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CAGE MATCH

BONNIE DEE

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Chapter One

The anticipatory rumble of the crowd made the hair on Andreas's neck rise. They wanted blood and violence, maybe even death. The thick scent of lust and sweat hung in the air along with a pall of opium smoke. Andreas breathed it in through every pore, let the muttering roar fill his head and the adrenaline tingle through his veins until he was one with the primal vibe that simmered in the cavelike room.

A single thick beam of light sliced through the darkness, illuminating the cage below. The big man in front of Andreas shifted to say something to his neighbor, blocking Andreas's view, so he bobbed his head to the right. The fighters were entering through barred doors that faced each other across the circular arena. Both men were practically naked except for briefs, oiled bodies glistening. Tonight's match was a hand-to-hand fight with no weapons or armor, only muscle and skill.

Andreas fingered the gold chain around his neck as he studied the two opponents, both virile, stunning specimens. He swallowed and his stomach muscles tensed as his erection swelled. Leaning forward, he peered intently at the taller of the two men. He was the more battle-scarred of the two fighters. Red-haired and bearded, his broad chest also boasted a pelt of coppery hair. His muscles were hewn rock, and his facial features were blunt and square. He looked like he could tear a man's arms off and beat him into submission with them.

Andreas looked at the other man and felt as if someone had delivered an unexpected punch to his gut. He exhaled his breath in a gasp. The second warrior was a chiseled and polished work of art compared to his adversary. Andreas's pulse quickened at the sight of his beautiful, sleek body, the wide shoulders, shining pecs and abs, and long, sinewy arms and legs. The man sauntered rather than strode toward his adversary, but despite his casual manner, there was tension and power coiled in his lean body. His fingers clenched lightly, making the muscles in his arms ripple all the

way up to his shoulders. He was like a snake seemingly asleep in the sun but poised to strike.

Turning up the magnification on his image-viewer, Andreas studied the leaner fighter. His hair was cropped close to his scalp and he was clean-shaven, unlike his opponent. His nose would've been a long, straight blade but for a kink where it had been broken. A scar bisected his right brow and turned down the corner of his eye, but the damage only added to his handsome features, giving them character that the perfection of faces in the stands lacked. There were few in the crowd tonight who hadn't had some cosmetic surgery, and Andreas thought all of them looked like pale imitations of the real man in the arena.

Guilt mingled with his pleasure at examining the attractive fighter. He despised himself for coming to these events, ashamed at the bloodlust and the voyeuristic aspect of watching two men tear each other apart with weapons or beat each other senseless with their fists. But at the same time, there was an undeniable craving in the pit of his stomach, roiling around like a bad case of food poisoning. He couldn't look away from the arena and wouldn't walk out now even if given the opportunity. He *had* to watch.

"Hey, Andreas" – Timon leaned over and nudged his arm – "want to bet on the match? Blind stakes, I choose Redbeard."

"Blind stakes? What's that?" He glanced at his friend, noting that Timon had tinted his hair and eyes to exactly match his blue shirt. The garment was no doubt a top designer label. Timon was a fashion hound who'd rather be dead than underdressed for any occasion.

"New game Rabi and I invented. You place the bet without announcing stakes. They're revealed at the end of the match."

Andreas laughed. "That makes no sense at all."

"No, it makes it more exciting, and it's fresh. Hurry, they're about to start. Are you in or out?"

"In, I guess." Andreas looked at his fighter again. Lighter, leaner, and younger than the other man, he also looked faster and smarter. "Sure. My guy can beat your guy." And maybe I'll win back my boat, he thought. Last time they'd played cards, he'd lost the brand-new vessel to Timon after only sailing it twice.

The bell rang, and the fighters began to circle one another. The crowd suddenly hushed to a low, rumbling murmur. Andreas tuned out the people around him, craned to see around the man in front of him.

He dubbed his fighter "Snake" due to the way he moved, smooth and deadly, circling slowly around his opponent. Andreas couldn't tell from this distance what color his eyes were, not even with the magnification of his image-viewer, but he could see they glittered as he stared at the other man. A chill went through him at the intensity of the gladiator's gaze.

For long moments, the pair stalked around each other like a pair of cats. Andreas wondered how much of it was for show. Did the men really need to assess one another,

or was it expected by the audience and so they went through the motions? Were both of them aching to surge toward their opponent?

Viewing at such a high magnification, Andreas almost felt he was in the cage with his chosen fighter. He was so intent on watching Snake that when he finally did attack, Andreas started and gasped in surprise. The man was so fast. He darted at his opponent and jabbed a fist into his solar plexus, knocking him backward.

Andreas quickly dialed back on his viewer as the two fighters dodged in and out of his frame of vision. By the time he'd refocused, the pair were punching and flailing, rolling on the sand and kicking up so much dirt, it was hard to see who was on top at any given moment.

Their grunts and the soft thumps of their fists were picked up by the cage mics and broadcast through the room. The crowd seemed to hold its collective breath as it listened. The fistfight was quieter than the exaggerated flesh hitting flesh in a vid, but more affecting because it was real and because everyone knew these men wouldn't stop until one of them was unconscious, possibly even dead. That was the thrill of the experience, the vicarious rush everyone came for.

Redbeard scrambled out of the other man's grip and pulled himself to his feet with the aid of the cage grille. Snake also retreated, rolling and pushing himself upright in one smooth move. Both men stood panting for a moment. Then Redbeard let out a roar and ran at Snake. He bent and rammed his big head into the other man's stomach like a battering ram, driving him back into the bars. Snake grunted and doubled over the other man as the air was driven from him. Redbeard brought his body up, snapping his head into Snake's face.

The audience groaned in sympathy as the lighter man took a beating. The bearded giant kept him pinned against the bars and used him as a punching bag.

Timon leaned toward Andreas. "Doesn't look too good for your guy."

Andreas didn't answer. He winced every time Redbeard's meaty fists drove into Snake's body. His fighter tried to keep up his guard, but the blows were coming in from every angle.

Then Redbeard made his mistake. He grappled Snake's body close in a wrestling hold, twisted him around, and cast him down. Sand puffed up as Snake hit the ground. Redbeard took a second to raise his arms and turn in a circle facing the crowd, receiving applause for his prowess. Then he turned back to his opponent, who was crawling away across the floor, and ran at him.

"Body slam!" Timon announced.

But as the big man drew himself up for the leap, Snake's long leg swept out, cutting both his legs from under him. Redbeard toppled rather than leaped and missed his mark. He landed on his face on the ground.

Snake scrambled to his feet and jumped on top of him, driving a knee into his back. He gripped Redbeard's head by the hair and slammed his face into the ground over and over. Redbeard struggled to knock him off or flip over, but Snake was

tenacious. He continued to pound the man's head into the sand with single-minded ferocity until he stopped struggling.

Andreas felt sick as he looked at the avid, hungry expressions of the beautiful people in the cheering crowd. Deep inside the stomach cramp of guilt remained, but at the same time his pulse pounded. He was as entranced and addicted as everyone else. He pumped his fist in the air and shouted until he was hoarse.

Down in the arena, the unconscious fighter was placed on a stretcher and taken away. The promoter raised Snake's arm high above his head, declaring him the official victor, and another roar of approval came from the crowd.

Timon leaned toward Andreas to complain. "You lucky bastard. There was no way he should've won over Redbeard. Now for the stakes."

"My sailboat," Andreas answered promptly. "I want it back detailed and pristine, the same condition in which you took it."

"Whoa, boy, you don't understand how this game works. The winner doesn't get to say what he's won. The loser tells you."

"That's ridiculous! Who'd give anything valuable?"

"We're all stinking rich," Timon pointed out. "None of us are going to be cheap about it. The point is to think up something extraordinary the winner would never have asked for on his own."

Andreas shook his head but laughed. Timon was nothing if not inventive. If he ever turned his considerable cleverness to something useful, he could change the world. "All right then, what have I won?"

His friend's slow, evil grin tipped him off that he might not like his prize. "Rule is you have to accept what you've won no matter what."

"Oh no, Timon, what are you up to?"

"Something good. Something fun and different. Trust me, you'll love it." He grabbed Andreas's arm and pulled him down the row, bumping people's knees as they went.

This was a small venue, nothing like the stadiums where full-scale battles were waged for the audience's entertainment. Still it took a few minutes to get out of the stands and reach the stairs leading to the lobby. Behind them the announcer called out the next pair of warriors' statistics while the excited murmur of the crowd swelled again.

"Your fighter showed mercy. He could've snapped Redbeard's neck. No holds barred in cage fighting," Timon remarked as he led Andreas across the lobby and toward the backstage. "Stay here a second."

Timon trotted ahead, spoke to the man guarding the off-limits area, and handed him some money before he gestured Andreas over. "Go with this guy. He'll take you down to meet your hero."

"What? No! I don't want—"

“Rules of the bet. You take what you’ve won, and, my friend, you’ve won one full hour to do anything you like with that hard-bodied beast. These guys have all had their shots, so you don’t have to worry about catching anything. Just ride him hard and enjoy that sweaty meat.”

“Timon, no.” Andreas’s stomach lurched and his mind raced. He knew it was common for people to pay for the pleasure of having sex with the fighters, but it seemed wrong on some fundamental level.

Timon grabbed his arm and pushed him toward the guard. “Go on now. My treat. You can fuck him or sit and talk philosophy with him for all I care, but the meter’s running. Go!”

Because his will was weak, his curiosity stoked, and his libido roaring like an old-fashioned gas engine, Andreas followed the man down the corridor and another flight of stairs to the next level. His heart beat as fast as if he were about to be put in the arena himself. What the hell was he going to do with this guy? What could he say? *You looked really hot out there tonight. I want to fuck you.*

The guard stopped in front of a closed door, turned to Andreas, and gazed through him with bored eyes. “Like your friend said, you have an hour. I’ll wait out here. Some like rough games, so I won’t open the door if you yell. Jabez won’t hurt you any more than you want, but if you feel things are getting out of hand or you really want to end it, call out, ‘Finished,’ and I’ll let you out.”

“Oh.” Andreas’s mouth was still a round circle of doubt when the man opened the door and ushered him inside. He drew a deep breath and looked around the rough, primitive room. Fake stone walls and flickering torches in wall sconces – not real flames but normal crystal-powered lights – gave the illusion of being in a dungeon. But the fantasy was blown by the large bed against one wall, its cushioned comfort a contrast to the rest of the barren cell.

Andreas took all this in with a glance before his gaze settled on the scarred fighter whom the guard had referred to as Jabez. He stood in the opposite corner, half hidden in shadow. He was absolutely still. Light played across his nearly naked body, illuminating hard planes and tawny skin, but the man’s eyes were hidden beneath the shadow cast by his brow. Andreas felt him watching but couldn’t see his expression. His pulse raced even faster, blood rushing in his ears.

Andreas cleared his throat. “Hello.”

Jabez remained silent and still. Wasn’t he supposed to set his client at ease, or was the intimidating tough-guy act part of the mystique the customer paid for?

“You were great out there tonight.”

More silence.

“My friend paid for this. It wasn’t really my idea. I haven’t done anything like this before.” Andreas was embarrassed to hear himself babble like a kid caught shoplifting. He didn’t have to explain himself. He was a grown man indulging in a perfectly legal sex transaction. “You probably do this a lot, huh?”

"Yeah." The man's voice was low and as rough as the fake granite walls. He stepped forward at last, and the light struck his face, the contrasting shadows making the angles even more severe. Blood still trickled from a cut on his cheek and abrasions on various parts of his body. The heady scent of sweat and blood teased Andreas's nose.

"What do you want? Bet you like it rough."

It was Andreas's turn to be silent. He was speechless. His cock throbbed, so engorged he felt it might explode in his expensive real-silk briefs.

Jabez continued to move forward, a slow saunter like his approach toward his enemy in the ring. The closer he got, the bigger he looked. It had been impossible to get a true reading of his height, the breadth of his shoulders, the power coiled in his muscles through the image-viewer lens.

He's going to kill me! Before I can call for help, he's going to tear my head off. Terror pumped adrenaline through Andreas's system, and he took a step backward.

At his movement, Jabez struck like the snake Andreas had dubbed him. He seized Andreas by the throat and pinned him up against the door. He towered over him, glaring down into his face, his hot breath puffing against his mouth. "Like it a little scary too, I reckon."

The man was right. Andreas swallowed beneath the hand gripping his neck, scared shitless but completely turned on. Every cell in his body felt electrified, alive in a way he'd never felt before. It was only adrenaline and lust, yet it felt like more than that. He could swear some kind of vibration poured from Jabez's hand into his body.

Dark spots spun in his vision, not from being choked – the hand on his windpipe wasn't all that crushing – but because he'd forgotten to breathe. Jabez released his throat but kept him trapped against the door with the length of his body. Waves of heat pulsated between them. Jabez gave a little grind with his hips, rubbing against Andreas's erection and making him groan. Andreas closed his eyes and parted his lips, reaching for a kiss. He felt the heat of the other man's breath, moist and close. Any second now their lips would touch.

Then, just as quickly as he'd pinned Andreas, the gladiator stepped back and let him drop onto his feet.

Andreas's eyes opened to meet Jabez's hard gaze. The man's eyes were narrowed, angry, and Andreas could finally see their color as a shaft of light struck them – blue, although right now they were so dark they appeared almost black.

"Is that what you want?" The man spat the words like hard pellets.

Shame flooded through him at the tone and the look. Was this the way a client was supposed to be treated? Jabez was quickly losing any tip he might have earned from their encounter.

"I told you. My friend paid for it. I didn't expect..." Andreas shut his lips tight as he reminded himself he need make no apology to this man. It was part of his job. "If

you don't feel like fucking, that's fine." He made his voice cool and much calmer than he felt inside.

"Maybe I don't." The big arms crossed over his slab of a chest, and the fighter resumed his imitation of a statue.

Andreas swept his gaze the length of the man's body and noticed his erection beneath the black fabric of his briefs. Despite his nonchalance, Jabez was aroused from their encounter too. The knowledge made him feel better, cockier, and a lot less ashamed. He folded his own arms and stared back.

"I guess it would be a pain to have to have sex with people when you're not in the mood. Part of your job, though, right? You guys get some kind of commission?"

The other man's lip curled in scorn, as if he couldn't believe the idiocy of the question. "No, we work off our indenture – unless we die first."

Andreas frowned. "What are you indentured for?"

Jabez's laughter was a harsh, humorless bark. "Whatever trumped-up reason they can come up with. On this planet it ain't too hard to lock a man up for just about anything." He dropped his gaze to Andreas's pants and changed the subject. "So what do you want? Blowjob? Fuck? Top or bottom?"

Andreas's cock twitched in response to the suggestions, but his brain had emerged from a lust-induced fog and he was full of questions. "I thought you did the after-fight visits for a little extra cash on the side. I didn't know it wasn't your choice."

"Didn't say it isn't my choice." The man's eyes seemed to burn through his trousers like blue lasers, scanning every inch of him. "But I don't do it for cash. It's more time off my sentence."

Andreas considered that. "You'll do anyone who comes in here then—man, woman, it doesn't matter?"

"That's right."

"But what's your preference? What do *you* like to do?" Andreas could almost feel the moment when the balance of power shifted. Jabez looked uncomfortable. He didn't like to be questioned.

He reached for the fly of Andreas's pants. "You want to fuck or talk the whole time?"

Andreas pushed his hand away. "Talk. Answer the question. What do you like?"

"Whatever the client wants." His jaw clenched so hard it bulged. Every muscle in his powerful body looked as tense as a cat facing a bathtub full of water.

"How do you feel about fighting? Do you hate it or do you get a charge from it?"

He shrugged. "I just do it. Now do you want me to suck you off or what?"

Andreas would've liked nothing better, but he was more intrigued to hear Jabez's answers to his questions. He didn't believe the man had no thoughts or feelings about the things he did. Suddenly, he was determined to know more, and curiosity was more powerful than his sexual urge.

“Do they ever rent out your services here? Could someone buy your contract?”

Jabez finally lifted his eyes from Andreas’s groin to his face. His eyes were wide except for the droop caused by the scar. “What?”

“Say I wanted to hire you as a personal trainer or a bodyguard. Would that be possible?”

A scowl twisted his brows, and his eyes narrowed once more. “Only way out of here is in a body bag.”

“Or when your indenture is up.”

“It’s never up.” His mutter was so soft, Andreas strained to hear the words.

He wanted to ask, *Then why do you do it at all? Why fight or entertain clients if you really believe your sentence will never end?* but a flash of hopeless misery across the man’s battered face kept him silent.

Andreas’s chest ached in sympathy for the plight of the fighter. He’d been to cage matches and other combat events his entire life and had never questioned the terms of the gladiators’ employment until now. Fights were just another entertainment like vids or races or any sporting event—something to pass the time. Andreas hadn’t been raised to consider the ethics of what the underclass did to make a living. He had his place in life, and his people were all that was important.

“Are we finished here? Or do you want something else?” The fighter moved closer to Andreas, once more boxing him in by the door. “I think you do. I think all this talk is ‘cause you’re scared to ask for what you want.”

Andreas’s erection had flagged as questions and guilt distracted him, but it stiffened again at the man’s husky voice and the proximity of his body. He inhaled the powerful odor of his sweat, as sharp and tangy as fresh-cut grass. He wanted to lean in and lick his gleaming chest, tasting salt and oil.

Jabez reached for his fly, and Andreas didn’t bat his hands away this time. The man cupped the bulge in front, his hand heavy and hot, and gave a little squeeze. Andreas sucked in a breath.

“Yeah. This is what you want.” The other man’s voice was a low, sultry caress and as powerful as his touch. “This is what you need.”

Jabez unfastened Andreas’s pants and reached inside to pull out his cock. Andreas couldn’t drag his gaze away from that big hand, the skin on the knuckles broken and bleeding. The dark purple head of his cock emerged from Jabez’s fist, and when the man began to stroke his length up and down, Andreas whimpered. The heat was unbearable and the glide of skin on skin wasn’t nearly enough. He wanted, needed, more, so much more.

As if hearing his silent plea, Jabez dropped to his knees. The sight of the hulking warrior kneeling submissively before him sent another flare of fire burning through him. Jabez leaned in slowly, his mouth open, and Andreas forgot to breathe again as the

man's lips closed around the tip of his penis, sucking it into steamy wetness. Andreas groaned and let his eyes drift closed.

But he didn't want to miss one second of the beautiful man giving him a blowjob, so he opened them again, just a slit, just enough to be able to see the frown of concentration on Jabez's face and the erotic sight of his lips curved around the head of Andreas's cock.

Reaching out, he cupped the other man's head on either side, feeling the soft stubble of his shorn hair against his palms. His hair was brown, and Andreas wondered whether it would be dark or light when it was longer. The shape of Jabez's skull was sexy, but Andreas could imagine he'd be even hotter with a mop of tawny or walnut brown hair framing his face.

Jabez released his cock and blew across the glistening, wet surface, making Andreas shiver. He stuck out his tongue and licked a line all the way up the shaft, then swirled it around the head. Andreas devoured the erotic image of that pink tongue against his dark, swollen penis.

The fighter removed a hand from Andreas's hip and reached beneath to cradle his balls. He fondled them softly before giving a firm squeeze that made Andreas gasp. Jabez resumed sucking and stroking his cock, bringing him quickly to the brink of orgasm. It wasn't far to go. He'd been hard and horny all evening while he watched the fight, and his lust had ratcheted higher when presented with Timon's "gift." Now, to have Jabez on his knees with his hands and mouth wrapped around his organ, Andreas didn't require much further stimulation in order to come.

He dug his fingers into the other man's scalp, groaned, and thrust his hips sharp and fast, driving his cock into Jabez's mouth. The fighter released his cock and brought his hands around to Andreas's backside. He clutched his buttocks as he let Andreas fuck his mouth as deeply as he wanted to go, so far into his throat that Jabez made a choking noise. The sound only spurred Andreas's lust higher. He drove deep one last time and froze, head thrown back, body shuddering as bliss rolled through him.

He leaned against the door, breathing hard. By the time he'd recovered and opened his eyes, Jabez was on his feet, standing in the corner of the room again, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. He met Andreas's gaze with a challenging stare.

"Anything else you want?"

As a matter of fact, there was. Andreas would've liked to order him to strip the rest of the way so he could see that long rod uncovered. He'd like to take Jabez's cock in his hands, his mouth, and suck him off. Or lie down on that big bed and have the man fuck him hard – or up against the wall or down on the floor on all fours. Yes, there were plenty of things he'd like to do in this room tonight. But he wasn't going to request any of them.

It was clear Jabez despised him and all his clients. Andreas didn't want sex prompted by a hot surge of hate. He also didn't want one evening only. He was fascinated by this man and wanted to see him again. Money and the power that went

with his family name would ensure he got what he wanted – more time and a deeper understanding of the fighter’s mind. So, despite his aching desire to fondle the other man’s cock, he shook his head.

“No. There’s nothing. Thank you for your time.” Before the other man could say anything, Andreas raised his voice and shouted, “Finished.”

Chapter Two

When the door closed behind the pretty young man, Jabez exhaled a loud breath. He was exhausted. His body ached in every muscle, yet he was as pumped as if just heading into a fight. He could still taste the guy's jizz on his tongue, and his cock was rock-hard and aching for relief. He'd been positive his visitor was going to ask for more, that he'd watch Jabez jack off or offer to suck him off, maybe even let him fuck that sweet ass. It was clear the rich boy was hot for him, but he'd cut things off so abruptly he'd left Jabez with his head spinning.

What was his game? Did he plan to come back sometime? Jabez was angry to realize he wanted to see the young man again.

Cursing, he collapsed on the bed, pulled down his briefs, and let his cock spring free. He grabbed the shaft in his fist and pumped it with hard, violent tugs meant to get him off fast. He pretended it was the rich guy's hand and that the man was gazing at him with his silver eyes while he jerked him off. Fuck knew what color they really were. The uptown crowd changed their hair, eye color, and skin tone more often than ghetto dwellers like Jabez changed clothes.

In his fantasy, the man begged to go down on him and Jabez let him. Soon those soft lips were wrapped around his rigid cock and the wet heat of his tongue swirled fire around it. Even on his knees, the man was looking up, fixing him with that silver gaze, so exotic, so erotic. Jabez imagined he was sending some kind of silent message, and wished he understood it.

He grunted and thrust into his fist, which was hard and rough, not soft, wet, and warm, as the man's mouth would be. The fantasy fell apart. Jabez finished himself off with a couple of angry tugs, came on his stomach, and wiped up the sticky residue with the bedcovers. The brief surge of pleasure was over in seconds, and he was back in hell, waiting for more pointless minutes of his life to tick past.

He pulled up his briefs and lay waiting for the guard to open the door. He'd probably escorted the client upstairs and would return any minute to take Jabez back to his cell. While he waited, he reviewed the evening's fight, what he'd done right, what he could've done better. It had been close, with his opponent taking the advantage and pounding him nearly senseless. Against those extra pounds, his superior speed was all that had saved him.

The door opened, and the guard beckoned him. "Short session."

Jabez grunted and rose to his feet.

The guard cuffed him and led him back toward his quarters. "Guy was asking about buying your services. Sounds like someone has a crush on you."

It wouldn't be the first time. Sometimes clients developed a taste for a particular fighter and came back for him again and again, but the appointments weren't cheap and eventually they'd lose interest. Still, Jabez's stomach contracted at the idea of seeing the young man again. Stupid to think about it. He dismissed the tightening in his gut as hunger pangs. He never ate before a fight, and by the time the match was over, he was always ravenous.

Back in his room, a meal waited. One thing the owners weren't cheap about was food. The fighters ate massive quantities of it. As he wolfed down several platefuls, Jabez thought about his visitor with all his questions.

"What's your preference? What do you like to do?"

No one had ever asked him that. He hardly asked it of himself, since there was no point. He'd do what he had to, as he had all his life. His existence had always been pretty much a matter of surviving from moment to moment. And right now all he could concentrate on was making it through this three-year contract alive.

But as he lay down to sleep, he tried to imagine what he'd like to do, how he'd choose to live if he had the freedom. All he could come up with was being outdoors. Not in an uptown city park, but the real outdoors, with trees and bushes and wild animals like in the nature vids he'd watched.

He fell asleep and dreamed of walking in the woods, breathing in the green scent of trees. When he pushed through some branches and entered a clearing, a big jungle cat sat there staring at him with shining silver eyes. He didn't know whether to run or face the beast.

Then he woke up. Another day in captivity began.

He ate, worked out, practiced with his sparring partner, and when evening came, he entered the cage again.

The moments before the door opened to let him into the arena were the worst. His body was like one raw nerve, exposed and vibrating with tension. The roar of the crowd sang along with the rush of blood in his ears. He didn't have a clue who he'd be facing. There was no time to plan a course of action until he strode out onto the sand and saw his opponent.

Jabez was relieved to see fresh blood tonight rather than a battle-scarred veteran. His opponent was of a comparable height and build, but one look into the man's eyes revealed he was terrified. He was new and wouldn't have the skills to match Jabez's experience.

Both men wore light armor—a helmet, breastplate, shield, and wrist and shin guards—and were armed with short swords. Metal to metal, Jabez had no doubt he could mow down his competition.

Instead of pacing the ring and assessing his adversary, he chose to take advantage of the man's fear and rush him before he had time to adjust. With a bellow, he charged and stabbed, but the dark-skinned man twisted aside and brought his blade up, slicing at Jabez as he ran past.

Jabez's headlong charge carried him into the metal grille. A sharp pain in his side let him know he'd been cut. He'd underestimated his opponent. Pushing off the cage, he dodged to the side, raised his blade, and parried a series of blows. His assailant was a surprisingly competent swordsman, but Jabez was better. Once he regained his balance, he pressed that advantage, driving the man toward the bars to box him in and allow no room to maneuver.

But his enemy seemed to understand the strategy and kept dancing aside, keeping away from the wall of the circular cage while parrying with his quick blade. Jabez thrust beneath his guard and hit his breastplate. He couldn't get in close enough to deliver the blow he wanted to.

Grunts, harsh breathing, the smell of sweat and blood, the *clang* of metal, and the constant roar of the crowd—these details edged Jabez's consciousness as he concentrated on wearing out the other man. Sweat ran into his eyes, and he was moving slower. He lunged, and his foot slipped on the sand. He went down on one knee. His blade lowered long enough for the other man to pierce his defense and leave another cut, this time on his biceps above the wrist guard. Jabez flinched away. Before he'd recovered, the blade stabbed toward him again.

Jabez raised his shield, deflecting the blow. The impact dragged his arm down, and his opponent took advantage, kicking Jabez in the chest and knocking him onto his back in the sand. His adversary kicked again, and the toe of his boot connected hard with Jabez's temple. Pain exploded through his head, blurring his vision, and Jabez knew he was only seconds away from feeling that blade pierce his gut.

He resorted to the street-fighting tactics that had helped him survive long before he learned to use a sword. Grabbing a handful of sand, Jabez threw it into the other man's face, then swung his blade, knocking his sword out of his hand.

While the man choked and blinked, Jabez scrambled to his knees and thrust upward with all his might, driving the point of his blade deep into his opponent's abdomen. He felt the skin shear away beneath the knife and the resistance of muscle beneath. Blood sprayed over Jabez in a fountain as he drove the sword in to the hilt.

He met the man's gaze, saw his eyes widen in shock, then glaze over and go dark. He staggered backward, clutching at his stomach before toppling onto the ground.

Panting, Jabez blinked away the blackness that shrouded his vision. The pain in his head broke over him in waves. The roar of the crowd swelled louder and louder and combined with the rush of blood in his ears. His gut churned, and the world whirled around him as he lost consciousness and fell, face forward, onto the blood-soaked sand.

* * * * *

He woke with the scent of flowers in his nose. He must be dead, because no place he'd ever lived had smelled so sweet.

Jabez listened before opening his eyes, taking stock of the noises around him. Air blew softly – fresh air from an open window bringing birdsong into the room. There were the quiet creaks of an unfamiliar house, the music of trickling water, and a low, metallic gonging he couldn't place.

He peered through his eyelashes at the room around him, a bedroom painted white like clouds. Where the fuck was he? The rustle of something moving made him close his eyes again, feigning sleep.

"You're awake. How do you feel?"

No use pretending. He opened his eyes and blinked against the sunlight's soft glow through sheer white curtains. The young man with silver eyes sat beside the bed on which Jabez lay. He'd been so still, Jabez hadn't heard him breathing.

"My name is Andreas."

Jabez automatically scanned him for weapons, then swept his gaze around the room, searching for something he could use as a weapon if need be.

The man leaned toward him and rested a hand on his arm. "You're safe here. You're at my house."

Jabez resisted the urge to pull away. Instead, he brought his gaze back to Andreas and stared at him with all the intimidation he could muster while lying flat on his back. He was pleased to see the leap of the other man's Adam's apple as he swallowed.

"Why?" His voice cracked on the single word, and he realized his mouth was as dry as the sand of the arena.

"I want to learn fighting skills, so I paid off the rest of your contract and engaged you as my personal trainer."

Jabez continued to gaze at Andreas while he waited for the words to stop swimming around in his foggy mind and make sense. He must be on some powerful drugs. At last, he was able to pin down the meaning of the words and formulate a response. "I work for you."

"Yes." A small smile played over the man's mouth, making it dimple at the corners.

Jabez glanced down at his wrists. No manacles, and his ID cuff had been removed. There was nothing to stop him from rising from this bed, knocking the slender man in the chair unconscious, and walking from the room—nothing except the fog that clouded his mind and the pain in his arm and abdomen that loomed like rocks somewhere in that fog. He was injured and going nowhere until he'd recovered, so he might as well enjoy the soft bed.

Jabez watched his new boss's fingers drum against his leg. Although the man's posture was relaxed, legs crossed, body sunk into the deep chair, the nervous tapping betrayed him.

"Why me?"

Andreas cleared his throat. "I've seen you fight twice now. You're good. I want to learn fighting skills from the best."

Fighting. Right. Jabez could guess what other skills of his the man wanted, but better to be some spoiled, rich guy's fuck toy than bleed to death on the arena floor.

He started to push himself to a sitting position. Waves of dizziness forced him back onto the pillows with a groan. "How'd I get here?"

"After the match, they carried you off to the infirmary. I went to see the management about buying your contract, then had you transported here. You've been out for about eight hours. My personal physician is tending you. He says you'll be all right." He waited a moment for Jabez to respond, and when he didn't, Andreas went on.

"This will be your room. You'll have access to any part of the house or grounds you want. I want you to feel like an employee, not a...an indentured servant."

"But I'm your slave, right?"

Andreas's face flushed, and his gaze dropped. "No. It's not like that."

Jabez grunted and looked around his new cell with its clean white walls and plush furniture. His gaze stopped at the open window. Fluttering curtains framed an aching blue sky and the top boughs of a tree. He hadn't seen the sky in almost a year and hadn't seen a sky this clear ever. Where he'd lived, there'd always been a pall of smog and towering buildings boxing him in.

"They told me your name is Jabez, but they didn't have a last name for you."

"Never needed one."

The other man cocked his head and studied him. "You have no family?"

The image of a girl with ragged brown hair and a throaty chuckle flashed in his mind. She hit him in the arm and called, "*You're it!*" before disappearing into the crowd.

"No," he answered.

"Mm." The long fingers *tap-tap-tapped* against his leg. Jabez wanted to grab his hand and stop the tapping. He wanted to suck one of those long fingers into his mouth and shock the man into silence. His cock hardened at the fantasy, despite the drugs dulling his senses.

"What's your last name?" Jabez asked to break the tension.

There was a moment's pause before he answered, "Fortias. I'm Andreas Fortias."

The name sifted through his consciousness like the fine powder floating from the converter plants and blanketing the streets of Brick Town.

"Fortias," he repeated before the name suddenly clicked into place. Shock froze his tongue for a moment. He'd known the man was rich, but hadn't imagined he was corporate royalty.

Jabez studied Andreas more closely, from the loose fall of black curls around his fine-featured face down to his body clad in shimmering garments of green and gold. The name Fortias was stamped on most products at the stores and appeared in ads all the time. It was emblazoned on business and civic buildings across the city. Fortias meant power, wealth, and privilege.

He met Andreas's silvery gaze once more. "Should I call you 'Master' or 'Your Highness'?"

"Andreas is fine." He offered another smile with those intriguing brackets around his mouth, but his fingers went *tap-tap-tap*. He was more nervous than he let on. "I'm putting my trust in you. You won't find a better work situation out there." Andreas nodded his head to signify the world outside the window. "Legally, you're bonded to me for the next few years, but if you work well with me and prove your loyalty, I might let you out of your contract sooner and with a generous stipend. Does that sound fair?"

Oh it *sounded* fair, all right, but words were lies. No one could be trusted.

Jabez nodded. The slight movement of his head made him dizzy again. His ears rang, and he squeezed his eyes closed.

"This is a lot to take in all at once, I imagine." Andreas's voice pulsed loud, then soft with the throbbing in Jabez's head. "You must be thirsty. Let me give you something to drink."

Suddenly the man's hand was at the back of his neck, lifting his head. Jabez opened his eyes in surprise as a glass of water was pressed to his lips. When the cool liquid touched them, he drank automatically. Nothing had ever tasted so good. The water washed down his wasteland of a throat, and the warm hand supporting his neck offered more comfort than he'd ever known.

It pissed him off. He jerked away from the gesture of kindness, bumping the glass so water spilled on his chest.

"I'm sorry." Andreas wiped the water from his chest with the sleeve of his silky shirt. "You get some more rest now, or if you're hungry, I'll bring you something to eat from the kitchen." He continued to speak in that quiet, soothing voice that made Jabez even angrier.

"No," he snapped, refusing both the food and the false compassion. He was here for one reason only: to provide amusement for a bored, jaded playboy. To believe anything else was to be a fool.

“All right then. I’ll leave you alone for a while so you can go back to sleep. There’s a com by the bedside. If you need anything, just call.”

Jabez already had his eyes closed. He listened to the soft pad of footsteps crossing the room and the door closing quietly. Had Andreas locked it behind him? He didn’t care enough to climb out of bed and find out. For now, he’d remain in this gilded cage and gather his strength until he could fly again.

Chapter Three

Andreas's stomach had been upset since the moment he'd made his impulsive decision to buy Jabez and take him home. When he'd seen the man sprawled on the bloodstained sand of the arena, a half-dead victor, he'd been seized with the desire to save him. The vague plan that he'd entertained since the previous evening to hire him as a servant became concrete. Leaving the stands, he'd gone in search of management to find out if "his" gladiator was alive or dead. Since he'd come to the fights without Timon or any of his other friends, there was no one to sway him to reason, so his overwhelming need to save this man took over.

Money and the Fortias name got Andreas exactly what he wanted, as they always did, but now that he had the rough warrior sleeping in his spare bedroom, he was a little terrified by his rash decision. Uncaged, the man could murder him, steal whatever he could grab, and run away.

On the other hand, he appeared to be as worn and weak as a sick puppy. It wasn't likely he'd try to go anywhere soon. Hopefully, by the time he was healed, he'd realize it was to his advantage to work for Andreas rather than break the law and end up back on the streets of Brick Town, where he'd probably come from.

Andreas drew a deep breath to calm his racing heart. He picked up the breakfast tray he was personally delivering to Jabez—no point in exposing Mrs. Gamble to his experiment in social reform—and carried it upstairs. He paused in front of the spare bedroom, balanced the tray awkwardly with one hand, and knocked on the door.

There was a long pause, long enough that Andreas began to wonder if his guest was still sleeping or if he'd taken off out the window before that low, rough voice finally growled, "Come in."

Andreas inhaled and muttered, "Open," and the door slid into the wall, granting him access. His lips were numb, as if he'd had a shot of painkiller, and he worked to curve them into a friendly smile as he walked toward his patient.

Jabez sat up in the bed, the sheet pooled around his waist and the rest of his torso, except where bandaged, gloriously naked. His skin was sleek yet marked by numerous pale scars, the badges of his victories.

“Good morning. I didn’t think you’d sleep the night through. You must be starving.”

“How do you know I slept all night? You watch me?” Killer blue eyes burned into him.

“No. I just looked in once before I went to bed. I assumed you didn’t wake up, because you never used the communicator.”

Jabez glanced at the device on the nightstand, then back at Andreas. “I need to piss.”

“The bathroom’s there.” Andreas nodded with his head and set the tray on the foot of the bed. “Do you need help getting up?”

“No.” He tossed back the sheet and swung his legs out of bed—long, sculpted, beautiful legs and big bare feet. Andreas reminded himself that he hadn’t hired the man for sex.

Jabez swayed for a moment as he stood upright, then straightened his shoulders and his back and gave Andreas another of those angry, challenging stares. Andreas refrained from offering his arm to lean on as he escorted him to the bathroom.

“My doctor will be here soon to check your wounds. Besides the cuts in your arm and your side, you have some cracked ribs. But he’s repaired everything and expects you to make a full recovery quickly. Are you in much pain? I’d prefer not to give you another painkiller until he’s seen you.”

“I’m fine.” The man’s slow steps and tense face belied his words. He closed the bathroom door behind him.

Andreas stood there until he heard the splash of urine hitting the toilet, then quickly moved away, giving him privacy. He was ashamed at the stab of lust he felt at his mental image of Jabez with his cock in his hand, pouring a stream like a fountain.

Why had he really brought the fighter home? His offer of legitimate employment was true. He did want to learn self-defense moves, but he couldn’t pretend he didn’t have secret hopes of something else happening between them.

Jabez was handsome, sexy, and utterly desirable, but he was a human being, not a sex toy. Andreas must keep his desire hidden while he built the other man’s trust in him. For the first time in perhaps his entire life, he couldn’t have exactly what he wanted when he wanted it.

When his guest emerged from the bathroom, Andreas motioned him to the chair by the window. “Why don’t you take in the view while you eat? It’s a beautiful day.”

Jabez obediently shuffled across the room and lowered himself into the chair. Andreas fetched the tray and brought it to him.

"I didn't know what you'd want to eat, so there's a little of everything here," he said as he uncovered the dishes on the tray and sat down in another chair. Mrs. Gamble had prepared eggs several different ways, pancakes, toast, and various breakfast meats, but Andreas had cut up the fruit himself.

Jabez began to eat, moving methodically from plate to plate and consuming everything on each one. Andreas watched in amazement. The array was intended to give him choices, but the man consumed every last item without pausing or taking a break to look out the window. In less than ten minutes he was finished. He set the tray on the small table near him and gave a resounding belch.

"Still hungry? Do you want more?" Andreas could barely suppress the sarcasm in his question.

Hearing his amusement, Jabez glanced at him with a slight softening of his lips that was almost a smile. "No." He looked out the window at the garden and the yard beyond.

"My house is a little way outside the city," Andreas said. "I used to have an apartment in town but decided I needed to get away from the noise and create some serenity. This is my little oasis. If the doctor says it's all right, you can sit out in the garden for a while this afternoon."

His new employee's silence made him feel the urge to talk more to fill the void, but Andreas squelched the desire. Jabez wasn't going to speak if he kept babbling, so he turned the tables and questioned him.

"Can you tell me a little bit about your life before you started fighting?" Andreas studied his profile as Jabez stared out the window. His jaw was sharp and angular and covered by a day's growth of stubble. Sexy hollows underlined his cheekbones, and the jut of his brow shaded his brooding eyes. His lips were a straight line, but the lower one had a lush fullness that prevented total severity.

"I'm not trying to pry, but I'd like to know a little more about you," Andreas prompted softly. "And you can ask me anything you want too. If we're going to work together, we should get to know each other."

Jabez turned his head slowly, almost regally, and stared into his eyes. "All right, I have a question. Did you like the blowjob I gave you?"

There was so much barely suppressed anger in him Andreas could almost feel him quivering with it. Reiterating that his visit had been an unasked for gift from a friend or reminding Jabez he'd chosen to service a client that night would not alleviate his fury. Andreas guessed honesty was the one thing Jabez prized above everything.

"Yes, I did," he admitted.

"Did you want more?"

"Yes."

"Do you want it now?" Jabez pushed relentlessly, his voice husky. The very timbre of it coupled with the suggestion started a slow burn in Andreas's belly.

He hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "I won't deny I'm attracted to you. It would be pointless and clearly a lie, but I told you that's not what I hired you for and I meant it. You're here to train me in martial arts. You don't have to do anything else."

"What if I want to?" The low rumble fanned the flames heating Andreas's flesh. He could feel his cheeks burning.

"That would be up to you." He kept his tone as cool as his body was hot. "Right now you should probably concentrate on healing."

He tried to steer the conversation back to less volatile subjects. "Can you tell me how you ended up in jail?"

There was another long pause before Jabez answered. "Armed robbery. When I had a chance at a three-year fight contract instead of a ten-year prison term, I took it."

The succinct answer only made Andreas want to ask more: What had he stolen? How had he survived in the Brick Town slum? Who taught him to fight like a warrior? What was his story? But pounding this wary man with questions would only make him more guarded.

Jabez stretched and rose, seeming less stiff and unsteady this time. He stood by the window and gazed down into the garden. "You live in this house alone?"

"My cook and housekeeper, Mrs. Gamble, lives here, but other than that, I'm alone." Those final two words sat squat and ugly in the ensuing silence with a weightier significance than he'd meant to give them. But it was true. He was alone, had been alone all his life. Friends like Timon, Rabi, and Simeon or the lovers Andreas occasionally hooked up with couldn't fill the void.

Jabez snorted and shook his head. Andreas didn't know if it was the mention of servants or of one man having all this space to himself or both that annoyed him. He got up and joined him at the window, seeing the lush profusion of flower beds and meandering walkways as though for the first time. The landscaping was luxuriant, and the paths begged to be strolled. The gonging of wind chimes and the trickle of the fountain were soothingly musical. His garden was a little bit of heaven on earth.

"I spend a lot more time here than I do in my office," he confided. "There really isn't much for me to do. Corporate figurehead only, you know?"

Son of the figurehead, if he was going to be completely honest. He was the heir to the family fortune and about as out of the loop as it was possible to be.

"What do you do all day?" Without turning his head, Jabez glanced at him from the corners of his eyes.

Andreas was ashamed to give him the answer. "Entertain myself. Go out with my friends. Sports, sailing, galleries, parties, nightclubs, races."

"Cage fights."

"Yeah." He smiled ruefully. "I have a hectic schedule of activities."

Jabez looked out the window again, and Andreas felt dismissed. His life had never before seemed so inconsequential.

“Who do you plan to fight against after I’ve trained you?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just want to have some self-defense techniques in case I’m ever, um, attacked or something.”

“Rich guy like you must have a bodyguard.”

“I did growing up, but when I moved out of my father’s house, I ended that. I was tired of having someone watching me all the time, and I don’t think I’m much of a target as long as I keep a low profile.”

Jabez grunted. “Heir to the Fortias Corporation? You need a bodyguard. Maybe a pack of them.”

There was a knock on the door, which kept Andreas from having to think of a response. Dr. Ahim entered the room, talking on his phone. He ended transmission with a tap of his finger on the earpiece and focused his attention on Andreas and Jabez.

“Patient’s already out of bed, I see. Good.”

He briskly tended to Jabez, removing the bandages on his arm and around his middle to find the cuts almost completely healed into clean pink seams. The miracle rejuvenator, Flex-seal, had also been injected into Jabez’s cracked ribs. A handheld scanner revealed the bones were knitting together nicely.

“Amazing stuff, Flex-seal. Makes my work almost obsolete.” The doctor placed his implements in his bag and snapped it shut. “I don’t need to bandage this wound again. The bruising should fade, and you’ll be as good as new by tomorrow.”

“You have a spa?” he asked Andreas. “I recommend a soak to ease his muscles and a shower afterward” – he winked and grinned – “for the stench.”

With that, the doctor swept out of the room, leaving the two men alone again.

“Are you tired? Do you need to rest again?” Andreas asked, almost hoping Jabez would say yes. He was at a loss whether his role was host, nurse, or employer, and he needed a break from the warrior’s silent intensity.

“No.”

The brief answer left him scrambling for what to do next. “All right then. If you like, I’ll show you the rest of the house.”

He went to the closet and the door slid open. “I ordered you some clothes until I can take you shopping to choose your own. Hope something fits.”

Jabez had followed him across the room and stood in the doorway staring at the shelves and drawers and racks for hanging clothes. The closet was mostly empty, but a few shirts and trousers hung on hangers.

Andreas opened one of the drawers containing underwear. When Jabez continued to stare at the open drawer, Andreas selected some boxers and a pair of socks and handed them to him.

“There are casual clothes, T-shirts, sweatpants, and shorts in the other drawers,” he suggested.

"You bought me clothes." Jabez smoothed his hand over the socks.

Andreas smiled. "Great as you look wearing only briefs, you need more clothes than that." He stooped and picked up one of the pairs of shoes he'd chosen. "Do these look too large?"

The other man frowned and glanced at the shoes. "They're fine." His voice was even rougher than usual, and Andreas understood the frown wasn't about the clothes chosen, but that he'd been given a gift.

Jabez caught sight of his reflection in the full-length mirror on the door of the closet and stared, transfixed, as if he'd never seen his reflection before. Maybe he hadn't.

A minute slipped past before Andreas touched his arm. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

"I'll leave you alone so you can get dressed." He picked up the breakfast tray and walked to the door, but glanced back to see Jabez still poised in front of the closet, staring. There probably weren't a lot of mirrors or clean clothes in the cells at the Fight Palace.

In the past two days, Andreas had often imagined what Jabez's life was like. Prior to that, he'd never even considered the conditions the fighters lived in. They were just another form of entertainment to fill a boring afternoon or evening. It made him ashamed to think of all the years he'd wasted on finding frivolous ways to pass his time, while people like Jabez struggled just to survive life.

Andreas was almost to the kitchen with the tray when his phone rang. He slipped the earpiece in his ear. "Hey, Timon."

"Where were you yesterday? I've been trying to reach you. A group of us is going sailing later today, racing Simeon's new yacht against the boat I won from you. It'll be fun." Timon talked loud, competing with music and voices in the background.

"Can't. I'm busy." Andreas wished he'd kept his phone switched off.

"What's up? You sound like you have a secret."

"No." He didn't want to share his news. Timon would insist on coming over and seeing his new acquisition, as if Jabez was a pedigreed dog he'd purchased.

"Come on. Spill. Ooh, and tell me about that big, strapping hunk of sex the other night. That must've been—"

"Not now. I don't feel well. I think I'm going to throw up."

"Too much to drink last night? Where did you go, anyway?"

"Later. I have to hang up now." Andreas cut off Timon's overly loud voice with a flick of his finger. Blessed silence replaced his friend's voice in his ear.

He went into the kitchen and surrendered his tray to Mrs. Gamble. The housekeeper was as neat as always with her shellacked hair and perfectly pressed uniform hugging her trim figure. Not a wrinkle or stain marred her crisp white apron. She gazed at the empty dishes and lifted her brows.

"Guess he was hungry," Andreas replied.

After taking a few moments to himself in the bathroom, clearing his mind of the nervous tension Jabez stirred up in him, Andreas returned to the spare bedroom.

Dressed in a dark blue, long-sleeved shirt and black trousers, Jabez appeared even larger and more imposing. He was taller than Andreas by at least half a head, and his shoulders were broad enough to brush the door frame on either side when he walked through it.

"I'll show you around first. Then you can have a soak like Dr. Ahim suggested. The mineral spa is guaranteed to take away all your aches and pains. I'm so glad I put one in."

He glanced at his companion to find him examining the artwork on the walls as they walked down the hall.

"You like the paintings? Simone's a great talent. I bought these at her first gallery show, and I'm trying to help promote her work. She deserves success."

Jabez dismissed the paintings with a grunt and looked down at the floor instead.

Andreas felt foolish as he realized he was trying to impress this man, not with his wealth, but by showing he wasn't attached to it. A patron of the arts and rescuer of damaged gladiators—oh, he was a real man of the people.

By the time he'd shown Jabez most of the downstairs, the kitchen, dining room, living room, and game room, it was apparent his guest's energy was flagging.

"I'll take you outdoors another time," Andreas promised as he led him through the weight room to the spa and pool area.

The blue-green lights shining from underwater, coupled with plentiful vegetation, gave the room the ambience of a forest grotto. Swimming laps in the pool every day had become an almost meditative exercise for Andreas. It kept him in shape but also cleared his head and centered him.

The adjacent smaller pool set in a grove of tall ferns contained all the restorative minerals found in natural hot springs. A soak in it at the end of each day had also become part of his routine—when he wasn't being rushed from one event to another by Timon.

He gestured toward the changing room. "I have extra swim trunks if you..."

Jabez was already removing his clothes. His unbuttoned shirtfront revealed bruised bronze skin, somehow all the sexier seen in a slice rather than completely revealed. But then he shrugged the shirt off his shoulders and Andreas changed his mind. The man looked equally stunning completely shirtless. He sat on the flagstones that bordered the pool and removed his shoes and socks, then rose again to unzip the fly of his trousers.

Andreas was busy removing his own shirt but paused to watch the other man slide his pants over his hips along with his briefs. In a second he shucked off both of them and stood as naked as a Grecian statue at the edge of the pool. Andreas felt carved

of stone himself, incapable of even breathing while he stared at Jabez's beautiful body and his half-erect penis jutting from a thicket of brown hair.

The man exhibited no self-consciousness but dabbled his foot in the water, then stepped into the pool. There were no air jets to churn the surface into foam, only clear water with wisps of steam rising from the surface. The water rippled around his legs, then his body as Jabez slowly sank into it, seating himself on the ledge that ran around the perimeter.

Andreas broke from his trance and let go of the shirt dangling from his fingers. Jabez was staring at him now, making his flesh burn. His cock rose and swelled at the knowledge it was about to be exhibited for this stranger—for there was no way Andreas could only strip to his shorts when Jabez was completely naked. He wasn't usually uptight about a little nudity but right now felt like raw meat on display for a hungry panther.

With feigned nonchalance, he took off his shoes and the rest of his clothes. He was acutely aware of the electrons vibrating in each cell of his body. His cock thrust before him like the throttle on his jet-glider, and he hurriedly padded to the bath and submerged himself into the water.

A quick glance at Jabez's face assured Andreas it wasn't his imagination; he was being watched with the keen concentration of a big cat considering its quarry. The things the pair of them could do to each other while soaking in this delicious heat tumbled through his mind, but he forced the images out of his head.

He met Jabez's gaze head-on. "So, what do you think? Will this place do for a while?"

"Don't have much choice, do I?" He paused a beat, then added in a less gruff tone, "Beats the Fight Palace. Guess I don't mind."

There was a moment's silence disturbed only by the quiet splash of water and the hum of the pool's filtration system. In the distance, even through walls and windows, Andreas could hear the constant low gonging of the huge wind chimes out in the garden. The otherworldly music was calming.

"Where will we work out?" Jabez asked.

"Upstairs. I had a studio built when I thought I might be a painter. Great lighting, plenty of room. I'll order mats and gear today, and it should be outfitted by tomorrow. You tell me what I need, and I'll get it."

He shook his head. "Just like that? You snap your fingers and there's a closet full of clothes or a new gym?"

For the first time, Andreas's niggling guilt turned to irritation. "I refuse to feel guilty about having money. I was born into it like you were born into your circumstance. It's not my fault."

"No." Jabez's silence was more eloquent than most men's speech. *But what do you do with all the money and power you have? Fritter it away on entertainment.* Andreas didn't need to hear the words. His brain supplied them.

"I have to go into the city for a board meeting tomorrow." He changed the subject. "I could teleconference, but my father prefers everyone to be there in person. My family doesn't have controlling interest in the corporation anymore, but I have some shares and still keep a hand in things."

"What kinds of things?"

"Acquisitions and mergers, policies and community programs. There's always a long agenda."

"Hm." There was another of those long pauses before Jabez continued. "I stayed in a corporate-funded shelter for a while. Place was a dump, but they had decent food."

"You lived in Brick Town before you got picked up?"

"Where else?" He cocked his head. "You ever been there?"

"No." Even when he and his friends went slumming they didn't dare cross the barrier to Brick Town, the crumbling, old part of the city shielded from view by high walls. He'd seen vids of the slum, however. It was a battle zone where roving bands ruled.

"You should check it out sometime, see what you're missing." Amusement tinged Jabez's voice, and a tiny smile curved his lips. Andreas wasn't sure if the ironic teasing was a step forward or back.

"You don't know your last name or anything about your family?"

Jabez dipped his head slightly before he answered "no," and Andreas knew he was withholding something. He wanted to know all this man's secrets, the hidden parts of his past and his walled-off emotions.

"My mother died when I was a baby. I don't remember her," Andreas offered, hoping to build confidence between them. "My nanny, Marianus, was like a mother to me. I loved her very much, but ultimately it was just her job to look after me." He paused before revealing the part that hurt. "When I was nine, my father dismissed her and sent me to boarding school. She didn't keep in touch."

Jabez remained silent, staring at him, probably thinking how pathetic he was to complain about having no mommy when he'd been provided with every other luxury in the world. When he spoke, his voice was so quiet Andreas could barely hear him above the soft hum of the pool pump.

"There was a girl. I think she was my sister. We were together anyway."

Andreas waited several moments for him to continue before gently prompting, "What happened to her?"

"I don't know. She disappeared one day." He shrugged and shifted, making the water ripple. "People disappear all the time in B-town."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

Because that's what people say when someone is hurting. "Your life must have been hard, especially being alone."

"Don't need your pity...boss." His voice was cold again, the shield back in place.

And Andreas was hot in the steamy water. His head felt light and his limbs heavy. It was time to cool off by swimming a few laps.

"I'm going to take a dip." He gestured toward the pool. "Want to?"

"No."

Andreas rose, water dripping from his body. He padded across the stone floor to the pool and dived into tepid water that seemed ice-cold after the heat of the mineral bath. He swam the length before surfacing. Another half dozen laps stretched his muscles and challenged his breathing. At last he stopped at the deep end, holding on to the edge and bobbing in place.

"You have stamina. That's good." Jabez stood beside the pool, a towel wrapped around his hips, arms folded over his chest. Water droplets glistened on his body like diamonds, and his eyes glittered like sapphires. "You could use some bulk, but your muscles are toned."

His critical assessment left Andreas glowing more than another man's flattery or compliments would have. It was crazy to care so much about this stranger's opinion, but he couldn't deny it mattered to him.

Andreas pulled his body out of the pool and rose with water streaming down his body. He stood, naked, letting Jabez examine every part of him. He refused to flinch or reach for a towel as the erotically charged moment spun out like a filament of glass.

Jabez walked toward him, the towel slipping on his hips to reveal more of the downy hair on his groin. He stopped in front of Andreas and met his gaze with those challenging eyes. "Can I ask you something?"

Anything! Just keep talking to me in that sexy voice. Andreas nodded silently.

"What's the real color of your eyes?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know you people color and reshape and do all sorts of cosmetic shit to your bodies. So I wondered what your real color is, 'cause nobody has silver eyes."

Andreas smiled. "They're not silver, only plain-old gray. I don't do body alterations or tinting. When I was younger, yeah, but not anymore."

"Hm." Jabez stared at him a moment longer, then picked up a towel from the foot of the lounge chair beside them and handed it to him.

Andreas dried his face, then wrapped the towel around his waist.

"Think I'll go to my room and rest," Jabez announced.

"That's a good idea. You still have some healing to do."

Andreas released his breath after the man moved away, taking his sphere of magnetized air with him. Jabez dropped the towel, slipped into his pants, and scooped up the rest of his clothes, but before he left the room, he turned to Andreas once more.

"By the way, the answer is 'men.'"

“What?”

“The other night you asked which I prefer.”

“Oh.” He swallowed, and his mind raced as he tried to decide if it was an invitation or merely a comment. Deciphering this man was like picking his way through a minefield. “Good to know.”

The door closed behind Jabez, and Andreas blew out a long breath. He was as hot as if he’d been soaking in the spa again. He tossed aside his towel and dived back into the pool.

Chapter Four

Jabez closed his eyes but couldn't sleep. The bed was soft, and the expensive sheets were like air against his skin, but the drugs had worn off and with them his weariness. He'd always bounced back quickly from injuries, and with the private doctor's miracle treatment, he almost felt 100 percent better.

He wasn't tired and didn't want to be lying in this bed alone, not when he knew Andreas was in another part of the house lusting after him too. He had no doubt his new "master" was hot for him. It was clear in his hungry gaze and the way his body tensed every time he looked at Jabez. Sex between them would happen eventually. Why not sooner?

Cursing, he opened his eyes and stared at the block of sunlight coming in the window. What the hell was wrong with him? He'd wanted to be left alone, made it clear he didn't want to be a sex toy, practically taunted Andreas about his reasons for bringing him here. Now sex with Andreas was the one thing he craved.

Jabez launched his body from the bed, his ribs aching at the sudden movement. He crossed the room to look out the window at the patch of garden below. He needed to be out there walking along the paths, burning off some of his pent-up energy.

Andreas strolled into view. The man's glossy black curls shone in the sun. The curve of his neck, the way his shirt hung loose over his lean torso, his sexy walk, all riveted Jabez's attention. He wanted to touch him, to comb his fingers through the silky hair and stroke his hands over that tight body.

When Andreas had emerged from the pool, sleek and wet, Jabez's cock had risen beneath the towel around his middle. But instead of getting out of there fast, he'd come on strong, making that stupid comment about his eyes and practically offering himself to the man. Was that really what he wanted, the instant pleasure of hot sex? Maybe there was a better way to use the attraction between them to his advantage, make

Andreas crave him so much he'd give him money and gifts – legal swag, not stolen for once, a stake to use in the future when he was back on his own once more.

On the other hand, Andreas might tire of his new hobby soon and sell Jabez back to the fight club, so maybe it would be better to steal everything he could lay his hands on and get out of here fast.

As he pondered his options, Andreas disappeared from his view around a clump of bushes. Jabez considered going down to the garden to find him but decided it was better to keep some distance between them until he decided how to play this situation. He turned from the window.

Sitting in a chair, he flipped on the mass-media-viewer set into one wall and scanned through the music, vids, and library of books he didn't know how to read. He finally settled on a show about dog breeding. He snorted at the crazy amounts of money rich people put into their pets, but watched the vid until the very end.

When it was over, he went to take a shower in a bathroom so white and clean, he felt dirtier than ever just from walking into it. The mineral bath had soothed his aching muscles like the doctor promised, but left scum on his skin. The shower jets' stinging spray washed away the mineral salts while the heat evaporated the last twinges of pain from his bruised body. He scrubbed from head to toe with the fragrant soap and emerged feeling better than he had in a long time.

His new clothes smelled good and pampered his body with their soft fabrics. The shoes were a little tight, but that might have been because he hadn't worn any since he'd been in captivity.

He checked out his reflection in the closet mirror. Except for his close-shaven head, a look that wasn't in style, he could pass for a man from uptown, perhaps one of Andreas's friends come to stay for a while. But there was something wrong, something that set him apart from the faces he'd seen in the vid with the happy dog owners. His expression was too hard-eyed and angry. Jabez practiced revealing his teeth in a smile, but the grimace wouldn't fool anybody. He looked like a dangerous criminal wearing fine clothes.

After closing the closet door, he stood wondering what to do next. Should he go find Andreas or wait until he was called? Just then his boss's voice sounded through the com on the nightstand.

"Jabez, hope I'm not waking you up, but dinner's ready if you want to come down to the dining room."

It was the first time Andreas had said his name. He liked the way it sounded spoken in that cultured voice.

"Yeah, I'm ready." His own voice sounded like a crow's squawk responding to the soft coo of a pigeon.

Jabez went downstairs, took a wrong turn, and ended up in the living room before following the delicious aroma of food to the dining room. The table was laid out with gleaming silverware, plates, bowls, and glasses. Flowers and candles stood on the

center of the table surrounded by dishes with covers. It looked like a fancy dinner in a vid. He'd never seen a table set like this in real life.

He raised his gaze to Andreas, whose eyes were wide as he took in Jabez's changed appearance. Inside, Jabez swelled a little at the admiring look. He'd seen it before, of course, on dozens of faces. But the people who'd come to visit him after a fight were lusting after his naked body. It was nice to have someone appreciate him with his clothes on.

Andreas stood at the head of the table and opened a bottle of wine. He poured the pale rose liquid into two glasses as he welcomed Jabez to sit down.

Feeling big and clumsy and likely to trip over his own feet, Jabez carefully pulled out the other chair and sat. He stared at the place setting before him, several different kinds of forks and spoons and varied sizes of plates. In addition to the wineglass Andreas placed in front of him, there was a tumbler of water, a coffee cup, and other empty glasses. He put his hands in his lap so he wouldn't accidentally knock something over and waited to take his cue from Andreas.

"This bisque is one of Mrs. Gamble's best. I think you'll enjoy it," Andreas said as he ladled brown liquid into Jabez's bowl.

He sniffed the rising steam and realized it was just soup. He watched Andreas serve himself and noted which spoon he used before picking up the same one from his place setting.

The soup was delicious if not very hearty. Jabez ate it all while Andreas talked about the wine. When he was finished eating, he set his spoon down and tried the blushing liquid. It was tart and dry, not that great, but he drained his glass as if he liked it.

"Are you feeling better?" Andreas asked. "You look good."

"I'm fine."

His host offered him a bowl of greens. Jabez put some on his plate and was embarrassed to see Andreas place his portion on one of the smaller side plates. He devoured every leaf while Andreas chatted about how he'd happened to buy this house a few years earlier. Jabez tried to think what a regular guest might say to fill the pauses in Andreas's one-sided conversation.

"It's a nice house," he finally said.

The rest of the meal continued in the same awkward manner with Jabez trying to choose the right silverware and add an intelligent comment now and then. By the third course, he realized he was eating too fast, finishing long before his host every time. He slowed down and tried to savor the food, but was so nervous he had trouble swallowing. Numerous sips of wine helped with that.

"Have you ever been off planet?" Jabez asked abruptly in response to the other man's discussion of jet-glider races.

"A few times. My first trip was a gift for my tenth birthday. I'll never forget it. Seeing the galaxy on a vid screen isn't remotely the same as experiencing it firsthand. They even let me suit up and go outside the shuttle for a little while. Floating in zero gravity was... Well, you just can't imagine what it feels like."

Like freedom, Jabez thought.

"I went one other time when I was older, but it was never as impressive as that first time. You come back to Earth and it makes the planet suddenly seem a lot smaller."

"What about overseas, you been there?"

"Yes." Andreas smiled and told a few of his experiences visiting remnants of the old cities and the new ones around the globe.

Jabez slowed down, then stopped eating altogether as he was caught up in Andreas's tale of going on a safari and seeing wild animals only yards away from his vehicle.

"You're interested in nature, aren't you?"

Jabez shrugged and returned his attention to his food. He didn't like talking about himself and what he liked or didn't like. No one had ever asked him before, and he didn't know how to respond to Andreas's questioning.

"If you like, I could arrange a trip sometime. We could go on a safari or backpack in the mountains or scuba dive, whatever you'd like to try."

Although he was intrigued by the offer, it reminded him he was Andreas's new favorite project—a pet to play with as surely as any of those fancy dogs he'd seen in the vid earlier.

"I thought I was here to teach you to fight?"

"Yes, of course." The other man dropped his gaze, and his cheeks flushed.

Jabez enjoyed seeing Andreas flustered. It gave him back what little power he possessed.

"After dinner we'll order what we need to turn the studio into a gym. The equipment should be delivered tomorrow, so you can get the room set up while I'm at my meeting."

For the rest of the meal, Jabez retreated into silence again. It was much easier to eat than to think of things to say, and Andreas did a good job of filling the silence all by himself.

As he watched him talk, Jabez was distracted by memories of kneeling before him and sucking him off. How strange to sit so politely at the table while that image flashed in his alcohol-fogged mind. *I've held your cock in my hands and mouth, tasted you, swallowed your cum. I've seen you naked, yet we don't know each other at all.*

Perhaps sensing the sexual drift of Jabez's thoughts from his gaze, Andreas fell silent and stared at his glass of wine—a deep red now.

He'd explained that this particular wine went well with the meat. Jabez had drunk his in three big swigs. It was no beer, but it tasted okay, and the beef was as rich and

soft as butter, a world away from the tough, chewy hunks he'd eaten in the cafeteria at the Fight Palace.

Andreas cleared his throat and spoke again. "Do you have room for dessert? Mrs. Gamble has made a delicious mousse."

Although his stomach was stretched to the breaking point, he muttered, "Sure," and accepted the fluffy pudding Andreas served him. It was light and only a little sweet. The bitter bite of the chocolate made him salivate and eat faster.

Finally the meal was finished. Jabez felt strangely disappointed. As awkward as it had been for him, he'd enjoyed hearing about Andreas's travels and his life. He wanted to know more.

"Let's have our coffee in the garden. It's a beautiful evening."

Jabez followed Andreas's lead, taking his delicate cup and saucer and carrying them carefully. He was surprised Andreas hadn't had someone serving them throughout the meal or bringing them coffee in the garden. Maybe he'd seen too many vids, but he thought rich people had servants to fulfill their every need.

The scent of rich earth and green plants rolled over him as they stepped outside. He breathed deeply, and his eyes nearly closed from the pleasure of the natural smells. The wine he'd drunk had his head buzzing and his body tingled with sensation. Joy swelled and burst in him – pure, simple happiness at being here rather than in a cell or on the filthy streets of B-town. He wanted to cry with relief or grab Andreas and kiss him in gratitude for saving him. Instead, he lifted his coffee cup and took a sip to steady himself.

Andreas led him to a pair of benches facing a large fountain in the center of the garden. He sat on one bench and Jabez on the other. Jabez would have been happy if there was only one and they'd had to share.

"My little paradise." Andreas leaned back and looked at the jets of water trickling down the three tiers of the fountain.

"It's nice."

"Growing up in the city, I spent a lot of time with Marianus at the park. It was my favorite time of day, being outdoors with no structured activities for a change." He gestured at the garden around them. "Even though I have a gardener, I spend a bit of time working out here myself. I actually know the names of a lot of the plants now."

"You need a dog." The words slipped from Jabez's mouth before he could stop them, but he felt they were true. There should be a dog running around chasing a ball, maybe digging up the flower beds and making a little mess in the perfect garden.

"I've thought about it, but I'm gone a lot and I don't want to leave Mrs. Gamble the extra work of caring for a dog. I may get a pet sometime, but not yet."

Setting his cup on the bench beside him, Andreas rose and walked over to Jabez. "I have my handheld. We can order the training equipment right now."

As Andreas sat on the bench beside him, Jabez's stomach jumped, maybe from the jolt of caffeine in the coffee. The other man's hip was warm against his. As he displayed the palm-sized computer, his arm rubbed against Jabez's, making the hairs rise like they were electrically charged.

Andreas's long-fingered hand skimmed over the surface of the screen, calling up a sporting goods site and searching through mats and ropes, helmets and mouthpieces, arm and leg guards. Luckily, all the items had pictures, so Jabez could point to his suggestions without revealing that he couldn't read their descriptions.

Andreas paused at images of martial arts weapons.

"You don't need weapons yet. Train your body first. You need to learn endurance and control before anything else."

"Yes, sir." The creases blossomed at the corners of Andreas's mouth, and Jabez wanted to trace them with his finger or kiss them.

After Andreas had placed the order, he turned off his handheld but didn't move back to the other bench. They sat together in the darkening twilight, listening to the fountain, the chimes, and the birds' evening songs. Jabez had never been in such a peaceful spot. He wanted to stay in the garden all night and sleep under the stars that were beginning to appear in the sky.

But at last Andreas rose to go inside. Reluctantly, Jabez followed him.

"I'll probably be gone by the time you get up in the morning. Our order should be delivered by early afternoon. I put a rush on it. So I'll leave it up to you to supervise the unloading and outfitting of the gym." Andreas continued to speak as he led the way upstairs. "I'll show you the space so you can think about how you want to set it up. I have a handyman who does all my home repairs. I'll give him a call and tell him to come over and install anything that needs it."

Jabez only half listened, as his eyes were on the other man's ass as he went up the stairs. His pants were tight, molded to a taut ass. The tail of his shirt blocked Jabez's view, and he wanted to pull it up so he could see—maybe even grab—that sweet butt.

"Sounds good," he said when Andreas paused, waiting for his response.

The studio was at the end of the corridor beyond the bedrooms and above the pool area. Glass enclosed the room above and on three sides. During the day, the space would be flooded with light. Jabez rapped his knuckles against the glass. It wasn't the real thing but Sturdi-glass, an unbreakable alternative. Even if a fighter got thrown up against the wall, it wouldn't shatter.

He walked over to an easel on which a painting rested covered by a cloth. He started to lift the material.

"Oh no. You don't want to see that." Andreas followed and put out a hand to stop him. "Loving art doesn't make you good at doing it. This painting is embarrassing."

Jabez shrugged off his hand and threw back the cloth. The image was a jangling riot of colors without recognizable form. He could feel the tension and confusion in it. The painting looked like he felt most of the time.

"The rest are even worse." Andreas indicated a stack of canvases facing the wall. "I'll clear these out of here, if you'll help me carry them. We can take the whole mess up to the attic, although I should just burn the things."

"Why?" Jabez touched the surface of the canvas, feeling the thick ridges of paint in chaotic swirls.

"They're awful. That's why I gave up painting."

Jabez didn't say anything else. He carried several canvases while Andreas transported several boxes full of painting supplies. A few trips to the attic emptied the room, leaving it ready to utilize as a training area.

Before they went back downstairs from the attic, Jabez paused by the stack of paintings tucked under the eaves. "Can I have it?"

"What? A painting?"

He nodded. "The one from the easel."

"For your room? I can buy you a painting if the walls are too stark, but you don't want to have to look at that piece of crap every day."

He wouldn't say that looking at it made him feel like he was on the edge of knowing something. Instead, he shrugged and turned away from the canvases.

"But if you really want it, you can have it. Sure." Andreas paused, then added, "I'm, uh, glad you like it."

Without replying, Jabez picked up the painting and carried it with him back down to the second floor.

As the two men stood in the hallway, for a moment Jabez was certain Andreas would invite him to come to his room. He wanted to go. Shouldn't but did. His body burned for the other man's touch on his skin. But after a second, Andreas bid him good night and went toward his room.

Jabez went into his bedroom and set the painting on top of the dresser, propping it against the wall. He touched it all over, felt the ridges and dips, and examined the bright colors. He liked how the paint was cracking in places where it was piled on too thick. He stepped back and gazed at it as a whole. Messy. Chaotic. It was very lifelike.

He stripped off his clothes, lay back on the bed, and turned on the media-screen. He flipped around until he found a porn vid, then settled back to watch the two men fucking in the middle of a forest. The story was something about primitive warriors from opposing clans who fell in love and met in secret. But the story didn't matter. It was the hot and heavy fucking that was the point. The blond man liked it rough, so his partner tied him to a tree and whipped him with a branch before fucking him. Then he draped him over a rock and fucked his ass a second time.

By the time the dark-haired warrior had the blond on his knees sucking him off before coming on his face, Jabez was shooting cum onto his own stomach. He groaned in relief. He'd spent most of the day hard and aching from being around Andreas. It felt good to let that tension go.

After that, he took another shower just because he could, dried off, and dropped into bed. He thought about how much his life had changed in a day's time, and about how it was impossible to tell what would happen next. Life was too changeable.

Then he passed out and slept until morning as if he'd been knocked unconscious.

* * * * *

Jabez liked being in charge. He'd never before had an opportunity to tell people what to do, but the deliverymen were obedient, bringing in boxes and even opening and placing the items where he told them to. The handyman put up a sparring ring of posts and ropes and built a case on one wall where the equipment could be stored. He was as obedient as the delivery guys, building everything exactly to Jabez's specifications.

Jabez stood with his arms folded, watching as the man put up a sheet of Peg-Board with hooks for hanging things.

"Hello?" A voice from the doorway caught his attention. He looked from the nail-pounding handyman to the stranger walking into the room. The man was of medium height and build. He had bright red hair and cobalt blue eyes that shone against his artificially pale skin. He looked like old money and stood arrogantly like a man who knew he ruled the world. One of Andreas's friends. Maybe the one who'd bet him an evening with a gladiator.

"Well, hello-o." The man scanned Jabez from head to toe. "What's going on here? What's Andreas up to?"

Jabez kept his arms crossed and his mouth shut as he stared right back at him.

"Now I know why he wouldn't come out to play yesterday. That boy has secret depths." He moved closer, and Jabez instinctively brought his arms down, holding his fists lightly clenched by his sides. Waiting.

He wanted to start circling the other man as he would any opponent but forced himself to remain still and see what the stranger would do.

"My name is Timon. I'm Andreas's dearest friend, and you must be his new...project. I can't believe he brought you home." He drew even closer, invading Jabez's space and making the hair on his nape prickle and his fists clench tighter.

"You have me to thank for it, you know. I'm the one who chose the terms of the bet. I knew a hot, juicy fuck was just what my boy needed to release some steam, but I never imagined he'd bring you home. You must be an amazing lay. "

Jabez refused to give him the satisfaction of an answer. He remained silent and stiff but poised to lash out. Not that he could plow his fist into this asshole's face.

Andreas would have him back in the Fight Palace before he could blink if he beat up his friend.

At last, Timon turned away to look around the room. "So what are you building here, your own little arena? You and Andreas going to 'spar'?" He drawled the word. Walking over to the ring, he ran his hand along the rope and watched the handyman work. "Where is Andreas today?"

"The city. I'll tell him you stopped by. You can go now." Jabez gave his most intimidating stare, but the man didn't flinch. Timon knew there was no bite behind his bark and he wouldn't physically force him out of the house.

Timon picked up a pair of boxing gloves from the floor, inhaled the scent of new leather, then slipped his hand into one of them. "I never thought Andreas was this butch. I don't think he'll like all the punching and sweating. I imagine he'll lose interest in this hobby as quickly as he usually does." He stared at Jabez with his unearthly, fake blue eyes again. "What will happen to you then?"

Jabez's stomach dropped since this was exactly what he'd asked himself.

"Back to the Fight Palace, I suppose." Timon dropped the gloves on the floor and strolled toward Jabez. He stopped only a foot away, challenging him with his stare while stroking a hand up his arm. The touch of his hand made Jabez's skin crawl.

"Maybe I can give you a room at my house instead. I could bring in sparring partners for you. I'd love having personal exhibitions of your skills."

Jabez gritted his teeth together. He longed to grab the man by the scruff of his neck and hurl him across the room against the Sturdi-glass windows, find out if they were as durable as they were supposed to be. His body vibrated with the need to kill, and so he held perfectly still, waiting for the fury to pass.

Timon's eyes burned like cold blue fire. He was completely aroused, enjoying the sensation of poking a caged tiger that dared not claw him. At last he dropped his hand from Jabez's arm and stepped back.

"All right then. Tell Andreas I stopped by and I'll see him soon." He walked toward the door, a whiff of expensive cologne trailing behind him.

The pretty little weasel of a man left Jabez with a queasy feeling – not only because of his taunting, but because he felt in his gut the guy was as rotten as spoiled meat. Somehow, some way, Timon was a danger to Andreas. He could sense it and vowed to keep his new employer safe from his "best friend" if it was in his power to do so.

Chapter Five

Andreas had never been so exhausted in his life. Jabez took his role as trainer as seriously as if preparing him for a death match. He'd seized Andreas the afternoon he'd returned from the board meeting and began working him. The rigorous exercises and strict discipline had continued for three days now, until his every muscle ached.

But even though his body felt as bruised as if it had been beaten with a stick, it was a good kind of ache. His muscles were sore but supple from the exercises, the martial arts moves and the weight lifting in addition to his usual routine of swimming laps.

The first couple of days, Jabez had mostly stood off to the side barking orders. "Ten more times. Put more force into it." Sometimes he took hold of Andreas's limbs and molded them into the proper movement. Those rare touches never failed to send an excited thrill through him no matter how tired his body was.

Today, Jabez finally stepped into the ring with him, wearing a pad over his chest and arm guards. Andreas's hands were wrapped, but other than that, he wore no body protection. He was to be the aggressor, lashing out at Jabez with his best punches and kicks, while Jabez maintained a defensive posture. Andreas was nervous. It was one thing to assault a weight bag, but he'd never hit another human being in his life.

Andreas held up his fists and shifted his weight back and forth on the balls of his feet as Jabez had taught him. He danced forward and jabbed, then gasped with pain as his knuckles took the impact and it raced up his arm. His punch had been intercepted by Jabez's padded forearm, which had less give than the canvas punching bag.

"You have to learn to take the pain. Suck it up and give it back."

Jabez's helpful comment made Andreas *want* to punch him. He jabbed high, then low, trying to get underneath the other man's guard. He kicked his foot higher than he

ever had before and connected with the side of Jabez's head, snapping it to the left. It must've hurt, but he only grunted and said, "That's better."

Andreas was taken aback, not only at the fact that he'd caused pain, but that he'd kind of liked it. Endorphins raced through his system, giving him a euphoric high and urging him to hit faster and harder. Jabez's training took hold as he copied the moves he'd been practicing the past two days, hitting through the pain and driving Jabez slowly back until he had him up against the ropes.

When the flurry of blows was over, Andreas's chest heaved and his heart pounded. He wiped away the sweat streaming down his face and stared into Jabez's cool blue eyes.

"Not bad. You need to work on accuracy, but that'll just take time."

Andreas's overheated body sent hot signals of lust down to his cock. He wanted to grab Jabez and pull him up against him hard, wanted to steal his breath in a deep, penetrating kiss, then pin him on the mat and fuck him senseless.

Jabez's padded arms were down at his sides, his defenses lowered. His gaze locked with Andreas's, and he leaned forward slightly.

For a second, Andreas thought it was going to happen. His lips tingled as if it already had, as if the other man's mouth had pressed furiously against his. Then Jabez straightened and he looked away.

"Get a drink of water, and we'll go again."

Andreas drank deeply and doused his head in water before returning to the ring for another bout. This time Jabez did more than absorb his blows, he returned light taps to his head and chest that rocked Andreas nearly off his feet. He knew his teacher was holding back, but it felt like he'd been smashed with a hammer. If Jabez ever truly hit him, he'd be knocked unconscious with one blow.

The sparring continued in brief bouts with breaks in between. By the time Andreas could take no more and held his hands up, begging for a reprieve, his head was ringing.

"Time! Enough for today." He bent over, hands resting on his knees as he breathed through the ache in his stomach from being punched one too many times.

"I say when you've had enough," Jabez growled, and even through the pain, Andreas experienced a stab of lust at the commanding note in his deep voice.

He looked up through the wet fringe of bangs drooping over his eyes at the big man standing over him. Was he really going to play it like that? The answer came in the form of a feint and a jab that stung Andreas's cheek.

Andreas rose and automatically raised his fists to protect himself. A hail of blows rained down on him, and all he could do was fend them off. There wasn't a second for him to regain his composure or counterattack as Jabez battered his defenses and drove him against the ropes.

When the assault ended, Andreas was pinned between his opponent's body and one of the posts. He gasped for air and pressed his hands against the other man's chest, feeling the rise and fall of his breathing even through the cloth breastplate.

Jabez's face filled his vision, his eyes darkened from the dilation of his pupils, the planes of his face shining with sweat, and his lips parted. He leaned forward and pressed them against Andreas's mouth, seized his lips in a punishing kiss that sent a powerful jolt through his body. Andreas opened his mouth wide, accepting the plunging tongue that twisted around his. Their teeth clicked together with the force of the kiss, and Andreas felt like he would explode into flames from the rising heat inside him.

Just as abruptly as he'd initiated the kiss, Jabez pulled back. He gazed into Andreas's eyes for a moment, his own half-lidded with lust. "*Now we're finished.*"

He walked away, and Andreas remained pressed against the post, his mouth open and ready for more kisses. He wanted to beg Jabez to come back and finish what he'd started, but the words stuck in his throat. Whatever happened between them had to be on Jabez's terms and by his choice. It was the only way he wouldn't feel used by the man who essentially owned him.

He watched Jabez remove his protective padding and walk from the room before Andreas stripped off the wrapping around his hands and examined his reddened knuckles. He was a fighter now. It made him feel manly and proud of himself for stepping outside of his comfort zone. He might not be ready for a cage match, but he could hold his own if anyone ever attacked him on the street.

And he was proud that he hadn't buckled under Jabez's grueling exercise schedule. Of course, it was only the third day, but Andreas had no intention of giving up, especially not if the fight sessions ended like this one had. He touched his sore knuckles to his mouth, brushed them over his throbbing lips, and closed his eyes, reliving that crushing kiss. *More!* He had to have more and soon, but for now he'd take a shower and jerk off while he waited for Jabez to realize their union was inevitable.

As he walked down the hall to his bathroom, Andreas considered adding a shower room right off the new gym. Of course it wasn't much farther to go down the hallway to his bedroom, so it was probably a needless extravagance. Funny how he thought more about the cost of things these days and whether he really needed them.

He stripped off his clothes and left them on the bedroom floor, then went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. The temperature acclimated to his preset in seconds, and he stepped into the array of jets pummeling his flesh from all directions. He exhaled a sigh. The hot water on his sore muscles was pure heaven. Since starting this training regimen, he appreciated a shower as he never had before. His appetite was ravenous too. He felt alive and in tune with his body and all its needs. Right now, the foremost need was a handjob.

Andreas leaned against the shower wall and breathed in a lungful of steam as he soaped his cock with long, slow pulls of his fist. He closed his eyes, imagined his hand

was Jabez's, and pictured how the man had looked kneeling in front of him with his mouth full of cock. That had been the single most erotic experience of his life...until today's kiss. The hot press of mouth on mouth had been even more intimate, more invasive and overwhelming and... He groaned as his cock strained into his pumping fist.

The quiet *click* of the shower door opening made his eyes open wide. Jabez stood framed in the doorway, shrouded by steamy mist, naked.

Andreas exhaled a soft groan and let go of his cock. Reaching out his hand, he pulled Jabez into the shower and into his arms.

If their first clashing kiss had been powerful, this one was searing. Wet bodies slid together and hands touched everywhere, stroking, grasping, squeezing, and fondling. Andreas pressed so tight against Jabez's hard body he felt he was melting into him. He ran his hands up that broad, muscular back and felt the cords of the other man's neck and the downy stubble that covered his head.

He cupped the back of Jabez's skull, pulling him closer and kissing him hard before his restless hands moved on. There was so much more flesh to touch. Andreas skated his palms down the slick expanse of his back and cupped his ass. He kneaded the taut flesh, then slid his finger into the crack between his buttocks to tease the rim of the hole he so longed to enter. His cock rubbed against the other man's groin, and Jabez's cock pressed as hard as rebar into his stomach.

Andreas broke away from the insistent tug of the man's mouth to draw in a breath of moist air. He pushed against the rocky chest, forcing Jabez to give him some space. "Let me... Let me just..." He panted. He wanted to offer Jabez the same service he'd given Andreas the other night, to pleasure and indulge him. He dropped to his knees and faced the other man's erection. It was as thick and long as one would expect on a man of Jabez's size. Andreas slid his hand lovingly up its length and back down again, before reaching beneath and cradling his heavy sac. Jabez grunted and pushed into his hands.

After fondling him for only a moment, Andreas abandoned his cock, leaving it thrusting and quivering. He brushed his fingers through the sodden thicket of pubic hair and traced a fingertip over Jabez's groin to make his stomach twitch. The rippling ridges of muscle were a beautiful sight. He loved being able to tease the man who could beat his ass if he wanted to. Before he was through, he'd have Jabez begging for release.

He scraped his fingernails up the wet length of Jabez's cock and rubbed his thumb over the smooth, round head. He admired the thick veins and rich dark red of the blood-engorged penis. Jabez thrust toward him. Andreas relented and took his cock in hand, again massaging the shaft and bringing the tip to his mouth. He rested it on his lower lip and looked up.

Water dripped from the angles of Jabez's face as he gazed down at him. He rocked his hips, bumping his cockhead against Andreas's lips, urging him silently to continue.

Andreas smiled and slowly sucked it in. The firm, fleshy member filled his mouth. He swirled his tongue around it and was disappointed to find the man's natural taste had been washed clean by the shower. He would've liked to taste more of the salt of his sweat from their workout. Still, he savored the solid warmth and sucked him in deeply, his own cock throbbing when Jabez gave a strangled groan.

Pleasing him was a joy. Andreas forgot about his plan to teasingly prolong the blowjob and increased his efforts to get Jabez off. He massaged that glorious handful of cock and bobbed his head up and down as he sucked.

Jabez rested one big, heavy hand on Andreas's head for a moment, then threaded his fingers through his wet curls and gripped them, holding his head steady. He moaned again and began to thrust.

Andreas opened his throat wide, letting the other man fuck his mouth. He took in as much of Jabez's length as he could without gagging. Feeling the power of Jabez's thrusts and his desperate need was a thrill. Andreas held on to Jabez's hips, becoming a vessel for the other man to fill.

Another groan was followed by a low cry. Jabez pushed deep, and his cock pulsed. Andreas swallowed the spurts of cum that hit the back of his throat and at last released Jabez's depleted cock from his mouth.

Andreas looked up the length of the other man's torso to watch his rapturous expression, beautiful and open in a way he hadn't yet seen. Years dropped away, and Jabez no longer looked like a hardened warrior. Andreas thought he could see a glimmer of the youth he'd once been before life beat him down. Water rolled like tears down his cheeks. His lips were slack and softer than their usual severe line. Only the twisted scar drawing down the corner of his eye indicated he was a fighter.

Andreas felt blessed to see him in his moment of ecstasy, although likely dozens of others had known the privilege too. But they wouldn't have studied his face and seen what Andreas believed he saw. Jabez was a man who felt things passionately, although he'd never let anyone know. He was a vulnerable soul who'd been hurt, a man with a hidden capacity for love, a man who could be devoted and tender if given a chance to trust and hope.

Andreas smiled at his fancy as he rose to his feet. He was reading a hell of a lot into one unguarded expression. Standing in the steam and stinging jets of water, he rested his hands on Jabez's hips and met his gaze when at last he opened his eyes.

"I thought that kiss in the ring was you ending our workout session."

A faint smile touched his mouth. "I wanted more."

"I'm glad you came to get what you wanted." Andreas leaned in to lick water droplets from Jabez's warm lips. His erection was still rock-hard between them.

Jabez reached for it.

Andreas stopped him with a touch of his wrist. It was important to him the other man didn't perform any acts out of obligation. "You don't have to."

Cornflower eyes fringed by water-darkened lashes gazed into his. "I want to."

Andreas released his wrist. "All right then, but let's dry off and lie in my bed." He wanted something more than a quick blow or a handjob in the shower.

Andreas turned off the water, opened the door, reached for towels on the rack, and handed one to Jabez, although he would've preferred to dry all that wet, naked flesh for him.

After toweling his hair dry, Andreas shook the mop of unruly black curls, then combed his fingers through it, trying to put it in some semblance of order. He noticed Jabez watching him, his own drying job already finished and the towel hung neatly back on the rack. He reached out and ran his fingers through Andreas's hair.

"I like it. Gives a man something to hold on to." A tiny smile accompanied his words. Who knew Jabez had a sense of humor? It had been buried under slabs of gruff alienation since he'd met him.

The little chink in his armor inspired Andreas to playfulness. "Did you like that?" He lowered his voice to a seductive purr. "You like fucking my mouth hard?"

Jabez's tongue darted over his lips, and his jaw tightened, but not in his usual angry way. He was aroused by the words and the lascivious delivery.

"You can fuck me other places. We've got all night," Andreas murmured.

Jabez reached for him, pulling him hard against his body and laying claim to his mouth once more. God, the man could kiss. First, he rubbed his lips lightly against Andreas's, as if simply enjoying the soft contact, and then he plucked at them with little nibbles. Andreas opened his mouth and accepted his softly probing tongue and the deeper invasion that followed – mouth fucking of a different sort.

While Jabez plundered his mouth, he clung to those big shoulders, enjoying the ripple of muscles beneath his palms. Lost in the kiss, he was barely aware of the man walking them both out of the bathroom and across the bedroom to Andreas's bed. He didn't notice until the backs of his legs hit the mattress and he fell onto the soft comforter.

Jabez tumbled with him, the weight of his body crushing, although he supported some of it on his hands and knees. Andreas loved the feeling of that hot, heavy weight pressing him to the bed. He dipped his head and licked Jabez's chest, wanting to go even lower and suck one of those tight little nipples into his mouth.

As if hearing his thought, the other man moved up and offered his pectorals for Andreas's further inspection. Andreas's mouth roamed across the broad surface before latching onto the flat disc of a nipple. Jabez hissed at the sudden nip Andreas gave him, followed by a gentle lap of his tongue. He played with one nipple, then the other, while Jabez squirmed against his mouth. Sensitive nipples. Good to know.

By now, Andreas felt as if his cock would explode if he didn't get relief soon. Again reading his mind, Jabez suddenly rolled to the side and pulled Andreas on top of him. Raising his knees, Jabez cradled Andreas's body between them. Jabez's cock had grown hard again, and he wrapped his hand around both their dicks, stroking them.

Andreas hissed at the heated friction of skin on skin and the erotic view of their cockheads emerging from Jabez's big fist. He pumped for a few minutes before letting go.

"You got lube?" His voice was as gruff as a bear's growl.

"Yeah." Andreas clambered off him and got lubricant from the nightstand drawer before moving back into place between the other man's hairy legs.

Jabez took the tube, squirted a dollop on his fingers, and massaged Andreas's cock, base to tip. He dragged his fingernails lightly up the length, making him whimper with need.

"You want me to come on your stomach, keep doing that," Andreas warned.

"No. I want you to come inside me, right now." He tilted his pelvis up, offering his entrance.

Andreas caught his breath at the erotic sight. He took the lube from him and prepped his fingers, then traced the path behind Jabez's sac to his puckered hole. He eased one finger inside, then two, stretching and widening the opening. Jabez grunted in pleasure, and the sound drove Andreas wild. He couldn't wait any longer.

He guided the tip of his cock to the other man's hole and eased inside in slow increments. Heat surrounded him, and after the initial resistance of the tight ring of muscle, he slid deeper and deeper.

Jabez gave another sexy grunt. He tilted his hips more and thrust against Andreas, drawing him farther inside. Andreas braced his hands against the backsides of Jabez's thighs and pressed against them as he found his rhythm, driving in and out. He groaned and he closed his eyes, giving in to the amazing sensation of being swallowed in the other man's body.

He pumped faster as his need grew stronger. Their bodies slapped together, and quiet grunts and groans mingled in an erotic melody. Andreas's tension mounted higher and higher before ecstasy suddenly burst through him. He cried out and jerked against Jabez. Bliss flowed in him like sweet, sticky honey while heat surrounded and melted him.

When the last shudder faded, he drew a shaky breath and opened his eyes. He drew his cock out of Jabez and let the other man's legs slide down to the mattress, and then he laid full length on top of his hot, damp body.

For a moment, Jabez kept his arms by his sides before tentatively slipping them around Andreas and holding him. Long moments passed as they lay fused together like two halves of a broken plate that had come together again.

At last Jabez pushed Andreas off him and rose from the bed.

"You're going?" Andreas watched his back and the tight muscles of his ass undulate as he walked across the room.

Jabez looked over his shoulder. "You want me to stay?"

"What do you want?" Once more Andreas gave the choice to him. "I'd like it, but it's completely up to you."

Jabez looked at the door, then back at the bed, his forehead furrowed. "Why?"

"Why, what?"

"Why would you want me to stay? You wanna fuck some more?"

Andreas smiled. "That's always a possibility if you stay long enough, but no. It's so we can talk and...cuddle." He felt like an idiot saying the word. Jabez was the least cuddly person he'd ever met.

"Cuddle?" His frown changed into a smile of sorts. Whether it was one of ironic disdain or genuine pleasure, Andreas wasn't sure. "I guess so."

He walked back to the bed, and Andreas couldn't help checking out his limp cock, still impressive in its size.

Jabez lay on the bed beside him, his body as stiff as a virgin on her wedding night. Andreas scooted up beside him and laid an arm over his torso. Jabez's skin felt hot enough to burn his arm.

"Cuddle," Andreas repeated, as if introducing a new word to a foreigner. "And then we talk. I tell you something about me, and you share something about you."

Jabez gave him a wary look as if he were a wild animal that had been cajoled into a trap.

Andreas leaned up on one elbow so he could look into the other man's face. He smiled to put him at ease. "It doesn't have to be your deepest, darkest secret, just a little something about you. For instance, I like sailing, gardening, art, sunrises, and speed. You'll have to take a ride in my jet-glider. It's a rush. And I'm starting to learn that I like fighting, even though right now my body feels like one big bruise."

Jabez looked back at him but remained silent.

"This is where you tell me what you like," Andreas prompted.

He shrugged.

"That's okay. You don't have to talk if you don't want to. We can just lie here. Want to watch something?"

"Yeah." The word was almost a sigh of relief. The guy really didn't like to talk about himself.

Andreas turned on the media-viewer, and a mosaic of colorful images splashed across the screen. "What do you want to see?" He scrolled through the choices, waiting for Jabez to make a selection.

"That."

He stopped on a program about gorillas, once nearly extinct, now reclaiming the African jungles in the postplague world. Jabez viewed the animals with rapt attention, and Andreas watched him with equal interest. He was a mystery, a puzzle to be decoded, and Andreas loved puzzles. Knowing more about his background would

help, but he must draw out the information with the care of a bomb technician dismantling an explosive device.

"They're beautiful animals, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"It's interesting how we humans imagine we're so much more evolved, but if you look at their way of life, it's almost more civilized than ours." As if to contradict his words, the next image on-screen was of a pair of male gorillas battling over territory.

"They fight just like us. Every kind of animal fights," Jabez said.

"Did you do a lot of fighting before you started at the Palace?"

"When I had to. Helps to be a big guy when you're living in B-town, but it's even more important to run with a gang. Safety in numbers."

"Did you?"

"When I was younger. I grew up with a pack of kids who didn't have parents."

"Including your sister."

"If she was my sister. I don't know. She disappeared when I was little."

"And the other kids you lived with took care of you after that."

"Sure." Jabez's tone was so dismissive, Andreas understood there'd been very little "caring" involved. He imagined Jabez eating scraps left over after the bigger children had taken their portions. His heart ached at the idea of a child alone and unprotected on the streets of Brick Town. The slum existed like a pustule no one would lance in the midst of the prosperous, thriving metropolis of New Englandia. Brick Town was the crumbling remnant of the old city of Boston around which the modern city had been built after the plague.

Not wanting Jabez to feel like he was prying for information, Andreas fell silent and turned his attention to the feuding gorilla tribes for a while. But he wanted Jabez to know he cared, that his past suffering meant something to him.

"At the board meeting the other day, I suggested setting up more outreach and business incentive programs in Brick Town. I know there's a lot the rest of us should be doing to help out the people who live there."

Jabez glanced at him, eyes glittering in the light of the viewing screen. "If I had enough money to get out of B-town, I'd never look back. Why would somebody like you care what happens to a bunch of criminals?"

"Maybe there wouldn't be so much crime if there were more opportunity for jobs, small businesses, and factories. I think it's the responsibility of those who are doing well to help those less fortunate."

Jabez gave a small scornful snort and looked back at the viewer. "Better to burn the whole place and everyone in it."

Andreas was shocked. How could someone who'd lived through hell damn those who continued to survive there? But he wasn't about to argue. For the first time, Jabez

was sharing a strong opinion, and whether he really meant what he said or not, he was freely expressing his hatred of the cesspool where he'd spent his entire life. Andreas prized that honesty.

"Well," he said after a moment. "It was good you had friends you could count on. Sometimes I wonder about mine." *Shallow. They're all shallow and self-involved.* But he wouldn't say that aloud.

"You should," Jabez said without glancing away from the program.

Andreas stared at him, shocked by the abrupt comment. "I should what? What do you mean?"

"Your friend Timon who came here the other day. I'd watch him."

"Timon was here? When?"

"When you was in the city."

"What did he say to you?" Andreas could imagine the rudeness. He sat up to face Jabez. "Tell me. Did he do something or say something he shouldn't have?"

The man shrugged. He looked like he wished he hadn't mentioned it.

"He hit on you, didn't he? That's so Timon. I'm sorry. I apologize for him."

"Don't matter. He's your friend. I'm nobody. He can say what he likes to me." Jabez gazed at the gorillas another moment, then looked at Andreas at last. "But I don't trust him."

A moment of silence followed before the big man shrugged and glanced away again. "I got no right to say that. Sorry."

Andreas should've been angry. Jabez was bad-mouthing one of his oldest and best friends. Yet he knew all too well how sleazy, rather than charming, Timon could act. It was no wonder Jabez thought the worst of him, and Andreas was actually very touched that Jabez seemed worried on his behalf. A warm glow spread through him.

"I'll keep that in mind. Thanks for your concern." He smiled so Jabez would know he wasn't being sarcastic, and then he changed the subject. "I don't know about you, but I don't want to have dinner in the dining room. I'll go down to the kitchen and bring us back something to eat. We can have a little picnic right here."

Andreas rose from the bed and put on his robe. "Relax. Enjoy the show. I'll be right back."

Down in the kitchen, he apologized to Mrs. Gamble for the extra trouble and asked if she could postpone the dinner she'd begun to prepare.

"A tray of leftovers would be fine, if you don't mind."

She scowled at the disruption to her meal preparations but put together a heavily laden tray of bread, cold meat, cheese, cut vegetables, fruit, and slices of strawberry torte.

"Shall I carry it upstairs for you too, *sir*?" She stressed the mocking title. Mrs. Gamble, with her neat coiffure and impeccable dress, had a knack for making him feel

she was doing him an incredible favor by cleaning and cooking for him. But his house was always pristine and his meals perfect, and he kind of enjoyed their little power struggle.

"I've got it. Thank you, Mrs. G. I apologize again. Tomorrow we'll have the scallops and sea bass for sure.

"Doesn't matter to me what you and your new friend choose to do. Just give me some advance warning, please."

As he climbed the stairs, Andreas's stomach rumbled in anticipation. He burned off so many calories these days that he ate like a starving man. He realized he'd never been truly hungry before, which led him to think about Jabez growing up without enough food. No wonder he always ate every bite put in front of him.

When he returned to his room, Jabez lay on the bed with his arms behind his head like a gorgeous, hard-bodied, pinup model. Andreas's belly gave a little leap and dive, like a fish dancing on the surface of a lake. He dragged his eyes from the glorious sight and set the tray on the bed, plumped up the pillows, and leaned against them.

"She's not happy with me. Had a big dinner already under way, but we can have it tomorrow."

Jabez didn't answer. He was already wolfing down slabs of cold ham on bread.

Andreas watched for a moment, then assembled his sandwich.

"I've been thinking about your position here," he said between bites. "It wasn't enough for me to buy out your contract. I realize that now. I owe you payment for your work. You've helped me so much—not just the physical training, but giving me self-confidence I never had before. I didn't know what I was capable of until you showed me, and I don't mean the violence, but fortitude and strength."

One of those delectable, minute smiles tilted the corner of Jabez's mouth, accented by a dab of mustard.

"What?" Andreas demanded.

"I expected you to give up after the first day. You surprised me."

It was as close as he was going to come to a compliment, so Andreas accepted it as such.

"Thank you," he said without a trace of irony. "Anyway, the point is I want to pay you a wage for your work." He paused, then added, "*Just* your work. Your job here is secure for as long as you want it, but you can also leave whenever you want. Any sexual relationship we might have has nothing to do with it. I'm not paying you for that."

Jabez stopped chewing, his cheeks swollen with food, and stared at him.

"You understand? You're free to go whenever and wherever you want, but I'd like you to stay. There's so much more for you to teach me, and I'd like time to get to know you better—as a friend."

He swallowed the mouthful with a wince and cleared his throat. "What do you want me to say?"

Andreas laughed. "That you'll stay on, of course. But what I really want you to say is whatever you're thinking. I want you to speak the truth."

Jabez lowered his half-eaten sandwich and stared at it for a moment as if seeking an answer. Finally, he looked up and met Andreas's gaze. "How much?"

No "thank you" or "I'd love to stay," but Andreas hadn't really expected that. He named a figure, and Jabez's eyes widened. He slowly nodded.

"I'll stay."

Chapter Six

Jabez watched Andreas sleep. His hand was curved next to his cheek in the vulnerable position of a child. His tousled curls and long, thick eyelashes added to the image of youthful innocence. The man was little more than a boy, no matter how many years he might have lived. He was so inexperienced about life, so protected from real violence, pain, or hardship.

Instead of feeling his usual scorn for someone so naive, a fierce surge of protectiveness flooded through him. It was a strange and confusing emotion. Andreas had everything. He was rich beyond most men's wildest dreams, secure in every way. Why in the world should Jabez feel the strong desire to guard him against harm? What could hurt him? There was nothing that could touch the prince of the Fortias Corporation.

Jabez reached out and stroked a curl away from his cheek. The man didn't stir, so he dared to let his hand linger. He traced the curve of his eyebrow, the straight line of his nose, then touched his soft lips, feeling the warmth of his breath. A pang of something he'd never felt before twisted his gut—not just the protective feeling, but something else that made him feel anxious, nauseated, excited, and joyful all at the same time.

He took his hand away from Andreas's face and laid it against the hard, smooth plane of his chest for a moment, feeling his heart steadily pumping. He kept his palm there until his own heart slowed its frantic pace and his stomach settled. Something was definitely wrong with him. Maybe something he'd eaten was upsetting his stomach.

Or perhaps it was the idea of freedom, knowing he could walk out of this house anytime he wanted to. Andreas had promised. He wondered if he'd really keep his word if Jabez said he was leaving. Part of him wanted to test and find out, but he knew he wouldn't. He had no place to go. Returning to Brick Town wasn't a choice, and he had no skills to survive anywhere else.

But staying here was frightening in a different way. The soft life was too easy to fall into, and waking in Andreas's bed like this could become a comfortable habit. Danger lay in letting his guard down and starting to enjoy all this too much. Jabez stopped the slow glide of his hand down Andreas's stomach toward his morning erection. No more sex. Not until he'd had time to bring his emotions back under control.

The abandoned dinner tray lay on the floor by the bed, and Jabez stepped on it as he rose. He stumbled and caught his balance, sending the tray clattering. So much for getting out quietly.

There was a quiet stirring in the covers behind him and a loud yawn from his sleeping partner. "Leaving, or just going to pee? Come back to bed. The night doesn't have to be over yet."

Jabez pointed at the sunlight creeping through the slats in the blinds. "It's late. We should be up and working out by now."

Andreas sighed and flopped onto his back, arms spread wide. Jabez scanned his nude body and the long, erect penis that had filled him so well last night.

"We're not in the military. I think we can sleep in one morning."

"I don't want to." Jabez made his voice cold, cutting off his own growing desire. "Get up, and let's get to work."

"Yes, sir." Andreas executed a salute and climbed out of bed. He passed Jabez and walked ahead of him toward the bathroom with a saucy twitch of his ass. "I'll see you at breakfast then."

"We'll go running first. You can't run on a full stomach."

Andreas looked over his shoulder and gave a little smile that said he didn't take Jabez's gruffness seriously. "Whatever you say, teacher."

The bathroom door closed behind him, and Jabez bent to put the scattered glasses and plates back on the tray. He picked it up to carry it back to the kitchen, remembering how Andreas had fed him bites of the torte last night and licked traces of the strawberry filling from his mouth.

He cursed. It was going to be hard to build a barrier between them if he kept glowing inside every time he thought of Andreas. The only solution was to wear both of them out with so much exercise they wouldn't have any strength left over for sex.

And sometimes fighting could give a guy almost as good a release as fucking.

* * * * *

Jabez found that running outdoors on a straight country road surrounded by grass, trees, the blue sky overhead, and very little traffic on the road was a world away from running on a machine designed to give an extreme workout. His lungs expanded, and his arms and legs pumped. A slow burn of expended energy coursed through him. He glanced over his shoulder at Andreas, a few paces behind but keeping up. The other

man's face grimaced with determination. This little run was taxing him a lot more than it was Jabez, but he didn't whine about the pain.

He slowed his pace and let Andreas catch up, then trotted easily beside him. "Feels good, huh?" He smiled when his red-faced partner shot him a glare.

"If having your lungs incinerate from the inside out is your idea of feeling good. Personally, I would've enjoyed wake-up sex more."

Jabez's asshole clenched at the suggestion, betraying his intention to avoid sex with Andreas until he'd regained his balance. He pictured stopping the run right there, grabbing Andreas's sweaty body, casting him down in the weeds at the side of the road, and yanking down his pants. He'd ride him until he screamed.

Gritting his teeth, Jabez ran faster, leaving Andreas behind again.

When they returned to the house, they split up and went to take showers before meeting at the dining table for breakfast.

"Today, we'll have some weapons training. I'll show you how to use a knife." Jabez realized as soon as he'd made the promise that it was a bad idea. He should be taking as much time as possible to get Andreas fight-trained and weapons-ready. His new paid position depended on making the job last.

"Really? I thought you said I wouldn't get to touch a blade for months."

"It's a reward for your hard work."

"I'm not sure when I'm actually going to need to know how to use a knife or sword or nunchakus, but I appreciate it." Andreas gave a smile that made Jabez want to lean across the table and kiss him. He was too pretty, too good-natured, and too close—an irresistible combination. Abstinence wasn't going to hold up long.

In the training room, Jabez showed Andreas the proper way to hold a short knife. "Make that blade an extension of your arm." He demonstrated how to lunge with the knife gripped in his hand. "Remember there's going to be resistance once you slice through the skin and hit muscle. You have to expect it. And you can't be squeamish about cutting or being cut. Hesitation could kill you."

Andreas nodded, his brow furrowed. Jabez liked how he paid attention. He never took his teaching lightly or acted like the whole thing was a hobby, although it was. And Jabez tried to train him as if he really was going to be fighting an opponent. Could happen someday. Even Prince Fortias might find himself mugged on the street.

"We can't slash each other, so I recommend buying a dead pig; hang it and practice on that."

Andreas's frown deepened. "I don't know if this is something I want to learn. I can't imagine piercing flesh, even dead flesh."

Jabez shook his head. "I told you. Don't be squeamish. When it comes down to you or the other guy, you have to be ready to stick him."

The other man gave a halfhearted lunge at the air with the knife, then examined the shiny blade. "I know you've done that. I watched you fight with that man and stab him, but what does it feel like? Not just stabbing, but killing someone."

"Feels good. Feels like you're still alive and your enemy is dead."

"How many have you...? Do you know?"

"No. They'd drag them away unconscious, and I didn't know if they were alive or dead. Didn't matter as long as I walked out of the ring."

Jabez watched the play of light on Andreas's blade as he lied to him. It was true he'd felt victorious and relieved to have made it through another day, but part of him had cringed at every man he left broken and bleeding. Although it had become his nature to fight and kill, that hadn't always been a part of him, and a little bit of his younger self huddled deep inside him.

"You can practice throwing the knife today," Jabez continued. "Work on accuracy."

They faced the target on the wall by the weapons cabinet and took turns throwing at the bull's-eye. At first Andreas couldn't make his blade stick. It fell to the floor every time. But after a while, he was finally able to make and keep contact with the target.

"Here. Let me show you." Jabez stepped behind him and held his wrist. He drew back their arms together and hurled, laughing when Andreas released the knife late and it hit the cabinet before clattering onto the floor. "Except you have to let go at the right time."

"I can't concentrate with you pressed up against me like that." Andreas looked over his shoulder, and Jabez was lost. They'd spent too many hours together today with lust sparking between them like a fractured power crystal. He leaned over Andreas's shoulder and kissed his mouth while continuing to grip his wrist hard.

Andreas angled his head, his mouth seeking a deeper kiss. He lifted his free hand and reached back to cup Jabez's jaw.

Jabez felt the flex of the other man's wrist in his punishing grip. Lust boiled through him, making him clutch even tighter. He wanted to leave his mark, a bracelet of purple bruises.

Andreas moaned and squirmed against him, his ass rubbing Jabez's growing erection. Mingled pain and pleasure was a powerful combination, as Jabez well knew. He nipped Andreas's lower lip and squeezed his wrist until the bones creaked.

With a gasp, Andreas pulled away, eyes wide, but a moment later he attacked Jabez's mouth again with a kiss that tasted of copper. Jabez let go of his wrist and grabbed hold of his waist, then let his hand slide over the bulge in the front of his pants. He moved his palm up and down once before latching on with a squeeze that made Andreas gasp again.

"Too rough?"

"No! More," he begged.

Jabez slipped his hand under the waistband and down to the heat and warmth of Andreas's cock. He seized and massaged the shaft with hard strokes, all the while grinding his erection against Andreas's tailbone.

It wasn't nearly enough. He'd felt the man's smooth skin last night and couldn't be satisfied with anything less. Abruptly, he jerked down Andreas's pants as he'd imagined doing during their run. Jabez pressed his cock into the groove of Andreas's ass and rubbed, exhaling a sigh of relief. He stared at the erotic sight of his dark cock sliding against Andreas's pale ass.

"Fuck me now!" Andreas ground against him.

Jabez didn't need more invitation. He pushed Andreas over the weight bench so his ass thrust up into the air, then went to the supply cupboard to grab the bottle of oil for slicking their bodies when they wrestled. After pouring some on his hands, he rubbed them together and began exploring Andreas's hole, inserting one finger, then two, massaging and stretching the tiny opening. All the blood in his body raced to his cock, leaving him light-headed and dizzy. Andreas whined and pressed onto his fingers, his sphincter clutching them.

Jabez slicked his cock with the oil. Removing his fingers, he gazed for a second at Andreas's clenching hole before guiding his cock into it. Astonishing heat surrounded him. He pushed hard past the outer ring and into the tight channel, which gripped him like a fist.

Andreas groaned. He cursed softly and lifted his ass higher, pushing back against Jabez, taking him deeper and deeper. Jabez grabbed his hips and held on as he pressed all the way inside. He didn't stop until his cock was entirely swallowed up. Relief flooded through him. This was right where he belonged, exactly where he needed to be.

The sight of Andreas's dark, bowed head and the sweat-soaked back of his shirt was more beautiful than a painting to Jabez. He let go of Andreas's hips to push up his shirt and gaze at the expanse of his back and the ridge of his spine. He pulled out the glistening length of his cock, then thrust again, enjoying seeing it engulfed by Andreas's body.

Out and in again. Jabez thrust into that delicious, sweet, hot ass. He held Andreas's hips hard enough to leave more bruised fingerprints as he filled him again and again. The other man grunted as Jabez hammered into him. He whimpered and begged. "More, more, more. Harder!"

Jabez fucked him deeply, groaning with every thrust. Rage and bliss and lust rose in him higher and higher, filling him until he could hardly see from the haze of red before his eyes. It was like the bloodlust of a match where part of him was detached and aware of every move he made, while the rest became a growling animal that wanted to attack and tear with its claws.

He slapped the other man's ass as he reamed him.

Andreas groaned, signaling his pleasure in the treatment.

Jabez stared at the red mark he'd left and spanked him a few more times. Then he grabbed Andreas's hips once more and held tight as he thrust his way to climax – balls slapping against the back of the man's thighs, groin smacking his ass. Jabez squeezed his eyes closed, his balls drew tight, and he came in hard, shuddering pulses.

He continued to press deep while pleasure rippled through him, and he bent over Andreas's back, licking his spine and tasting his skin, so soft. He wanted to stay inside him forever. Keep him close and fuck him or be fucked by him whenever he wanted. He could live in this house the rest of his life, safe at last, cared for, wanted.

This was the secret dream he'd pushed down so deep inside for so long he'd almost forgotten it, the dream of a home and a special person who wanted him. Now it seemed his childhood dream had actually come true, but Jabez knew better than to believe in such fantasies. He straightened and pulled out of Andreas one last time before stepping away from the other man's warm body. This couldn't last. Better to stop himself from growing too used to this pleasure and to Andreas's friendship before it was snatched away from him.

With a groan, Andreas straightened. He pulled up his pants and glanced over at Jabez, who was tucking away his cock. "That was unexpected."

Jabez noticed his erection outlined by the fabric of his pants. "You didn't come. I can take care of that." He reached for his waistband.

"That's okay. You don't have to."

"No. I owe you."

"You don't 'owe' me anything. I want you to know that. Things don't have to be perfectly equal between us, and you don't ever have to do anything you're not in the mood to do."

"Maybe I want to." Jabez hooked a finger in his waistband and pulled him closer.

Andreas smiled and let him free his cock and grasp it in his hand. "I'm not going to turn you down, but you understand what I mean about not feeling obligated, right?"

"Right." He shut him up with a kiss. Andreas could babble about no obligation all he wanted to, but Jabez knew he owed him his life.

He pulled Andreas's erection with hard jerks, rough, the same way he'd do it for himself, and soon he was swallowing the other man's groans. Breaking off the kiss, Jabez watched his face, the fine, even features, straight dark brows, and riotous black curls – his pretty, young prince.

"Like it hard?" he whispered as the friction built between his hot, oiled palm and Andreas's shaft. "Like it rough?" A flutter of arousal stirred in his belly again, although his cock was still limp.

"Yes, yes." Andreas's moans increased with the rapid tugging of Jabez's hand.

"Come on then. Come, bitch." Jabez continued to mutter encouragement and slurs that whipped Andreas into a frenzy. His hips jerked, and he thrust into Jabez's fist. He groaned as he came at last, spurting warm jets of cum over Jabez's knuckles.

Jabez kept his arm around his back, supporting him as he swayed on buckling knees. He gazed at the blissful expression that made the other man's face practically glow. Only when Andreas's eyelids fluttered, then opened, did he finally let him go.

Jabez examined the spunk on the back of his hand and licked it clean while staring into Andreas's eyes. The air between them vibrated with something – not sexual tension since they'd both released it, but something – and the sensation made him anxious. It was time to put some distance between them.

He jerked his thumb at the abandoned knife on the floor. "We'll work on this later." Without another word, he walked from the room.

Chapter Seven

Living with Jabez was like being in the eye of a hurricane – momentarily calm but with winds whipping to a frenzy if Andreas stepped out of that zone. No. It was more like climbing up a slippery sand dune – three steps forward, then a slide back down.

Jabez had been living with him for over a week now, and Andreas loved having him there; loved the amazing sex and the flashes of friendship he occasionally allowed, but hated the inevitable shutdown that followed every glimmer of a connection. Andreas found the analogy he'd been searching for – a turtle. All he could do was wait for Jabez to emerge from his shell and maybe try to coax him out with a lettuce leaf. He couldn't poke or drag him out.

He realized he was making some headway one evening when Jabez volunteered some personal information without a prompt. Andreas had been trying to get him to choose which audio book they'd listen to that evening. Usually, Jabez would randomly point at the screen and say, "that one," but finally he'd admitted the truth. "I can't read."

"Oh." Andreas felt like an idiot for not figuring it out before. Of course he couldn't. Who would have taught him? He'd lived on the street since he was a child, and had no formal education. "I could teach you, if you'd like to learn."

"Yeah?" Jabez cocked a brow, looking doubtful.

"Sure. If I can learn to fight, you can learn to read."

"Who says you've learned to fight?" His rare smile was like unexpected sunlight on a gloomy day and made Andreas's heart flip-flop in a way that was becoming a habit.

"Hey, you said I was improving."

"Maybe enough to beat up your candy-ass friend Timon, but I wouldn't put you in a street fight."

"Timon. Don't remind me." Andreas flopped back against the pillows and stared at the media-viewer displaying the library of book titles. "He keeps calling, and I can't avoid him and my other friends forever."

"Don't. Go out with them. Live your normal life."

Andreas brushed his hand from Jabez's naked chest down his torso as far as he could reach. He cupped his flaccid penis and felt it stir even though they'd just had sex about fifteen minutes before. "I don't want to. I'd rather be here with you."

As if he'd pushed a button, the turtle's head and legs drew back inside its shell. Jabez rolled off the bed and walked toward the bathroom.

"Don't stick around here because of me. Go with your friends. And I don't need to learn to read. I've gotten by just fine without it so far."

Cactus. Andreas closed his eyes and sighed. *Porcupine.*

The next day Andreas took a break from the fight training to do some work related to Fortias. He spent hours at his computer terminal preparing a comprehensive proposal for various outreach programs he wanted the corporation to fund in Brick Town. The most important things were to educate the people and make them capable of something more than menial labor, as well as to revitalize the community with new businesses and job opportunities. Andreas had plans to accomplish the revitalization of Brick Town but had to make the plan palatable for the board. That was the difficult part.

When he was ready, he'd call a special meeting so there'd be nothing else on the agenda to distract them while he presented his ideas. But first he wanted to run them by his father and get his support. Another difficult part.

A knock at the open door of his office took his attention from the screen. He turned with a smile, expecting to see Jabez, but Mrs. Gamble stood at the door with a sour expression on her face.

"Your friends are here. Does this mean I should plan dinner for five or that you won't be home tonight?"

Andreas cursed and tapped the screen to close the document. "I'll let you know when I know, Mrs. G."

He went downstairs to find Timon, Rabi, and Simeon at the bar in his living room helping themselves to the scotch.

"He lives!" Rabi proclaimed, throwing open his arms in a dramatic gesture. "We'd begun to think the gladiator killed you."

"Or that he was keeping you in a little cage and only feeding you cock," Timon added with a grin. "Does he?"

Simeon gestured with the drink in his hand. "Coming here wasn't my idea. I hate drop-ins. Don't blame you if you send us away." He downed the whiskey in a gulp and poured another.

Andreas exhaled and crossed to the bar to accept the glass Simeon handed him. The tall blond rolled his eyes at the others and mouthed, *Assholes!*

Rabi threw himself down on the couch, his weight making it creak. "So come on. Let's see him. Timon told us all about him. I want to see the muscles."

"He's not an animal in a zoo, Rabi." Andreas couldn't keep the annoyance from his voice, and that mistake was like a whiff of blood to a shark. Rabi and Timon were lethal when they found a soft spot. They'd dig until their victim bled.

"Oh my God, you're starting to fall for him!" Timon exclaimed. "I knew something was weird by the way you sounded on the phone."

Andreas didn't bother with a denial since it would only confirm Timon's suspicions. He steeled himself for some merciless teasing by practicing Jabez's turtle impersonation. He sat on the chair across from Rabi and sipped his drink.

Rabi smoothed his silk shirt over his rounded stomach. "If this is the new chic trend, I'm in. Daddy, I want a stud under my tree for Christmas."

"Do you have him wearing a choke chain or a bow around his neck?" Timon asked with glittering eyes and a gleaming smile. Andreas had never before noticed how much he did look like a shark.

"Aw, come on, lighten up," Rabi added. "You look like someone pooped on your parade."

"I'm not amused," Andreas drawled with a jaded tone to match his friends'. "Might find you funny if I was twelve."

Timon and Rabi laughed, and Simeon saluted Andreas with his glass.

Why did he hang out with these people? He couldn't remember when or why they'd become his friends.

"We're going out tonight, and you're going with. Bring your new friend, but we won't take no for an answer. We miss you." Timon fluffed a hand through his chartreuse locks and fingered the silver hoop in his ear. "Not all of us have hot sex slaves at home. We have to go out and find someone if we're going to get laid. Maybe having your boy along will bait the hook."

"Speak for yourself. I don't need any more bait than this." As Rabi indicated his big body, rings sparkled on his fingers and bracelets jangled around his thick wrists. Rabi tended to overaccessorize.

Simeon wandered over from the bar, working on his third drink, and nudged Andreas's shoulder. "Come on. These assholes are right. We miss hanging with you, and we'd like to meet your new...whatever he is. Besides, Timon told us you've turned your studio into a gym. I want to see that."

Realizing that getting them out of his house would require a crowbar, and diverting Timon from a path once he'd chosen it was nearly impossible, Andreas rose to his feet. "Fine. I'll show you my gym and introduce you to Jabez."

Rabi heaved to his feet and clapped his hands together. "And show us your new fight moves? I'd pay to see that, especially if you're both naked."

Andreas felt like a weight was hanging over his head as he led his friends upstairs. An inner voice warned him that exposing Jabez to their brand of vicious teasing was a terrible idea, but he didn't see any way around it. Better to acknowledge that he and Jabez were a couple — *were they?* — and force his friends to accept the idea.

He showed them into the gym, bathed in the golden glow of late-afternoon sunlight, and left them trying on the boxing gloves while he went to find Jabez.

Jabez was in his room, sitting on his bed cross-legged and looking at a book, a picture book with real paper, that Andreas had given him. It had been one he'd enjoyed as a child, and despite Jabez's initial refusal, he had been learning to read under Andreas's tutoring.

Wearing an unbuttoned, white Oxford shirt and a pair of gray pajama pants, Jabez looked as mouthwateringly sexy as Andreas had ever seen him. But then he always looked hot no matter what he wore or didn't wear. A perverse part of Andreas felt like showing him off exactly as he was with the open shirt exhibiting his chiseled torso, but he wouldn't treat him like a piece of meat for his friends to inspect.

"Hi. You remember Timon? Well, he's here along with a couple of other friends. They'd like to meet you, then take us out for the evening," Andreas blurted and received the expected response. Jabez's face, which had been open and nearly smiling at the sight of him, closed down faster than a Florida town in hurricane season.

"I feel bad about this," Andreas continued. "You probably won't find their company pleasant, but I can't send them away without meeting you. Hell, I want them to meet you, to know who I'm spending all my time with. I'll get rid of them as soon as I can, I promise."

He paused to draw breath and gauge Jabez's expression again. It was like trying to read a compass in a cave.

He rose from the bed. "All right. Let me put something else on."

"Okay. I'll wait outside for you." Andreas paused before leaving the room. "And, Jabez, don't let anything they say get to you. What they might think doesn't have anything to do with how I feel about — with my opinions."

He stepped into the hallway, and the door slid closed behind him. He'd wanted to give Jabez time alone in the room to collect himself, but now he felt fidgety and impatient waiting in the hall. Keep it short and send them on their way, he coached himself. Everything will be fine.

Jabez emerged from his room still wearing the long-sleeved white shirt, buttoned, with a pair of charcoal gray slacks. Except for his build, still apparent despite the covering of a shirt, he looked like any uptown office worker dressed for a casual evening out. Impulsively, Andreas grabbed his arm and pulled him close. He lifted his face and pressed a quick kiss against nonresponsive lips.

"Don't worry. This will be okay. Don't feel uncomfortable."

Jabez gazed back into his eyes, and the sapphire had turned to cobalt. "I'm not. I think you are, though. I'll keep my mouth shut and try not to embarrass you."

Andreas scrambled to catch up both mentally and physically as Jabez strode ahead of him down the corridor. He'd never imagined Jabez might think he was ashamed to introduce him to his old friends. In Andreas's mind, it was totally the other way around. He was nervous about the impression his shallow, self-involved, patronizing friends would make on a man whose opinion he valued.

When they entered the room, the light had changed from gold to orange as the sun was setting on the horizon. Rabi and Timon were in the ring, jabbing at each other with the boxing gloves. Simeon lounged against the ropes, a bottle hanging negligently from one hand.

At the sight of Andreas and Jabez, Rabi raised a gloved hand. "Time out."

Timon took advantage and threw a punch that caught him in his expansive gut.

Rabi expelled a sharp breath and clutched his stomach. "Fuck!"

As Timon ambled over to the ropes, Andreas quickly made introductions. "Simeon, Timon, and Rabi." He pointed each of them out. "This is my new friend and employee, Jabez." *Please, God, don't let them say anything demeaning.*

His prayer was fruitless as Rabi joined Timon at the edge of the ring.

"Damn, look at that body!" Rabi exclaimed. "Tell me again why we're going barhopping tonight when we can stop by a fight club and pick up one of those to keep."

Andreas cringed inside. Had Rabi always been this crude and cruel? Why had he never heard it before? He cut a glance at Jabez, but his face was like stone, not a flicker of emotion showed in his eyes.

"Quiet, Rabi. This is a new friend, not a boy toy." Timon elbowed him. "Show him some respect."

It was a toss-up whether Rabi's blunt teasing or Timon's barely veiled sarcasm was more annoying.

"It's going to be a long night." Simeon shook his head and drank from the bottle.

"Not that long," Andreas said. "I appreciate you stopping by, but Jabez and I have other plans for this evening, so I'm going to have to ask you to leave soon."

Timon climbed between the ropes and tossed the gloves on the ground. "Nope. Change your plans. You're going with us. We insist. If Jabez is going to be your new bestest friend, we need to get to know him, and there's no better way to do that than to get drunk together." He slung an arm around Andreas's shoulders and another around Jabez's back. "You'll get used to our ways, Jay. We tease a lot, but it's all in fun."

"Lots of fun," Simeon echoed, slurring the S. He extended the whiskey bottle to Jabez. "Have a drink?"

To Andreas's surprise, Jabez accepted the bottle and took a swig. Other than having wine with dinner or an occasional beer, he'd shown no interest in drinking until now. He swallowed deeply, and when he pulled the bottle away from his lips, he didn't

cough or gasp, as if the liquid were no stronger than a beer. He handed the bottle back to Simeon, who gave a ponderous nod and accepted it.

"To friends."

"Absolutely." Rabi heaved his bulk between the ropes, then carefully rearranged his clothes. "To good friends who share their bounty." He reached for the bottle, snapping his fingers at Simeon, but stared at Jabez with a lascivious look that gave another message about what he'd like to share.

Andreas's skin crawled at Rabi's look and the thought of anyone besides himself touching Jabez. He shouldn't be so disgusted. It wasn't as if the four of them hadn't swapped partners or shared lovers in the past. Sex in all its combinations and configurations was simply another form of recreation for them. He shouldn't be so horrified that Rabi considered Jabez fair game, but things were different now. *He* was different now.

Andreas stepped away from Timon's arm around his shoulders and resisted the impulse to pull Jabez away from him. "Jabez is working for me, and we have a friendship. There won't be any sharing. We'll go out with you tonight, but try to act civilized."

* * * * *

The evening started out reasonably enough with dinner and drinks at Fra Angelico's, which lasted several hours. Jabez sat quietly by Andreas's side like a rock in the swirling stream of their conversation. He'd answer questions when asked, but so succinctly it felt like he hadn't spoken at all.

"How did you end up cage fighting?"

"Serving a prison sentence for armed robbery."

"You get fucked a lot in prison?"

"Some."

"Who taught you to fight?"

"A guy."

"How many men have you killed?"

"I don't know."

"What does it feel like?"

"All right, that's enough," Andreas intervened and turned the conversation toward other topics. Had he been that invasive with his questions when he first met Jabez? He hadn't meant to be, but was there much difference between his honest curiosity and their bloodthirsty inquisition?

After dinner, he tried to bid good night to his friends, but they weren't ready to relinquish him yet.

"The evening's just started," Rabi declared. "We're going dancing."

They stopped by Seamy, the latest trendy club, and strolled to the front of the line, where the doorman immediately admitted them. The noise level inside was deafening and the packed bodies made it difficult to move. Colored strobe lights and electro-funk fusion filled the room. Seamy was billed as “not just a club, an experience” and everyone received a pill on entry to help glide them along the psychedelic journey.

Andreas gripped Jabez’s hand as he’d done underneath the table at the restaurant and in the vehicle on the ride here. He leaned close and rose on his toes to yell in his ear. “You okay? If you hate it, we can go.”

He shook his head, and Andreas noticed his stubble had grown nearly a half inch. His hair was turning out to be a medium brown color, but right now it was purple, gold, red, black, and blue as the lights played over his scalp.

Andreas felt the pill he’d popped kicking in fast, enhancing his vision and all his senses. His body automatically swayed to the music, and he wanted nothing more than to grab Jabez, pull him onto the dance floor, and grind against him. He had the primitive desire to let everyone in the crowded club know that the hottest man there was all his.

There were no tables at Seamy, just a ledge along the wall for people to set their drinks and stand by. The rest of the place was dance floor and rooms in back where couples could go for privacy. Most of the clientele were men, and most were shirtless. One expected to literally lose his shirt by the end of an evening at Seamy, but the chance of going home with something better packed the club every night.

With no waitstaff, everyone had to crowd the bar for service, and getting through could take an hour, but people danced, flirted, or made out while they waited, so no time was wasted.

“Let your friend buy the drinks,” Timon shouted over the pounding beat. “I’m sure he can get through.”

So Jabez, with Andreas following in his wake, pushed through the crowd and had a tray of drinks for them in record time. By the time they located the rest of the group, all three men were half-naked and each was displaying his own unique dance style. Simeon barely shuffled from foot to foot and looked like he might pass out anytime. Rabi threw himself around with graceless verve, arms flailing in the air, and Timon swayed and thrust sinuously.

Andreas’s silk shirt felt like burlap scratching his sensitive skin due to the effect of the drug he’d taken. He was so anxious to feel his bare flesh sliding against Jabez’s that he practically tore his shirt off. Jabez removed his, and everyone in their proximity looked his way. Much as he’d sworn not to display Jabez like an object, Andreas couldn’t help the warm swell of pride that suffused him as they moved together and began to dance.

He’d half expected reserved Jabez to refuse to dance and instead loiter on the edge of the floor with a drink the entire evening. But Jabez surprised him, moving with a fluidity that made Timon’s sexy dance look clumsy. Andreas had never considered

himself much of a dancer. He didn't have the ability to give into the music and let go of himself, but tonight he was soaring on a rush of endorphins. He turned his back to Jabez and pressed tight against his hot body, forgetting everyone around them as he matched his movements to his partner's. They swayed and ground together, bodies thrusting in a simulation of sex that threatened to become the real thing.

Andreas felt Jabez's erection pressing against his ass. Big hands skimmed up and down his chest, his stomach, and his cock molded by tight pants. Jabez grabbed his hips and thrust against him until he felt faint with want.

Turning his head, Andreas reached for Jabez's face and guided it toward his mouth. "Let's go in back," he shouted near his ear.

Jabez didn't reply but bumped and nudged Andreas through the throng toward the back of the room.

"Going so soon? You kids in love," Rabi yelled as they inched past him. He grabbed hold of his partner, a man wearing gold body paint that made him shimmer from head to toe, and spun him around.

Andreas had rarely used the so-called private rooms at the back of a club. He'd always preferred to take any lovers home with him and felt it was sordid to fuck in public. But tonight, it seemed incredibly hot...and incredibly necessary. If he didn't get Jabez's hand, mouth, or asshole on his cock in the next few minutes, he might detonate.

The playroom was a big space divided into cubicles by cloth hangings. Walls, ceiling, dividers, everything was black, giving the sensation of stepping into a quiet cave after the flashing colors of the club. The bass beat throbbed through the walls, but the rest of the club noise was muffled. The only other sounds to be heard were sexual ones: gasping, grunting, groaning, cries, curses, even sobs and the slap of naked flesh.

Despite being billed as a "private" area, there was very little privacy to be had. Some didn't even bother to close the curtain on their cubicle, and put on an exhibition for anyone who walked past. The club wasn't named Seamy for nothing.

The atmosphere of sex and the ripe smell of it whipped Andreas's arousal to a frenzy. He turned to face Jabez, hauled him up close, and kissed him as if he were the only source of oxygen in the room.

Jabez growled deep in his throat and hugged him so tight his ribs hurt. They stumbled into the nearest empty space, Andreas snatching and halfway closing the curtain behind them. Then Jabez swung him around and pressed him up against the one solid wall, kissing and kissing him with a powerful clash of lips, teeth, and tongue.

When he finally pulled away, he crouched to lick and nibble Andreas's nipples, and then knelt before him and unfastened his pants. Jabez jerked down the too-tight fabric and freed Andreas's throbbing cock. He sucked the head into his mouth, drawing it so deliciously deep, Andreas almost cried out and came right then. With the drinks and drugs and sex-charged atmosphere, he was already halfway there. It only took a few pumps of Jabez's big fist and a few hard tugs of his mouth before Andreas teetered on the brink.

He groaned and let his head fall back against the wall. The divider between their cubicle and the next was partially open and he could see another couple: a man with his hands pressed against the wall and his ass outthrust, his partner standing behind him and driving in deep. That image, coupled with Jabez's sucking and stroking, put him over the edge. He cried out as he came, soaring on the beat of the music, unleashed and flying high. His hips bucked as waves of pleasure rolled through him.

When he stilled and opened his eyes at last, Jabez gazed up at him with an expression of such hunger that Andreas's stomach flipped lazily over and over. He dropped to his knees and took the other man in his arms, kissing him deeply once more. Then he pushed Jabez back to the floor under the weight of his body, tore his mouth away from Jabez's lips, and kissed his throat, his chest, and abdomen to his waist. He unfastened his trousers and pulled them down.

For a moment, he simply gazed at the beautiful, erect cock jutting from the nest of brown hair. He touched the quivering shaft with his fingertips, feeling the satin skin and the solid strength beneath. He scratched his fingernail up a thick purple vein and traced the circumference of the head. Jabez made a strangled sound and angled his hips up, seeking more from him.

Andreas was about to suck the delicious length into his mouth, when a movement through the halfway-closed curtain of their cubicle caught his attention. It probably wasn't the first person who'd passed by, but Andreas had been too lost in bliss to notice until now. The man paused and stared back at him. It was Timon holding hands with a pretty boy who looked way too young to be in the club.

Timon smiled at Andreas and watched him lower his mouth onto Jabez's cock and draw it between his lips. Andreas stared back at him as he sucked deeply, claiming Jabez with his mouth. Timon winked and walked on, his hand already reaching down the back of the boy's tight pants.

Andreas felt a little ashamed that instead of rising and closing the drape, he'd stared blatantly back at Timon. For a man who'd sworn not to make an exhibition of his boyfriend — *was Jabez his boyfriend?* — he was doing a poor job of it. But it was too late to worry about that now. Jabez was groaning and thrusting, craving release.

Andreas massaged his cock with firm strokes, ducked his head down to swirl his tongue around his soft ball sac. He sucked the delicious firmness of Jabez's cock into his mouth once more, relishing the taste of salt and musk. Deep inside, he felt the desire to do this in front of everyone in the club, to show everyone in the world that Jabez was his.

His hand skimmed up and down in a blur as he created the friction that would bring Jabez to climax. Jabez lifted his hips off the floor, hands pushing against it on either side of his body. His head rolled to the side, exposing the long line of his neck and the rapturous expression on his face. His groan sounded as sweet as a symphony, and he arched his back, offering all of himself to Andreas's hands and mouth.

His climax swelled through his cock and burst. Andreas swallowed it while pumping with his hand to milk every last bit. At last Jabez finished, his chest rising and falling and breath gasping from his parted lips.

Andreas waited for him to gather his composure, then grasped his hand and pulled him up. "I've never done anything like this before," he admitted. "I didn't mean to tonight. Not here on the dirty floor."

"Felt good." Jabez glanced around. "And I've fucked in dirtier places than this."

His words made Andreas think about Jabez's past, which he only exposed little bits of in offhand comments like that one. He hoped they'd be together long enough for him to piece the whole story together someday.

"We should go back. I'll tell them we have to go, and we'll get out of here."

Jabez shrugged. "Whatever you want. It's your night out. Your friends."

Andreas wasn't sure how he felt about that answer, but he led the way from the back room into the overheated club. They worked their way through the throng to his friends and the new partners they'd collected around them. The little group was taking a break from dancing to drink neon-colored cocktails. Timon and his boy hadn't yet returned, so Andreas grabbed Simeon to tell him they were leaving.

Simeon gazed at him through bleary eyes. "Don't go. We like your new friend. We want you to stay."

Andreas hugged his shoulders. "Sorry. I'm in training. We'll see you another day." He nodded at Jabez, and they started for the door.

"You're leaving?" Rabi brayed. "We've got plans. Hold up until Timon gets back. He'll tell you."

More fun plans. Andreas shook his head. "Gotta go."

"You're ruining everything! We need your friend for this." Rabi looked like a red-faced baby deprived of a favorite toy. "Here's Timon now."

Timon came toward them, his green-tinted hair tousled and his arm slung around the youth, whose pouting red-painted lips were now smeared into his Kabuki white face.

"Hold up there, pardner. Where do you think you're going?" Timon hailed Andreas.

"Tell him the plan," Rabi urged, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Timon pointed. "Outside."

Andreas felt like he was trying to walk through thick mud and couldn't shake it from his shoes. He looked at Jabez, wanting to share a sympathetic grimace about his annoying friends, but Jabez was focused on the door.

Outside the club a crowd waited to enter, but it seemed blessedly quiet compared to the noise they'd left behind. Music blared through the open door, and people clamored to get in. Andreas thought the club definitely lived up to its name, and he wanted nothing more than to go home, take a shower, and curl up in bed with Jabez.

"Hear me out," Timon began before Andreas could speak. "This will be a real adventure. We want Jabez to be our guide in Brick Town, to show us what real 'seamy' is."

"We'll make slumming in B-town the new must-do." Rabi's face glittered gold around the mouth from kissing his spray-painted friend.

The gold one clapped his hands together. "We'll be trendsetters!"

"Darling, we're always trendsetters," Rabi assured him.

"No and no." Andreas pointed at each of them. "It's been fun, but we're going home now."

"You speak for both of you?" Timon sidled up beside Jabez and put an arm around his waist again. "I thought you said this boy wasn't your puppet. Can't he make up his own mind?"

"No," Jabez said brusquely. "It's a bad idea, especially this late at night."

"It's not an adventure if there's no risk, and I'm sure a big, strapping man like you could protect us."

Andreas was getting more annoyed by the second. He hated the way Timon stroked Jabez's arm and felt his biceps. "Enough," he snapped. "We're going home."

Timon pushed out his lower lip in a pout. "Then the least you could do is invite us to party there. We've all shared lovers in the past, and some of the rest of us would like a crack at your new fuck toy. He's too yummy to keep all to yourself."

Red-hot rage surged through Andreas. He felt as if he were outside himself watching as he raised a fist and slammed it into Timon's laughing face with a perfect punch just like Jabez had taught him.

Timon's head snapped to the side as Andreas hit him. Blood sprayed from his cheekbone where Andreas's ring cut it, splattering his companion with the Kabuki makeup. The boy screamed. So did Rabi. Timon fell backward, hitting the sidewalk with a soft *thunk*. He cried out and covered his eye with his hand. Blood continued to flow from beneath it.

Andreas's fist stung from the blow, but he was getting used to pain and shook it out. He searched for something to stanch the blood while the others clamored in shock and amazement at what he'd done. Simeon began laughing uncontrollably, then suddenly bolted away and began to puke at the corner of the building.

Jabez handed Andreas his shirt, which he'd tucked in his back pocket.

Andreas crouched and started to help Timon sit up, but his friend snatched the shirt and pushed his hands away. He pressed the cloth to his face.

"Are you crazy?" His yell was muffled by Jabez's shirt.

"I'm sorry," Andreas lied. It had actually felt good plowing his fist into Timon's face, payback for a lot of years of putting up with his pranks and bullshit. "I lost my temper."

"Get away from me!"

Andreas glanced at the faces of his companions and their entourage, most of whom looked more amused than outraged by Timon's plight. But that was their way – to mock and laugh at others' misfortunes. These were his people, and he didn't care if he ever saw any of them again.

He made eye contact with Jabez and jerked his head, and the pair of them made their way down the street to where Andreas's vehicle was parked.

As he slid behind the wheel, Andreas felt an exultant surge of victory, which would've been sweeter if Timon had actually hit back.

"Sorry about all that. I didn't realize my friends were such morons. I don't know why I don't have better friends than that."

Jabez shrugged and looked out the window.

Andreas noted the stiffness in his back. What could he do to alleviate it?

"Next time we go out, you choose the place and the company – or no company at all, okay?"

After a long moment, Jabez looked over at him. "Did you think I couldn't take it? He was just trash-talking like your friends do with each other. You overreacted."

"I don't think so. Timon insulted you."

"So what?"

"I just..." Andreas was nonplussed. He hadn't exactly expected Jabez to be grateful to him but had expected *some* appreciation. "I didn't like the way he talked about you or the way he touched you."

"Because you don't like your friends touching your things?"

"No. That's not what I meant. You're twisting this around. I was defending you."

"I don't need you to defend me. I'm not your boyfriend." Jabez turned back to the window, shutting him out.

"That's funny. I kind of thought you were." Andreas stared at the road, the taillights of the gliders before him, and the brightly lit buildings flashing by.

"I just work for you. If we fuck, it's only for fun. It doesn't mean anything." Jabez's voice was as rough and cold as gravel mixed with ice. "You shouldn't care too much about me."

Andreas felt like he'd been punched in the face himself. It was like that childhood board game he used to play – reach the end of the trail only to get smacked right back to the beginning again. Three steps up, slide ten paces back down. He didn't say anything else to Jabez for the rest of the ride home.

Chapter Eight

Jabez felt sick inside, like someone had taken a beater and churned his guts. Heaviness filled the air between him and Andreas, smothering him in its choking darkness, all because he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

When Andreas had taken a swing at Timon, Jabez had been more shocked than if he'd been suddenly attacked himself. For one moment, his heart had soared. Andreas was sticking up for him, nailing his fist into Timon's smart mouth. But the high had immediately been followed by a dive straight to the ground. The bond between them was getting too complicated. Simple sex was becoming mingled with emotions way beyond his comprehension. The strength of his feelings scared the hell out of him like no hulking opponent in the arena ever had.

The fact that he'd spoken without thinking frightened him too. He bit his tongue to keep silent the rest of the way home, but as they pulled into Andreas's driveway, his words got away from him again.

"Why do you even like me? You don't know me at all."

"Because you won't let me. But I do know you a little." Andreas stopped the glider and turned it off. "I know quite a few things about you. You like the outdoors and animals. You're curious about the world and want to travel. You have a great appetite for knowledge. You examine every new thing you learn from all angles and tuck the information away like it was a gem."

Andreas turned toward him. Jabez didn't face him but felt his eyes on him. His pulse was racing and his head full of all the things Andreas had said about him. No one had ever paid that much attention to him before, or made him think about who he was.

"I know you like sex rough, but you like it gentle too," Andreas continued, "and the cuddling afterward, even if you won't admit it. I know you like simple foods best,

but you'll eat anything." His soft chuckle was like warm fingers stroking down Jabez's spine.

"You're right, I don't know everything about you, but I like what I've uncovered so far. And I could ask you the same question. Other than being glad I got you out of the Fight Palace, do you feel anything for me?"

Too much. Jabez couldn't admit that or give a list of everything he admired about Andreas. There was too much—his joyousness, his sense of humor, his kindness and generosity, his caring. But Andreas still didn't understand that there was nothing good like that in Jabez, no reason to like him except that he was a great fuck. If Andreas ever realized the truth about him, he'd probably get rid of him.

So Jabez did another stupid thing and offered to show Andreas what a dung heap he'd come from. "What your friends wanted to do, go to Brick Town, maybe we should do that. Not tonight, but soon. If you really want to know about me, you should see where I'm from."

There was a pause before Andreas answered. "You're right. I've been around the world and out in space, but I've never been in my own backyard. Before I present my plans for Brick Town to the board, I should know more than facts I've read about the place. Take me there. Show me your world."

Jabez's stomach plummeted. Even as he'd made the rash offer, he'd hoped Andreas would say no. He didn't want to walk the streets of B-town again. Not ever. For one thing, there were people there he couldn't afford to run into. For another, it would bring back memories he was better off forgetting.

"All right. Tomorrow," he said.

* * * * *

Jabez's pulse raced as he and Andreas walked from the parked glider toward the gates of the Brick Town border station. He'd insisted on Andreas leaving his vehicle behind and walking into B-town. The glider was like a flashing neon sign asking someone to steal it. But being on foot was more frightening than riding in the protection of a vehicle. All the previous night, Jabez had tossed and sweated through nightmares about being trapped in B-town.

Only a small percent of Brick Town residents were allowed to work in New Englandia. They had to have proof of employment and a stamped passport in order to go back and forth. If a resident stayed out of the quarter past curfew, he'd be arrested, taken back across the border, lose his travel rights and his job. This was to keep the criminal element contained in the slum where it belonged.

Jabez's steps slowed as they reached the row of gates, cubicles, and armed guards. "This was a bad idea."

Few besides B-town residents returning home ever crossed this way. Not even thrill-seekers like Timon. There weren't any kinky clubs or illegal drugs people couldn't get on safer streets in their own part of the city.

Andreas took his hand. "We'll be all right."

You have no idea. Jabez glanced over at his...whatever Andreas was to him, employer, lover, friend? Dressed in the cheapest clothes they could buy, there was still no hiding his quality. Maybe it was Jabez's imagination, but the man's very walk seemed to signal he was somebody worth mugging. And even with the bill of a cap pulled low over his eyes and his jacket collar turned up, Jabez was afraid Andreas might be recognized as the heir to the Fortias Corporation.

As they reached the gate and a bored-looking guard who was examining ID cards, Andreas gave his hand a squeeze. "We won't stay long. We'll be home in time for dinner."

Jabez nodded. He offered his shiny, new identification that said he worked for Andreas Fortias to the guard. The man's brows shot up, and he looked up at Jabez's face.

"What's your purpose in Brick Town?"

Andreas showed his card as well and began to explain. "I'm on a fact-finding mission for the Fortias Corporation, making an assessment of the services available to the homeless in the depressed portion of the city. This man is serving as my bodyguard. Show him your weapons, Jabez. All licensed and legal," Andreas assured the guard.

He frowned and studied the paperwork Andreas flashed him. "I don't know about this, sir. One armed man to escort you through B-town? Do your people know you're doing this?"

"I'll be safer incognito," Andreas answered smoothly. "The longer you make us linger here, the more attention it draws to us."

"Yes, sir." The guard caved at his authoritative tone and processed them through quickly, as though anxious to be rid of the problem.

"People do exactly what you tell them to, don't they?" Jabez muttered as they walked through the terminal and onto a crowded street. He'd forgotten how closed in it felt here with the tall walls all around.

"Not always, but if you sound sure of yourself, people generally believe you are."

Jabez looked at Andreas, watching him take in his first view of B-town. His gaze darted restlessly from one thing to another, and he couldn't quite hide the distaste that curled his lip.

"No trash compactors?" he asked as he saw the mounds by the street.

"When they break here, they usually stay broken for a while and there's no curbside pickup." Jabez pulled on Andreas's arm, guiding him through the pedestrians. "It's not like uptown where every house and business has a compactor to squash

garbage to the size of a brick." He smiled and added, "But one thing we have that you don't uptown is actual bricks."

He pointed to the dark red, rough wall of the building they were passing. "They say some of the buildings date back to the founding of Boston."

Andreas ran his hand over the wall, feeling the texture. "This part of the city should be declared a national historical site. People should pay to see it!"

"Yeah, I'm sure tourists would be lining up to get into B-town." Jabez grabbed his elbow, pulling him on down the street. "Try not to gape at things. That guy over there is watching us. Don't look at him!"

Squeezing his arm, he steered him around a corner.

"What do people do here? I mean, those who don't work in New Englandia. It looks like there are a few businesses."

"A few. But it's mostly black-market trading and drug manufacturing." He gestured at a woman sitting on the ground and leaning against the side of a building. People stepped over her sprawled legs and continued on their way. "A lot of people live on welfare and spend their days rocked like her."

"See, this is what we need to do. Give people incentive to do more. Give them jobs to go to. Education and job training must be our first priority."

Jabez snorted. "No one out there" –he pointed at the high wall separating the slum from the rest of the city – "wants to hire anyone from in here if they can help it. Maybe as a janitor or for lawn care. But most people wouldn't let someone from B-town in their house to clean it if they offered to do it for a third of what they're paying."

"Then we need to change the image as well, revitalize the community." Andreas sounded so enthusiastic and painfully naive.

Jabez didn't say anything, but Andreas seemed to hear his silent doubt.

"I know I sound overexcited. Until recently, I didn't bother to think about much of anything besides finding new entertainment to fill my days, but I'm trying to make up for that now. At some point you have to try to make a change if you want your life to get better."

They walked in silence for a while, and Jabez breathed in the familiar rank odors that took him back to his youth and made him feel as if he'd never left B-town. If Andreas weren't walking by his side, he'd think he'd imagined that other life in the plush house with the pool and the garden, like a drug dream to while away a long afternoon.

"I've done my share of wasting time," Jabez admitted. "You're right. Sometimes you have to make a change."

Of course, everything that had happened to him he'd stumbled into by chance – the fight club, his meeting with Andreas – but he wanted to meet Andreas halfway and so he offered the words.

Jabez stopped and pointed to a stucco-faced building across the street. The windows were broken and it appeared abandoned. "That's where the shelter I lived in for a while was. Guess they ran out of money or got driven out by the gangs."

A rail-thin bald man wearing a dirty undershirt and baggy shorts came out the front door and staggered down the steps to the street. He was drunk, stoned, or else shaky with age.

Jabez tugged on Andreas's sleeve, urging him across the road through the sparse traffic. It didn't take long to catch up with the tottering old man. He planted himself in front of him and the man jerked back as if to dodge a blow.

"They still run a shelter there?" Jabez pointed at the building.

The man stared at him, mumbled something, and shoved past.

Jabez shrugged. "Anyway, I only spent a little time there. I'll show you some of the other places I lived." Before, he'd avoided Andreas's personal questions. Now that he'd committed to this visit, he felt strangely driven to make him fully understand what it meant to live here.

Halfway down the block, he noticed the man who'd been watching them was back and shadowing them. He felt the cool blade resting against his inner arm, ready to drop into his hand in a split second. There was also the comforting weight of a gun beneath his jacket and another knife hidden under his pant leg in case he was disarmed. The concealed weapons made him feel safe, but his skin still crawled with nervous tension. He knew how quickly a situation could erupt here and a life could end.

"So where's the place you robbed that got you arrested?"

"Not in B-town. Nothing worth stealing here and no cops to arrest you. It's strictly gang law down here. Order maintained by whoever's in power."

"So you were in New Englandia? I thought no one could leave here without proof of employment."

"Fake work visa. Got myself some better clothes. Figured I'd hit a couple of shops uptown and be set for life." He laughed and shook his head. "I was more ignorant about N.E. than you are about here. I blended in about as well as a wolf pretending to be a dog."

Jabez recalled his first view of the city had been like seeing another planet. He'd watched vids set in that wealthy world, but seeing it firsthand, so clean and orderly and bright, had completely put him off his game. Hands shaking, body trembling like a junkie's, he'd walked into a store and drawn the gun. In seconds, store security had taken him down.

"Got caught and arrested right away, spent a few months in jail before they offered me the club contract. Fighting my way to an early release seemed like a good idea."

"It led you to me, so I'm glad you took the option. But it doesn't seem ethical to put prisoners in a position where they could be killed on any given night."

"Sometimes there's worse things than dying. This way." Jabez guided him down an alley as familiar as the hallways of Andreas's house were now. "I squatted lots of places, but this is the first one I remember."

He and Andreas stopped in front of a huge building that might have held offices sometime in its history. Almost all the windows in the crumbling ruin were missing or boarded over. Jabez remembered how cold the rooms got in the dead of winter with only a barrel fire.

He glanced at Andreas, trying to see the place through his eyes, but for himself all he could see was Zach, Gentia, Ugly Joe, Lightning, and the others. His pack, his family, until they died or disappeared one by one.

"The girl you remember, the one you think was your sister, what was her name?"

"Azura. I remember her laughing and running away. We were playing a game, and I remember the food she gave me and her eyes."

"What do you think might have happened to her?"

He shrugged. "A lot of people disappear here. Some are killed or overdose or kidnapped and sold as slaves. But there are stories about black vans that come from the other side and drive around picking up people and taking them away."

"Who?" Andreas frowned.

"It was only a rumor." Jabez hesitated, remembering a boy screaming, men dressed in black putting him into a van and the door sliding closed before the vehicle rolled silently away. "One night I saw something like that happen, but it probably had something to do with gangs."

The van had been too shiny and clean to belong to anyone in B-town, but he kept that thought to himself. It was long ago, and even if that was what had happened to Azura, he couldn't do anything about it now.

The distant sound of laughter and music came from inside the abandoned building. His chest tightened with longing, a ridiculous flash of nostalgia for the place that had been his home. He pictured the inside: sleeping bags or old mattresses on the floor, odds and ends of clothing and whatever things the kids could scrounge, a bunch of ragged brats acting cool and talking tough, getting high, screwing, arguing, and fighting. But this wasn't his world any longer, and he wouldn't take Andreas inside.

"Come on. Let's go get a drink." Jabez strode away, not waiting to see if his boss followed.

He stopped at the first bar they came to and paused inside the doorway, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. He searched for danger as heads turned their way, judging them too, before he led the way to a table in the corner, sitting with his back to the wall so he could continue to watch the room while he drank.

Andreas slid into another seat and their legs bumped beneath the small table. "It's strange for you being back here, isn't it? Is there anyone you want to see while we're here?"

Jabez shook his head.

A waitress came over and he ordered the beer that was on tap, then fished through his pocket for coins to pay with. He made a show of barely having enough money, which should make some of their silent watchers lose interest, if only Andreas didn't carry himself like royalty.

"I've told you about my plans for B-town, but I didn't ask for your input," Andreas said. "That was arrogant of me. You're the one who lived here. You'd know better than me what's most needed."

He stared. "You're asking *my* opinion?"

"Yes. Absolutely. In fact, I think after we work on this plan together, you should come with me when I present it. Give the board a firsthand account of surviving in Brick Town."

Jabez gave a scoffing snort. "Fortias isn't going to go for your plan, and even if they were willing to throw money into this crapper, it wouldn't change anything here."

Andreas folded his arms on the table and leaned forward. "Do you really believe that? You think there's no hope for things to get better?"

"I told you anyone lucky enough to get out should walk away and never look back. There's nothing worth saving."

"What about kids like you, growing up with nothing? Don't you think you deserved a chance? Or that they do? I see the potential in you, and someone needs to see it in them too and help them."

His gut churned with anger he didn't know why he was feeling. As usual, Andreas was trying to be kind and generous and do the right thing, but he was so innocent Jabez wanted to punch him.

The waitress returned with two glasses. Jabez waited for her to leave before answering. "You don't know anything about me or this place. We met because of a bet. It was a fluke and good luck for me. But when it's over, I'll take my money and go somewhere far away from this city. I'll never return to B-town, and I wouldn't care if the whole place burned."

Andreas held his glass but didn't drink from it. He focused on the foaming beer. "All right. I understand."

Jabez felt terrible, as if he'd kicked a puppy.

"You're right; I don't know you or what you've been through. I'm finally beginning to understand that. We don't have much in common, except for sex. Maybe it's better if we back off on that and concentrate on the fight training. When I've learned all you can teach me, you'll go on your way."

The pit of Jabez's stomach boiled, but not with anger this time. It was a sick, hollow feeling that hurt much worse than anger.

"Because right now you're making me feel like I've been using you like a whore." Andreas's voice had never sounded so cold. All the warmth and the shimmer of

amusement that usually colored his tone leached away, leaving it bone white and jagged.

Jabez swallowed his beer in three gulps. The quiet between them was so complete he could hear the tiny *click* the glass made when he set it back on the table.

"Hey!" a voice called from across the room. "Aren't you somebody famous? I know that face."

Picturing Andreas being held for ransom by the crew in the bar, Jabez rose from his seat. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Following his lead, Andreas pulled the bill of his cap low over his face and stood.

From the corner of his eye, Jabez caught the movement of several people rising from their stools at the bar. "Hold up. What's your hurry?"

He seized Andreas's elbow and hustled him toward the door. Better to play deaf than respond to these guys. Not until he'd pushed Andreas through the door and closed it behind him did he draw a breath.

He continued to march Andreas along, but a glance behind told him trouble had stayed in the bar. Not a surprise. It was one thing for them to threaten someone who'd stupidly stumbled onto their turf, another to come after him on the street.

A couple of blocks away, he turned a corner. Jabez took another look behind and when he faced forward again, a fist cracked into his face, popping his head backward. Pain exploded from his nose. Shock slowed his reflexes, and before he could slide his blade into his hand or draw the gun, a knee to his gut drove the breath from him.

Blinking away the flashing lights in his vision, he looked for Andreas. A man pinned his arms from behind, avoiding a backward head butt aimed for his jaw. Jabez felt a flash of pride that Andreas had remembered to use the move; then he turned his attention to his own opponent.

The man who'd been following him earlier looked familiar close-up, but Jabez didn't have time to figure out why. He bent over, drawing a choked breath, and let the blade drop into his hand. Straightening, he thrust at the man before him, slashing his shirt and nicking the chest beneath.

"Asshole! Don't kill me," the man howled.

His voice was more familiar than his face. Jabez drove the knife up under his jaw but halted with the point of the blade pressed to his throat. "Who the hell are you?"

As he looked into the man's eyes from inches away, he suddenly knew. "Lightning."

"Haven't been called that in years." He bared his teeth in a white grin against his dark face. "It's King Leonidas now."

Jabez's eyebrows shot up, and he eased the point of the knife away. "King?"

"You know how fast things change around here. I run the whole southeast side now. Always told you I was gonna be somebody." He glanced down at Jabez's hand and the blade that had nicked his skin. "You planning on cutting my throat?"

"I don't know. You said hello by punching me in the face."

"Love taps, baby." He pulled his arm from Jabez's loose grip and pushed the knife away from his throat. "Besides, I owed you that. Remember the last time we saw each other?"

Jabez searched his mind and found a muddy memory of a fight about who owned something; he couldn't even remember what now, a big argument, a fistfight, and Lightning moving out of the squat. He'd disappeared after that.

"You fucked me up good. Hadn't been for you, I'd have been paying attention and on my guard that night. Instead, I got grabbed. It was a miracle I ever escaped."

"Escaped from where?" Jabez checked on Andreas, who'd stopped struggling now that the man holding him had loosened his grip.

"The black van is no lie. They take people, do shit to 'em, and when they're done, the lab rats are got rid of. If I hadn't got free, they'd have taken me to that room. Nobody ever came back from it."

"Human experiments?" Andreas said. "Where did this happen? Did you go to the police after you escaped?"

Leon looked at him, then at Jabez. "Who is this guy?"

"You have rights. People can't get away with that."

Leonidas moved toward Andreas and Jabez tensed, but his old pal just rapped his knuckles on the other man's forehead. "*People* can do whatever they want, and nobody here's got any rights 'cept what we take for ourselves."

He turned back to Jabez. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Fact-finding mission," Andreas spoke for him, and Jabez wished he were standing closer so he could kick him in the ankle to shut him up. "There are some who'd like to make Brick Town a better place to live through outreach programs and financial aid."

"As long as they keep out of the King's business. Fuck with the status quo, and you fuck with me."

"Can you tell us more about the facility you escaped from? Where is it, and how did you get out?"

"You ask too damn many questions."

"He's trying to help. He's always trying to help," Jabez said.

"Maybe we can do something to shut it down if you tell us where it is." Andreas moved toward them, entreating with his open hands and concerned expression.

"That side of the wall. Uptown." Leonidas jerked his thumb. "Big white building, long and low, no windows. When I got out, I saw the capitol dome way up the hill, so I guess it was south about a dozen blocks. The industrial section."

"Thank you. That's very useful."

"How useful?"

"We didn't bring any cash or credits, Lightning, so don't try to jack us." Jabez pulled back his jacket to reveal the pistol he wore.

"Hey, man, we're friends. I wouldn't think of it." The dark glitter in his eyes could've been amusement or anger. With Lightning, Jabez recalled, one often flared into the other.

"We've gotta go now." Jabez took Andreas's arm.

"Keep it real, brother. Don't let your friend fancy you up too much," Lightning advised.

"Nice meeting you, Mr. King," Andreas shouted over his shoulder as Jabez pulled him away.

Not until they'd made it to the checkpoint within sight of the guards did Jabez relax. He glanced back to find King Leonidas and his mate had disappeared into the crowd.

"Well, that was interesting," Andreas said. "If it's true, then it's another reason to shed some light on what goes on here in Brick Town and how the people are treated. The city can't ignore this place any longer."

Jabez clamped his mouth shut as the uniformed guard checked their IDs and paperwork and ushered them through the gate. When they were seated safely in Andreas's glider, he finally spoke.

"Do you see? There's nothing you can do to fix that place. People like him and all the other gang lords will take whatever money you throw at B-town. The people you want to help won't see any aid."

"So we shouldn't even try?"

"Do whatever you want, but I'm telling you how it is."

"Noted." Again Andreas's voice was cool and didn't sound like the man Jabez had come to know. Andreas guided the gleaming vehicle onto the expressway and headed out of the city toward home.

Toward home. As the word rang in his mind, Jabez knew he'd become far too attached to both the man and his living situation. Even if Andreas gave him enough severance pay to travel the world, there was no place else he wanted to go.

Realizing how much he cared scared the hell out of him. He hunkered in brooding silence, closing Andreas out because he'd let him too far in.

Chapter Nine

It was the first night in a long time that Andreas had slept in his bed alone. He missed the warmth of Jabez's big body pressed up against his side or curved around his back. He missed the weight of the other man's arm slung over him or his heavy leg pinning him down. How had he become accustomed to having a bed partner so quickly?

In the past, he'd found it annoying when one of his overnight guests stayed too long. They were sexy and fun, but he wanted them gone by pretty early in the morning so he could get on with his day. He'd never once felt that way about Jabez. He could linger in bed with him for hours and never grow tired of it, maybe because Jabez didn't chatter and gossip about stupid things.

As he heaved an impatient sigh and rolled over again, he wondered if Jabez missed sleeping with him too. After their trip to B-town, he'd remained quiet, sunk in his memories. Andreas had wanted to patch up their earlier quarrel and take back his suggestion they put their sexual relationship on hold. But considering Jabez's comment about taking his earnings and leaving, Andreas realized he was the one who was going to end up with a broken heart when his lover eventually walked away. Better to stick to his resolve to back off on the sex that had transformed into deeper emotions on his part. Maybe if he gave Jabez time and space, he'd realize he had feelings for Andreas too. If not, wasn't there some old saying about "if you love something, set it free"?

The uneasy night passed in fitful dozes and long, sleepless stretches, and when Andreas woke in the morning, he had the prospect of combat with Jabez to look forward to. He'd come to equate the hand-to-hand duels with sex. They left him as charged up as any foreplay.

Before he finished dressing, his phone rang. His father's voice snapped through the earpiece. "Andreas, come into the office today. I have something to discuss with you."

The forbidding tone made him nervous, but Andreas chose to ignore it and use the opportunity presented to him. "Good, because there's something I need to share with you too. An idea I had about—"

"Eleven thirty in my office then. I have a lunch date at noon." His father cut the connection before he could respond.

His stomach churned as it often did when he had to deal with his father. They had few personal things to talk about, no shared history of baseball games or father-son fishing trips. Their contact throughout the years had always been brief and businesslike. Andreas had been another appointment for Quentin Fortias to schedule into his overcrowded day.

The only good thing about his father's early-morning call was that it distracted him from fixating on Jabez. When he went to the training room where Jabez was practicing slow-motion martial arts moves, Andreas simply watched the beautiful dance and rippling play of muscles for a few moments before interrupting.

"I have to meet my father in the city this morning. I won't have time for a workout."

Jabez brought his hands down to his sides and turned toward him. In the early-morning sunlight pouring through the glass, his eyes were a bright blue that made Andreas's heart flip. "All right."

Andreas paused on the verge of asking him along. Jabez could wait during the meeting, and afterward they could go to a restaurant and see some sights around the city. It would be a pleasure to show him the art museum and the ships in the harbor. Or they could drive out to the nature preserve and take a walk. But they weren't dating, and he was supposed to be distancing himself. Andreas closed his mouth and walked from the room.

He ate breakfast alone, organized the materials for his presentation, including running through his speech, then went out to the garage and got in the glider. He sat for a moment behind the wheel, thinking about what his father might want with him today. He'd never call him in for a commendation, so it was probably a reprimand for something he'd done wrong.

As he'd done many times before, Andreas ran through his recent actions to try to figure out what his transgression might have been. The top contender was punching Timon in front of the club. Somebody in the crowd taking footage of celebrities had spread images of the fight to the media. At least there was no way his father would've found out about the visit to Brick Town or his houseguest, Jabez.

There was no point in worrying about facts he couldn't change. Andreas took a deep breath and exhaled, expelling his anxiety before zipping out of the driveway. Soon he was on the highway retracing yesterday's route into the city.

As country quickly gave way to the urban zone, Andreas saw the glistening white splendor of New Englandia with new eyes. After the squalor and filth of Brick Town, the sparkling buildings made of faux marble and Sturdi-glass appeared almost too

pristine to be real. The architectural style was all new-Greco-Roman chic since the city had been built postplague. The classic columns and symmetrical facades were pleasing to the eye, and the gardens, statues, and fountains that decorated the city were lovely, but for the first time Andreas perceived the false front they presented.

Everything wasn't beauty and light in New Englandia any more than it was in the dark tumor of B-town. There were hidden ills beneath the glossy surface, including the mysterious laboratory Leonidas had claimed existed—if the “king” had told the truth. Andreas decided to look for the building when his appointment with his father was over. If he could locate it, he'd try to find out the truth and who was accountable for what went on inside.

But right now he needed to concentrate on maintaining a cool, collected front as he faced off against his own personal demon. Andreas was already sweating, and not from heat, as he walked from the car park into the Fortias Building and took the lift to his father's office suite on the top floor.

As he walked down the hushed hallway, he ticked off his talking points about the Brick Town project. He decided to outline the pluses for Fortias before beginning his laundry list of B-town's needs. Not only would they be fulfilling community needs, but their generosity would give a boost to the Fortias name. Urban revitalization and new jobs would create more consumers for all the products and services of the corporation's many companies.

His father's secretary greeted him. “He's ready for you.” Which translated meant, *You've kept him waiting, and he's already annoyed.*

Andreas checked the time on his watch. He wasn't even late yet. It was several minutes before eleven thirty. He surreptitiously wiped his damp palms on his trousers before entering the office and extending his hand across his father's desk. “Father.”

The image of himself in twenty-five years glanced up and nodded, but didn't rise or shake his hand. “Andreas. Sit down.”

He sank into the chair and gazed across the highly polished surface of the desk at his father's folded hands, then forced himself to lift his gaze to his eyes.

“Is there a problem?” Andreas followed his father's cue and cut through any pleasantries. He had a sinking feeling today was exactly the wrong time to present his plan and that there would probably never be a right one.

“I've heard about your new living arrangement. It's unacceptable. Perhaps if you'd acted discreetly, you might've gotten away with hosting a killer in your house, but now that you and that man are splashed all over the media, you'll have to get rid of him.”

“Excuse me?” Andreas had caught a glimpse of the fight on the media-screen the morning after it had happened, but he'd been so focused on his trip to Brick Town that he hadn't listened to more than a few words of the broadcast.

“I said get rid of him. You're damaging the Fortias name with your behavior, fist fighting over a whore.”

"How did they find out about Jabez?" But Andreas already guessed the answer. His friends had spread the word.

"It doesn't matter. I knew about your latest peccadillo days ago, and I should've said something then, but I hoped you'd get bored quickly and send the man back where you got him. Now it's gotten messy, so I'm forced to intervene." His scowl deepened. "I don't have time for this nonsense. If the media approaches you, you should express remorse for drinking too much and fighting, but refuse to comment on your lover."

"I am sorry for hitting Timon, although I wasn't drunk. But I *don't* apologize for bringing Jabez home. He's been training me to defend myself and... Actually, 'no comment.' You don't need to know about him any more than the media does. He's my business."

"No, son. He's *our* business, because unchecked gossip can affect our business. You need to learn what you do has repercussions. It reflects on the family name, which in turn reflects on the corporation's image."

Andreas swallowed and counted slowly to ten while keeping his hands loose on the arms of the chair. "I understand that, which is why I've been discreet, except for the incident outside the club. I'll call the press, make my apology, and explain that Jabez is my new bodyguard. You have a platoon of bodyguards, Father. No one is going to question me hiring one."

He held still and waited. His father was the master of nerve-racking pauses. But when Quentin spoke again, his tone had actually lightened. "That's not a bad spin. I suppose you can keep him around in that capacity, but I don't want to see any more news about you splashed across the media. This is a delicate time for Fortias. Public opinion isn't as...favorable as it used to be. We want to present an impeccable reputation to both our investors and the general public."

Andreas gritted his teeth at his father's arrogant bestowing of permission to keep Jabez as if he were a new pet. He was twenty-five years old, but the man still treated him as if he were ten. Andreas hid his frustration and took advantage of his father's abrupt change in mood to bring up his idea.

"Speaking of favorable impressions, I have a proposal which might help improve our corporate image. I'd like to show you my plan before presenting it to the board. I've sent it to your e-box. If you'll open it on your screen, I can outline it quickly. I know you're in a time crunch."

"Yes, I am." His father glanced at his watch. Andreas knew there were almost twenty minutes left in their meeting. The harangue about his improprieties hadn't taken that long. "I'll look over what you sent me and get back to you."

"I'd like to go over it with you. If you'd allow me to explain a few things —"

"If your proposal's strong enough to be presented to the board, it shouldn't require extra explanation." He rose from his chair. "I need to get ready for my lunch meeting. I'll talk to you about this later."

Dismissed, there was nothing Andreas could do but head for the door. If he tried to argue the point, his father would view him as a wheedling child. He'd never offer Andreas the same measure of courtesy he gave his business peers by hearing him out.

Although he'd spent less than a half hour in the building, by the time Andreas reached his vehicle again, he was wrung out. Hell, maybe if he did spend more time in the office, he could become a viable part of the corporation instead of just "the heir." He'd spent too many years avoiding responsibility and pursuing fun. Since no one had expected anything of him, he hadn't given it.

Now he was ready to step up. But in order for the board or his father to take his plans seriously, he had to prove his knowledge of the corporation and its inner workings. It was time to study as he never had in college, read about every company under the Fortias umbrella, and figure out how the whole intricate mess worked. The prospect sounded more challenging, and certainly a lot less interesting, than learning to fight had proved to be.

As he drove from the lot, he called Timon.

"What's up, bruiser?" He sounded as sarcastically cheery as always. "Calling to invite me over so your friend can pound me too? Mm, I wouldn't mind a pounding from him."

A sincere apology died on Andreas's tongue, and he had to manufacture one. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry. Since the footage apparently got broadcast everywhere, I'll be making an apology through the media too."

"Daddy's orders?"

"No. It's the right thing to do. I was wrong, and I'm glad you're not pressing charges for assault."

"Who says I'm not? Kidding! I get it. You were only defending your boy's honor. What a knight in shining armor you turned out to be."

"He's not my boyfriend. He's my bodyguard."

"That's the official story?"

"Yes. It would've been nice if you'd kept your mouth shut about who he is." Andreas stopped the glider at a light and sat tapping his fingers against the wheel, wondering how he could politely cut the call short.

"You can blame Rabi for sharing the juicy details about your lover with the press. He knew they'd eat up the gladiator-turns-houseboy angle. I think he owes a lot of money to his bookie right now, so he probably wanted some quick cash."

"How's your face?" Andreas changed the subject.

"The cut on my cheekbone is healing, but my eye's black, blue, purple, and red. My little minx, Xion, tells me it's sexy, makes me look so badass."

"Is that the boy you picked up that night?"

"Yep. You know me. I don't usually like to take my tweenies home, but he was so sweet, tending to my injury and all, that I think I'll keep him around awhile."

"Again, I'm truly sorry for hitting you."

"No big deal. Throw a big 'forgive me' party in my honor, and all will be forgotten. But seriously, I miss hanging with you. Ever since you bought Mr. Muscles, you don't spend any time with me. I don't need a party, just a scrap of your time. Aren't we friends anymore?"

Andreas hesitated as the thought flew through his mind that they weren't. He no longer wanted Timon's company, no longer found him amusing, and never had found him all that likeable. The hesitation was long enough to throw Timon into a fit.

"My God, what was that, a pause? You paused?"

The light changed, and Andreas drove forward. "Of course you're my friend, but I feel like I'm changing, figuring out some stuff about myself. I need some time to think about what I want from—"

"Oh no. Thinking is overrated. Listen, whatever I've done to piss you off, you've got to let me make it up to you."

It suddenly occurred to Andreas that Timon was trying too hard. He was the one who'd been punched in the face but he was insistent on fixing their friendship. This wasn't the Timon he knew, who could be vindictive to a painful degree. Something was up. And then what his father had said earlier hit him.

"I knew about your latest peccadillo days ago. I should've said something then, but I hoped you'd get bored quickly and send the man back where you got him."

How had he found out about Jabez? Who kept him abreast of the details of Andreas's life, which he always seemed to know about with a paternal sixth sense? Andreas and Timon used to joke about Quentin having spies watching him. Andreas had never imagined that the joke was a cover-up, but the spy was real.

"Timon, you want to get together? Meet me for lunch right now at the Acropolis. Don't bring your new friend. Come alone."

"Well, that sounds more dire than friendly when you say it like that. Are you going to black my other eye?"

"I just want to talk. You're right. We have some issues to work out."

* * * * *

On the way to the restaurant, Andreas took a roundabout route, cruising the streets in the area King Leonidas had described. There were plenty of white buildings, but most had many windows. He was ready to give up the search and resume it after his lunch date when he turned a corner and saw a facility such as the king had described—nearly windowless, basically a warehouse but set in lush landscaping so it blended with the rest of the buildings on the block.

Andreas brought the glider to a slow crawl past the block-long structure. The discreet sign in front proclaimed: ASCLEPIUS ENTERPRISES. He turned and made a complete circuit of a city block, the perimeter of the grounds. There was nothing to

indicate what was manufactured there. He could only assume, if Jabez's old friend told the truth, that it was a scientific facility, perhaps experimenting with pharmaceuticals since Asclepius was the Greek god of healing.

What better way to check the efficacy of the drugs than on human rather than animal test subjects? The dregs of B-town were perfect candidates because they wouldn't be reported missing.

It was nearing the time he'd set to meet Timon, so he pulled away from the curb and headed toward the restaurant. He mentally prepared himself to ask his friend the hard questions about exactly what services he performed for his father.

Although Timon's apartment wasn't too many blocks from the Acropolis, he could be counted on to arrive late. He was always late. However, when Andreas walked into the dining room, Timon was already seated at a table. He almost didn't recognize him at first because his hair was dyed what might have been its original color – brown – and his head was bent over the wine list.

Andreas didn't wait for the hostess but crossed the restaurant and slid into the other chair at the table. "You're on time."

"I know. Isn't it scandalous?" He looked up, and Andreas felt a jolt of guilt at the sunset colors around his left eye and cheekbone. "God, I'm sorry about that." He indicated the injury.

"It adds to my cachet. Makes people wonder what I've been up to if they've been hiding under a rock and haven't seen the broadcasts." His smile was so sincere, it nearly made Andreas doubt his suspicions. Timon was his friend, even if he was a wiseass jerk.

After the server arrived, Andreas ordered a drink and settled back in his seat, searching for a way to ask what he didn't want to hear the answer to.

"All right. I've known you too long. You have something weighty on your mind. Spill." Timon arched a brow and tapped his manicured fingernails on the tabletop. "Is it something else about your new boy?"

"His name is Jabez." Andreas realized Timon had never used it, never referred to him as if he was a real person. "And yes, there is something I've been wondering about. My father mentioned knowing about him before our picture ended up in the media, and it occurred to me that no one but you knew about him living with me."

The raised brow lifted even higher. "Your point?"

"I think you told my father. I think maybe you've been reporting to him about a lot of personal details of my life for a long time."

Now both eyebrows rose. "I'm your father's secret spy? I thought we'd decided it was Mrs. Gamble."

Andreas didn't smile at the old joke. He'd never really believed his housekeeper tattled to his father.

"Or that your house was bugged." Timon continued to seek a smile.

When Andreas stared at him, waiting for a real answer, he rolled his eyes and sighed. "All right. You win. I'm the snitch, but it was to protect you. After you moved into your own place and refused to have bodyguards any longer, your father asked me to keep an eye on you for him. Sort of like a guardian angel without the halo. So I've been doing him this favor, but it doesn't make our friendship any less real."

Even though he'd guessed as much, Andreas's stomach felt like it did when Jabez plowed a fist into it. He expelled a soft burst of air.

"Oh, come on. You aren't going to take this the wrong way, are you?"

"Is there a right way to take it?" Andreas was proud at the calm tone he managed.

"Yes. You forgive me, and we both laugh about it."

"How much did you tell him? The things I did or the things I said too? Private conversations? How about pictures? Did you take pictures too?"

Timon frowned, his perfect, slender brows reaching for each other. "Now you're being ridiculous. I told you it was only meant to keep you safe. If I saw you getting into anything bad, I was to share it with Quentin or caution you against it."

Andreas laughed harshly. "Unless you were the one leading me into trouble. I never would've been at the cage fights, let alone hooked up with someone there, if you hadn't driven me into it."

"I know I'm not a good conscience. But I never suggested anything that would actually put you in danger."

"Unbelievable!" Andreas shook his head. "You were the one with the stupid plan to go slumming in B-town that night at the club. But that's not the point. You lied to me. You pretended to be my friend when you were actually my guard."

"I really was your friend. I am!"

Andreas pushed back his chair and rose. "No, Timon, you're not. Don't call me again." He started to walk away so abruptly, he almost ran into the waiter returning with their drinks.

"Andreas, don't be like this." Timon's voice followed him through the restaurant. "You just need some time. I'll call you in a few days."

* * * * *

As he drove toward home, his mind ranged from one disappointment to the other. His father didn't think enough of his ideas to give him a few minutes of his attention, and his longtime friend was a big-time liar. His whole body ached, and he wanted to crawl back into bed and start the day over again, but with a dusting of magic to make everything turn out differently. The only positive thing he'd accomplished all day was discovering a name and address for the building Leonidas had described.

By the time he reached home, he was hungry from missing lunch, but his stomach was so twisted in knots, he didn't know if he could eat. More than food he needed to

see Jabez, even if they were currently estranged. He couldn't resist the pull and searched every room of the house for him.

When he came across Mrs. Gamble dusting the living room, she simply pointed at the doors leading to the garden. "He's out there. Lunch has already been served. If you want anything, you'll have to make it yourself."

"Yes, ma'am."

He walked outside and down the brick path winding through the raised flower beds with their profusion of colors and scents. The soothing gong of the chimes, the sweet smell of flowers, and the cool breeze ruffling his hair reminded him there were elemental good things in life to balance rejection and betrayal. And when he rounded a curve in the path, he saw something that made him feel even better. Bare-chested and eyes closed, Jabez lay on a patch of grass by a flower bed, soaking in the sunshine. He looked so peaceful and contented with a half smile curving his lips that Andreas stood still, not wanting to disturb him.

After a few seconds, Jabez spoke without opening his eyes. "Are you going to stand there gawking at me or say something?"

"I'd be content to look at you for quite a while," Andreas admitted with a smile, "but I wouldn't mind talking." He came over and sat in the grass beside Jabez. The tension that had hovered between them since the night at the club seemed to magically disappear in the sunlight.

Jabez opened his eyes a crack and looked up at him. "Bad day?"

Andreas nodded. "I'm to stop making a spectacle of myself in public, but Father agreed you could remain here as my bodyguard. Generous of him. Then he pushed me out of the office without looking at my proposal. But the fun wasn't over yet. I figured out my good friend Timon has been reporting to my father about me for years, telling anything he thought was useful for him to know. And how was your day?"

"Worse. Mrs. Gamble gave me spinach at lunch." Jabez's deadpan delivery made Andreas chuckle, and the tightness in his chest loosened even more.

He stretched out on the ground beside Jabez and plucked a blade of grass, rolling it between his fingers. "I located the place Leonidas told us about and took down the address. I'll see what I can find out about it."

Jabez studied Andreas's face, then lifted his hand and cupped his cheek in his palm. Andreas pressed against the comforting warmth, feeling rough calluses against his cheek.

"Sorry you had a bad day." His voice was low and kind, so different from his usual gruffness that it made tears prickle in Andreas's eyes.

"I have nothing to complain about, right? Compared to what you've been through in your life, my troubles are pretty insignificant."

Jabez opened his eyes wider and the light struck them, making them glow like blue neon. "Your friend backstabbed you. You're pissed."

"I am," Andreas admitted, "and disappointed and hurt, but not as much as I was a few minutes ago." He turned his face to press his lips against Jabez's palm. His kiss was rewarded with another caress of his face.

"I'm sorry for what I said about taking my pay and leaving. I don't want to go anywhere," Jabez said abruptly. He drew a deep breath and blew it out with a *whoosh*. "I've been practicing that in my head all day."

Andreas smiled and kissed his hand again. "I'm glad, because I want you to stay. Fuck the fight training. We can do it or not. I don't care. I just want you around for as long as you'll stay."

Jabez slipped his hand around the back of Andreas's neck and pulled him down for a kiss. Their lips brushed softly together; then Jabez pulled away and whispered, "I want to stay with you."

It was as if the magic start-over dust Andreas had fantasized about were sprinkled over them. The arguing and tension were suddenly gone, replaced by glowing warmth and a closeness he'd yet to feel with Jabez. This was the tender side of the man he'd longed to see, had believed was hidden under his hard exterior. It was worth the wait and the trouble he'd gone through these past days of gently prying him open.

Jabez put his other hand around Andreas's waist and pulled him on top of him. His kisses were as soft and loving as his words. His hands roamed up and down Andreas's back and ass with a gentler touch than usual. There was an undeniable undercurrent of sex with their erections pressed against each other, but this wasn't the raw, gritty sexuality Andreas had come to expect from him.

After a moment, Andreas pulled away from the kissing to lay his head on Jabez's shoulder. He closed his eyes and reveled in simply being held against his big, warm body. The heat radiating from him was comforting. Andreas nuzzled his neck and breathed in the scent of his skin. Today he may have lost a friend and his father's confidence, but he'd found something much better.

Andreas nearly drowsed in his lover's embrace under the hot sun, until his stomach loudly grumbled.

Jabez laughed. "You need to eat?"

"I'm so hungry I could devour just about anything I get my hands on." Andreas slipped his hand between them and felt the bulge in Jabez's pants. He rubbed the solid girth of his cock through the material.

"Not yet." Jabez pushed Andreas off him and sat. "Food first."

He rose and offered his hand to pull Andreas to his feet, and he didn't let go but continued to hold his hand as they walked together from the garden into the house.

* * * * *

Preparing food in the kitchen led to finding interesting uses for some of Mrs. Gamble's cooking ingredients. The oils and whipped cream were especially useful.

Andreas blocked the door so the housekeeper wouldn't walk in on them unexpectedly. He couldn't afford to lose his cook.

Much later, after swimming and spending time in the hot tub and another joyous reunion in Andreas's bed, Jabez lay sleeping. Andreas caressed his soft brown fuzz of hair, leaned and kissed his forehead, then went to his terminal to research Asclepius Enterprises.

His search confirmed it was a pharmaceutical company, but the information about what drugs they produced was sketchy. A discreet site with virtually no information was all that represented the company to the world.

Without thoughts of his father or Timon to distract him, the nagging feeling that he recognized the name suddenly sharpened into knowledge. Andreas entered his corporate password and sifted through information about the parent companies and subcompanies that made up Fortias's holdings. He found Asclepius so quickly, it took him by surprise. They were a legitimate research and testing facility for a wide variety of prescription drugs that were produced by another company. On the surface they had nothing to hide, but if the tales of how their products were tested were true, they had much to be accountable for. Andreas intended to make sure they paid.

Chapter Ten

Jabez stroked a hand through Andreas's hair, glossy black curls coiling around his fingers. His plan to view this gig as business-only had disappeared the moment Andreas entered the garden yesterday afternoon. One look at his wounded expression, and all he could think about was trying to stop the sadness any way he could. He cared for Andreas much more than he wanted to.

Right now as they lay side by side in the bed, Jabez looked into his eyes, willing him to see his feelings and believe what he told him.

"Listen, 'cause I only want to say this once. This is a stupid idea. Dumber than bringing me home or sightseeing in B-town. Going into that lab to ask questions is a good way to get killed. The only thing you could do that'd be even dumber would be to walk the streets of B-town hoping to get picked up and taken there just to gather proof."

Andreas raised a brow. "That's not a bad idea! I don't expect they'd actually allow me to see the lab, but going undercover—"

"Stop! Don't even think about it. These people are dangerous as fuck. Leave it alone."

"I'm joking." He smiled. "I'm not that crazy. But I won't forget what I know. I'm done being ignorant about what the corporation that bears my name is involved in. Maybe no one on the board knows how Asclepius Enterprises conducts their testing, but somebody should. I can't go to them with only rumors and hearsay. I have to have facts to show them."

"How about the police? Let them investigate."

Andreas frowned. "I can't call them on hearsay. If it turns out not to be true, a raid would cast a stigma on Asclepius and Fortias. The board would never take me seriously again. I have to know for sure before I bring anyone else into it."

"Then let me go." Jabez's heart raced as he made the offer. He didn't want to go anywhere near the monsters who'd been a faceless threat for half his life, the very people who'd maybe taken Azura away. "I'll find a way to break in, take some vids, and you wait outside in the glider."

Andreas shook his head. "It's too dangerous. They probably have elaborate security. I still think the best route is for me, as a member of the board of the corporation that *owns* the company, to demand a tour of the facility."

Jabez released an angry breath and the impulse to grab Andreas by the throat and shake sense into him. "Then get the board to support you and send in a team. Maybe get them behind your B-town proposal first."

Andreas pushed up off the pillows and propped his head on his hand. "I thought you didn't believe in my plan?"

Yeah, but I'd rather have you focused on that than putting yourself in danger. "I don't know if they'll buy it, but you gotta try to sell it if it's important to you."

The sexy little creases bloomed at the corners of his mouth. "Thank you! I appreciate your support."

Jabez shrugged. "Why do you care what I think, anyway?"

"Because your opinion is important to me. *You're* important to me."

A warm glow, different from sexual heat, spread through him, but he still didn't understand why he seemed to matter to Andreas. And he was afraid of how brief his crush might be. Would Andreas get bored with him and send him away?

"So, will you let it rest for now?" Jabez continued. "They've been there this long, what's a little longer?"

"You might not feel that way if you were one of the people being held there, but all right," Andreas agreed. "I'm not waiting for my father to respond to my proposal, since I'm pretty sure he's going to ignore it. Instead I'll send it to the board and request a meeting, during which I can bring up this other matter. The corporation's concerned about public image. I'll suggest they take care of the problem before it blows up in their faces."

Safe for now. Feeling like he'd defused a bomb by stopping Andreas from marching blindly into danger, Jabez rose from the bed. "Enough lounging. We have work to do."

"Hm. I thought we might have a different kind of training today, like hiking some mountain trails."

He smiled as he bent to pick up his pants from the floor. "Mountain climbing around here?"

"We can fly anywhere we want. The jet-glider is so fast, I can whisk you away to the Blue Ridge and back before dinner."

"You're serious." Jabez stared at him.

"Anywhere you want to go. We need to get out and see some different scenery. We'll take a lunch along. I'm sure Mrs. G won't mind packing one."

"She'll mind, but she'll do it anyway." Jabez had learned the cook thrived on complaining but loved taking care of Andreas. "Okay, let's go."

* * * * *

In a little over an hour they were showered, dressed, and ready. Andreas took a few minutes at his computer to send his proposal to the board members, then looked at Jabez and shrugged. "Guess that's it. Ball's in their court."

With a hamper full of food in the back of the jet-glider, they sat close together in the tiny cockpit. Jabez had never flown before, and his pulse raced as the little jet lifted off the ground.

"You sure this is safe? It's so small."

Andreas grinned. "Are you nervous?"

"No." He touched his seat belt and pressed back into his seat as the ground became a blur and they ascended to the sky.

Andreas was right. They were out of New Englandia airspace and over the mountains almost before Jabez had time to get used to flying. The little jet didn't require a runway, so they touched down in a parking lot beside the land gliders.

They were at the base of a mountain that was part of a national preserve. Trails led in several directions. The length and difficulty of the trek varied on each path. Andreas chose the extreme climb. Jabez carried the hamper of food and followed him.

He drew a deep breath, and the sharp scent of pine nipped his nose. Every sound seemed magnified, the *crunch* of gravel and dead leaves beneath his boots, the wind through the tree branches, birdcalls and insects buzzing, Andreas's quiet cough. Jabez couldn't take in enough of the vibrant greens of nature and the vivid blue sky, the gray rocks, velvet moss, and hidden flowers.

He'd seen more nature over the past weeks of living with Andreas than he'd experienced in his entire lifetime. But the suburban countryside near Andreas's home was nothing compared to the beauty of this natural wilderness. It was the world Jabez had always dreamed of seeing – fresh, earthy, a world away from the stench of B-town or the slick elegance of New Englandia.

After walking in silence for several minutes, Andreas glanced over his shoulder. "You like it?"

Jabez could only nod. "Like" was a weak word, but he couldn't express the almost painful joy this place roused in him.

The path veered upward, an easy incline at first, then a steeper cut. The wide trail became narrower and rougher. They clambered over fallen logs and detoured around boulders as they continued to go upward. Jabez found himself breathing hard and his calves burning from the climb.

"Whew, I'm out of breath," Andreas echoed his thought. "It's the altitude. We're not up too high yet, but it's a steep ascent. Worth the view, though. You'll see."

Jabez hefted the hamper into his other hand and wished they'd thought to put the lunch in a backpack as he continued to plod along the track. It seemed fainter and less traveled now, as if many had given up and gone back when the climb grew too difficult.

"You come here with your friends?" Jabez couldn't picture stylish Timon, overweight Rabi, or listless Simeon making this climb.

"No. I've always hiked alone. It's kind of a spiritual walk for me, a chance to get away from my life and gain some perspective. I haven't come up here in a long time. I guess I lost myself for a while, got caught up in diversions and stopped thinking too deeply." He glanced back at Jabez again. "Until you. You made me take a hard look at my life."

Jabez didn't know what to say. He'd never had such a compliment. Sure, people had told him he was a good fighter or his body was sexy, but no one had ever said he challenged them to think about life.

He stared at the path and trudged on. The forest around them was incredible with its shades of green and different-shaped leaves. Jabez caught movement in the corner of his eye and froze, flicking his gaze toward it. He saw something big, a flash of brown, and then the animal was gone.

"Did you see...?" he asked Andreas, but the other man was too far ahead, pushing branches out of his way and pulling his leg from a snag of brambles.

"Almost there," he called back.

Jabez trotted to catch up, his gaze riveted on Andreas's butt as he climbed a series of makeshift steps hewn into the hillside.

"Here we are." Andreas stopped abruptly.

Stepping around to stand beside him, Jabez inhaled sharply at the view spread out before him. They were on a little plateau that overlooked a deep valley sheltered between the mountains. Treetops fell away in soft green folds below, and the wide sky arched overhead. They might not be at the very top of the mountain, but they were close to it.

Jabez felt powerful, as if he could leap off the edge and fly away, and at the same time very small, but not in the helpless way he'd felt while alone on the streets. He could see himself as a tiny part of a great whole and just as important as a leaf or a river or the entire planet.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Andreas was grinning widely, and suddenly Jabez had to kiss him. He set the hamper down, grabbed his waist, and pulled him close, covering that smiling mouth. His lips pressed against soft warmth, and he slipped his tongue out to stroke lightly over Andreas's tongue.

After a long kiss, he pulled away. "Thank you. For everything." He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat and blinked away the prickling behind his eyes.

Andreas cupped his jaw, stroking a thumb lightly over his cheek. "Shh, you don't need to thank me for anything. I'm glad to have you in my life."

Jabez nodded curtly and turned away. He stooped to rummage through the hamper before he lost control of himself and wept like a child for no good reason at all.

Mrs. Gamble's lunch tasted even better than usual after the long climb and the fresh air. They sat side by side, gazing at the view as they ate, and even Andreas was quiet. The silence was comfortable, companionable, restful, and after a while it prompted Jabez to speak.

"You should paint again. Your paintings are good."

Andreas paused with his sandwich halfway to his mouth and looked over at him with wide eyes. "Where did that come from?"

"Something I've been thinking about. I think you liked it but thought you weren't good enough, so you quit." Jabez paused. He wasn't used to offering opinions. "But if you like it, you should do it, even if it's only for yourself. And you should frame some of those paintings in the attic and hang them in your house."

"You think so?" A smile lurked on his lips, and Jabez wasn't sure if Andreas was pleased by his compliment or amused that he couldn't tell good art from bad.

"Yes, I do," he said firmly.

Andreas put his sandwich down and leaned back on his elbows, legs stretched in front of him. "What about you? What do you like doing? You should feel free to pursue anything you're interested in. I'd be happy to buy you books about any subject or supplies for hobbies or sports."

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "I'm used to just making it from one day to the next. I don't know what I want to learn about. Everything, I guess."

"I can hire you tutors then. Seriously, anything you want is yours."

Uncomfortable with his big promises, Jabez looked away across the valley.

"Have I offended you?"

"I feel like a stray dog you've decided to spoil. You can groom me all you want, but I'll never belong in a dog show. And what happens when you get bored and decide to get a dog with a pedigree?"

"You think I'm just dabbling?" Andreas leaned forward, frowning. "I swear this isn't a game to me. I really feel something for you, and I want you to stay with me always. You could just as easily get tired of me and leave. I have as much reason to fear being abandoned as you do."

Jabez snorted, the idea was so ridiculous.

Andreas reached out and took hold of his arm. "Do you think because I'm rich I have everything I need? What good is it all without someone to love—without someone special to share it with? I need you as much as you need me. We have a bond."

One look into those earnest eyes and Jabez was lost in their shimmering silver depths, hooked like a fish, caught like an animal in a trap or a man in a fight cage. He didn't have the strength to resist the pull of Andreas's gaze or the soft stroking of his

hand on his bare forearm. Jabez *wanted* to believe the other man's promise of affection, and he could no longer deny the connection between them.

He turned his arm over and slid his hand into Andreas's. "Then I promise to stay with you and you promise to keep me around."

Andreas smiled. "Didn't we just do something like this yesterday?"

"Yeah, but I didn't really believe it then," Jabez replied. "Now I do." He tugged the other man toward him and leaned to kiss him.

They finished eating, drowsed in the sun, and climbed the rest of the way to the peak before gathering their picnic supplies and starting down the mountain.

Jabez felt as if they were inside a warm, glowing bubble of light, a perfect sphere that nothing could puncture. Even flying couldn't cause him anxiety. Not until they touched down on Andreas's driveway to find a strange vehicle parked there did the bubble burst.

"My father." Andreas scowled. "He read my message to the board. This isn't going to be pleasant."

Chapter Eleven

He parked the jet, and as they walked into the house, Andreas held tight to Jabez's hand. He should ask him to go to his room and spare him the fireworks, but the truth was he wanted him by his side. They'd made a commitment to each other today, and he wanted to introduce him as his boyfriend to his father. To send Jabez away would only make him feel Andreas wasn't proud to be with him.

"Don't be nervous," he said after they passed Mrs. Gamble in the hallway and she told them his father was waiting in the study.

"I'm not," Jabez replied calmly. "I've faced men who could kill me. All your father's going to do is yell some."

"Yeah, but sometimes I think I'd rather face him in a cage match than listen to his tongue-lashing."

He pushed open the door, and they entered the room where the old man sat behind Andreas's desk, working on his terminal, making himself at home.

"Hello, Father. What brings you out to the country?"

The man ignored him for a moment as he read something on the screen and tapped a response. At last, he deigned to look up, elbows on the desk, hands folded beneath his chin. He studied both of them intently before he finally spoke.

"This is your new bodyguard?"

"This is my friend, Jabez." Despite his resolve, Andreas let Jabez's hand slip from his. He wiped his damp palm on his pants.

His father didn't reply, but the slight roll of his eyes dismissed the relationship. "As long as you keep it private, I don't care. You know why I'm here."

"Yes." Andreas pulled up a chair and indicated to Jabez to take the other seat. He hated that he was facing his father across his own desktop. "I didn't think you were

going to support my plan, so I decided to go forward with it on my own. When I meet with the board, each member can give an unbiased opinion of my ideas.”

The older man snorted. “Unbiased? You can’t be that naive. Their minds were made up before they even read the first page. The title alone, *Brick Town Renovation*, is enough to shut down this foolishness.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but that’s only your opinion. I’ll wait to see what the other board members have to say.” Andreas’s cool tone belied his boiling blood.

“The fact that you sent this without consulting with me first only proves to me how irresponsible you are.” His father sat up straighter and brought his hands down to the top of the desk. “You’re my heir. If I died tomorrow, you’d acquire enough shares of Fortias to make you a formidable threat to the rest of the board. But currently, all you are is an embarrassment to me, a boy rather than the man you’d need to be in order to lead this corporation.”

Andreas had no reply. Another “I’m sorry you feel that way” would be redundant, but how else could he respond to such a caustic statement?

“It’s partly my fault. I haven’t taken the time to teach you what you need to know about business. You have no idea where all the money you waste comes from, and until you understand how the world works, you’ll be an idealistic idiot who doesn’t deserve to bear the Fortias name.”

Andreas waited for his father to catch his breath and resume the tirade. When he added nothing more, he asked, “Is that all?”

The permanent lines etched into the old man’s brow furrowed deeper. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Yeah. That’s plenty.” Jabez’s unexpected voice from his left made Andreas jump.

The big man rose from his seat. The expression on his face was frightening, and for a second Andreas feared he’d launch himself across the desk and tear his father apart. Instead, he stood, feet planted, fists clenching and unclenching loosely by his sides.

“Your son isn’t stupid. Doesn’t matter if his plan works, at least he’s trying to help people. You should be proud. So if you got nothing useful to say, you can go now. He don’t need to hear your negative shit.”

His father’s gaze swept from Jabez to Andreas, waiting for him to silence the nonentity who dared speak to him as an equal.

“Before you go,” Andreas said smoothly, “there’s one more thing you should know. I’ve learned that one of our R and D companies, Asclepius Enterprises, has been using people from B-town as test subjects for years. Isn’t this the kind of ‘bad press’ stuff you were talking about the other day? If so, I think it might be wise for Fortias to get to the bottom of the matter before the media finds out. They’d seize hold of a juicy story like this and squeeze it dry.”

Andreas's father surged from his chair, hands planted on the desk as he leaned across it. "Is that a threat? You moron, don't you understand that all of this" —he indicated the room around them— "is possible because of the corporation? You damage Fortias, and you ruin your own livelihood."

"Maybe I don't need to live like this. Maybe there are other, better ways to live than building your life on the backs of others."

The older man pointed at him. "Keep your mouth shut. Don't say a word to anyone about what you just told me. Do you understand? Let me look into it and see if there's any truth."

Without waiting for a reply, he strode from behind the desk and toward the door where he paused and looked back. "Andreas, do you understand me? For your own safety, you should keep your mouth shut."

The door closed behind him with a click rather than a bang. Andreas stared at it and listened to his father's footsteps recede down the hallway.

"Shit." He inhaled deeply as he waited for his rocketing heart to slow down. "That was not what I intended to say. Not tonight. Not yet."

"Well, you did. And I think your old man's right. You better keep your mouth shut until you find out who knows what and how far they're willing to go to keep it a secret."

"But maybe keeping secrets is what's been the problem all these years. Maybe it's time to shake things up and shine some light in dark corners."

The feeling of peace and happiness from their perfect day together still lingered, but it was tainted now by the uproar with his father. Andreas didn't want to get into an argument with Jabez about what he should do next, so he changed the subject.

"Look, there's no reason to let my dad ruin our day. Let's set this aside for now and have a nice soak in the spa. I don't know about you, but my muscles are burning from that uphill climb."

Jabez nodded.

They had a luxurious soak followed by a fine dinner, an evening of playing video games on the media-player, and other kinds of games in bed.

Afterward, as Jabez slept, Andreas reclined against a pile of pillows and watched a news report on the screen. There was famine in the Sudan, a coup in Paraguay, a bombing in Istanbul, and a heated argument at the summit of the United Corporations about allocation of national resources. Countries still existed, but corporations ruled the globe.

Ads flashed on the sidebar, and after a moment, he started paying attention to them instead of to the news. Almost every product, every service, every company, promoted in the advertisements linked back to Fortias either directly or indirectly. *My bread and butter, but is it healthy for the world?*

He looked over at his lover, sleeping so peacefully, his face softened in repose. Faint frown lines still etched his forehead and bracketed his mouth, but he looked much younger. Andreas wondered how old he was. Jabez claimed he didn't know. He hadn't measured the days or years of his life. He'd simply survived them.

Why should anyone be condemned to go through life that way while the other half of society had everything they needed? The corporations had helped create this dichotomy with the way they'd reinvented the global economy postplague. With so many fewer people and the world in upheaval, it had been easy for a few to take control and shape things to their liking. While there were definite benefits to the new world order, there was also a downside that no one seemed to want to explore.

Andreas was tired of waiting. He wanted to make up for all the lost time when he'd been too selfish to be aware of the world around him. He wanted to make up for all Jabez's years of suffering. Reaching out, he traced the scar that bisected the other man's brow and dragged down the corner of his eye, then leaned to kiss where he'd touched.

Jabez grunted and shifted, but didn't wake, proving how safe he now felt here. When he'd first arrived, he would've jerked upright and probably snapped Andreas's neck if he'd touched him while he slept.

Slipping out of bed, Andreas put on a robe and went downstairs. He sat at the chair in his study, which his father had so boldly commandeered. The screen of his terminal glowed a soft rose, and he tapped it awake. He checked his in-box and found it ominously empty. Not one of the board members had weighed in on his proposal, not even to tell him it was a stupid idea like his father had.

Andreas drummed his fingers against the desktop in a soothing rhythm for a few moments and then began to compose a message.

"By now I hope at least some of you will have read through my three-tier plan to revitalize the Brick Town district. I hope you're considering my proposal seriously. I need to add one piece of information that may influence your thinking on this matter. It has come to my attention..."

He outlined the rumors about Asclepius in the briefest manner, adding that the accusations were as yet unproven, but the suggestion was damning.

"If this unethical treatment of the disenfranchised is something our corporation has countenanced, it's a crime. If we simply overlooked the activities of one of our companies, then it's time to review our entire corporate structure."

Too much? Too bold?

His rash nature took over, and he pressed Send, then stared at the screen for a few moments longer before rising and padding back upstairs to bed.

Jabez still slept and snored lightly. Andreas stretched out beside him but didn't sleep for a long time.

* * * * *

The next day, the two men went on an early-morning run that left Andreas invigorated rather than gasping for breath.

"Hey, look at me. I'm a runner now," he informed Jabez. "Not even winded."

"Then maybe we need to add on a few more miles."

"No. I think a shower and breakfast sounds better."

Jabez smiled and didn't argue, and Andreas thought he could quickly get used to this kinder, gentler, less-scowly version of his friend.

They separated to go to their own bathrooms, because not every shower had to be shared, no matter how fun that was. Just as Andreas finished and reached for a towel, his phone rang. His heart rate spiked until he identified the caller as Timon.

"Hello," he answered gruffly.

"Hey. I wanted to apologize again for everything. I hate the way that conversation went. I was glib like I always am and not really apologetic, but I know I was wrong and I don't want our friendship to end over this. It was a real friendship to me, despite my snooping around for your father. I am your friend, Andreas."

He'd rarely heard Timon sound so sincere, but he had too much else on his mind to want to deal with him and his apologies right now. "What do you want?"

"Meet me. Let me take you out for lunch again, just you and me like old times. I'll prove to you I'm serious about making amends."

"How?"

"Hell, here it is up front. I know about your Brick Town proposal. Your dad ranted about it for about an hour last time we talked. He wanted to know why I wasn't aware of it so I could've forewarned him. But I think it's a great plan."

"You think it's a good idea? Now why don't I believe that?"

"All right, maybe not a great plan, but if it's important to you, I want to help make it feasible so the board will listen. Meet me. We'll talk. You'll see."

"Fine. Where?" Andreas jotted down the address of the restaurant and ended the call.

When he told Jabez he'd be going into the city again today, Jabez was less than thrilled.

"You're having lunch with the guy who lied to you and ratted you out to your dad?"

"He says he wants to make amends."

"He's a prick. I'd tell him to fuck off." Jabez paused, then added, "Sorry. What the hell do I know? He's been your friend a long time. If you want to make up with him, you should."

"I don't necessarily want to 'make up' with him, but I'm willing to hear him out." Andreas slipped his hands around Jabez's waist and pulled him close. He leaned in and sampled his mouth, tasting mint on his warm, sinuous tongue. At last he pulled away.

“Won’t be gone long. Tell Mrs. Gamble she can count on two of us for dinner. No surprises.”

The drive into the city seemed to take longer than the jet-glider trip to the mountains had the previous day. It was because Jabez had been with him. Watching the other man’s reaction to flying, his initial fear, then his interest, had been entertaining. Driving to an appointment he didn’t really want to keep was a pain, but at last he neared the address Timon had given him.

Andreas frowned as he glided slowly down the street, searching for the number of the building. None of the buildings looked like they’d house a restaurant, but then Timon was a master of finding the latest trendy culinary spot. His patronage was likely to make a formerly nondescript eatery suddenly hip.

Up ahead, Andreas saw Timon and Rabi loitering on the sidewalk. Timon raised a hand in greeting.

Andreas parked his land-glider at the curb and got out. He was annoyed to see Rabi. With the two of them present, there was little chance of a heart-to-heart conversation with Timon.

“Bruiser! Wait’ll you see what we’ve found for you.” Rabi gestured at the building they stood in front of. “Space. Headquarters for your organization, People For People. Can’t have a foundation without office space, advertising, and slogans. You need an image people can plaster all over their fundraisers. Maybe a little B-town street kid.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Andreas stopped a few feet away, staring at the two men and the building’s empty windows.

“You want contributions, you create a foundation so all the rich people can outdo each other giving to it.”

Timon came over and linked arms with Andreas. “Don’t listen to him. Just take a look inside and see what you think.”

“You’re crazy. The last thing I need is office space.” But he accompanied him inside the building with Rabi following behind, chattering all the while.

“You see? It’s perfect.” His voice bounced off the walls, echoing in the empty chamber. “All you have to do is—”

Andreas heard Rabi’s footsteps behind him at the same time that Timon grasped his arm tighter. And then he felt a wasp sting the side of his neck. Pain radiated from the sharp point of entry. His head buzzed and his vision blurred while his bones seemed to liquefy.

His last clear thought as he fell to the floor and before he lost consciousness was that he hadn’t used one of the defensive moves Jabez had taught him. He’d been set up and blindsided.

* * * * *

When Andreas surfaced into consciousness, his head throbbed and his limbs still felt boneless. His cheek was pressed against moldy-smelling bedding, and he realized he was lying facedown on a thin pallet through which he could feel the hardness of a floor. He was cold, but his body was too numb to shiver.

He dragged his eyelids open and it was like lifting weights. He took in the soiled ticking of the mattress, a cement floor, and a portion of the wall, also cement – the old-fashioned kind, not the faux cement some artists liked to use in their lofts to create the illusion of poverty. He was imprisoned someplace.

Before he tipped off some unseen watcher that he was awake, Andreas tried to take stock of his situation. He guessed Rabi had stunned him with a neuron-gun. His entire nervous system felt like it had been whipped in a blender, which was supposedly how a shot from one of the weapons felt. The question was why?

The only possible answer he could come up with was Fortias. Timon spied for his father. What else might he do for him? Father had threatened him about keeping his mouth shut about Asclepius, and he'd defied him and sent the information to the entire board. Maybe this was some sort of punishment to teach him a lesson. He couldn't wrap his mind around the idea that it might be something worse – that his own father would conspire to hurt him or even kill him to keep a secret.

Maybe Timon worked for other members of the board as well. He clung to that belief like a shipwreck survivor clinging to debris.

The room was quiet; not a hiss or hum of sound infiltrated the eerie silence. Andreas had seen all he could see from his prone position. He struggled to push himself upright and found he still had bones in his body after all – every one of them throbbing with pain.

He sat up and looked around his cell, bare except for the pallet on the floor and a toilet in one corner. There was a door with no handle and a small window, covered on the outside. He searched for cameras but didn't see any sign he was being monitored.

His chest tightened and his breathing grew shallower as the horror of his situation crashed over him. He was a prisoner, held by whom and for what purpose he had no idea. Holding on to the wall, he hauled himself to his feet and shambled around the edge of the room. The walls seemed to be moving closer together, crushing him as he realized there was no way out.

Ransom. That was it. This might have nothing to do with the Asclepius thing. It could be a straight-up kidnapping...by his ex-friends. Andreas knew Rabi had some gambling debt and Timon's trust fund was probably running low.

But that didn't make sense. He knew it was them and would turn them in when he got free. Which meant they could never let him go free, so he was going to be killed.

Theories and questions swirled in his mind faster and faster along with his pacing the perimeter and the racing of his pulse. The need to get out of this tiny, enclosed space was overwhelming. He could barely breathe, and he gasped for air. His vision grew dark at the edges as blood pounded in his temples.

“Oh God!” he muttered and sank down to the floor, putting his head between his knees and fighting his panic under control. Was this how Jabez had felt when he was arrested and thrown in a jail and later the fight club? How had he learned to cope with existing in a tiny enclosure with the knowledge that every day might be his last?

The door slid open, and Andreas scrambled to his feet. His fists clenched and his body tensed as he assumed the defensive posture Jabez had taught him.

The man in the doorway had a weapon pointed at him and a half smile on his face. “Relax, Mr. Fortias. You’re not in any immediate danger. I imagine you’re wondering where you are and why you’re being held. I have the answers you need, but I’m going to have to ask you to calm down, go back to the far corner, and sit.”

For a second, Andreas hesitated, envisioning attacking the man, wrestling the gun from his grip, and punching him senseless, but he obeyed, backing to the wall and sliding down it to sit on his haunches.

The man lowered his weapon slightly. “Very good. Now I’m going to briefly explain your circumstances. You’ve been to cage matches. Our organization holds unique matches for exclusive clientele from across the globe. Celebrity fights.”

Andreas swallowed past the dryness in his throat before he attempted to speak. “My friends did this to me?”

“That’s right. We pay well for our celebrity participants, but they’re not easy to obtain.”

“No one notices when they go missing?”

“Of course, which is why we select carefully from around the world—a famous Bollywood actor, a Venezuelan singer, an American corporate prince like yourself. Only one or two of these matches are held a year, and always at different locations.”

“Sounds like a lot of trouble. Why take such a risk?”

“You’d be surprised what our clients pay for the privilege of witnessing something no one else on earth can claim to have seen. They thrive on the thrill and the idea of being elite.”

Andreas nodded slowly. “A fight to the death?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“But neither opponent will actually make it out of here alive. You couldn’t let them.”

“On the contrary, our clients also pay well to own the victor. They find it extremely arousing to wield power over a celebrity pet. If you win the match, you’ll be auctioned off and live out your days kept and cared for in some secret hideaway.”

“What if both participants refuse to fight? What if we won’t put on a show for these perverts?” Andreas demanded.

The man gave a small smile that made Andreas’s flesh crawl. “One or the other of you *will* attack. There’s always a fight, because people will do anything for the chance to live just a little bit longer.”

Chapter Twelve

Jabez stalked across the gym, took a couple of punches at the bag, then resumed pacing. Even enclosed by a ceiling and walls made of glass, he felt as trapped as he ever had in his cell. It was nearly eleven at night. Andreas still hadn't returned home from the city, and he couldn't decide what to do.

Maybe Andreas was having a great evening out with his friend and hadn't felt like calling home. Hell, it wasn't like he needed to check in with Jabez if he happened to change his plans.

Jabez paced and punched, and his thoughts wavered back the other way. It wasn't like him not to call. He'd promised Mrs. Gamble he'd be there for dinner, and he was more thoughtful than that. Something was wrong. He'd been killed on the highway, mugged on the street, or worse. Jabez didn't want to think about what "worse" might mean.

"Fuck it!" He took the phone Andreas had given him, which he'd yet to use, and put the earpiece on. Andreas wouldn't think he was stepping out of bounds if he gave him a call. It was hours past when he'd said to expect him; anyone would be worried.

The phone went to Andreas's message. His smooth, calm voice only made Jabez more anxious. Something was really wrong, and that fuck-faced asshole Timon had something to do with it. He felt it in his gut, and as a fighter he trusted his instinct above anything. So he'd find Timon, grab him, and punch the information out of him.

Jabez located the keys to the jet-glider and asked for Mrs. Gamble's help in finding Timon's address. She looked it up among Andreas's addresses and explained to him how to get there. "But you probably won't find him at home. He'd be out this time of evening. You think something's happened to Andreas, don't you?"

He nodded.

"I do too. Much as I complain about his changes in plans, he's always been pretty good about calling to tell me if he's not coming home in time for dinner. Maybe we should call the police."

Jabez shrugged. "Go ahead, if you want, but I'm not waiting around."

"No," she agreed. "I'll call the police and the hospitals to see if there's been an accident. You go find that weaselly Timon. But Andreas has taken his car. I mean land-glider. Can't get used to the new word. Are you going to be able to handle that little jet of his?"

"Yes. I can drive it."

He went to the garage and stared at the jet-glider, as silent and still as a sleeping wild beast. Andreas had claimed it was no more complicated than any other vehicle, but the idea of zipping above the ground at twice the speed of a land glider in a jet that could crash to the ground scared the shit out of him.

He climbed into the cockpit, inserted the card in the slot, and fired up the crystals. As he studied the controls, he wished he weren't in an enclosed space. He was afraid he'd accidentally shoot forward through the garage wall rather than back out toward the road, but Andreas was right and maneuvering the vehicle wasn't that hard.

Jabez had just figured out how to lift off and was screwing up his courage to do it when his phone rang. He'd left the earpiece in and needed only to flick it on. "Yeah?"

"Jabez, this is Timon. Andreas was supposed to meet me earlier today and never showed. I've tried calling his phone but keep getting the machine, so I thought I'd check with you. Have you seen him?"

"Not since this morning." Jabez's mind flew as he tried to figure out the best way to get Timon to meet in person. The last thing he wanted to do was scare him off by accusing him of something. "Maybe he had an accident. Mrs. Gamble's called the police. What do you think I should do?"

"Sit tight. I'm sure he's fine, and you'll want to be there for him when he does come home."

How fucking stupid do you think I am? How would you know my number if you didn't have Andreas's phone?

Jabez swallowed his rage. "Is that what you're doing, waiting at home? I can't keep sitting around. We should go out and look for him together. Where were you supposed to meet him? I'll meet you there."

"Oh...well, okay. It's a new Vietnamese restaurant on Persephone Boulevard." He gave Jabez the address. "Do you have a way to get there?"

"Yeah. I'm flying."

* * * * *

The jet-glider obeyed his every command with an ease that quickly won him over. He reached the city in minutes, then slowed and glided just above the streets.

He half expected Timon wouldn't show. If the man had something to do with Andreas's disappearance, surely he wouldn't be stupid enough to meet Jabez face-to-face. But when he reached the restaurant, Timon was sitting at one of the tables on the sidewalk in front. He wore a sapphire blue shirt with his hair dyed a shade of orange that made him stand out like a flame.

As Jabez approached, Timon rose. "Have you heard anything? I'm so worried."

He shook his head. "None of your friends have seen him?"

"No. I don't know what to think."

Jabez wanted to get him out of the restaurant to somewhere less public. "Take me some places you usually go. We'll look for him."

"Wouldn't it be better to wait and see what the police have to say?"

"No. I think we should go now. Come on."

There was no way Timon could refuse without appearing uncaring, but Jabez could read the reluctance in his expression. "All right."

As soon as they'd walked away from the umbrella-shaded tables and the noise and lights of the outdoor café, Jabez took hold of his arm with an iron-fingered grip.

"Hey! Lighten up there."

Jabez leaned in close and whispered, "Shut the fuck up or I'll rip your nuts off and stuff 'em down your throat."

"Let go of me. I don't know what's wrong with you, but I'm not your enemy. We're both worried about Andreas."

Jabez clenched his arm even tighter and gave him a little shake. "You did something to him. Where is he?"

Timon's eyes narrowed. "Let go of me, or I'll yell for help and tell the police you tried to abduct me. I'll have your ass thrown back into prison so fast, you'll have jet lag."

Jabez slid his free hand up Timon's back to grasp his nape in a viselike pinch. "And I'll break your neck so fast, you'll be dead before you hit the ground. Now tell me what the fuck you've done to Andreas."

Timon's brave front crumpled as he let out a little yelp of pain. Jabez guessed no one had ever roughed him up in his entire life, except maybe during sex.

"Where's your glider?" he added, easing the pressure of his hand slightly.

The other man sucked in a breath of air. "Right over there. Fuck! Have you lost your mind? What makes you think I know anything about Andreas? He's just missing. I had nothing to do with it."

"I know you have his phone or you wouldn't have known my number, asshole. Open the door." Jabez waited while Timon opened the passenger-side door, then pushed him inside the vehicle. "Slide across. You're driving."

He let go of Timon's neck but pulled out the knife he'd hidden in his pocket. When he got in beside him, he brandished the blade. "Don't do anything stupid, or I'll shove this in you. Now take me to Andreas."

"I don't know where he is. He's gone."

Jabez stuck the point of the knife into his side, ripping his expensive shirt and cutting into his flesh. "Where?"

Timon shrieked as the knife pierced his skin and clenched the steering wheel. "I really don't know. It was Rabi's idea."

"I'm losing my fucking patience. What was?"

"They told me to get rid of him. I was supposed to hire someone to take him out. But I didn't want to kill him. He's my friend."

Jabez made another dig with the blade. He pulled it upward, slicing through skin and shirt and leaving a red trail behind. "Who told you to kill him?"

Timon squealed. "Some of the board members. He was making waves, making threats, and they wanted him gone. Then Rabi said we could make a little money from the deal. He knew a guy who knew a guy, and next thing I know we were doing the job ourselves. We sold him to these people, but I don't know where they've got him now."

"What people?" Jabez carved a second slice.

Tears ran down Timon's cheeks, and his teeth chattered as he spoke. "They host underground fights, matches to the death between celebrities. Celebs are harder to get than junkies from B-town, so they paid us well. Rabi said this way at least Andreas would have a chance to survive. But I don't know where the match is taking place. Could be here. Could be anywhere on the planet."

Jabez's stomach rolled. He knew in his gut Timon was telling the truth. Andreas had disappeared into the underbelly of the world. He was beyond reach, yet Jabez had to find a way to reach him.

"Who goes to these fights? How do they find where they're at?" He pushed the blade into Timon's side, hitting his rib.

Another scream. "Stop! I can't help you if I'm bleeding to death. Only the ultrarich are invited, and only invited guests know the location of the match. I'm sorry we did it. I didn't really want to hurt Andreas, but you don't tell the Fortias Corporation 'no.'"

"Was it his father? Did he order the execution?"

"No. Some of the others. Andreas's dad is a prick, but he wouldn't kill him. He'd kill *me* if he found out about this."

"Take me to his house," Jabez demanded, removing the blade from Timon's side but grabbing the back of his neck in a punishing grip again. "If only the rich go to these fights, Fortias can get me an invitation."

* * * * *

They pulled up in front of an ornate gate beyond which the driveway curved away to the mansion half hidden by trees and bushes. Timon opened the window to answer the voice coming through the speaker. He cast a sideways glance at Jabez as he spoke.

"Mr. Sandoval here to see Mr. Fortias on an urgent matter."

"You don't have an appointment."

"No, as I said, it's an urgent matter concerning his son that suddenly came up. Time is critical. I would've called first, but I have to see him in person."

"Just a moment, sir."

There was a very long silence. Timon's knuckles were white as he gripped the wheel. Jabez had stopped prodding him in the ribs with the knife, but he held it ready.

A moment later the gates began to slide open and the voice returned. "Mr. Fortias has a few minutes for you."

As they drove toward the massive house with its white-columned front and many glowing windows, Jabez thought about Andreas growing up here. How opposite their lives had been, and yet there was something connecting them that was stronger than their differences. At first, he'd thought the thrill he felt every time he saw Andreas was only lust, but now he believed it was something more. He was frantic with fear over what might be happening to Andreas, and he'd never felt such gut-wrenching terror on behalf of anyone besides himself before.

He put his knife back in its sheath before they got out of the vehicle. "I'm not going to need this again, am I?"

Timon shook his head. "You wouldn't get past the door with a weapon anyway."

"I don't really need one," Jabez reminded him, silencing him with a stare.

His pulse pounded as he walked with Timon through the front doors, where a security guard in a dark blue suit quickly scanned them and took the knife from his belt, but missed the one in his boot. Another man in a suit waited to lead them into the house.

He ushered them into Quentin Fortias's study, where the man sat in an oversize armchair in front of a fireplace. A real wood fire glowed on the hearth. He didn't turn toward them but continued to stare into the blaze, his sharp-featured face in profile, his hand holding a glass with casual grace. It was an act, Jabez realized. Although his pose might appear relaxed, the man's body was tense. He wanted to appear in control, to be the man with the power.

Only when they'd moved into his line of sight did he acknowledge them with a frown. "What is it?"

Timon began to stammer. "Mr. Fortias, I don't know how to break this news to you. It wasn't my idea. I was merely following orders, and I thought I could take care of business without actually harming —"

"Just tell him."

Timon swallowed. His face was so pale, it made his blazing orange hair even brighter. He looked like a clown. Jabez imagined he'd gone through his entire life bullshitting his way out of bad situations, but no bullshit would save him tonight. There was no hiding the truth of what he'd done to his "best friend."

"Someone contacted me, Mr. Fortias. Someone on the board. I won't say who. In the past I've done errands for and shared information with this person." He swallowed again. "It was felt by some that your son had become a liability and needed to be...eliminated. This man told me to arrange that."

The old man's scowl was replaced by the widened eyes of honest shock, which made Jabez feel better. He'd been afraid Quentin had participated in his son's disappearance.

"The idea of hiring a hit was too awful, but Rabi came up with an alternative. He made an agreement with an organization that hosts...sporting events, I guess you'd call them. Celebrity cage matches. We delivered Andreas to them, and now he's gone."

The word "gone" was like a punch to Jabez's stomach. He felt sick and bleak as he realized he might never see Andreas again. But he wouldn't get him back with that attitude, so he shrugged it off and took over telling Fortias the tale.

"When Andreas was late home, I found this guy and made him tell me everything. We don't know where they've taken him, but I guess all it takes to be invited to one of these matches is enough money. I need you to find out how to reach the bastards and bankroll me."

"You?" His brows shot up.

"Yes. If you call in the cops, you put Andreas in danger. These people will shut down and go even deeper underground. Help me get inside, and I'll figure out a way to save him."

Fortias's expression of shock turned to laughter. "You think you can scam me? Don't be stupid. I'm not giving either of you any money."

"This isn't a con." Jabez stepped closer and stared into his eyes. "You didn't get where you are today without knowing how to judge character." He jerked his thumb at Timon. "Except for trusting him. But I'm telling you I only want to save Andreas. There's no time to fuck around while you decide whether or not to believe me. We've got to find him and get him out now."

For several long moments, their gazes locked. The older man studied him with narrowed eyes, and his lips pressed in a straight line, but at last he nodded. "All right."

He turned to Timon. "Do you know how to reach these people?"

"No, Rabi lined it up."

"Then fucking call him and get him to meet you somewhere." He glanced at Jabez. "You bring him back here bound and gagged if you have to."

"Yes, sir."

Chapter Thirteen

Andreas had no idea how long they'd held him. He wore no watch, and the light never changed in his cell. It could have been days or weeks. It felt like years. But they'd only brought him food twice, so it was probably a day or two.

He'd had plenty of time to search every square inch of his barren cell and learn there was absolutely no way to escape and nothing to use as a weapon. For the first time in his life, he felt what it was to be helpless, vulnerable, totally powerless. This was how Jabez had lived for almost two years. How had he kept from killing himself?

Because, as the jailer had said, the will to live was powerful. Andreas knew when they finally put him in that ring, he would fight and kill if necessary to keep himself alive.

He stopped pacing the enclosure and began doing calisthenics to keep strong and alert. If he made it through the fight alive and some eccentric person with a jaded sexual palate and too much money bought him, he was going to be ready to seize any opportunity to escape. While he was being transported from here to wherever would be the time to try.

Andreas was on his second set of push-ups when the door slid open with a pneumatic *whoosh*. He clambered to his feet to face whatever came next.

Out in the corridor stood the man who'd spoken to him before and a pair of armed guards.

"It's time, Mr. Fortias. Strip to your briefs."

Andreas did as he was bid, removing his shirt and pants. His shoes had been missing since he first woke up here. One of the guards beckoned him into the hall, and he walked forward, leaving the cocoon of his cell with mingled relief and dread.

"You're matched against Scandinavian model Ankar. Perhaps you've heard of him?" The bald man in the suit spoke conversationally as they strode down the hallway.

"No." He glanced at the guards on either side of him and at the windowless corridor, gauging the possibility of making some kind of move.

"The fight will be man-to-man, no weapons. No holds barred. Do whatever it takes to keep alive. I know your opponent will be doing the same. Good luck."

Turning suddenly down a side hall, the man left them, while the guards continued to prod Andreas forward.

His skin was hot and cold by turns—a slick of sweat over goose bumps. His stomach churned, and he realized the dull roar that he'd taken for some kind of engine noise was actually the sound of a crowd. How many people would be watching as he fought for his life? What kind of sick people paid a fortune to view this kind of match, and what would happen if he and Ankar simply refused to give them a show?

The sound was above and around him now as they walked beneath enclosed tiers of seats toward a door. One of the guards opened it, and the other jabbed his gun into Andreas's back. "Go."

He stepped out of the darkness into a blinding spotlight. His gaze darted around, taking in the sawdust-covered floor of the arena, the circular cage that enclosed the space, banks of lights shining above, rows of seats all around filled with people—a blur of faces, dozens of pairs of eyes focused on him and his opponent.

His attention swung toward the man entering the ring across from him. Ankar was taller than Andreas and probably a good ten pounds heavier. He had classic Nordic features—pale, blond, sculpted—a Viking god reduced to fighting in a cage. Andreas had never felt guiltier about all the times he'd sat in the stands watching a match such as this. Death hadn't been the goal of those fights, but the lust for violence had been tinged with excited dread and anticipation of a fatal outcome. Now it was his turn.

I'm sorry, Jabez, for coming to watch you put on a show as if you were no more than a performing animal. I deserve this.

The doors closed behind them, and the two men stared at each other across the stretch of ground that separated them. The audience yelled, cheering on one or the other of them. Andreas heard his name. He wanted to search the faces and see if any were familiar. He knew a lot of very wealthy people, people like Timon, who'd go to any lengths for a new thrill or a new kink.

As the opponents continued to study each other, unmoving, the fans began to hiss and boo, annoyed at their hesitation. Andreas moved into the ring, his fists defensively raised. He circled to the left, which made his partner move to the right in a mirrored dance. Again, he wondered what would happen if they refused to fight. Would the guards come in and prod them toward activity, perhaps threaten to shoot them if they didn't perform?

His pondering came to an abrupt end when Ankar suddenly lunged toward him. Andreas should've been ready, but the move took him by surprise. Sparring with Jabez had been one thing, facing a man ready to actually kill him was another. He jabbed, but the other man bent low and rushed him, tackling him backward. Ankar drove Andreas into the iron bars and knocked the breath from him with a shoulder to his solar plexus.

As he gasped for air, the model grabbed hold of him, pulled him away from the cage, and flung him to the ground. Who knew walking a catwalk could develop such lightning reflexes?

The Norseman came down on top of him with all his weight, pinning him to the ground. He landed a punch to Andreas's jaw that snapped his head to the side.

Gathering his scattered wits, Andreas ignored the pain and his wheezing breath and began to use the skills Jabez had taught him. He brought his knee up between Ankar's legs, driving it into his balls. When the man howled and jerked away, Andreas rolled from beneath him. He scrambled across the floor, slippery with sawdust, grabbed hold of the bars of the cage, and hauled himself upright. He couldn't let this guy get the advantage again. Ankar was stronger and bigger, so Andreas had to fight him with speed and dexterity.

He remembered Jabez's adage, "No trick is too dirty in a fight," and stooped to scoop up a handful of sawdust. As Ankar recovered from the blow to his genitals and ran at him again, Andreas flung the dust into his face. Once he was blinded, Andreas gave a sweeping kick that knocked his legs out from under him.

Ankar was felled like a tree. Andreas leaped on top of him and grabbed his throat, fingers digging into his vulnerable flesh. Still blinking away sawdust, the other man reached up blindly and grabbed Andreas's wrists, trying to pull his hands away from his neck. He choked and gasped for air, eyes opening wide.

Andreas hung on, staring back into those tear-glistening eyes. The man bucked beneath him, struggling to throw him off. The desperate, gasping sounds he made were awful. The feeling of his sinewy neck beneath Andreas's hands was horrifying, yet Andreas felt a powerful, primitive urge to keep on strangling the life out of him. His lizard brain screamed, *Enemy. Kill.*

Ankar reached up with desperate hands and clawed at his face. He dug a thumb into Andreas's right eye and gouged. Blinding pain radiated from his eye, and he screamed. His grip loosened, and his hands automatically went to his face. He heard Ankar draw a ragged breath, felt hands push him off as the other man squirmed out from underneath him.

Andreas opened his good eye in time to see Ankar lunging at him again. The model grabbed a handful of his hair and wrenched his head back, then delivered a jab to his throat that made Andreas gag.

Ride the pain, Jabez's voice in his head ordered. Use it.

He obeyed, not heeding the throbbing in his eye or throat. He blinked away the blackness that threatened to obliterate the light. If he didn't stay focused, stay conscious, he'd die.

Jerking his head to the side, he tore his hair from the other man's grip. He punched Ankar's gut with a one-two combination like Jabez had taught him, then leaped up and darted away from his opponent to give himself time to regroup.

Andreas was only dimly aware of his surroundings. The glare of lights and din of the audience were hazy compared to the man before him. There was only this moment, this place in time, and an enemy to be taken down. A kind of calm clarity came over him as he attacked Ankar once more.

Andreas went in hard and fast, punching and kicking in controlled abandon. He drove the bigger man back against the bars, battering him with blow after blow. Blood splattered from beneath his fists. The model's beautiful face was a red mask. His head was bowed, fists held protectively in front of his face, and then he crumpled, cowering on the ground and drawing himself into a fetal ball.

Andreas felt powerful, towering over him, kicking and hitting. It was as if he were possessed by a demon with one directive—to eliminate this man from the face of the earth. But deep inside him, the voice of conscience and reason clamored to be heard. He couldn't kill this man, a prisoner like himself thrown into an intolerable situation. If he refused to finish it, what would happen? The ring was no place for compassion or mercy, but Andreas didn't want to become a killer.

He stepped back, panting, his fists still clenched. The crowd roared for blood, chanting, "Kill, kill, kill." Turning in a slow circle, he looked at the faces staring back at him, the avid eyes and shouting mouths. He might be the one in the cage, but they looked like animals, hungry hyenas eager for a kill.

"No," he shouted, unheard over their death chant. "I won't do it."

A blow from behind knocked him forward. He stumbled, but caught his balance and twisted around to face Ankar. The man was back on his feet. His bright blue eyes glittered in his red-streaked face. His teeth were bared, and he made a growling noise as he barreled into Andreas with his head down.

Reacting on instinct, Andreas grabbed his head in a hard grip and twisted. He couldn't hear the snap of his neck above the yelling of the audience but felt the resistance and the break. When he let go, Ankar fell to the ground and lay still.

Andreas was dimly aware of the people around him surging to their feet. One of the doors opened, and a medic accompanied by several armed guards entered the arena. The medic knelt beside Ankar and checked his vitals, then gave a signal to someone in a viewing box above the tiers of seats. A voice came over the sound system proclaiming Andreas the winner of the match and recommended all private bets be settled before anyone left the premises. The disembodied voice went on to say that the Fortias heir would be available for closer inspection prior to the auction. "Any who wish to bid may visit him in the holding cell."

His body trembled as the flood of adrenaline receded, leaving him shaken and weak. He didn't know if he could remain upright, let alone walk with the guards as they escorted him out of the ring and back down the corridor. He staggered, and the men grabbed his arms on either side, hauling him between them. They dropped him onto the pallet in the cell.

A medic again knelt beside Andreas to examine his injured eye. "This may require some surgery. It's hard to tell how much damage has been done with all this swelling, but don't worry, I'm sure it can be fixed. You won't be blind."

Andreas glared at him with his good eye.

The man examined the rest of his body, stitched and bandaged a few gashes, then packed up his bag and left the room. Andreas collapsed back on the pallet with a groan and closed his eyes. His head throbbed and whirled as though he was drunk. He'd killed a man, broken his neck, and didn't even have time to feel sick about it because he was already focusing on what would happen next.

He thought of Jabez and the night he'd first met him. Even if it had been Timon's idea, Andreas had accepted the gift of sexual services. Was this how Jabez had felt, drained from his fight yet still wired, waiting and wondering who would come for him?

Once more the door slid open. Andreas opened his good eye to see a man entering the room accompanied by a guard. He blinked away the blurriness that shrouded his vision and focused on the big figure. A fresh rush of energy flooded his system, and he bolted upright to face the man in the elegant suit with the stylish haircut.

Jabez gazed back at him, his face expressionless before glancing at the guard on his left. "You can leave. I'll be fine."

"I'm sorry, sir, but we can't take that chance. We don't want a hostage situation to develop."

Jabez reached into his pocket and drew out a wallet. He handed the man a wad of cash. "I've got it under control. I'll call you when I'm done."

"Very well, sir." The guard left, and the door slid closed behind him.

Andreas opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Jabez put a finger to his lips.

"I got here late but caught the end of your match. Impressive."

Andreas remained silent, letting Jabez play out the scene for any listeners they might have.

"You don't look like much, but you beat the shit out of that Viking, which was pretty hot." He moved closer and touched the injured side of Andreas's face with gentle fingers. "The question is whether you're worth my investment. Maybe I could outbid the others, but maybe not."

Jabez leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "I think I need to get you out another way. Are you ready?"

Andreas inhaled the scent from his neck and nodded.

Reaching down the front of his trousers, Jabez pulled out a pair of miniature guns and handed one to him. The palm-sized weapon was military issue, capable of more power and accuracy than its size would suggest. Andreas wrapped his fingers around the cool handgrip.

Jabez continued his charade. "Get down on your knees. Show me you're worth it, and I'll bid on you. Believe me, you could do a lot worse. There's a guy with a torture chamber, loves to play with his celebs before he finishes them off."

Hiding his weapon by his side, he motioned Andreas down on his knees, then called out, "Fuck you, you little biting bastard. Hey, guard, I'm finished! Get me the hell out of here."

The door immediately slid open, and the guard came inside, his attention focused on Andreas.

Jabez stepped behind the guard, wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and fired a silent jolt into the side of his neck. The man gave a gurgling wheeze, then slumped in Jabez's embrace without a struggle.

He let the body slide down to the floor, then began to strip the man, taking not only his uniform, but his weapon, ID badge, and key card. He threw the uniform at Andreas, who quickly put it on.

Jabez tucked his gun in his jacket pocket for easy access and paused in the doorway to glance both ways before stepping into the hallway. He beckoned Andreas to follow and closed the door behind them.

"Hide your gun. We'll try to bluff our way out first, but if it doesn't work, you've gotta be ready to shoot without hesitation, understand?"

"I can do it," Andreas promised. He followed Jabez down the hall, wishing he wore a cap so he could pull the bill down over his eyes.

Jabez turned down the side corridor that the man in the suit had taken earlier. "We're almost to the front of the building. There'll be lots of people, some of them waiting to check you out. Don't duck your head but keep a little behind me so your face is hidden. Walk like a guard, and they probably won't look past your uniform."

Andreas released a shaky breath and straightened his shoulders. He held his weapon hidden in the palm of his hand, pressed against his side. His body trembled, and his legs felt like they might collapse beneath him. They were actually going to walk right through the crowd and out the front door.

He walked behind Jabez, using the other man's body as a shield to hide his face. The guard's uniform was big and sagged around his waist, although he'd cinched it with the belt.

Jabez pushed open a glass door, and the sounds of celebration greeted them. The guests in their elegant clothes were drinking and talking, enjoying the after-match social. Several people looked up as they came through the door, studying Jabez's imposing figure, but barely noticing Andreas just as Jabez had promised.

Andreas pressed even closer to him. Anyone watching might think he was guiding Jabez to the exit. A pair of double doors was in sight, and they wove through the crowd toward them. His throat was incredibly dry, and a wave of dizziness swept through him. He looked around the room, searching for other guards or personnel among the party guests. They were easy to spot with their dark suits, communicator earpieces, and restless gazes.

The doors were only a few yards away now, but there were men flanking it on either side. He and Jabez would have to walk past them to leave the building.

"Ready?" Jabez muttered, putting his hand in his jacket pocket.

"Yeah." Andreas tightened his grip on his weapon and turned off the safety.

The guards by the door stood at ease, hands crossed in front of them, bodies relaxed as they scanned the room. It was clear they saw their job as a formality and didn't expect trouble from any of the assembled guests, who were enthusiastically socializing.

For one second, Andreas imagined they could walk right past. As a patron who'd decided to leave the party, Jabez wouldn't be scrutinized, and perhaps Andreas could accompany him without question. But the moment he thought it, he made eye contact with one of the guards. The man's eyes widened, and he reached for his weapon.

"Hey," was all he had time to say before Jabez pulled his own gun and shot him. The silent laser blast didn't draw any attention. Even the man's partner didn't notice him falling until he slid down the wall to the floor.

The partner's response was faster. He drew and fired at Jabez, who grabbed the nearest party guest and pulled the man in front of him like a shield. The blast shot past them both and hit someone standing behind them. A woman screamed.

Andreas whirled to find two other guards pushing their way through the crowd, shoving people out of the way as they ran toward the incident at the door.

"*No hesitation,*" he remembered as he aimed carefully and shot one of them. A smoking hole appeared in his chest, and the blast knocked the guard back into a waiter with a tray of canapés, sending it crashing to the floor.

Pandemonium broke out as people screamed and pushed one another in their attempts to escape the room. Jabez took advantage of the turmoil. He shot over the shoulder of his human shield and plugged the other guard at the door, hitting him in the head. The man dropped to the floor like his partner.

Jabez thrust away the man in his arms, grabbed hold of Andreas's arm, and yanked him toward the unguarded door. As they slammed through it, Andreas felt a lightning bolt stab through his arm. He cried out but kept running. He didn't have a choice as Jabez dragged him along.

There was no time to look at the building where the fight had been held or the parking lot through which Jabez hauled him, but flashes of impressions struck him. The air was humid and sweltering, rich with the scent of loam and chlorophyll. Trees surrounded the area—exotic trees, a jungle. Gravel crunched underfoot—a makeshift

parking lot filled with expensive gliders, both land and jet. He glanced at the building behind him—a long, low warehouse. Dark-suited guards were bursting through the door, raising their weapons.

Andreas raised his injured arm and shot behind him. A hole smoked in the side of the building, and the guards dived to the ground. Then Jabez was shoving him into his own jet-glider and slamming the door behind him. He raced around to the other side and slid behind the steering wheel.

Jabez can fly? His thoughts were as fragmented as his impressions, and pain pulsed through him with every heartbeat. Pain in his arm, pain in his eye. Confusion. Noise. Fear. His head whirled. Andreas shook himself and gathered his scattered thoughts.

Jabez had turned the machine on and was cursing as he fought the controls. From the corner of his eye, Andreas saw the guards back on their feet and running toward the glider, firing their guns.

“Go! Go!” he yelled.

Jabez obeyed, guiding the jet off the ground. They flew up with dizzying speed until the people, building, and parking lot became tiny specks that disappeared into the massive green jungle.

Chapter Fourteen

Andreas slumped in the seat beside him. Jabez glanced over, concerned by his pale face as he clutched his hurt arm. "Are you gonna be okay?"

"Yeah. I'm good. Just drive."

Jabez's stomach dropped as they continued to soar upward. He checked the controls and leveled their course to head for the horizon, and he checked the sky behind them for pursuers. It was clear.

"You can fly this now?" Andreas turned his head to look at Jabez through his one good eye.

"Guess so."

"Where are we? How did you find me?"

"Near Rio." Jabez looked through his window at the mass of green jungle that continued for mile after mile beneath them. "After you disappeared, I made Timon tell me what he'd done. It didn't take much to shake the story out of him. I asked your father for help because I knew he had the power to get me in."

"My father?"

"He invented an identity and gave me the papers and money I needed while I grabbed Rabi and forced him to contact the organization. It took a few days, but I got here in time." He didn't mention how terrified he'd been that he'd never find Andreas or wouldn't get to him in time.

"So are Timon and Rabi in jail?"

"Not yet. We locked 'em up in your father's kitchen cooler. We didn't call the cops, didn't want 'em to do anything to wreck our plan or get you killed."

"So me being kidnapped had nothing to do with Fortias?"

"Oh, it did. Some board members paid Timon to hire a hit man, but your friends didn't have the guts to kill you so they sold you."

"My friends." Andreas shook his head. He looked out his window and after several silent minutes turned back toward Jabez. "We have to end this now. I'm going to the media and telling everything I know. Let the press put it out there for the public to pick apart. No more secrets."

"You think that's smart?"

"It's the only way to be safe. They can't erase me when the whole world's watching."

"First, I'm taking you to a doctor, and we should call your father. He's worried about you."

"Worried about what my behavior will do to the corporation."

"No. Worried about *you*." Jabez had seen it in the old man's face over the past couple of days and in the measures he took to find Andreas. "He's a prick, but he does care about you."

He took his phone from his pocket and handed it to Andreas. "Call him."

Andreas sighed. "All right." He put the device in his ear and a moment later was speaking to his father. "Hey, it's me. Yeah, I'm okay. We're both okay. I have a couple of injuries. Jabez is taking me to the hospital."

He paused, listening, then responded. "I guess that would be good. But, Dad, as soon as they patch me up, I'm holding a press conference. I'm going to tell everything I know about what happened to me, about the board's hand in it, and about the lab."

There was another pause. "All right." He ended the call and leaned back in his seat with a sigh. "My father said he'll have security detail waiting for us at the hospital."

"Good. You're never going anywhere without bodyguards again." *Or without me right by your side.* "Your ass is too precious."

Andreas offered the phone back to Jabez with a wan smile.

He took it and held Andreas's hand for a moment, appreciating the warmth and the solid reality of him. *You're safe, and I'm never going to let anything take you away from me again.*

"You look like crap. Maybe I should stop somewhere sooner."

"No. I can make it. Just get us home." Andreas held tight to his hand and closed his eyes. He was silent for so long, Jabez thought he was asleep, but at last he spoke again. "I can't relax. I keep thinking about the fight and that man I killed. I'm going to have to find his family and tell them what I did."

Jabez didn't answer immediately. He knew Andreas's earnestness and stubbornness usually went hand in hand. He chose his words carefully.

"It wasn't your fault. I think you should let the situation play out, turn your friends over to the police, and see what happens. They'll plea-bargain to try to get their

sentence reduced, finger some people. Hopefully, the corrupt board members, the lab, and the gaming operation will all go down."

Andreas sat up straight, turning to face him. "But meanwhile, Ankar's family is wondering what happened to him. What if I'd just disappeared and you hadn't found me? His people are probably frantic about him. I have to do this. I should call right now."

"Call who?"

"He was from Scandinavia. Call the consulate or something. I don't know."

"All right. Do it, but you don't have to take care of it right this minute. Wait until after we land and get you checked out." Jabez added as an afterthought, "Please."

He released Andreas's hand to operate the glider. The computer navigated the way and all he had to do was avoid other craft sharing airspace.

At last the white cityscape of New Englandia shone in the distance. The jet swooped toward it with breathtaking speed, and Jabez took over manual control as they dropped altitude and cruised closer to the ground.

As Fortias had promised, a security team and medics waited at the emergency entrance of N.E. Hospital. As soon as Jabez landed, the staff rushed out to take Andreas inside and guards closed ranks around them. Jabez expected to have to fight for the right to stay with Andreas, but evidently Fortias had told them to expect him too. He was swept along with the group through the crowded emergency room straight to a private room that had been reserved for Andreas. It helped when your family had paid for a wing of the hospital.

Jabez waited with four guards just outside the room where hospital personnel tended to Andreas. He took the phone from his pocket and called Quentin. "We're at the hospital. Where are you? Andreas expected to see you here."

"I had work to do. I'll come now." In his usual succinct style, Quentin disconnected with no good-bye. He was hardly warm and caring, but he'd been concerned enough about his son to trust a criminal with wads of cash just for the chance of getting him back safely.

Jabez leaned against the wall, arms folded, watching the dark-suited guards arrayed by Andreas's room and the activity of hospital personnel coming and going.

A nurse approached him. "Sir, you might be more comfortable sitting in the waiting area. This could take a while."

"I'll wait here, thank you." Jabez met her gaze. Seeing there was no moving him, she nodded and continued on her way.

The minutes of waiting seemed like hours, but he'd had plenty of practice killing empty hours. He drifted into a trance as he stared at the polished floor and thought about Andreas. Praying had never been a part of his life, but he came close to it now, sending a wish for healing to whatever energy made things happen in the universe.

Over the past couple of days and sleepless nights, he'd blocked his fear for Andreas so he could accomplish what needed to be done. But now that the rescue was over, the realization he might've lost Andreas hit him like a sucker punch. The idea of never seeing him, hearing his voice, or holding him was impossible. Now that he'd known real affection, maybe love, he couldn't face being alone again. He wished he could be with Andreas right now with all this mess behind them, just the two of them lying together and resting at last.

Quentin Fortias and his entourage arrived, further blocking the corridor and upsetting the medical staff, but no one dared reprimand the man who'd financed their building. He strode past the guards and into the room, his imperious voice demanding answers and barking orders. Jabez was getting used to the sound. He'd spent more time than he ever wanted to around Quentin Fortias over the past two days, but had to admit the man knew how to get things done.

A moment later, Fortias appeared in the doorway of Andreas's room and beckoned him. "You. In here."

Jabez obeyed. He entered the room, and his gaze instantly went to Andreas lying in a hospital bed, bandaged, with an IV drip in his arm. His color had improved, although he was still very pale. Below the gauze covering his eye, the bruising of his eye socket showed red and purple.

"Talk to him. Tell him we need to discuss this thing before he makes another rash decision," Quentin commanded; then he addressed Andreas. "After you're feeling better, we'll come up with a solution. Right now you need to rest and heal."

"No. I need you to call a press conference, right here, right now in the hospital lobby. All the secrecy must end. We've got to stop what some members of the board have been doing, and the only way we can do it is if we present a united front. Between the two of us, we still have some control in the corporation."

Quentin was already shaking his head. "I won't support you. I'll deny —"

"Deny me for the sake of business? Father, you said yourself Fortias is suffering from bad public image. This is our chance to come clean, take responsibility for what we've allowed to happen, and try to salvage something worthwhile. This is a pivotal moment. We can make a change." Andreas's eyes were alight with passion as he gazed at his father. "Please, help me."

Jabez brushed past a doctor to stand beside Andreas and take his hand. Ignoring everyone else in the room, he leaned over him and smoothed the tangled locks of hair from his sweaty forehead. "Tell me who to call. I'll make it happen."

Quentin Fortias gave an annoyed click of his tongue. "You're useless. A thug like you couldn't get the media to come here unless you took hostages. I'll arrange it. Pierson!" His personal secretary sprang to attention. "Call a conference and get my fucking speechwriter over here to help prepare a statement."

"We don't need a speechwriter. We just need to tell the truth."

Fortias held up a finger. "Concessions, Andreas. The first rule of business is to learn to negotiate. Maybe if I'd spent more time teaching you how to function in the corporate world, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Jabez straightened and turned toward him. "What can I do?"

"Stay out of the way and keep your mouth shut."

Fortias paused and stared at Jabez. "Actually, you could be useful. You can help spin this—the new face of Fortias giving hope to the ghetto dwellers, helping the disenfranchised achieve their potential. I'll let my writer figure it out. Stick around, but still keep your mouth shut."

* * * * *

By the time the media sharks had attacked, fed, and swam away again, Jabez was exhausted. He could barely stand in his position between Andreas, seated in a wheelchair, and Quentin Fortias, who appeared as fresh as if he'd just started the day.

"You got what you wanted." The old man addressed his son. "Now go home and get some rest. Both of you look ready to collapse. My driver will take you."

Jabez was glad to collapse in the backseat of Fortias's lavish vehicle, which was almost as large as his old cell. He sat close to Andreas on the wide seat and put his arm around him.

Andreas rested his head on his shoulder. "Wish I could say it's over, but our work's only beginning."

"At least your father's backing you. The old man may be a son of a bitch, but he knows how to get things done."

"You sound like you're growing fond of him."

"No, but I understand him. He doesn't let anything get in his way."

"He certainly doesn't."

"You care. He gets shit done. The two of you together are unbeatable." Jabez closed his eyes and heaved a sigh. "Can we stop talking? I'm beat."

"Yeah, we can."

With the weight of Andreas's head on his shoulder, Jabez tightened his arm around the other man's body, relieved to have him safe in his embrace once more. How quickly he'd become used to the feeling. More than used to it, he was addicted to Andreas like he'd been hooked on drugs back when he was a kid.

"One more thing." His drowsy voice drifted to Jabez's ears as if from far away.

"Mm?"

"I think I forgot to say thank you for coming to get me, so thank you."

"Now we're even. You saved me. I saved you," Jabez mumbled.

Warm fingers caressed his forearm and wrist, found his fingers, and laced with them. "You never owed me anything. People shouldn't measure the things they do for each other, especially when they're in love."

Jabez's stomach tightened, and he was suddenly wide awake. He stared at their linked hands before turning his face so his lips brushed against Andreas's soft curls. He breathed in the musky odor of his body, the sweat and oils from his days of captivity and hand-to-hand combat. Nothing had ever smelled sweeter to him. He pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

"Sleep now. Talk later."

"Okay." Andreas's voice was barely a murmur.

Jabez continued to stroke his fingers while Andreas's breathing slowed and deepened. He was happier than he'd ever been, but afraid of the weight of the word "love." Could he be everything Andreas needed him to be?

He'd spent his life reacting to whatever shit was thrown at him and surviving situations not of his choosing. Now it was time for him to make his own decisions, to become better than he'd imagined he could be and fulfill a potential he'd never realized he had until Andreas showed it to him.

But letting go of who he used to be, no matter if he'd outgrown that role, was going to take some adjustment. His life was truly about to change.

Chapter Fifteen

Applause broke out and music blared over the speakers as Andreas cut the ribbon, opening the new Civic Center in Brick Town. He turned and smiled at the assembled crowd, well-dressed people from uptown mingled with the up-and-coming merchants of B-town. Policemen patrolled the perimeter of the gathering. Loitering at the fringe and watching from across the street and from tenement windows were the very types of people the Center was meant to help. Hollow-eyed, stoned, violent, hopeless – the dregs of the city appeared to be beyond saving, but Andreas was determined to try to integrate the two halves of the once-whole city.

His next step was to lobby to take down the wall. No doubt there'd be an outcry at the idea. It was one thing to act as benefactors to the needy, quite another to have them uncontained in the city. Crime rates would go up. Security would be beefed up. The city would be a mess, and people would lay the blame at his door.

Andreas was ready for whatever happened.

He located Jabez and winked at him. His lover didn't return the smile. He was in focused bodyguard mode today, gaze sweeping the surrounding area and fingers clenching lightly by his side as if eager to reach for his gun. A tingle of warmth at the protective stance lanced through Andreas. As he turned and descended the steps at the edge of the platform, he felt safe, sheltered...and damn horny. But there was at least a half hour of handshaking, smiling, and promoting his agenda followed by a luncheon before he'd find time to be alone with Jabez.

"It's good work you're doing here, Mr. Fortias." A kind-faced woman in a chic Moripa gown far too dressy for the occasion smiled at him. He couldn't remember her name, but the electronic secretary he wore in his ear offered it to him in a cool, computerized voice.

"Thank you, Mrs. Sanjasi, but it's good work *all* of us are doing together. The Center couldn't have been built without community support, and I hope the Fortias

Foundation can continue to count on the generosity of people like you to make the dream come true.”

He cringed inside at the politician-speak coming out of his mouth. But the difference was that he held no office and he meant his words sincerely.

Inside the building in the large main hall, folding tables had been set up and a buffet of soups and breads was available. It was simpler fare in sparser surroundings than most of the assembled society types had probably ever experienced, but if they were dismayed, they hid it well and continued to chatter while they queued for food.

Andreas met and greeted everyone, including the new managing council of B-town and some of the manufacturers and merchants who'd taken advantage of the initiative program to set up shop in the ghetto. Notably absent was the mayor of New Englandia, who appeared ready to fight the integration of the city tooth and nail.

The luncheon dragged to a close, and then there was more networking to do. Andreas shot another yearning glance at Jabez, this time catching his eye. The smoldering look the other man gave him must have been visible to anyone watching—or maybe Andreas only imagined Jabez's gaze was almost physically palpable. His cock was hard, and the event didn't seem to be drawing to a close.

Andreas excused himself from a conversation with a man opening a glider body shop in B-town. He started toward the restroom, aware of his bodyguard following. They were barely down the side corridor when he grabbed Jabez's hand and dragged him into the first empty room he came to, a small office space not yet equipped or occupied.

They came together in a fierce clash as if they were battling in the ring. Even though they'd woken in bed together that morning, it felt to Andreas as if he hadn't been alone with Jabez in far too long. He pressed his body up against the wall, crushed his mouth in a hungry kiss, and pushed his fingers through the other man's soft hair. It was quite long now, shaggy and sexy and a medium nut brown. He held Jabez's head between his hands while their lips mashed together and their tongues curled around each other.

Too many layers of clothes kept their bodies apart. Andreas wanted to tear open Jabez's shirt to stroke his hands over that sleek, hard chest. He thrust his hips, rubbing his erection against the bulge in the other man's trousers. Pulling away from the kiss with a groan, he gazed into Jabez's face.

“How long do you think we could be gone before somebody'd notice?”

Jabez's eyes were trained on Andreas's mouth, and his hands slipped beneath his jacket to wrap around Andreas's waist. “Not enough time.”

Andreas sighed. “You're right. We'll be out of here soon enough; then we'll have the rest of the day together.” He thrust again and grunted at the sensation in his throbbing cock. “There's just something about grabbing stolen minutes that's even hotter than sex at home.”

Jabez chuckled. The warm sound poured over him like black coffee, rich and potent. Even now after several months together, Andreas treasured every small smile, every rare laugh the other man gave him.

"All right. Soon." He gave Jabez one more peck on the lips and reluctantly let go. Stepping back with a sigh, he straightened his clothes and made sure the bulge in his pants was hidden.

As he turned to walk from the room, Jabez's voice stopped him. "Andreas."

"Yeah?" He glanced over his shoulder.

"You did good. This place. The new jobs. You're making it happen."

Succinct as always, Jabez's compliment meant more to him than the effusive praise of the media or politicians eager to ride the "New Fortias" bandwagon of social reform.

"Thank you."

* * * * *

The Civic Center opening ended at last. Andreas and Jabez were walking toward the waiting glider on the street when a voice called out, "Hey, Prince, it's the King."

Andreas recognized the voice and turned to search for King Leonidas in the crowd, but the security guards blocked his view.

"It's all right. Let the man through," he ordered. Bodies moved aside, and he caught a glimpse of Leonidas being frisked by one of the guards.

"Hands off, fool. I got no weapons."

The man left his entourage of three behind and approached Andreas. He was ringed by a protective bubble of security guards. Excited media people pressed close to document the unexpected development.

Leonidas nodded at Jabez before focusing his brown eyes on Andreas. "What's up you don't invite me to your party? Supposed to be for the important folks in B-town, right? That's me."

"Sorry. I guess I didn't think you'd come." Andreas's smile felt stiff on his lips. He knew Leonidas was fucking with him and hadn't expected an invitation, but he had to play it carefully. "Welcome. What brings you here?"

The dark eyes scanned the new building behind him. "Lot of changes happening here. A new day dawning and all that shit. B-town needs a new day."

"Yes, it does."

He looked at Andreas again. "'Course I heard about the lab getting shut down. People freed and sent to halfway houses to recover. I want some of that 'restitution for the victims' action." He nodded his head slowly. "You done good taking 'em down."

More brief but heartfelt praise. Andreas accepted it with a genuine smile this time. "Thanks."

"I respect you, man, but like I told you before, change ain't good for my business, so I hope you and me aren't gonna have a tussle."

"Me neither, King. I don't want trouble. I hope we can work out solutions that help everyone get ahead."

Leonidas threw back his head and laughed. "You already starting to talk like a politician. Don't let 'em change you."

"No, sir, I won't."

The man turned to Jabez. "Keep an eye on your boy here. Keep him real and keep him out of my shit."

Jabez grunted.

The rest of the security team was growing restless and visibly uncomfortable about the implied threat in Leo's words. But before they could hustle him away, he made his own exit, giving an extravagant bow to Andreas. "Royalty to royalty."

Andreas returned the bow.

The crowd parted as King Leo and his mates strode away. Andreas turned to Jabez and whispered, "That was unexpected."

"That's Lightning. He likes you, but he could be trouble."

Since Andreas was swamped with trouble and people with conflicting desires making demands on him these days, it was just more to add to his plate.

"Couldn't be worse than my own friends were," he remarked, thinking the blunt gangster seemed more real than Timon or Rabi ever had. "I really picked some winners."

"Simeon isn't so bad," Jabez offered.

Andreas wondered how the other two were doing in prison. Knowing Timon's mouth, he was either ruling the cell block or being beaten up on a daily basis. As for Rabi, he'd probably get shanked the first time he leered at one of the other inmates. Their lawyer had tried to convince the judge to send them to a white-collar, country-club detention center. Andreas's father had used his connections to make certain they went to hard-core prison. Andreas tried to feel bad or guilty about that but couldn't manage it.

Andreas and Jabez continued toward the glider, and soon the driver had whisked them away from the streets of Brick Town back into New Englandia. Leaning over the seat, Andreas handed him a note. "Stop at this address before home, please."

He sat back and made a bet with himself on whether Jabez would be curious enough to ask where they were going or if he'd remain silent and go along for the ride. The odds were running sixty forty in favor of silence before Jabez finally asked the question.

"Where are we stopping?"

Andreas grinned. "You'll see. It's a surprise."

He'd been planning it for a while, but things had been so hectic the time wasn't right. Today, he'd realized life would always be busy and the time to get Jabez this special gift was now.

When they stopped in front of the building, Jabez stared at the window for a moment before looking at him. "You're shitting me."

Andreas shrugged. "You want this, don't you?"

"Yeah. But do you?"

"I do. It'll be nice."

They got out of the vehicle. Andreas waved off the security escort as the men piled out of the other glider and started to swarm toward them. "I think we'll be okay in here on our own."

The smell of disinfectant cleaner and urine, of wood shavings and animal musk assailed his nose as they entered the door of the shop. A continuous chirping of birds from cages in the back filled the air and the monotonous yapping of a single dog voice rose above it.

Andreas hoped Jabez wouldn't pick that one, but he wasn't going to say anything. He wanted the choice to be totally his. "We'd like to see the dogs, please," he told the clerk when she approached them.

"Any breed in particular?" She led them to a row of kennels where puppies lay and slept or wrestled with one another.

Andreas watched Jabez's face as he studied the animals, a frown of concentration furrowing his brow.

"You can handle them and see how they react to you in the play area." The girl indicated an enclosure filled with dog toys and a few scattered seats for customers. "I'll give you a minute to decide."

After she hurried away to tend to another customer, Andreas jogged Jabez's elbow. "What do you think? They're all cute, huh?"

"Mm-hm. How long do you think they have to live in these cages?"

"Not long. People claim them pretty quickly," Andreas assured him. He hadn't thought about the effect seeing caged animals might have on Jabez—or on himself. His chest tightened when one sad-eyed pup gazed at him and whined.

"We're not taking them all," he said, trying to convince either himself or Jabez. But when the salesgirl came back, he told her to let all the puppies from their individual cages into the play area. "We want to see how they react to other dogs as well as to us."

A few moments later, they were seated in the center of a pack of overexcited young animals. The pups yipped and fought and played tug-of-war with a rope when Andreas pulled on the other end. They were surrounded by both pedigreed breeds and mutts with short or long coats in brown, black, white, and gray.

Andreas shook his foot to get a little beagle to stop chewing the toe of his shoe and turned to Jabez. "See any you like? Don't say 'all of them.'" He felt increasingly likely to do that himself.

A white terrier sat on Jabez's lap licking his hand. He scratched its head absently but pointed to another dog sitting quietly, alone, in the middle of the activity. "That one."

Andreas gazed at the homely animal and repressed the urge to say, *Really?* The dog was past puppyhood with long, gangly legs and a head that seemed to be too big for its body. Its coat was medium length with brown and white patches. The mutt must have a sloppy stew of a pedigree to create that cobbled-together appearance.

"He or she is cute," Andreas said enthusiastically. "You're sure?"

Jabez nodded and put the terrier down on the floor. "Yeah. That one." He snapped his fingers and the ugly dog's ears pricked up. It came straight to him and rested its chin on his knee.

"I guess so. It clearly belongs to you."

"To us." Jabez looked at him and smiled—a smile that not only curved his mouth but filled his eyes with warmth. Andreas fell in love all over again. He loved the ugly dog too for bringing this transformation over Jabez.

He reached out and stroked the dog's rough fur. "Ours. What will we call her?"

Jabez frowned again as he gazed into the dog's eyes, considering. "She'll let us know. We have to wait and see."

* * * * *

Back home again, they brought the dog and all the supplies they'd bought for her into the house. Mrs. Gamble met them near the front door and gazed at the new addition to the household. "House-trained, I hope?"

"Yes," Jabez promised, pulling the dog back as she stretched the length of her leash trying to reach Mrs. Gamble.

"Keep her out of my kitchen." She smoothed her dress as if dog hairs were already threatening to cling to it. "Red snapper for dinner," she added before walking away.

"Thank you, Mrs. Gamble."

Andreas stooped to rub between the dog's ears. "She likes her, or she would've made us promise to keep her outside."

"Should probably let her out for a bit right now to piss." Jabez tugged on the leash, leading the dog through the house toward the back door. Andreas dumped the dog bed and dish and bag of food in the front hall and followed him.

Outside, the dog with no name was off leash. She zigzagged down the brick pathway, sniffing every plant and stopping to pee several times. Andreas winced when

she let loose a stream on his favorite rosebush. When she'd finished christening the earth until she had no urine left, she began to dig at the edge of one of the flower beds.

"Nuh-uh." Andreas charged toward her. "No digging."

She skittered away from him, tail and ears down, gazing over her shoulder at him with hurt eyes.

Jabez let out a piercing whistle. The dog pricked her ears and ran past Andreas toward him. She started to leap up on his legs, but a sharp "no" set her back on all fours. She danced around Jabez in happy circles, tongue lolling, and Andreas wondered if she was mildly retarded. He hadn't had much experience with dogs.

"Guess we'd better let her play in the side yard, not the garden," Jabez said as he scratched the top of the dog's head and received a tongue bath on his hand in return.

Jabez had taken off his tie earlier and now removed his jacket. "Can we lose these monkey suits now?"

"Absolutely. I want to see you in bearskin. Get it? Bare skin?" He grinned at his own foolishness as he went to Jabez and slid an arm around his waist.

"Funny." He didn't crack a smile, but there was a twinkle in his eyes.

"Hey," Andreas said as they walked toward the house with the dog frisking around them, "I kind of like your commanding tone with the bitch here. Very sexy."

"Yeah? You want me to order you around too? Maybe have you wear a dog collar?"

Although they were teasing, the words sent lust stabbing through him. Black leather and deep-voiced commands danced in his mind. "I'd wear it if you wanted me to...sir." He added the respectful title with husky emphasis.

Jabez shot him a sideways glance, eyebrows raised. "The idea makes you hot."

"Kinda," he admitted.

His lover slipped a hand around the back of his neck and gripped it hard. "We can play like that." He steered him forward roughly.

When they reached the foot of the stairs, Jabez let go. "You want to be my dog, crawl up to the bedroom."

Andreas hesitated for a second, thinking of the knees of his suit trousers.

"Down!" Jabez barked, and Andreas obeyed the command, climbing up the steps on hands and knees. The real dog thought they were having great fun together. She licked his face and jumped on him with her front paws before racing ahead to wait for them on the landing.

Feeling a little humiliated and a lot turned on, Andreas made his way up the stairs more slowly, then crawled down the hallway to the bedroom.

"Strip," Jabez commanded next.

Andreas rose to his feet, loosened his tie, and unbuttoned his shirt.

"Slow."

After calling up music on the media-player by voice command, Andreas began to strip slowly. He took the tie off and whipped it toward the bed, then shrugged his shoulders out of his jacket and let it drop to the floor. With a sexy bump and grind, he slid one shoulder, then the other from his shirt, skimmed it down his arms, and danced shirtless for Jabez's pleasure. The dog sat on her haunches, watching him with her head cocked.

Jabez lay fully clothed on the bed, his legs stretched out before him and his arms folded behind his head. His eyes glittered in anticipation as Andreas slipped his thumbs under the waistband of his pants and briefs and eased them down his hips. He revealed his groin inch by inch, first the dark hairs on his pale stomach, then the head of his cock. His sensitive flesh tingled as he pulled the pants down the length of his hard shaft.

Grinding his hips some more, he let the trousers slither down his legs to the floor. Removing shoes and socks was awkward but necessary, and then he was completely nude. He felt self-conscious, afraid his dance was more silly than sexy, but the look in Jabez's eyes told him he was happy with the show. Andreas closed his eyes and raised his arms above his head as he swayed from side to side and thrust his hips. He danced his way to the side of the bed, moving tantalizingly just out of Jabez's reach. The dog followed him and bumped against his legs with her furry body.

Jabez continued to watch him for a few more moments before growling another command. "Strip me now."

Andreas crawled onto the bed and began to unbutton Jabez's shirt. He kissed every new bit of flesh he revealed all the way down to the fly of his trousers. Then he opened that and continued on. He licked the soft down of Jabez's lower stomach as he took his powerful cock in his hand. Bringing the tip of it to his lips, he was about to draw it into his mouth when Jabez's voice stopped him.

"Beg first. You don't touch without asking."

Andreas shivered at the forceful tone. He let go of Jabez's erection and sat back on his heels, hands curved in front of him like a begging dog's. "Please, sir, may I have a taste of your cock?"

Jabez grunted either in arousal or approval, Andreas wasn't sure which, but he took the sound as a go-ahead and bent to suck his lover's cock. He stroked his fist up and down its silken length and savored the salty taste of the head. He glanced up to see Jabez's eyes glittering as he watched. The other man's soft groan encouraged him, and Andreas sucked deeper.

"Stop," Jabez rasped after several moments. "I wanna come inside you."

Andreas quit immediately. "Yes, sir." His asshole spasmed in anticipation, clenching over and over. His own cock was rock-hard, and precum oozed from the purple head.

"Get the lube."

While Andreas obeyed, Jabez finished taking off his clothes and spoke to the dog, which was whining from being ignored. "Lie down."

The animal obeyed as compliantly as Andreas. She turned in a circle, then curled up with a sigh, nose on her paws, eyes upturned to continue watching the two men.

Jabez settled back on the bed once again with his arms folded behind his head. He watched Andreas massage his cock, lubing it with a film of oil. Andreas stroked until the heat of the friction had Jabez groaning.

"Enough. On your hands and knees now like a dog at the foot of the bed." His rough voice made Andreas's skin burn.

On all fours, he backed to the edge of the bed. Jabez got up and came around to stand behind him. Grasping Andreas's hips, he guided his cock to his entrance and pushed inside. The hard, fast entry made Andreas gasp, but Jabez was relentless, not gentle this time as he fucked him deep.

"Whine," he commanded next. "Whimper like a dog while I fuck you."

The harsh words made Andreas burn even hotter. Not only his skin but his insides felt like they were on fire. He closed his eyes and pushed his ass back hard onto the other man's cock while making quiet whimpering sounds in his throat.

On the floor, the other dog whined in sympathy and got to her feet, coming to the edge of the bed to see what the trouble was.

"Down," Jabez told her firmly, and she resumed her waiting posture.

As his lover moved in and out of his body in steady strokes, Andreas felt the heat inside him mount. His ass was pummeled by the other man's powerful thrusts, and Jabez's cock hit the sweet spot inside him that drove him closer to ecstasy. He balanced himself on one arm and reached beneath his body to grab hold of his erection. He was skating on the edge and just a few tugs would bring him off.

"Stop. I'll tell you when you can come. If you come before I say you can, you'll be punished." The threat sounded real spoken in Jabez's low voice, and Andreas felt another shiver of excitement. He let go of his aching cock and put his palm back on the bed, resuming his soft whining interspersed with grunts as Jabez pounded into him.

Powerful hands gripped his hips, and Jabez let out a strangled cry as he came. His cock pulsed, and he continued to rock against Andreas slowly until he was finished. He rubbed his hands up and down Andreas's back in a soothing caress, held his hips, and gently pulled out. Patting Andreas's buttocks, Jabez said, "Good boy. Now you get a reward. Lie down."

Andreas scrambled to obey, reclining on the bed. He glanced down at his cock, rising like a tilted monument from his body. Precum glistened on the head. He licked his lips, breathless with anticipation as Jabez climbed onto the bed, nudged his legs farther apart, and crawled between them. His eyes were riveted on Andreas's face as he took Andreas's cock in hand and lowered his mouth toward it.

"You can come now," he said before sucking the tip into his mouth.

A jolt of pleasure shot through Andreas at the heat and wetness. He moaned and lifted his hips for more. Jabez stroked him slowly and drew him in deep. He cupped his

balls, fondling them carefully. The roughness of his fucking gave way to gentle caresses and soft touches as he lovingly drew Andreas toward the brink of orgasm.

Eyes half closed, Andreas watched his handsome face. Jabez released his penis from his mouth and let his hand take over. "Good boy," he murmured again. "You're so good. Come for me now. I want to see you come."

The erotic request was almost more powerful than the pleasure of that hot mouth surrounding his cock had been. Jabez stroked harder and the friction of palm to shaft was almost painfully hot. Andreas heard himself continuously moaning. His hips jerked of their own accord and then ecstasy shattered him. His cock pulsed. Jets of cum shot over his belly all the way up to his chest.

"Yeah, like that," Jabez encouraged. "Beautiful." He bent and took Andreas's cock into his mouth once more, finishing him off with hard sucks and swallowing the rest of his load.

Andreas groaned in deep pleasure and stopped thrusting. He melted into the mattress, relaxed and boneless. He drowsily watched while Jabez let go of his penis and cleaned him up, licking the trail of cum up to his chest before licking and lightly biting each nipple.

After he'd moved to lie beside him, Jabez propped his head on his hand and looked into Andreas's face. He rubbed his arm, the weight of his hand heavy and warm. "I should get you a collar."

Andreas smiled. Even in the aftermath of his climax, a tingle of desire pierced him at the idea. He'd enjoy the submissive act of wearing a dog collar that proclaimed him Jabez's pet.

"You're good with dogs. Both the discipline and the rewards," he teased.

"Mm." Jabez glanced over at their new pet still waiting patiently on the floor. "We should reward that one for being so obedient."

Andreas snapped his fingers. "Come here, girl."

The dog leaped to her feet, raced the few steps to the bed, and vaulted onto it, landing on top of them.

"Hey. Whoa!" Andreas pushed her off him as her claws scratched his hip.

The dog found a space between their bodies and wedged herself into it, lying full length between them. Her rough fur tickled his skin.

"You shouldn't let her on the bed. If she does it once, she'll think she always can," Jabez said.

"I didn't 'let' her. She came on her own."

"Hm." Jabez rubbed her muzzle and scratched her forehead. The dog's eyes closed in bliss. "Well, I guess it doesn't hurt to have her here." He patted her head, then returned to petting Andreas, resting a hand on his hip and idly rubbing.

"You're so good with dogs, you should think about doing something with them. Go to school and become a vet or open a boarding kennel or raise show dogs or something."

Jabez made a scoffing sound. "Yeah, me a vet. I can hardly read."

"You'll learn. You'll continue learning whatever you need to know, but you have to believe in yourself. You can do anything you want, be anything you want. I don't believe you want to just be my bodyguard forever."

Jabez didn't say anything, but Andreas knew he was considering his words. He'd learned to stop expecting an instant response from Jabez—that was his own way of reacting, giving impulsive and immediate answers—his lover took time to think deeply before he responded. Maybe tomorrow, maybe a few days from now, Jabez would bring up the subject again in his own time.

Andreas glanced down at their new pet. "What the hell is she doing?"

The dog was rooting her snout into the sheets and licking them.

They both stared for a moment; then Jabez began to laugh. Rich, hearty waves of laughter rolled through him, shaking his body. "She's licking up your cum."

"Gross." Andreas grimaced and pushed her nose away from the sheet before he began to laugh too.

"So it's gross when she does it, but not when I do?" Jabez raised an eyebrow. "Maybe I should stop swallowing."

"No. I don't think that would be a good idea." Andreas slipped a hand around his neck and pulled him close for a kiss. He tasted himself on Jabez's tongue. "I don't think that would be a good idea at all."

Jabez chuckled again and rested his forehead against Andreas's. "I love you."

He said it offhandedly, as casually as if he'd said, *I enjoy you. You make me laugh*, but he said it.

A glow of warmth spread through Andreas, brighter and hotter than any orgasm. His heart expanded so fast it felt like it would rupture in his chest. "I love you too."

He pulled away and looked Jabez in the eyes. He lightened his intense delivery of the words with a joke. "And I'm not just saying that because you give great head."

For a moment they gazed into each other's eyes, silent messages deeper than words passing between them. The dog's whine broke the tension.

Jabez looked down at her and scratched underneath her chin. "She's lucky. She's got a good home."

Something clicked in Andreas's mind, the name Jabez had said would come to them when the time was right. "We should call her Azura in memory of your sister. I don't think it's disrespectful to name a dog after her. Having a namesake will be like always having a reminder of her with you."

Jabez patted the dog's head and gazed into her eyes a second before he responded. "Yeah." He lay back on the bed with his arm curled beneath his head and looked up at Andreas. "We'll give her a happy life."

Andreas bent and kissed him before lying back on his own pillow. "We'll all have happy lives."

 THE END 

Bonnie Dee

Whether you're a fan of contemporary, paranormal or historical romance, you'll find something to enjoy among my books. My style is down to earth and my characters feel like well-known friends by the time you've finished reading. I'm interested in flawed, often damaged, people who find the fulfillment they seek in one another.

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