced Alma in his arms and gave her a loud smacking kiss on the cheek. "Break out the best wine in the house, Alma. Tonight, we celebrate!"

"Sir..." Alma's hand clutched at his arm, but Malik shrugged it off, turning toward the back of the house.

"Ciaran!" he bellowed, taking a step. His head suddenly throbbed so hard he stumbled before righting himself.

The house was too quiet. Malik turned, smile still firmly in place. "Is he out in the gardens?" His eyes flickered to the silver chain held tightly in Alma's hand. His heartbeat stuttered and stopped before starting to beat again, faster and harder. "Alma." His voice turned cold. "Where is Ciaran?"

Alma could only shake her head, tears falling from her red eyes. "They came and took him, Master Malik. Kava himself. I couldn't do...I couldn't..." The words dissolved into sobs.

Malik stepped away from her, a look of understanding slowly forming on his face, the spot in his mind that held Ciaran suddenly flared to life, full and painfully aware. "Kava...here?" He worked the words over the razors in his throat, a thousand images bombarding his brain as he turned. "Get word to Dex, tell him what's happened," he whispered as he fumbled with the door, pulled it open and rushed back out into the cold brisk air.

This was what Ciaran expected, wasn't it? Deep inside, since waking up in that first jail cell so many months ago. This amused malice staring out from dark deranged eyes. Only, they weren't Malik's eyes.

"You're a long way from home, aren't you?" Kava waved his array of slaves out of the room with an idle flick of his wrist.

Ciaran focused in on the thick, stubby fingers with distaste. He could barely stomach the thought of how thoroughly those hands had touched his brother, likely knowing secrets Ciaran would never know, would never want to know.

He struggled to stand back upright on his knees properly, only to fall forward again when pushed. The chains at his wrists, bolted back to the wall behind him, caught him awkwardly. He looped his fingers round and grasped them to take the pressure off the skin of his wrists, but his shoulders still ached from the strain.

Kava tilted his chin back up and Ciaran jerked his head to the side. "Don't struggle so much, boy. We have much to talk about while we wait for your...brother, is it?"

Ciaran snarled and snapped his teeth, aiming to take a chunk out of the fleshy hand so conveniently near his mouth. Instead it connected firmly with his cheek. The taste of blood filled his throat.

"So there's your spirit. You disappointed me the other night. So passive." Kava tsked at him.

Ciaran glared and said nothing.

"Gave you a little something, did he?" A hint of appreciation flickered across Kava's face. "But not too much. Always trying to be clever, my Malik."

Ciaran turned away in disgust. He'd never felt the urge to kill someone before. It felt cold and warm all at the same time. Surely if he got the chance, he'd not only obliterate the slimy grin from Kava's face but everything else that made the man recognizable as well.

Is this what his brother felt like?

"You're a long way from home."

The implied question hung in the air. Ciaran wouldn't answer it, unsure exactly how much Kava knew, though it was painfully obvious he knew a lot more than anyone had guessed. Who besides Dex and Dashi knew they were brothers? They'd been so careful, hadn't they?

"Think you can keep secrets from me, boy?"

"Bastard," Ciaran spat. He gritted his teeth as Kava walked away. "I hate what you did to him."

"Did to him?" There was a hint of genuine surprise in the statement. Kava mulled over the contents of the black cabinet in the corner before making a choice and tossed Ciaran a disparaging look. "Nothing he didn't want, I assure you. He's a born whore, my Malik."

Ciaran shuddered when he identified the whip unfurled before him. "He's not yours." His protest was barely a gasp; the fear taking his breath away.

Kava was pleased. A quick yank burst all the buttons on Ciaran's silk shirt and left it hanging open, unwelcome fingers lingered casually over his bare skin before getting back to their task.

"He is a whore."

Ciaran risked a glance up before the blow came. The sharp bite of the whip was even faster, and more painful, than he expected. He yelped, half praying Malik would find him, half praying he wouldn't.

Kava's eyes were ablaze. "My whore."

The sound of the whip reached Malik's ears even before he cleared the doorway to Kava's private rooms. The grim faces of the guards and the way they gripped their weapons made him wish he'd waited for Dex to arrive before leaving. But his focus was on Ciaran. Getting to him, holding him. Getting his brother as far away from this place as possible.

He should have known, should have guessed Kava would do something like this. He should have been better prepared, should have left Ciaran a guard or something--anything that would have allowed his brother to protect himself.

This was his failure.

A sharp snap of leather against skin followed by a cry of pain had Malik breaking out in a cold sweat. But still he kept his pace. He couldn't appear a threat. Not yet at least. Otherwise loyalty or not, his men would cut him down in a heartbeat.

The guards at the entrance narrowed their eyes, but did not stop him as he pulled open the door and walked in.

The first thing he noticed was the smell. The chamber had always had the smell of iron and sweat-stained leather, but now the stench of blood and fear covered it all like a putrid perfume.

This room was larger than Kava's bedroom, another place he knew intimately. Kava reserved this one for the more perverse enjoyments.

Instinctively, he knew Ciaran would be at the end of the room. The steel restraints hung there, from the ceiling and wall, perfect for keeping victims on display.

He refused to look.

Focus on Kava.

Kava's arm was pulled back, readying himself for another blow. Malik was sure he wouldn't be able to stand it if he saw the blow fall. "My lord!" His voice sounded overly loud and sharp in the room.

Kava spun, arm still raised and Malik saw a flash of betrayal before Kava lashed the whip down, cracking it across Malik's chest. The sting was mostly absorbed by the light military jacket he still wore.

"You've interrupted my fun, slut." Spittle flew from Kava's mouth as he spoke, his lips curled into a snarl as he regarded Malik's tense form.

"Apologies, my lord." Malik fought to keep his voice steady and his eyes away from Ciaran. He took a careful step to the side, "You look winded, my lord. Shall I call for your attendant?" Another step.

"It was a mistake, Malik, a mistake to think I wouldn't find out." Kava moved his hand, the snake-like whip trailed on the floor beside him. "I've told you, again and

again, you favor one of them and the others are bound to turn on you." He tossed Ciaran's family ring to the floor at Malik's feet.

The light in the room glinted off the gold, only slightly dulled under a coating of blood. Malik's stomach turned and twisted painfully. "You did say that, my lord."

"And you were always too stupid to listen!"

Ciaran swayed at the edge of Malik's vision. There was something awkward about the angle. Malik bowed his head, dropping his gaze to the floor in acquiescence.

"I handed it all to you, all of it! Gifted you the world, and you let it fall through your fingers. For what. That?" Kava pointed in Ciaran's direction, a look of hatred on his face.

But Malik was no longer focusing on Kava's words. All he could hear was Ciaran's hard breathing. "Forgive me, my lord." His eyes narrowed before slowly coming up to meet his master's again.

"No. No forgiveness! I'm making an end of you. And your cohorts. That idiot Dex. He's been a thorn long enough. Festering bastard. No more!" Kava pulled the whip forward, snapped it loud to the right of Malik, who did not flinch.

"Why won't you look at him?" Kava stepped closer and Malik countered with a short move in the opposite direction.

"I don't need to see him, my lord." Malik swallowed at the bile in his throat.

"Look at what you made me do to your brother, Malik."

Malik's heart pounded painfully in his chest as his eyes were drawn, almost compulsively, past Kava to where Ciaran knelt on the cold stone floor. His head was bent low, arms pulled painfully back behind him, clothes tattered and body bloody from the whip. And he wasn't moving.

This wasn't how it was supposed to end.

Kava rushed forward, whip readying another strike, but Malik stood firm, body braced for the blow.

"Mal--gods, no!" Ciaran's body strained against the chains, agony etched in his face.

At the last moment, Malik dropped his shoulders and swiveled, coming up under the whip and trapping it against his body with his hands, letting the sharp kiss of the whip cut into his palms as he wound it around and jerked it out of Kava's hands.

The whip's heavy handle flew in a high arc between them, and Malik tugged once, feeling the satisfyingly firm thud as it landed behind him, out of Kava's reach.

"I will kill you for this!"

Malik lowered his head, but there was nothing subservient to his stance this time. "You will try."

Kava reached for the nearest weapon to him, more familiar than Malik with the precise location of all the room's instruments of torture. He hefted a long curved steel bar with a barbed end in one hand and a jagged-edged sword in the other, swinging the first at Malik, eyes blazing and a stream of unending curses flowing from his mouth. "You ungrateful whore! I saved you! I gave you a home, a reason to live!" He lashed out again and again, coming within a hair's breath of Malik's unprotected throat. Then

turned as if to attack Ciaran's unprotected form.

Malik maneuvered himself between Ciaran and the flailing madman. "You took everything from me!"

"You! I found you lying in a trash heap!" Kava's words began to slur as his frenzy built, but he turned from Ciaran and back to Malik. "You lied and whined your way in here, plying your charms, sneaking your way into my bed!" He pressed forward, catching against Malik's side, slicing deeply into skin and muscle.

"For godsake, Mal, protect yourself!" Ciaran's voice with an accompanying rattle of chains woke Malik from the nightmare he was trapped in.

Another wild pass had Malik ducking under and away from Kava's sword. Angry, Kava threw the heavy sword at Malik who fainted to his right, feeling the brush of air from where the blade barely missed his head and clattered on the floor to the side of him. Malik immediately turned and picked up the discarded weapon. The weight of it in his hand calmed him. This was something he understood. This was what he'd been trained for. To fight against the enemy. He easily parried the downward swing from Kava's weapon and turned it, forcing Kava to break his grip on the wicked looking steel.

"You dare draw arms against *me*?!" Kava yelled. His free hand grabbed another short razor-sharp sword from a nearby table, attacking Malik with both hands, driving him back against the far wall with an inhuman scream of rage. "I am your King! I am your *God*!"

"You are nothing!" Malik was only barely aware of the sound of fighting just outside the door of the room, Dex's raised voice, and the sound of steel against steel when entry was refused.

Malik hissed as Kava struck and the sword cut through the sleeve of his jacket and into his arm. The shock and pain forced him to lower his guard briefly before twisting back again, only to feel Kava's sword leaving a slice of fire across his back as he turned.

"I will have him, I will defile him in ways you can only fear in your darkest nightmares."

A haze of red rage filmed over Malik's eyes for a second before he changed his grip on his sword and moved forward. "You. You will *never* touch him." With sheer force of will, he forced Kava back across the room, gradually getting the upper hand in the fight before finally spying the weak spot in Kava's defense and striking. His breath stopped in his throat as he felt the tug and slide of his sword pushing into Kava's fleshy stomach.

Kava's face contorted into pain and an almost child-like confusion as he fell to his knees. He dropped his weapons to clutch his hands against his wound. He opened his mouth to speak, but only a bubbling kind of sound came from his throat.

Malik spared a small last look at the man who had been the focal point of so much pain and confusion for so many years before he turned, lurching just a bit from his injuries. He fell to his knees, dropping his sword to his side before fumbling blood-slick fingers on Ciaran's shackles, pulling the pins that released them.

"I didn't think...you'd find me."

"I wasn't going to lose you again."

Ciaran grunted as Malik laid him back on the floor. "I'm sorry."

"No." Malik shook his head. "I'm sorry. I would've been here sooner." His voice cracked and he drew in a pain-filled lung-full of air.

Ciaran placed one hand along side Malik's face, smiling despite all the blood. "You're free of him."

Malik couldn't tell if it was the sharp intake of breath from Ciaran or the whisper-slice of a blade through the air that alerted him, either way, he knew in an instant Kava hadn't finished with them yet.

His instinct was to push Ciaran out of the pathway of the sword, choosing to save his brother in the only way left to him; but Ciaran was too quick, twisting over and picking up the sword, turning counter with Malik and thrusting. Malik watched as Kava realized, too late, that he would die not in the midst of a glorious battle, but at the hands of two slaves.

The sword in his hand dropped harmlessly to the ground beside them, and the brothers watched as Kava slid back to the ground, eyes wide and dark as they glossed over in death.

Chapter Thirty Eight

Ciaran opened his eyes to the familiar view of the fire by Malik's bed. Almost immediately the aches he'd left behind in sleep returned to him.

"You're not supposed to move."

Ciaran found the face attached to the voice and gave Dashi a dubious look. "Are you to be my guardian, then?"

Dashi gave him a firm nod. "Lord Malik was very clear."

Ciaran snorted softly. "You look cold." Actually, Dashi looked barely dressed, but the slave only shrugged. Ciaran lifted the blanket. "Come on."

Without hesitation, Dashi scrambled under the covers and nestled next to Ciaran, careful not to nestle too closely. The chill of his skin took Ciaran's mind off of the burn of the cuts across his chest.

"I was so very scared..." Dashi's voice sounded young and frightened, and Ciaran kissed the worried furrows between the young slave's eyes.

"Everything is okay now, Dashi." Ciaran was surprised at how certain he sounded.

Raised voices could be heard from outside the door. Ciaran smiled at the cadence of the argument. They argued like siblings. Brothers. "What have they been saying?"

"Hmm. Dex is saying that the army will probably follow Malik. Because Kava had no heirs and also because Malik...did things for them?" His voice turned up at the end, unsure. "And Dex says if Malik promises no more war and to solidify the borders, the people will probably be happy too."

"Oh? How's that going over?"

Dashi just giggled. "Malik says you can't stay because you are brothers. There is a stigma...maybe, and because of what he's done for Kava..." Dashi listened some more and then grinned widely. "But Dex says shame is for the weak. And that Malik is an idiot."

Ciaran rolled his eyes.

"He also says one of you was an orphan taken in by the same family. You are not really brothers."

"Oh, does he." Ciaran wondered which of them would get that role to play.

Dashi rested his head against Ciaran's shoulder. "He doesn't want Malik to go."

"I know." And the fact that they were not in a prison cell right now, suggested things had already gone far better than expected after he'd passed out.

A few minutes later, the door swung open and Dex marched forward. He looked more amused than anything else and, after surveying the bed, held out his hand and snapped his fingers. With an 'eep', Dashi scurried out from beneath the covers and over to clasp Dex's hand.

"I have done what I can, but you know how he is," Dex said. Ciaran caught Malik's solemn scowl by the doorway. "He would have you living in a cave eating

dried tree bark before he gave the situation proper thought. Idiot," he finished with a fond growl.

Ciaran gave Dex a weak smile.

"That's enough." Malik's voice was unusually gruff. "Let him be."

Dex just shook his head and smiled. He laid a hand on Ciaran's brow. "You, rest."

Ciaran waited until Dex had closed the door behind him before turning his gaze to Malik. He patted the bed beside him and watched as his stubborn brother limped across the room.

"You *are* an idiot," he echoed affectionately. "You're the one who should be in bed."

"I'm fine." Malik muttered as he sat.

Ciaran covered his hand and squeezed. "Is it done?"

Malik nodded. "It is."

"You're safe?"

Malik gave him a peculiar look. "*We're* safe."

Ciaran relaxed back into the pillows, tugging at Malik's hand until he laid down to rest by his side.

"So," he said after a moment, "Dashi says I'm to be your queen."

Malik snorted. "I should be so lucky."

Ciaran listened to the fire for a while, playing with the hem of Malik's sleeve. "You know, I saw Aedam at Kava's right before--"

"It's been taken care of," Malik cut him off.

"He couldn't have known on his own."

"Ciaran, I took care of it."

Malik's tone was final. Ciaran took a steadying breath and decided he didn't want to know. "Is Alma still going to be cooking for us?"

A huff of amusement. "She is."

"Good." Satisfied at least that he wouldn't starve so soon after almost dying, Ciaran let his head fall to the side and waggled his brows at his brother. "Queen it is, then."

"Yeah?"

"Well, maybe." Ciaran's eyes twinkled. "Probably. If you're good."

Epilogue: Eighteen Months Later

Malik knew Ciaran was there before he even walked through the door. The tingling sensation in his mind, his tenuous connection with his brother now fully restored to how it was when they were children, guided him through their quiet house to the room where his brother waited.

The windows to the garden were open wide, and the breeze blew the sheer white curtains up until they billowed into the room like living creatures. In the midst of the shimmering fabric, his dark suit a stark contrast to his surroundings, was Ciaran.

Pride thrummed through Malik at the sight of Ciaran standing there, confident, unafraid. How far they'd come from those first days. It took his breath away.

Quietly, he slid up behind Ciaran, slipped an arm around his waist and pulled him lovingly back against his chest. Ciaran melted back without hesitation, and a peace slowly enveloped them as they watched the sun set across the garden landscape.

"How was your day?" Malik whispered, his face resting against the side of Ciaran's head, hair softly ruffling in the breeze as he spoke. "Did you send the emissary from Glystalk back with promises of gold?"

Ciaran nodded. "I'm sure they'll be more than happy. What about you... Invade any small kingdoms?"

"Just the ones that deserved it." Malik couldn't see his brother's smile, but he knew it was there. He gave Ciaran a squeeze. "Dex and Dashi are coming for dinner. I told them you would be pleased to put on a special performance, given what day it is."

Ciaran chuckled, his chest expanding and filling, pushing against Malik's arms. "You are wicked."

Malik joined in his brother's laughter. "Funny, that's what Dashi said."

"I don't care if it is our anniversary, I won't be stripping down and dancing for the delight of our friends."

Malik sighed dramatically. "I suppose *I'll* do it then."

Ciaran laughed, delighted. His hands slipped over Malik's, finding and tracing the design on the commitment ring on his finger. They'd each worn one for a year now, no longer brothers in anyone's eyes but their own. "I love you."

Malik's arms loosened, and Ciaran turned to cup his face. Soft lips touched his own as Malik opened the connection in his mind. Love and acceptance immediately flowed through him in a warm rush. He had learned this. Ciaran had taught him.

There was no more darkness between them now. Only laughter and admiration and love. He let all of that in and more, no wall, no barrier shutting it out. He smiled. This is the way it was always meant to be.