



Within Reach

A Bonded Fantasy

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Dedication

To my Mother, who always finds the strength to do what's needed. You're an amazing woman, Mom.

Within Reach

He belonged to the child the first time he saw her. She was sad, tired. He just wanted to take her in his arms and make it all better. The morning sun narrowed her watchful eyes where she sat against the white-washed wall. She sat on the cobblestones with her knees tucked up, a delicate dark figure glimpsed through the jostling crowds. So far no one had noticed her but it was just a matter of time.

The air still held the freshness of dawn but the stench of City living was already overwhelming it. Leaving his perch on the shadowed counter of a basket shop, he moved into the brightly colored people, his plain, un-dyed leathers opening a path as if they were freshly skinned. The chatter and shouts died out around him as if he were a tiny rainstorm drenching human enthusiasm. They knew him for what he was: predator, other.

Crouching slowly, he sat down next to her. This line of row houses along the market was not shops, and had no doors. Instead, entrance into this building would be gained on an interior courtyard. "Good morning," he said.

"Hi." She looked at him openly, curious and surprised.

Something in his gut unfurled that she didn't so much as flinch when he approached and joined her. Her eyelashes were dark, long and perfect around dark eyes. On this side of the street, the sun lit harshly enough he could just see that they were deeply brown, not truly black. "What's your name?"

"Eledi."

He sucked in a sharp breath. It was a word from the Truxet old tongue, used only by Council scholars now. It meant "gift." His glance moved over her thick, glossy brown hair, her round face. How was this beauty connected to his people?

"What's your name?" she asked in return.

"Ruse."

"I like your animals." The little girl simply climbed right onto him, in that clumsy warm way of small children. Her fingers traced the embossed Sandcats that flowed over his tunic. It felt like she was petting the catspirit inside him, her touch seared him so deeply. His cat purred, content and indulgent.

"Do you know what they are?" He was breathless, that this delicate creature held no fear of him. He held his arms loosely along his outer thighs, using them to steady her as she knelt and wobbled on his thighs. He didn't want to scare her by putting his hands on her.

She considered the images along his collar carefully. "These are kitties. They say 'meow.' They hunt chucks and birds."

"You're very smart, Eledi. Those are Sandcats." Most City dwellers knew so little about animals; beyond the very rich who kept pets or the occasional Guild worker who dealt with the Farm. The sounds of the bustling market faded. His heart beating hard, he considered the precious being who studied him under her lashes. Time slowed. His muscles tightened, ready to run, to fight. For her.

"Mama's coming." She laid her disheveled head on his chest, one arm tucked tight into her own body, the other tracing the leather cats. Her weight went lax against him in utter trust.

He closed his eyes, arms quivering from the will he had to exert to keep from enclosing her. Bowing his head, he let himself inhale deeply, scenting her. She smelled warm, and sweet. She'd been bathed in the last day, but had probably slept since then because her scent was strong. He scanned the oblivious citizens. A Trux warrior had approached a four-year-old girl and still there was no notice of them, let alone concern.

"Where has she been?" he asked softly, gently, not letting a hint of his anger show.

"Working. Just one customer this morning, then we are going to go to the garden." She sighed happily. "I wuv the garden."

He lifted his head, scanned the crowd. No one was moving toward them from the surrounding shops. "What does she do?"

"She wears pretty dresses, and goes to talk to some men."

Every instinct in his body went on alert. "Her job is talking to men?"

"I have to stay here with Nawi. Nawi is making breakfast. Would you like to have some? I told Mommy about you and the Sandcats and she said you sound very interesting and she was coming right away." She bit her lip, her fingers skipping between the cats.

"This one is the best one." Eledi tapped decisively on one of the images.

His mind moving fast, he asked calmly, "Why's that?"

"Because I always watch, too. I know good eyes from bad eyes."

He couldn't do it. He didn't have the strength. He gave in, reaching up to ever so gently touch the back of her head. Her hair was warm from the sunlight, soft. His hand was bigger than her whole head.

"You're right, Eledi. You are like him." His cat purred. "You can mindspeak with your mother?" It wasn't unheard of, but it was very unusual. Enough to be remarkable that a child with that kind of mage strength was sitting unattended at the edge of a market. Why wasn't she in the Mage Guild compound?

"Eledi! Breakfast is ready!" The voice of a woman drifted from an upper window of the house they sat against.

"Who are you again? Roo?" The little girl climbed off him in a flurry of strong limbs.

"Ruse."

"Come to breakfast!" She stood and smiled at him. It blinded him, to see such innocent happiness and acceptance. This morning he'd been a slightly annoyed warrior doing his duty, marking time until he could leave this human pit and get back to his people. Now he would do anything to stay near this child. All his people loved children, honored and adored them. But this one was extraordinary. She touched his spirit.

"I don't think Nawi or your mother would like that."

"I'll ask." She tipped her eyes up to the sky, squinted.

He could see her lips move as if she were pretending. There was a thought.

"She said yes!"

"Did she?" He stood cautiously. Still no approaching woman in sight. He doubted the little one now. Maybe she wasn't really mindspeaking, and there was no mother. He was supposed to be meeting a Marten any moment now. He had to remember that, but first, he would see precious Eledi safely home. And learn how he could see her again.

"She said if you're good you can come to breakfast."

He was taken aback by that. That sounded like a suspicious mother, not a pretending child. But it still could be.

"I can't stay long." But he'd love to tell this Nawi what he thought of her child watching skills.

"Come!"

To his surprise, the little one took his hand. Or rather, two of his fingers. She trotted down three sections of the row house, turned down an alley, and went into it. His heart seized. She'd traveled so far alone.

"Where is your house, Eledi?"

"We don't have one. We're staying with Nawi right now. I liked Ahnu's better but it was a long time ago."

What was he doing with this human child he had no right to? Why was he learning all these things that were just going to keep him up at night? The alley opened up onto an interior courtyard, crowded in the way of the poor with trunks and debris. She turned left at the end of the alley and walked two houses back, then began to climb a trellis covered with jasmine. He snatched her off before she cleared his waist and gently set her on the ground.

"What are you doing?"

"Going to breakfast!"

"I need to use a door, Eledi."

She snorted, rolled her eyes. "You do *no-ot*."

The patent disbelief in her voice made his lips twitch. "I do when I'm a guest. And you should too."

"A guest?"

"A visitor, a stranger. With manners."

"Nawi won't care about your manners, but I can't use the door, or I'll get in twubble."

The adorable lisp that showed up in some of her words made his heart clench. Why out of all the human children he'd enjoyed watching during this duty had this one so captured him?

Tipping his head, he considered the trellis, the balcony it attached to, the wider balcony it abutted with on the house beyond... And the open door on that balcony.

"Did you sneak out, Eledi?"

"No."

He simply met her eyes, held them.

"No! I just went out on the balcony, and climbed down. I didn't do it." Her little face closed up in mutinous disregard of the proof. His lips twitched again. Just then they both heard a panicked, "Eledi!" from inside the white row house's second story.

Eledi winced.

"Is that Nawi?"

"No. That's mommy."

"Eledi!" The sharp emotion in the voice drew his gaze up. A dark-haired woman came rushing out of the house, her gaze tearing along the empty balcony. She threw herself against the railing and scanned the quiet, tiny courtyard the square of houses backed in on. Her gaze pinned Eledi, who shuffled closer to him, and then her dark eyes settled on him with a woman's vengeance.

He was astonished when wind ripped down from the sky and spiraled around him in fury. Eledi reached for his hand and he quickly folded her tightly to his chest, protecting

her face. The wind snatched them both and ripped them into the air. His cat snarled ferociously, but in a moment they were set down on the balcony two bodylengths from the woman.

Her voice shaking, she held out her hand and demanded, "Put her down. Eledi, come to me."

He let the little girl slide out of his arms, but she ran around behind him, clutching one thigh. "Mommy, I'm sorry!"

"Eledi, I am very, very afraid right now. Come here at once, young lady!" She held his eyes directly, a feat few humans could do. He realized her eyes held color, but couldn't make out what it was. They were not the brown-black of her daughter's though she did have the same silky, disheveled, brown hair.

Eledi peeked out from behind him. "Why are you afraid?" Surprise sounded clear in her high voice.

"Now!" With that command, the wind stirred along the balcony.

Eledi scampered to her, throwing herself into her mother's long dark blue skirt. The woman laid shaking hands over her daughter's head, still holding his gaze. She pressed the little head to her tightly, soothing her hair.

"Thank you. Thank you, Eledi. Please go inside. Nawi has breakfast."

A presence moved up into the doorway. The lithe young woman held out her hand to Eledi. Her face was white, her body poised as if to run from him.

The little hands squeezed her mother one last time. "I'm sorry! He has good eyes, Mommy." Eledi stepped toward the younger brunette and took her hand, looking back at him regretfully. "I wasn't supposed to be watching the market without Nawi," she admitted.

"It's good that you are sorry. You disobeyed, and worried your mother. I'm glad you're home safe now."

"Are you staying for breakfast?"

"Eledi."

The woman's word was calm, and carried some mystical motherspeak that drew a sigh from the child. She waved to him when she walked inside with the younger woman.

He considered the woman before him. She continued to stare right back, now visibly more in control, but still far from relaxed. He was impressed when the minutes spun out and she refused to speak first. Good tactics.

He offered first. "Good morning."

She cleared her throat. Finally, her eyes dropped. He still couldn't detect their color. Perhaps there was a flash of green. "Good morning."

No apologies from her. No defensive explanations. She was dressed simply, modestly. She had lovely, lightly tanned skin without a mark.

"I enjoyed meeting Eledi very much. She is... wonderful."

"Yes. She is." The woman's hands twitched once in her skirt. "Why did you approach her?"

Ah. She took the attack first. "I don't really know. Something about her calm stillness. The way she watched the market. And I worried that she was alone."

She looked him in the eyes, studied him, somberly. He let her look over his deeply tanned skin, his lightly lined face. You didn't live in the harsh sun of the plains and not get lines. He had a few scars, but nothing noteworthy. Other than his size, of course. And

his race.

He reassured the woman. "I see that she is a minx. I take it she has done this before?"

"Yes. I thought we had come to an understanding." The woman let out a great, shuddering sigh. She raised a hand up to her lovely, sculpted face and covered her eyes briefly. She drew her shoulders back as her hand fell, seeming to pull strength from her depths.

"Would you like to come in?"

"You trust her judgment?"

"I consider it carefully and with weight. But she is a child."

They considered each other again. His opinion of her just kept going up.

"If you'd rather go off now that you've met me, I understand."

He raised a brow. "Understand what?"

"You know what I am." One elegant, long-fingered hand closed into a fist.

"I know. Why should I give up a breakfast with a wonderful child and a brave woman because of that?"

"Because." She shrugged.

He recognized the tired sadness in her eyes from seeing it in Eledi. She'd bathed very recently, he could smell the soap, but it had been hurried and he could still smell a man's sex. His cat hissed at the obnoxious scent. It didn't belong on her. It wasn't his.

His anger seeped into his words. "They threw you out of your Guild, didn't they? They call you skinlicker or smoothskin. They stupidly spit on you in public and pay you in private. But none of that has the least thing to do with whether I will take food with you today."

She blinked at him. Her eyes were large and long lashed. It drove him crazy he couldn't make out the color clearly.

"Are you coming in?"

"Only if you trust that I would never harm your child. You will never need to call her from my arms in fear again. I am Ruse, a Sandcat, and I have the full control and honor of a Truxet warrior."

She was silent again. *If you'd rather go off now that you've met me, I understand.* Her words echoed in his brain. Very few human women would invite a Trux into their home willingly, socially.

"Trust is earned, Sandcat. Your people have proven they can be trusted to serve human justice in our Cities. But every man stands alone in the sun."

The Truxet saying winged through his chest like a shock to his lungs. He stilled, but she was walking into the darkened doorway.

"Breakfast is probably cold, but you are welcome to come share it, Ruse."

Her hair went down to her ass in a loose braid. He had a sudden desire to see her face tipped up at him, that braid wrapped around his fist. His dick stirred. He scowled. His vision was lacking the true color of her eyes. Eledi's high piping voice echoed excitedly from the rooms. Luring him. He went and stood in the door. The Marten was surely waiting for him by now. His cat turned in a tight circle, annoyed.

"Lady."

His low voice stopped the woman who was passing through the doorway across the narrow room. She hesitated, looking back over her shoulder. The line of her shoulder, the

angle of her jaw, her golden skin in shadow seemed to burn into his mind like an exquisite tapestry. Her scent called his hands to reach for her, and the man's lingering scent called his claws.

"I must go. But I would like... I wish I could stay."

She turned her body to face him, her eyes holding his. The utter grace of her regal turn fattened his dick some more.

"Then perhaps you could come to breakfast tomorrow."

Her words were calm, low. But he heard the uncertain interest.

"I'll be here. I'll use the door next time."

She turned back and he stopped her again. "Lady."

When she only hesitated this time, he took the opportunity to look at how the tip of her braid nestled in her ass. "What is your name?"

He saw her jaw shift from the side. He thought she smiled.

"Amaya." She went into the next room, and Eledi's chatter increased. He heard the questioning exclamation of the other woman.

Turning away from everything he wanted, he took one pace and leaped, falling the two bodylengths to the courtyard and landing lightly. He went quickly down the alley, pausing to adjust his interested dick.

Back at the basket shop, the Marten was waiting. This duty was an information hunt, complicated but boring. He'd been here a month, would be staying another two weeks. He'd have a few days at River Mountain, the seat of the Council, to share a debriefing of his team. Then finally, he'd be at Grasshome.

He could practically feel the feathery tassels of the long grass against his fingers as he'd pace the path from sifting stone to lair. He'd come over the rise and see the woven corrals of his people. He ached to be there, back on the earth's sea where the wind could dance so beautifully.

How odd that this time, he pictured a tiny, bobbing brown head dancing among the flowers and rushes ahead of him. Trailing between them glided the smooth strong spine of a woman. Her back was exposed in the leather halters of their adopted women. Her straight spine undulated as she gracefully looked over her shoulder to smile at him, while their daughter danced in the wind beyond...

* * * *

The next morning Eledi could not be contained. Nawi was not speaking to her, and she feared that her friend was right. This was a foolhardy gesture that could go nowhere but to turn their neighbors upon them. The irony did not escape her. She took such pains to cover her patrons, and now she was inviting a Beast boldly into her home. Her *borrowed* home. That she would no doubt soon be asked to vacate.

She finished beating the last rug and hauled the thin weight over the banister. It was more of a towel really. Similarly sized rugs of her childhood couldn't even be lifted by one person, their wool was so dense. After beating the rugs for the first time in weeks, the balcony had to be swept, then the banister wiped. Eledi helped. She was so darling, with her cleaning rag. Ever eager to help.

Turning her mind back to her daughter's chatter, she heard, "...full of trees like the garden's, Mommy! Trees as big as houses going on farther than the City walls! Have you seen it Mommy?"

"No, Didi, I've never seen a forest. I've seen the ocean, though." She would never forget that part of her life. Such grief, such beauty.

"You *did*?" Eledi's enormous black eyes were huge with awe. "You saw the big water?!"

"I did."

"You never *told* me!"

Amaya laughed with the open joy she only ever discovered around this precious soul. "I've lived a lot longer than you. I haven't had time to tell you everything I've seen."

"But you have to!"

"I agree." The low, smooth voice slunk up her neck like a caress.

Eledi gave an ear-piercing shriek and scrambled to the man standing on the balcony. "You came!"

"I did." He smiled down at her, holding out his hand, and she latched onto it with both of hers.

The picture burned into Amaya's brain. This huge, dangerous warrior looking at Eledi with clarity and kindness, while her dark-haired daughter laughed up at him, swinging his hand. His hand was immense in hers, scarred, calloused, with a dusting of brown hair. He was much darker than her, but not as dark as those from Sixth City in the desert. His face was handsome, broad, with thin lips and laugh lines by his eyes. The few lines on his forehead and by his mouth marked him older than she, perhaps. He looked solid, capable, in his well-worn fighting leathers. He carried no weapons that she could see, nothing at all on his belt. But then, he wouldn't need them, when he could transform his body into a weapon.

He looked up and his dark eyes sent a pang through her. They seemed to pull at her feet, and like yesterday, she firmed herself to keep from moving to him. Insanity. She thought again, as she had yesterday, *they look so familiar*... But she knew they'd never met. She'd never had a Sandcat before. She was sure they were one of the smallest Clans.

He nodded to her, his eyes more serious than when they had watched Eledi. "Good morning. Amaya."

The way he said her name made the hair rise on the back of her nape. And it was totally unacceptable. That he was here. That he could do that to her.

"You said you were going to use the door, sir?"

"I will." He nodded to the balcony door standing open. "You know my name, Lady." The rebuke for her distance was ever so mild but she knew it for the challenge it was.

"Ruse! Ruse! I know your name! I 'member!"

He crouched down to Eledi, giving in to her tugs. "I'm so glad. I remember yours, too, Eledi."

She giggled, delighted. "Do you like sweet bread and apples?"

"I do."

"Come see my flowers! And Nawi!" Eledi put one hand around his neck, pushed his short, wavy brown hair from his ear and whispered to him. She was good, but the courtyard was still and Amaya heard her. "Nawi is afraid of you."

"I will try not to be scary." He whispered back seriously.

Eledi giggled again, wildly. "You're not scary!"

He stood. Eledi tried to pull him into the flat, but he remained immovable. "Amaya?"

After you.”

She nodded to him and went forward. They passed through the sitting room into the kitchen. Smells of sweet spices filled the air. Nawi was beyond, folding away the wash in her trunk. The bedroom faced the front of the narrow house and bright sunlight lit up the tiny front window as market voices called below.

“Nawi, our guest is here.”

Nawi froze, and then jerked the trunk closed and hurried into the kitchen, closing the bedroom door the three of them shared behind her. She was six years younger than Amaya, and had been raised Guildless. Her path had been set by birth, not by choice. The young brunette’s eyes glanced up at Ruse, a slight tremor passed over her body, and then she bobbed a curtsy.

“H-hello. Sir. Good morning. Ready. Breakfast is ready.”

“Good morning, Nawi. Thank you for your hospitality. I’m glad to join you.”

His gentle, low voice only seemed to terrify her more. She froze, then rushed to the mageheat.

Amaya sighed, disappointed. So many City women considered Beasts brutal and suspicious. She went to the stove and put an arm around Nawi. “Sit. I’ll serve.”

“No! He’s your guest.” Nawi jerked the spoon away from her reaching fingers.

Eledi had climbed into her booster seat and was directing Ruse to the chair next to her. “Do you like flowers?”

“I like them very much. There are many, many flowers at my home.”

The two women at the counter looked at each other, stunned. Beasts did not talk about their homes. Ever. Of course, she had never heard of a Beast coming to breakfast in a City home, either.

Eledi leaned forward eagerly. “What kinds do you have? I know lots of them.”

“There are daisies. Do you know those?” he asked.

“White, yellow, or pink?”

He folded his hands on the table. Sitting, he was still nearly as tall as Amaya. He smiled at Eledi, and the wide mouth made his whole face look softer. His jaw was so square. It could probably bite deep, and never be dislodged. It was what he was born to, to know violence, to meet it and overcome it with honor. But her job as a whore among these Beasts had taught her they were never violent with women. True, they could be dominant or passionately rough sometimes. She imagined that jaw opening along the curve of her hip...

“White, but some yellow,” Ruse answered.

“You don’t have pink in your garden?”

“I don’t have pink. My home doesn’t really have a garden, it just has flowers that grow where they like.”

Eledi looked up at him, mouth agape. “*Wild* flowers?” The awe that infused her tone made Amaya smile and bite her lip.

“As wild as the wind.” He looked up and caught Amaya’s eyes. Leaned closer. The brown was so deep, so warm. She leaned toward him.

With a gasp, she focused on stirring the apples. Ridiculous. Her child and a friend in the room with them and she acted like a virgin getting her first kiss. Her cheeks burned red with embarrassment.

She listened to them discuss the fields of grain and flowers where he lived. His

description, the love and pride his voice held, pulled at her. It was mesmerizing to hear someone describe the Wild as something beautiful and treasured, instead of feared.

"I've seen all three colors in our garden."

"That's right. You were going to the City garden yesterday. Did you have a nice time?"

Eledi's face crumpled. She looked quickly at Amaya, who was settling in opposite Ruse, only because she thought Nawi might faint if she had to. Amaya sighed.

Ruse looked from one to the other. "Ah."

"I didn't get to go to the garden yesterday because I was naughty."

"Eledi. It wasn't because you were naughty." Amaya sent her mother's tone into her voice.

Eledi heaved a great put-upon sigh and it was all Amaya could do to keep a straight face.

"I can't go to the garden OR the market for a WHOLE WEEK because I had terrible danger."

"Do you understand why your mother wants you to remember what you did was very wrong?"

"Because I had terrible danger," she repeated.

"That's not why." He turned that great head of his and looked at Amaya. Her breath caught at the intensity of his gaze. There was some emotion there she couldn't pin.

"Because I could get hurt."

"That's not why."

Eledi was silent, puzzled.

Still looking at Amaya, he said, "Because she loves you very much and would be hurt even more than you if something happened to you."

"How would Mommy get hurt if I got lost? She would miss me, then she'd find me..." Eledi looked at her, concerned.

Amaya smiled reassuringly, humbled at her daughter's faith.

"He means I would worry. Do you remember how I brought you to me with the winds when you were gone even that tiny moment?"

Eledi, laughed, delighted. "And you brought Ruse too, because I wouldn't let him go!"

Amaya sighed, deeply. Some days she didn't know where she found the strength. Nawi served the apple bread pudding to Ruse first, then Eledi. Returning to the table, she sat stiffly. Amaya reached for the pitcher, but Ruse got there first. His skin was so warm. She pulled her hand back quickly. He poured the four drinks, and then Eledi settled into quizzing him about flowers.

In mere minutes, Eledi had finished. In a flurry of activity, she began to drag all her toys to the table. Nawi finished next and quickly began to clean up.

"Nawi, let me." Amaya asked forgiveness for her friend's discomfort. "It's your turn to go to market, isn't it?" It was, although they never went until late afternoon, when the leftovers were put on sale.

Nawi nodded jerkily. "That's right. Good morning, sir." Bobbing a curtsy at Ruse, she grabbed a pouch by the door and clattered down the stairs.

Eledi sang cheerfully, "Bye Nawi!"

"Good bye, Nawi. Thank you for breakfast," Ruse called after her fleeing form.

“Would you like seconds? There are some.”

“No, thank you.”

Eledi tugged on his sleeve, “Ruse, this is the best one, my favorite. Isn’t she the most beautiful?” She cradled the doll baby carefully. Dressed in an array of clothes Amaya had made from old working slips, the carved wooden head of the doll was realistic.

“What’s her name?”

“Baby.”

“Ah. She is precious, but I’m not sure if she’s as beautiful as her mother.”

Eledi looked up at him, puzzled. Then, her face cleared. “I’m her mother!”

He smiled down at the little girl bouncing at his side. His voice was low, almost crooning. “And you are even more lovely than Baby.”

Eledi went into gales of laughter, hugging the doll. Snatching up her other rag doll by the foot, she whirled it around her head as she ran around the table, shouting, “We’re beautiful! We’re beautiful!” She galloped into the living room.

Amaya sat with her spoon in mid-air. She hadn’t been able to get her breath back from the look on his face when he had spoken to Eledi. Her heart kicked in her chest, beating again, and her spoon clattered back down to the dish. She put her hands in her lap. He watched her, his arms folded along the edge of the table. One of his biceps jumped. She swallowed.

“I cannot imagine your courage.”

“W-what?” Winds, now she was stammering.

“Living like this. With no Clan, no one to lean on. There’s no father, is there?”

Amaya looked down, shook her head. Eledi was now singing in the other room. He stood, came around, and moved Nawi’s chair so that it faced her. He sat, gathered her hands in his.

“Amaya. I would be there for you.”

Amaya looked at him. His hands were gentle, warm, and dry. The fingertips were rough. His eyes were deep, his form large and still. He was steady. He was strong.

“Friends are never turned away.”

“More than friends.”

She shook her head. “I have enough of those.”

His hands tightened, and he pulled on her arm so that she turned her body to face him.

“Not like me. None of them see you as woman first, lover second. None of them are in love with Eledi. None of them want to know you so well they can see the world through your eyes.”

Gasping, Amaya ripped her hands out of his, wrapping them around her. She stared at him, stunned, overwhelmed. He was just a stranger. Just another man. Just another valiant Beast, the kind she’d dreamed would take her away for years.

He raised a massive hand up to her face, touched her jaw so faintly. “Breathe, Lady.”

The room swirled as air came back to her brain. She must look like a fish.

Eledi ran back in. “And this is her red dress!” She hurled herself onto Ruse, and he caught her up, propped her sideways on his thigh. He looked at Eledi first, glanced at the doll, then watched her face as he shared his compliments. He held her so carefully. To Amaya’s knowledge, Eledi had never been held by a male before. She had no fear of his size.

Eledi chattered on to him. He looked up and caught her gaze. She could smell his leathers, his maleness. Eledi leaped off him and ran into the other room again. He let her go without glancing away from Amaya's eyes. His hand came back up to her face, grazed her jaw, cupped the back of her nape. He leaned in as he pulled her forward. She braced her hands on his knee.

"Your eyes are so alive," he murmured against her lips. Brushing his against hers, he barely mouthed her lower lip.

Blood surged to her cheeks, heating them. Her lip tingled, her breath panted against his. She felt a muscle in his thigh jump, but he merely wiped his lips leisurely to the corner of her mouth, where he nuzzled. Then pulled back. She sank her fingers into his leg. His muscles were so hard, there was barely any give. They stared at each other. She swayed, drawn into his black depths.

Eledi came clattering back into the kitchen. "And this is her green one!" She threw herself up onto Ruse, and he looked down at her, releasing Amaya from his spell. She sat there, feeling overwhelmed. She could use a powerful friend. She could always use another patron. But what was she going to do with a barely-there-kiss that took her breath away? And eyes that took her brain away? And a loving manner toward her daughter that took her heart away?

Having exhausted the doll's wardrobe, Eledi stayed with them in the kitchen. Amaya forced herself to finish the breakfast she couldn't taste. She managed to make light comments as she cleaned up the kitchen. Ruse stood beside her and washed the dishes over her protests. He said he had to go. Eledi smiled at him and thanked him again for bringing her home from the market. He told her he'd see her again. She smiled, nodded, and watched Eledi hug him. Her daughter looked so tiny and fragile in his arms. And so happy. She avoided his eyes as he hovered, waiting for her acknowledgment in the doorway.

And she made a mental note: make sure Triska knew she wasn't accepting new patrons for awhile. He was dangerous to her body, to her mind. Serving her men yesterday after he'd left had been awful, and she looked forward to her early evening appointments tonight even less. She feared. She could not afford another kiss like that.

* * * *

He waited for her in a room that smelled like sex. Lots and lots of sex. It smelled good. Earthy. Wild. Normally, it would interest him. Now, it just enraged him. Amaya's scent was everywhere, mixed with four others that he could detect. The room was all in shades of green and gold. It was a high end room, as far as brothels went. Nothing looked cheap or broken, worn or stained.

His cat was pacing inside him, and after the first hour, he decided he had to as well. But when he heard her footsteps in the hallway, he threw himself down on a round, padded stool and clenched his hands on his knees. He drew in a deep breath. He would be respectful. He would be calm. He could smell her scent clearly. She'd probably been fucked on this stool.

She opened the door, stepped in, and closed it softly. She stayed there a moment, then turned and leaned against it, her hands behind her on the knob. As if she might run. Her eyes stayed on the floor, as they had when he'd left her apartment this morning.

"Triska tells me you've paid for the night."

And every other night of the rest of your life. “Of course.”

“I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.”

“You underestimate yourself.” He could almost smell her snarl. “Say it, Amaya.”

“What would you like me to say, Ruse?” She made it a sultry request, a professional one. He swallowed down his own snarl.

“Whatever it is that you’re thinking. I want to hear your thoughts.”

For the first time, her gaze flicked up to meet his, then away. “I was thinking that you have vastly *overestimated* your own self.”

He grinned, through his clenched teeth. “What else?”

Her dark eyes rose to his, and held his stare. A sizzle went down his spine, much the same as when her breath had eased over him during their kiss this morning.

“For one day, I thought you were different. What happened to wanting to know the woman first? To being my friend, not my lover?”

“Ah. I never said I didn’t want to be your lover. I plan on being both. And I am at a great advantage over you. I have a Sandcat inside me. He knows Clan when he smells them. He knows who belongs to us. We know you very well, Amaya.”

“Are you implying that your Sandcat now knows everything about me after one whiff?”

“He knows everything essential. The rest is important, and I cannot wait to learn more.”

“Obviously. So, what is this essential heart of me?”

“You are proud. You are strong, and incredibly intelligent. You are courageous, and aching lonely. You are tired, and sad, and crave belonging. Family was torn from you and you work to create a shadow of it but it’s not the same. You’re sensual, and giving, but have learned caution. You are a protector, and you live too much for Eledi.”

She continued to hold his eyes. His cat crouched, a snarl rumbling inside him. He dared her to refute him with his steady hold. Cats knew all about holding a stare. She looked away first.

“What do you want, Ruse?” She spoke softly, guarded, weary.

“I can’t stay here. My cat is going insane from the scent of other men. Let me walk you home. We’ll play with Eledi, tuck her in.”

“I don’t think that’s wise. You have no place in her life. You were just a kind, passing acquaintance.”

He stood abruptly with the force of the cat’s lunge inside him.

She raised one eyebrow. “You’ve paid for my services in this room for one night. I am not going anywhere.”

“I told you, it stinks. I can’t stay here. Do you deny how right we felt together this morning? I fit there, with her, with you.”

“Ruse, I’m a single mother, Guildless. I can’t afford to indulge in feelings.” She shrugged out of her dark gray cape. A pale satin slip hugged her unbound breasts, cut to the tender point between them that revealed her breastbone. It was pink, much lighter than her golden skin, and flared smoothly over her belly and hips. Her nipples stabbed clearly through the thin material, as did the rise of her mound. She looked utterly eatable. “Shall I undress you?”

A growl escaped. She remained standing in front of the door. “I’m not going to fuck you, Amaya. When I take you, I want to love you. I want to worship your shoulders, that

have lifted all of life's cruelty. I want to lick every inch, and discover unknown patches of your skin no man has ever touched." Shit, he was losing his voice to the cat. It was too low, too rough. He breathed in, trying to reign in the change. "I want to suck on your fingers and know they are about to dance on my body. But tonight, I'm going to prove I'm in control of my cat. And I'm going to prove I want the details of your mind more than your cunt."

"Ah, but it's my cunt you've paid for. The only thing you have a right to. An even exchange, isn't it? Your coin for a warm hole." She walked with straight shouldered grace to the low bed. She sat on it elegantly, legs tucked to one side. She pulled her long, loose hair over one shoulder, where it gleamed and rippled like a pelt.

He stared at her hands moving through her hair. She shifted, and he smelled her warmth. "Well, Ruse? Shall I use these 'dancing' fingers, or would you like me to undress you with my teeth?"

He scowled. "Amaya, don't. We're already closer than this. It's too late to bluff."

"I don't know about that, Sandcat. Apparently, that nose of his hasn't told you that Raffiel, the Wolf who usually has me now, and has been having me for almost two years, is much closer to me than you. He's actually had a conversation with me on several occasions. He knows the unessential things like my favorite color, and what position I like best. But I'm sure you'll pick them up quick. After all, you bought the whole night."

Ruse closed his eyes. Fuck. The fucking little brat. Out of all the hundreds of Wolves... *He knew Raffiel*. He knew the man's laugh, his walk, and the way he liked to grab the paid women and pull them into his lap. His signature move was to kiss the inside of their elbow. They all swooned over it.

"Fine, since you can't make the decision, I'll undress." She stood in a whisper of delicate pink woman scent and lifted her hands up to one shoulder. She began to undo the velvet bow there.

"Why are you angry at me? Why are you scared? You can trust me, Amaya. I will be here for you, always."

"I'm not scared, Ruse. And I do feel you are trustworthy. But let me clarify something for you. I can't go with you, and you don't live here. You haven't lived here, you can't live here, and you wouldn't be willing to for all the terrific kisses in the world. That's why I'm angry." The bow unraveled, and the satin slithered down to drape over the rise of one full breast. She moved her hands to the other side.

He surged forward one step. "Don't."

She made a dismissive gesture with her bare shoulder, and let her hands fall to her sides. "As you wish."

"Amaya..."

"You know what? I've never had a Sandcat before."

He stared at her, hurt and anger twisting through his gut. "Bitch."

"Ass. Who do you think you are to waltz into my life and say you're going to be there for me? You throw some compliments around like it's going to erase all the pain I've survived, and then you have the gall to buy me for the night!"

He was breathing hard. Not good. For one thing, he was losing control, and for another, it only increased the scent of the room. Amaya, and other men.

"You feel it. I know you do. We belong together. I'm going to make that happen, and I want you as my partner, not my prisoner."

“Is that a threat? Because I’m quite sure that women have to volunteer to leave the City with Beasts.”

He stared at her, fists clenching. She glanced at them, and raised her chin. He narrowed his eyes. “I would never hurt you.”

She shrugged. His cat roared so hard he shuddered with the force of it inside him.

“I have to go. I can’t stay here, with you taunting me, with this smell in the air.”

“This smell is who I am, Ruse. It’s who I’ve been for five years. I didn’t turn to this because of Eledi. I don’t even know who Eledi’s father is. How about that little essential?”

Breathing as if he’d run from Sixth City to Seventh without stopping he turned on one heel and moved toward the door.

“Make sure you get your refund.” Her voice was as cool and thin as the satin on her body.

He glanced back. “Just know I’ll be following you home.” His cat began to leap and slash inside him. They were leaving her. They were leaving her unprotected, untouched, unclaimed. He closed the door as softly as she had, and went to find the manager.

* * * *

He was following her. She could feel him out there, skulking. No. That wasn’t fair. Protecting. Guarding. She’d been horrible. More horrible than she’d been even with some of her rudest customers. But what was she supposed to do? Fall at his feet in a simpering pile of “Save me?” Tell him how long she’d dreamed of living with the Truxet? Tell him how attractive he was, how magical it seemed when she saw him look at her daughter?

She hadn’t cried. She’d tied her gown, and gone downstairs to face Triska. Triska had shrugged and said that Ruse insisted the night was paid for so she might as well go home and “clear her head.” Amaya had visited with the men relaxing in the house lounge, and then Raffiel had come in.

His strong, black arm shot out and cinched around her waist. With one powerful curl, she was in his lap, laughing. He buried his face in her neck, humming, licking the hollow of her throat. She tilted her head away, giving him access, and fought to keep her body lax. His hand settled on one breast, and she couldn’t hide her flinch.

He pulled back, surprised, and she smiled at him, putting their history into her eyes so she’d mean it. Her training chants came back to save her. This is not your body. It’s his. His pleasure is yours. Your skin is all you know. Seek the sensation, embrace it. He lifted her arm and lowered his face to kiss her inner elbow. He hesitated, holding her gaze, and she was able to soften into his erection, flatten her breast against his bare chest, let her mouth fall open in anticipation. He kissed her, and she closed her eyes to focus on her skin, on the moment, and not the fact that his arms were more slender, his night skin the wrong shade, and his smell not what she craved. After enjoying this man’s body for years, it suddenly felt so wrong.

Then Triska was before them, the stunning curves of Lorelei by her side. “Amaya, you have another obligation. As does Raffiel.”

Raffiel laughed, and pulled Lorelei down onto his other thigh, and the women laughed with him, of course. Amaya exchanged a kiss with him, and sat heavy against his side as he kissed Lorelei, and then he set her aside.

Now she pattered through the night in her thin slippers and slightly thicker cloak.

She'd only passed two groups of people. The streets were silent, the magelights dim. The sky glowed its comforting green from the mage Guild-powered walls. She'd walked this silent, dark walk nightly for years, sometimes with a working sister, sometimes with a patron, mostly alone.

Ruse had come to her. He'd paid for her. She'd been shaking with rage before she'd entered the room, and calm descended. He was everything she ever wanted. But he wasn't real. He wasn't. And even if he was, he was too damn late. Ruse wanted to take her away to live with him, and she could no longer go. She walked through the streets, feeling the weight of his gaze like a thick, soft blanket. It would have been easier if he'd just bedded her. Used her. She could have controlled the relationship then. But he didn't, and she could sense that he wouldn't.

She had to get away, and soon. She'd get a new apartment and start contracting her own patrons. That should have happened a year ago anyway, she just liked being near the other women, in the house with everyone coming and going. He'd find her, of course, but she'd be cold, even colder than tonight. He wouldn't stay. She could last until then. Somehow she'd find the strength.

* * * *

He waited in the heat of the afternoon. The Royal City was farther north than both Sixth and Seventh, the Cities he had the most experience with, but because of its location on the sea, it always seemed to warm sooner and grow colder later. Even though the stucco he leaned against was in deep shadow, it still radiated heat from the morning.

Today he'd tracked some of the information he was hunting for, then abandoned that for the information that really mattered. Who Amaya had worked with, and for how long. He'd been proud of how he'd kept it together last night, but he hadn't been able to sleep. He'd had to know. Even though they were out of her life now.

He'd been waiting now for three hours, but he didn't mind. His cat was in complete agreement. From that first scenting he'd shared as she passed him on the balcony, he knew something was tilting his world other than a pretty face. Then he'd kissed her. He was ashamed of the jealousy, while he shared none of the bias of humans toward her job. Paid women were generous, wonderful people, valued in the Truxet world. But that was not her path anymore. She was his. And she would never know pleasure again unless he was sharing it with her. The thought of her touching men yesterday after he'd left made him shiver in pain from his cat twisting and screaming inside. She'd reeked of Raffiel as she'd passed by him in the shadows. The only thing that had kept him in human form was the fact she hadn't had sex. No, he wasn't going through another repeat of last night. She doubted him. She'd been alone a long time. But he wasn't going to face her taunts in a room that reeked of her history. Her history didn't matter. Only their future.

Eventually, he saw Nawi leave. He knew Amaya was still in there because the boy he'd set to follow her had said no one had left the house. Several women entered the courtyard alley, and then a hooded figure left. Her grace gave her away. What did she have on under it tonight? He glanced up at the dimly lit bedroom window. Trusted her that someone good watched over Eledi. He followed her to the house several blocks away. The house that served many Truxet and a few Cityguard.

He waited while they told her. He'd already moved her things. He waited, his cat rising to pace. He'd take her there tonight. To their new home. A temporary home, just

for a short while. Until he told her, taught her, convinced her. A mate. Amaya. His beautiful mate, after all these years. With a child, a beautiful child. A gift.

When she came out, she was crying. He went rigid. She was crying, in the arms of that fucking flirt Kent. The Mountaincat rubbed her back, rocked her. She turned her face up, and he lowered his closer...

* * * *

His coughing roar broke the evening shadows. Amaya jumped, but Kent merely moved her behind him as he put his fists on his hips.

"Stop being so dramatic, Ruse! Get over here."

He stalked out of the shadows, flowing in a hunting pace. "Get away from her."

"No." Kent sat on the front step. Just sat, as if he was going to have a snack.

Snarls rumbled up from his chest.

"Come here, Amaya." Kent patted the space next to him on the stairs.

He froze in the middle of the street and roared again, louder, at the familiarity with which he spoke her name.

"Shut up, you ass." He grinned at Amaya, who still stood against the door, and he knew she'd told Kent about last night when he'd displayed his jealousy.

He began to race toward the man, but mastered himself, stumbling to a stop. He stood, panting, a bodylength from the set of stairs that led up to the third story.

Kent frowned at him, pointing a challenging finger. "*What* has gotten into you?!"

A shiver passed over him. He'd barely stopped himself. To attack a brother Trux was enormous. An enormous humiliation, and against their laws.

"You stand between me and my unclaimed."

He let the simple words carry on the night. Amaya would hear it from him, in a better way than this, but his friend deserved an answer.

"Well." Kent blinked at him, clearly surprised. He clapped his hands once, standing, shouted, "Well!"

He bounded down the stairs to embrace Ruse, and Amaya's scent overwhelmed him. Ruse swallowed down his growl.

Clapping him on the back, Kent asked jovially, "You can't stay in the City. When will you leave?"

"I..." Damn. He didn't want to lie to the man. He had no intention of leaving Amaya for some other Trux to convince.

"I will *not*." Amaya stood at the top of the stairs, and he felt, looking up at her pale, fine features framed by her hood, in the golden magelights that lit the street, how humans must feel when they knelt before their goddess and prayed. She was mystery and hope. He ached to discover her, to suffer her every whim. Except that one.

"Amaya, come with me. Talk with me." He was so grateful that his voice was calm, but urgent. No quaver of need showed.

"Your chance to ask that of me died when you took my job away." The quaver in her voice was clear.

He ached. Moving toward the stairs to block her escape he paused on the bottom step, looking up at her. "I will help you find a new duty. Please, come walk with me."

"*Walk?!*" her voice was full of scorn.

"Walk." He went up to the second story landing. "No work, no pleasure tonight,

Lady. Walk with me, and talk.”

She looked down at Kent in the street and his cat went wild in rage. He curled his hand into the banister, his nails scraping on the stone.

“It’s more serious than a high-handed flirtation, love. I think you should go with him.” Kent’s encouragement didn’t soothe his cat.

He moved up another set of stairs, until he was within reach. His cat settled, pacing.

“Amaya. Do not fear me.”

“Oh, I don’t think *fear* is the right word,” she spat at him.

The tear tracks glistening on her cheeks cut worse than her anger. “I know. It would have been kinder to stop you before you entered, but I’m struggling right now. I needed you to know *I* am your path, now. There can be no question.”

She grabbed the banister in front of her and shook it. It being stone, she ended up shaking herself. He was a little alarmed at the feminine snarl that rose from her closed throat. “Question! Question? There’s an idea! Have you ever tried asking? Eledi learned it when she was two! I’m not a thing you can take, or a child to direct without choice! You took my belongings, you took my job, and you think I will accept you? Is this how *you* think ‘partners’ work?” Leaning down, she bared her teeth at him.

They were sharp and smooth and gleaming in the shadow of her hood. He caught his breath to see them.

“Ass.” The word whispered like a caress, then she was hurrying past him in a wave of Kent-scented woman.

He caught her arm and ducked her swinging slap. She pulled so strongly from his light grip that she stumbled on her long skirts and tumbled on the stairs. He leaped and caught her before she landed, his heart in his throat.

“Enough. You are going to hurt yourself.” He bared his own teeth back at her, swung her up, kicking in his arms, ignoring her braced and pushing hands on his neck and jaw.

“Put me down! I’ll scream for the guards!”

“We are the guards,” Kent laughed.

Amaya panted as he came down the stairs.

“Never knew you were so woman-stupid, Ruse. Good luck.”

“Kent!”

Amaya’s wail went right to his cock. She called another man?

“You’ll be fine, love. He’ll never hurt you.” Kent went back up the stairs.

“He’s carrying me away!”

“Ruse...” Kent paused, warning him, asking with his eyes if he had to watch out for Amaya.

Ruse’s cat roared, but he recognized the man’s honor. “I’ll take her home. That’s all I’m doing.”

Kent nodded at him once. “Come see me tomorrow if you need to, Amaya.”

Ruse spun in the street and roared with gut-shaking fury at the threat.

Kent just laughed and bounded back up the stairs into the pleasure house.

Amaya struggled in his arms so fiercely he feared his firm hold would harm her.

“You don’t control me! Put me down!”

He put her down. She staggered back and blinked at him, surprised.

“I just need to talk to you, Amaya. Don’t. Run.” His cat was crouched, trembling.

She swallowed. Huge eyes scanned his face. She’d worked with Truxet men for

years. He prayed she knew enough not to—

Fuck. She ran. Her skirts were in her fists, her loose hair shining where the hood fell back. And everything would have been fine if he hadn't caught the wisp of her woman's scent from beneath her layers of clothing. Hot, rich, damp. The scent that came from a woman's core when she was aroused.

His dick went hard as a spike as every muscle in his body shivered to chase. He closed his eyes, willed himself to breathe. His claws pricked his palms in his clenched fists, he could control this...

Then she laughed. Throaty, taunting, pleased. "If you can catch me, we'll talk."

He turned and went the opposite way, rounded the alley, doubled down the pace, turned, crossed the main intersection and turned again. He slowed when he passed through the next alley. He heard her footsteps coming closer. They hesitated, then sped past his alley toward the main intersection.

He watched her, quivering, the blood beating in his penis so that it throbbed like a second heart. She wove among the people, looking back. Not laughing now. Out of breath, she pushed a hand to her side, dodged into an alley across from him.

He turned, went down the main street, and up a side street parallel with her alley. There was no doubt in his mind she would continue to work her way west, toward Eledi. He heard her rapid footsteps, light but uneven, her sawing breath. He watched as she passed by his shadow. This wasn't the place, just off a major street. He rushed to get around her again. This time he blocked off an alley by tipping a pile of crates, then headed farther around to wait.

He was breathing lightly, crouched on a loading balcony when she came by, still hurrying, in a patter of footsteps and swishing skirts. He launched himself in a full extension off the deck to land soundlessly in front of her. His midair twist put him face to face with her, a bodylength apart. He rose slowly from his crouch.

"Amaya." He let warning infuse his voice, but his aching dick thrummed in his leathers. *Run*, he thought.

She whirled and he leaped again, somersaulting over her to land facing her once again.

Her breath shuddered on a sob. "Don't do this!"

"You ran."

"I—I—of course I did!"

"You're wet. I can smell you. And you laughed."

"I—Ruse! I don't want this!"

Liar. He didn't say it, merely shifted in his crouch to give more room to his dick. "You want Kent?"

She moaned. "I want to go home to Eledi."

"I want you both to come home with me."

She took a step back.

"Don't!" He quivered. "Amaya, if you truly don't want to be fucked, *here and now*, you need to just sit. Sit right where you are. But if you run, you are saying 'yes'."

She panted, her fists clenching in her cloak.

Do it. "You control yourself, woman. Because if you take one more step from me I will take you, and you will understand that it will not be rape." His cat crouched inside him as well, utterly riveted.

Her fists clenched and unclenched, her breathing now equal to when she was running. Her whole body quivered. She gave a sob, and then fell to her knees on the cobbles.

He let out a long breath. “Shhhh. Shhhhh, Lady.” Adjusted his stance again, body relaxing. “We’ll just sit here a moment...”

He cut off when she awkwardly gathered her skirts up and turned on her knees away from him. “Amaya...” he warned her more firmly this time, a rumble in his voice.

Then, then... he couldn’t even understand it for a moment. She drew her skirts up to her waist, revealing leather shod feet, bare legs, rounded hips and firm ass. The globes of her ass were separated by the tiniest bit of black lace that curled around her hips. Then she bent, widening her legs, laying her forearms down on the street. Her whisper carried straight to his heart.

“Please.”

He crawled forward in slow motion, feeling like his dick was an anchor he had to haul between his legs. Her scent filled the air, wrapped around his head. His arms quivered. He reached her, lowering his face to her shadows, and inhaled. *Sweet water, carry me gently, now.*

“Please.” A tremor ran through her, and the light gleamed on moisture in her folds, marking the edges of the dark lace.

He rose up, kneeling between her legs, and worked his leathers with trembling fingers. “Shhh. I’m here. Soon.”

He dug his dick out of his pants, and very precisely reached out one claw tipped finger and lifted the band of lace from the top of her ass. He pulled it out, dragging his finger down, until he was able to pull the strip aside, to the far side of one smooth cheek.

She moaned, a guttural sound. Her back arched as she tipped her ass even higher toward him. He hated the clothes on her, that he couldn’t see her back, her nape. In the dim alley, her hair was a pool of darkness. He gripped his base and positioned the tip of him against the center of her valley. She tossed her head, trembled, gasping, at that slight touch.

He had no words for her, for this offering, this claiming. He flexed his hips, his balls already shriveled up tight from the wet heat kissing his tip. He sank into the edge of his crown, withdrew, set the tip gently against her, and did it again. Flex, sink, withdraw. When her hips followed him back on his third withdrawal, he gave in and laid his hands on each of her hips.

“Ahhhhhh.” Her whole body bucked. He could feel her hip bones, the crease of her thigh, the edge of her tummy. He clenched his fingers, hissing.

He set his dick to kiss her again, and flexed in. This time, he flexed again, and pushed the flared width of his crown past her ring.

“Uhhh!” It was his turn to offer a stunned moan. She was so wet, a line of liquid heat dripped down his length. The flesh that wrapped around him and sucked was unlike anything he’d ever felt. It crawled inside him, sent tendrils of pleasure writhing up his limbs.

“Ruse! Please, please!”

He tightened his fingers, and slowly sank home. Deeper. Home. He never hesitated, but continued to push, straining with his thighs, until his tip met a hard barrier inside her. He paused, then pressed harder.

“Yes!” She erupted under his hands, writhing and bucking, while inside she’d clamped down hard. She crawled away a few inches, and he buried his fingers to hold her, but it was only so that she could slam back, her ass meeting his hips hard.

He let her set the pace, a steady slapping beat, helping her by pulling on her hips and pushing his own tight to hers when she pushed back.

He lost track of how long they beat together, their bodies shivering, craving. The smell of her clouded his sight. The sound of her liquid core slurping with each thrust clouded his ears. They were the only two people in the world.

Finally, she broke first, wailing, “Please, fuck me, *please*.”

He stilled, deep inside her. “Yes.”

He sent his hands farther under her, to draw her up off the street, pulling her back against him. Leaning back on folded thighs, she lay along his front, her head nestled by his throat. He held her shivering weight upright against his heaving chest. She moaned at the change in sensation. His dick was compacted even more inside her, although not driven so deep. Her hands came down on his arms.

“No. Your clit.”

She was shaking so hard in his arms it took her a minute to fight under her skirts to her folds. Her fingers brushed his base as she passed over herself.

He lost it. He drove up hard, his arms clamped around her ribs, his thighs spreading hers. From this position, his full strength could be unleashed, and he couldn’t hurt her. He pounded up into her, burying his face in her hair. She came nearly at once, a beautiful broken moan.

He thrust and thrust and thrust, as if he could reach her heart so easily, with nothing more than the force of this marvelous lust. He knew that he couldn’t and that made him thrust harder, growling, aching, pulling her down onto him.

She came again, a hitching wail, higher, longer. He pistoned faster, her cum dripping off his balls, the wet sucking sounds of her body those of a predator feasting on a kill.

“Life, lover, mother, mate.” The words came out of nowhere, grunting from his lips with every thrust. She was taut in his arms, a gorgeous weight, a burning heat, her nails scraping now at his balls as her slack fingers brushed them, dangling.

“Fuck, mate, mine, woman, life.”

She came again, silently, bowing nearly out of his grip as the crown of her head thrashed against his chest. For the first time, he could see her face, her mouth a rictus of agony, her cheekbones and jaw sharp lines. Her eyes locked on his. He came roaring, struggling to get deeper, grinding her down as he spasmed, every muscle in his body exploding in white light.

Their gasping breaths echoed off the stone walls and street. He rocked her, his body shuddering in aftershock, as she petted his hands. Eventually, he stopped, his knees aching. He didn’t care. She was in his arms, and their scent whirling in his head was the most perfect moment of his life.

His thigh gave an involuntary twitch so strong it sent her jerking in his arms. She laughed shakily. Stretching her arms down, she made to crawl off him. He thought about it a moment, then regretfully let her. She crawled to the wall and sprawled against it, slack.

They stared at each other. Finally, he eased off his knees and stood. He closed his pants and helped her up. She trembled, her skirts tumbling to the ground. He put his arm

around her. They walked to her alley at the edge of the market.

“Tomorrow, I’ll come for you. I can explain. Wait for me out here. After dinner.”

She sighed.

“Or I could always come to breakfast again.”

She looked at him sharply. “Nawi’s nerves couldn’t take it. She made that clear today.”

He nodded, unsurprised, but disappointed. Hopefully, not for long.

* * * *

Amaya stood next to her alley. She’d almost chickened out and brought Eledi as protection. He’d been such an ass, and before the anger had even cooled she’d been hot for him. Insane for him. She was still angry at him. It seemed a bit late to demand an apology when she’d begged to be fucked on the street.

She was used to unleashing her passion, lowering her barriers to accept the sexual desires of others. She was careful of her men and had worked her way up to a good house where nearly all of them made her job rather worthwhile. But nothing in her entire experience had the primal urgency and raw sexuality of last night’s encounter.

She drew in a deep breath. She tried to summon the core of respect she needed when faced with Eledi being difficult. This was going to be so hard. She turned her head without thinking and there he was. Her eyes pounced on the figure moving smoothly across the emptying square. The sweepers were out, the magelights just starting to glow dimly.

It had rained in the morning, and there was still a hard breeze blowing in from the ocean, smelling fresh. She had a flash of it from her memory: impossible space, a pang in her heart. Whenever she smelled the ocean she could see it in her head. Sometimes she wished she never had. Then she wouldn’t miss it.

When she opened her eyes, he was coming across the street. Like all the Beasts, he was confident, physical. She bet his body was beautiful. He was wider than the more slender men she was usually drawn to. She repressed the shiver that pebbled her arms, remembering his thrusts powering up into her. She was taller than many women. It had taken immense strength. He’d gone on so long. She’d heard the echo of his roar in her head as she lay down to sleep.

He seemed surprised when she offered the underside of her wrist to him, a Beast greeting. He bent to it, closing his eyes as his nose flared. She felt his warm exhale and lowered her arm, glad the cloak covered her pebbled nipples.

“Good evening, Ruse.” She met his dark gaze, faltered on his steady eyes, looked away.

“Amaya.” He offered his arm in the City manner and they set off.

She was glad he felt no need to speak among the people passing. They walked for quite a way, came to a quiet side street of nice homes. He led her in one of the buildings and up, and up and up to the top floor. Top floors were the most sought after as they were farthest removed from the constant human presence. He did not take her cloak when they stepped inside.

“This is the living room.” It was furnished nicely. The air smelled clean.

“This is the bedroom.” The bed could sleep four. There was her trunk!

“This is the kitchen. Here is the bath.” Both fully stocked. A private bath on the fifth

floor?

"This is her room. I had it painted today, the smell will fade."

She caught her breath. Flowers. The room was tiny, less than two bodylengths square. The pale blue walls were covered from floor to ceiling with flowers. Their stems began at the floor, and they bloomed at various levels throughout, except in the corner where the bed was, where they bloomed all over the ceiling above it. She didn't think a single flower was duplicated.

He did not wait for her to her comment, but led her to the balcony and showed her the typical courtyard each square of City houses shared. This one had its own water source. A few children were playing far below. The balcony had more stairs at the far end, and he led her up to the rooftop. It was enclosed with the typical banister, and had furniture, even a little covered shade stall, but the details were lost to the wonder of the treetops staring back at her just one row of houses away.

"I couldn't get anything on the actual garden square." He sounded apologetic.

The treetops were rounded, so green, all greens. They swayed gently in the breeze. They were so beautiful. The sky still held color from the setting sun, gilding the trees. She stood for a long time, until the colors had faded to pastels, before she could face him.

"What do you mean by this?" She waved her arm weakly through the air.

He led her to the cushioned seats under the awning, lit a small magelight on the table. She was thankful that the seats were individual. He leaned forward in his chair, his hands so close, but her space was still hers.

"You know more than most about my people."

She nodded.

"You know that we do not believe in taking mates out of fondness or expedience. We mate because we find a spirit connection."

She felt a thrill of alarm. "You find soulmates?"

"Sometimes. Perhaps once every generation or two. There is a soulmated pair in the Owls now."

She breathed out a sigh of relief. There was no resisting a soul bond. It was the same thing as being chained at the wrist, instantly, for life. Any argument she made would be mute in the face of such a bond, and she was grateful he wasn't going to claim they had that connection. The strength of her feelings and the pull of him was such that for a minute she feared she'd believe it.

"It's my belief, Amaya, that you and I are potential mates."

She glanced at him. His hands were clasped tightly, as if to control himself. She glanced away. She cleared her throat. Oh, this was going to be hard.

"I—I feel an unusual connection to you as well."

"You do?" He sounded so excited her lips twitched.

"Despite my job, I don't usually go around fucking men on the street. Especially men who have been hurtful."

He sat back, his hands gripping his knees. His voice was lower, gritty, when he finally said, "Amaya, come with me."

She wanted to run. To get up and flee down the stairs and hide under the covers with Eledi. She'd tried that last night, and it hadn't worked.

"You know, you must, that my people are not the bestial monsters most humans believe."

“Because you want them to fear you, and you’re too secretive.”

He wasn’t distracted by her political offering. “My world is beautiful and free. You would be respected, given the choice of any career you desire. My Clan lives in Grasshome, a rolling ocean of fields.”

“Ocean?” She was struck by his choice of words.

“Look at me! Amaya, you would be safe there. We protect our lands better than these City walls. The wild is nothing to fear. I would teach you...”

“Ruse.” The sad resignation in her voice brought him to his feet. She gasped.

He hurried around the table and knelt by her side, capturing her hand.

“Hear me out!”

“Eledi.” Her one word was final.

“Yes! She would be raised by our whole Clan, in love, and freedom! She could grow in strength and never know the power or loss of Guilds. She’d have choice and respect as she never would here.”

She turned on him fiercely, able to meet his eyes now that she’d grabbed her foundation. “She would not! Ruse, I’ve known the truth about your people since I was pregnant! Five months pregnant, and five months too late to the life I would have wanted for myself!”

She tried to struggle free of his grip, but he only moved the entire massive wooden chair around so that it faced him directly, boxing her in. He let her have her hands, his on the arms of the chair. She sat back, crossed her arms tightly. Her breath was already shuddering in her chest with coming tears and she hated it.

“Tell me.”

“I was a daughter in the Seneschal Guild.” She took a shuddering breath, aching at having to voice the story. “My mother died when I was twelve. The only good thing in my life was my older sister. She ran away within the year. When I was a few months from becoming an adult, from taking my placement in the Guild, a young Baron began to court me.”

Ruse settled on his heels. His gaze burned on her face, but she wouldn’t meet it. He was so strong, so solid.

“He said he would make me his mistress. He—He took me to the ocean. He was a very good lover. One of the best I’ve ever had. He talked my Guild into holding my space, covering for me, that I was actually in a position in his house. I lived with him for several months, then one of his friends began to seduce me. I knew what he was doing. I let it happen. I liked sex. I was curious.”

She bit her lip, rocking her head against the back of her chair. “I was wild, I was young, I was so angry all the time. I was lonely. I took another lover, and another. There isn’t anyone I wouldn’t fuck. I liked it. It felt good. Then B—the Lord found out.”

She didn’t want to give Ruse his name. “It didn’t matter that he’d been fucking anything that walked, male or female, since we met. He sent me back to the Guild, who took me. Until I was pregnant. They made sure it wasn’t the Baron’s, gave me a moon to find the father and marry him, and then they threw me out.”

To have a child outside of the blessing of Earthmother and Skyfather was to reject Skyfather’s bonding of the spirit. The child would be born with only half a soul, said the teachings, worthy only of a body touch, and never to enter the temple.

“None of the men I had would marry me, not the servants, who would be marrying

up, or the guards. I'd given myself away for free, and they didn't trust me. I'd been cold and haughty to most of them. I had no friends there.

"Four months on the streets, and my sister found me. She'd just come back from a year's contract as a paid woman among your people. She cared for me. She was relatively wealthy, for a smoothskin. She could have opened her own business, possibly even bought her way back into the Guild. She gave all her wealth to me, because as soon as I was able, she went back, to be adopted.

"She's a Wolf now. She sent me word, once, a few years ago. She stayed with me through the pregnancy, the burial, and a year beyond, helping me make contacts, talking me through what I'd done to my life. And telling me story after forbidden story. It's through her knowledge I chose the Truxet word for 'gift' when I named Eledi. She loved your world. She didn't like being a paid woman; she'd always had more pride than I, but she said it was different there.

"I heard her stories, and I'd never wanted anything so badly. She said I just wanted to dream of running away because of the babies. But it was more. She was in reach of a better life, an adventure. I wanted to taste that, too. But I wasn't free to reach for it. I was a mother."

Amaya fell silent, lost in her sister Basa's word paintings of animals, caves, and a world of equality.

"Burial?"

She jumped at Ruse's soft question.

She opened her eyes and met the blackness of his. His brows were drawn together, but he still looked... tender.

"If my son had lived, you could never have even asked me to go with you, could you?"

He spasmed as if she had punched him in the face. The wood of the chair creaked under his grip.

"Amaya!" He surged up and grabbed her, wrapped her in his huge arms, and she was held against his racing heart, safe.

The tears that came whenever she thought of him were easy, instant. They always would be. She wrapped her arms up over his shoulders and clung. The past was so bitter. The regret just never seemed to quit piling up.

"How?" He choked, swallowed. "Oh, Fire, Fire, how?"

She cried on him for a little while, then packed the pain away. She got that bizarre separated feeling she often did after thinking of her baby. That she could continue to function and breathe when that black experience covered every inch of her reality. Pushing back, he let her go. She drew up her legs and curled in the chair. He stayed on his knees facing her.

"The bodymages said he died well before the birth. If I think of Eledi in my womb, growing next to his body, I..." She swallowed down the vomit. "They don't know why he died. One thought it was his heart." She laughed bitterly. "One told me it was because I didn't have enough spirit within me without a husband to support twins."

Ruse began to shudder and sway, his jaw clenched brutally. He looked away sharply. She was grateful for his rage on her behalf.

"I never went to the Temple again after I buried him."

"Does Eledi know?"

“No.” The word was thick in her mouth. “Maybe someday.”

“Amaya, you must know there is another way of looking at the world. It is not divided into body and spirit, with the mage powers paired beneath them. We believe that each of the six magecrafts are equal. They are complete on their own. They can be blended, any of them. Males do not rule Air and females do not rule Earth. To say that a mother is weakened without a Temple blessed man at her side, that that was the cause of your son’s death, it—it—is so *Dark* and perverted compared to our world view I can hardly comprehend it.”

She sighed. She’d thought of this often. “You cannot deny that a married couple is stronger for their sharing, for their bond.”

She raised a hand to forestall his arguments. “I do not believe I killed my son by bearing him out of wedlock. I don’t. But I will always be haunted by the possibility he could have lived if I’d had a partner to draw more strength from.”

He fell silent, his lips drawn so tight they were nearly nonexistent. She could tell he fiercely wanted to disagree, but understood her.

It was several moments before she was able to pull herself back to the reason she was on this rooftop in front of this man who held her ankle loosely.

“You are not human.”

Ruse adjusted his seat, sitting more comfortably. She saw determination come into his eyes.

“I am Trux,” his voice admitted it with pride.

“Your people cannot have daughters.”

“No.”

“But you did. Long ago, you used to.”

“Centuries. Perhaps millennia.”

“If you did not need human women to reproduce, you would never have sought mates among us.”

“Amaya...”

“It’s true. We are inferior in magic, strength, and lack your beast.”

“Your spirits are just as strong as ours. That is all that matters.”

“Then why are human sons not welcome among you?”

“Amaya...”

“Tell me.”

“What place could they have in our world? They may develop the power and hunting skills to help us hold our territory against Dark creatures. But they would always be second class citizens in training, in battle. They would be jealous, unhappy.”

“They would compete for your precious females.”

“That’s...”

“When your priests souldance to find mates for the women who come to your world, do they seek mate choices among human men?”

“They are not part of our world.”

“They don’t.”

“We don’t have the same connection to them. We can’t, even if we wanted to.”

“Which you don’t.”

“That doesn’t mean that our mate choices are any less real! Every mate choice we offer the women, that we would offer *you*, would be a true, potential, mate of the spirit.”

He was getting frustrated.

She was distracted by his words. "You'd offer me a choice?"

"Of course! It is our law!"

"So you would take me into your world, then walk away if I chose another man?"

Ruse's face crumpled into an ugly snarl. "Yes. I would."

"And that's what you'd have to do if I had a son."

This time he did snarl. "You don't!"

"I do! His body is gone but his spirit is right here!" She smacked her chest with her fist, hard. "No women with sons may be brought into your lands for adoption and mating! *That* is your law!"

He was breathing heavily, his huge chest heaving. She thought she saw green mist rise from his eyes. She knew it was a warning sign, rather like the claw punctures that dotted her hips this morning from where he held her hips last night in the alley.

"Amaya, do you know how rare this is? That I should find you? Why are you fighting me over a principle? You have a chance at a better life, a good life, with me."

She wanted to hurt him so she said with spite, "Or someone else."

He narrowed his eyes, his upper lip lifting.

She was instantly sorry. This whole conversation was so pointlessly hurtful. Because of..."Eledi."

"What about her?"

"If I were to go with you. If I were to mate with you, that would be my choice. And I would forever take her heritage from her."

He glowered. "You would not. She'd have the same choice of duty and mate that every woman has, and less struggle with transition."

"What if she wants a human husband? What if she wants to belong to a Guild? What if she'd like to meet her grandfather one day?"

"She would take a Truxet to mate, and be happy. She could go among the Cities with her mate, many women do. And her grandfather would not want to meet her even if she stayed in the City, let alone if she returned from being raised by us in Vladaya."

"I will not take the choice from her."

"What choice?" He was yelling now, and she hated it. "The choice to become a City servant? A paid woman that people spit on? Living in danger and poverty outside of a Guild? Do you really aspire for her to fight and buy her way into one? She'd be an outsider all her life."

"We'll still be outsiders in your world, too."

"You will not!" he roared. He was up on his knees now.

"Stop yelling at me!"

He sat back abruptly, eyes lowered. His breathing calmed.

"My apologies. You would not be outsiders at all, Amaya. You would be loved, and welcomed, and utterly accepted."

"How many little girls are there in your Clan?"

He continued to stare at the ground, fists on his bunched thighs.

"Ruse? How many?"

"There are others, in other Clans. We would visit..."

"None?!"

"One."

“One.” She blinked at him, shocked despite herself. “How big is your Clan?”

“I cannot tell you.”

“You are one of the smaller Clans. I know that.” She offered it as an excuse. Shook herself. “She’d be so isolated. The focus the young men would have on her...”

“They would never, never dishonor her!”

“Oh? You all go virginal to your mates?”

He looked at her, mutinous.

“And these young men carrying second spirits inside them, they have perfect control? She’d be absolutely safe?”

“No one would rape a child. Not one of us, at our most undisciplined, uncontrolled point.”

“The line between child and young woman can blur.”

“You’re doing it again.”

“Oh?”

“This conversation is crazy. She would be protected, she would be respected. I believe this with all of myself, and I am not blind to my people’s weaknesses. I would not ask you to bring Eledi into danger.”

Amaya was suddenly utterly exhausted. “I’ve known you barely three days, Ruse.”

“That’s shit and you know it. Don’t cower behind that.”

“Just because we have a spark between us doesn’t mean I trust you with my child’s life! I’m not cowering, I’m using my head!” She couldn’t meet those black eyes. They were burning into her.

“If you died, right now, here. If you had one breath to tell me whose care you wanted Eledi to go to, who would it be?”

His. She gasped. Her eyes flooded with tears. “That’s despicable. Who’s posing crazy issues now?”

“Answer me.”

“My sister!” She began to cry, her shoulders shaking.

“But that puts her under the laws of Vladaya.”

“I know! But I’m alive. And I don’t have to send her there. I can make sure she’s raised with the choice between City and Beast. I will not set her path with my own selfish desires!”

“In your heart of hearts, you know it’s a better path. You told me when we started this conversation. You said that your sister’s stories called to you, that you wanted it for yourself. It’s not too late, Amaya. I will hold your child as my own, gladly and with joy. I do already.”

She began to sob openly now, heaving gasps, choking on her confusion. He gathered her up and this time rose with her in his arms, settled in the chair and cradled her.

“Amaya.” He crooned her name and held her.

She pressed her face tight to his neck. She couldn’t believe this was happening. That this man was holding her. Arguing for her, for Eledi. He smoothed his hands over her hair, from shoulder to elbow, from hip to knee. Over and over his hands stroked her as he whispered apologies, called her name.

“Be still now. Amaya, I’m sorry.”

His hands pressed her, learned her, shared strength. Eventually, she quieted to the occasional shuddering gasp.

“That’s right. Shhhh. No more talking now. Shhhh.” His strokes became slower, lingering. He shifted her in his arms, so that she was sitting facing out, her legs splayed over his, her head tucked under his chin. This freed his hands to travel more of her limbs. His fingers petted hers, gripped and twined them, let them go. He sent one hand to her stomach while the other cupped her jaw, turned her face to his.

He kissed her tears first, touched them with that rough tongue. He licked them all the way down over her lips, under her jaw, down her neck. He returned and nuzzled his lips gently over spiky eyelashes, his hand kneading circles around her belly.

She lay passive in his arms. She was used to having to greet a stranger’s body. To go into another’s personal space, let her own be invaded. The new scents that struck you, the body shape you had to utterly accept, it all had to happen without any hesitation. She was able to enjoy her job by separating her emotions from the physical sensations of her flesh. This, this wasn’t like that.

She did not have to suppress a flare of strange awareness. There was no mental surprise that his ribs were that big around or his legs were touching hers there. Despite the newness of their touch, everything about him felt natural, comfortable. Her brain was not assessing where he might be sensitive, or what he wanted her to do or say. She felt no buzzing in her brain as she tried to guess how he wanted her to react. She simply lay against his body, and felt. Felt with more than just her skin. She felt his care, his respect, his awe of her. She accepted all of him.

Her body melded to his like a puzzle piece. They made one picture together. A forbidden picture, an impossible picture. The picture she thought she must have always been meant to find. He kissed her, and the picture became even clearer. Their mouths met, the side angle melding them perfectly. Her tongue rose to meet his, and it was so erotic. An echo of the inevitable joining.

His hands moved over her gently as his mouth met her jaw, her lips, her neck. The night air was cool but his heat under her was immense. When he’d peeled her cloak apart, undid her blouse, drew off her skirt, untied her panty’s hip bows, and she lay sprawled on him naked, she stirred for the first time.

Raising her arms up around his neck, she arched, gently rolling her ass against the rigid flesh that jumped under her. She watched his face watch her body. His hands came up to her breasts and held them, cupping their weight. They were good-sized breasts, with large nipples from having Eledi, but they looked a bit small in his hands.

They stayed like that for long moments, her breasts quivering in his gentle grip, her ass clenching, rubbing, rolling just slightly across his lap. Her fingers twined in his hair, learned the secret swirl against his neck, felt the damp heat of his excitement.

Eventually, she felt like she should warn him. “I’m going to come.”

He raised those black eyes to hers. They were vaguely unfocused, full of that emotion she couldn’t name, that she’d seen when he’d first kissed her.

“Yes.” He left her breasts. His hands dove under her, between them. They weren’t hurrying, but they were efficient. He drew himself down, so that when she relaxed her weight again, his penis speared up between her legs. She was completely bare, stripped of all hair but that on her head. His tip was dark and round between her lips. She wasn’t sure if the moisture shining on it was from him or her.

He raised his hands up to lift the weight of her breasts from her chest again. He held them, just staring at his hands on her. Surprised, frustrated that he had not put himself

inside her, she writhed in a shiver against the warm leather at her back. She stared, her heart beating harder, at the hole opening slightly on his nestled cock. The firm weight of it trapped between her thighs was sexy. She stared as a seep of liquid so smoothly, thickly, drifted out of that small hole. She closed her legs tight around it, and danced.

Her arms tightened hard, pulling on his neck, but he stayed strong, letting her pull her body taut between her grip on his penis and her grip on his corded neck. His cupped hands stayed maddeningly still, but as she moved her body on his, she was able to shift the weight of her breasts for sensation. Her nipples throbbed in the cold air, ached. His penis rubbed against her clit.

“Rrrruuuusssse.” She sighed as the orgasm took her. There was nothing to hide. Nothing to pretend.

His hands lowered, one clasping her tightly in the center of her body, spread wide across her ribs, the other covering his erection, pressing it sideways against her mound.

“Ammmayaaa.” He breathed it, his body rigid, and she felt the bar of flesh jerk between her soaking wet lips. It jerked again, and she felt the wetness ooze down over her bare mound. It jerked several more times, his hand crushing himself against her, as cream dripped down over her hips.

When he relaxed, she let her arms drop down. She took his wrist, and raised his semen covered hand up to her face. She laid her face against the warm wetness, that smelled so sharp. She let his huge hand cradle the weight of her head, glorying in how much it felt like she’d shared a gift.

He gathered her up in his arms cross-wise again, pulled her cloak up over them. “When do you have to be back to Eledi?”

“Flikanen will spend the night if I don’t come home, but I like to be back before dawn.”

“Rest. I’ll have you back before then.”

She lay her tear and semen stained face against his neck. It was no good. She couldn’t sleep.

“What is this place for, Ruse?”

“What do you mean, Amaya?”

“How long will you be assigned here?”

He hesitated. “Two more weeks on this duty.”

Two weeks. It wasn’t fair.

“Her room is beautiful, but I won’t bring her here.”

“Amaya, just think about it.” His voice was tight.

“You’re not being fair. I’ve never brought her to meet my lovers.”

“I’m not a lover. I’m your mate.”

She only let the sigh out mentally. “So, you moved me from the house, cancelled my private appointments. You want me to really move in here with you for two weeks. Then what? Then I have to build my contacts all over again, use my small savings, find a new...”

“No! This is your home. It’s yours. As long as you want it.”

Her mind whirled. “You can’t do that.”

His huge, warm hands came up and stroked her shoulder, softly rubbing circles. “I need to know where you are. That you’re safe. I want you to get to know me, think about living with the Truxet. If you really, truly decide you won’t leave the City, I’ll know you

have this.”

He seemed to want to say something more. She could practically feel his mind working hard. His hands tightened.

“Just be with me, Amaya. Let me be with Eledi a bit. Tell me your fears and let me state another view. Think about us, what could be, how your life could change beyond these caging City walls.”

She closed her eyes. Raising her hand that wasn’t trapped against his body, she began to trace his face. Hairline, nose, brow. His skin was so smooth along his jaw, she knew he didn’t have to shave. She learned the line of his cheeks, the span of his lips, the curl of his ear. He held himself still under her fingers, physically relaxed, but she knew he was intensely aware of her every touch. Soon the pads of her fingers throbbed with energy, sensitivity.

“I’ve known many men, Ruse.”

“You have.” His voice was hoarse.

“I made peace with my choice to be a smoothskin over a servant. I often find pleasure in the exchanges, and a great measure of dignity. Some of them I’ve become friends with.”

He swallowed. “That is good.”

“Why do you call so strongly to me? You are not the most handsome, nor the most powerful man I’ve known. What is this that you have singled me out?”

“You doubt.”

“Of course I do!”

“Have you ever taken a souldance?”

“I wanted to when I was younger, but Father said I was too young.”

He huffed. “As if a child doesn’t have a worthy soul? I’ve taken two spiritdances in my time. I’m lucky that I was able to use the same spiritmage both times. I want that for you. I want him to taste your spirit, for you to feel the freedom that comes from having someone see you so clearly.”

“Did he tell you about me? I’ve heard they can see the future.”

“Sometimes they can. If he did see you, he didn’t say. No, I just... I just feel, with you, as I did with him. In that place outside of time. That... I could see inside you, and never doubt your worth. That I could be that naked with you.”

Her heart stuttered. She’d been thinking she’d hear a compliment on her eyes, her body. But this. She pushed up off his thick chest to look him in the face. They were high up enough that the golden magelights on the street did not reach here. The one small flickering light on the table lit one side of his face. The night air glowed vaguely green, as always, from the overspill of the powered City walls. His eyes were so deep and dark, they seemed to want to pull her in like a well.

“Basa told me. When a woman is presented with mate choices, any of them would be perfect for her. That they all share a potential unity of spirit. She said your marriage rite was a public fuck in a pit, with your family as witness and the Beast in attack form. During that fuck, she said the spirits were bound. Bound. Even if one should leave the other, for your lives, you were bound.”

She couldn’t resist and raised her hand to touch his square, clenched jaw. Instantly her fingertip tingled to life again, as if there were a lightning current that ran from him to her.

“We call it the matebond. And the ceremony you describe is very sacred to us. It’s not a public fuck. It has a real purpose.”

She tilted her head, trailed her fingers across his lips, watched them part. She wanted to fall on him and weep for all that could never be. Struggling off his lap, she stood, locking her shaky knees.

“Amaya?”

“I need to go home. I want to go to Eledi.”

He stood, rising over her. Her head came to his upper chest.

“Then I will take you to her.”

He offered her the globe magelight to light her way.

She wanted to scream in the night. She wanted to hit him, to smash the light. She wanted him. His jealousy, his bossiness, his tenderness, his respect for Eledi, his passion, his mysterious otherness.

She took the hollow stone with a murmur of thanks and preceded him down the stairs.

* * * *

He went to Estuarde. His uncle had an apartment much like the one he’d just bought. His uncle’s woman, Elarin, lived across the street with her two sons. Human sons. Estuarde had watched over her for eighteen years. It was a life Ruse had always pitied. He wasn’t ready to give himself over to it, but he knew he could if he had to. First, he’d see if his uncle had anything to share.

They settled on the deck. Talked briefly of his latest duty, tracking down some of the rumors on the new predator that seemed to have arisen in the wilderness.

“You’re not here for a general visit.”

“No. I’ve found a mate.”

His uncle watched him. Estuarde was a master of giving no emotion away. He thought perhaps it was from spending eighteen years hiding his pain.

“You did not go to mate choice.”

“No. I just found her, here.”

His uncle waited. It was rarely a good thing when a man found a mate on his own. She usually had ties to the City, or was already married, or feared them. Even if she went to Vladaya, a huge *if*, the woman would be given others to choose from. So many warriors waiting. So many good men.

“I feel like I’m on the edge of one of the Royal cliffs. I’m so close to getting her to come. And I know if I bind her close enough to convince her, she’ll choose me.”

“But.”

“She had a son, stillborn. She feels disloyal.”

His uncle grunted. “It is good to say goodbye to the past.”

“She has a daughter. She fears for her among all the boys.”

“You’ll have to convince her it won’t be like that. The whole Clan would hold that child precious.”

“She thinks it’s a betrayal to bind her daughter to the Truxet as a child.”

Estuarde settled deeper into his chair. His eyes cut over to the other building, assessed the street for danger, settled back on him. “She’s right. In our world, women have two paths, City, and Wild. It’s a choice. By taking a child into our Wild, you are

taking the City path away from her. The only way we'd give up a woman is if she doesn't match enough men."

That hardly ever happened. They both knew how rare it was. He felt like he was about to be shredded inside from his cat howling in fury. "I need to show her it's not condemning Eledi. If she wants it, and I know she does, why wouldn't it be good enough for her daughter?"

His uncle shook his head. "You see her point. That's why you're here."

Both men's eyes were pulled to the apartment across the street. Their Alpha knew about Elarin. He knew Estuarde even sometimes talked to her. It was insanely dangerous. Ruse remembered how he'd begun to change the first time he'd taken Amaya, the Sandcat roar that poured from his throat. He thought about how his cat was maddened that Amaya wasn't watched every moment, claimed, fucked before their Alpha so that it was settled. After three days. He considered years of not being able to make love to the woman that called to his spirit, both his spirits, for fear of mauling her to death out of need. Of losing all honor with control and dragging her into the wilderness as a rogue. He had no idea where his uncle found the will to do this. Living apart from the pack, alone in the nights. To be so close, and keep apart.

"Any advice?" His voice was steady, without pity.

Estuarde looked at him. He'd known this uncle the least well, as he'd spent the least time with the Clan while he was growing up. He was always in the City when he wasn't on duty, watching over Elarin even though she was highly placed in the Woodworking Guild. But he was powerful, and had lived with this problem. Ruse admired him even while he feared to tread the same path. Estuarde looked more like Ruse's grandmother, with hair that turned more gold in the sun, and eyes of lighter brown.

"It's a fact of life that parents lead their children. Most of our sons follow their father's beastspirit. Most human children follow the Guild they were born to."

Ruse blinked at him. "I don't follow you, sir."

"Think about it."

Ruse felt a flash of furious anger that his uncle could toy with him over something he knew was important. He swallowed it down. Respect. Control.

His uncle chuckled. "You'll get it."

A man entered the front door of the opposite house. Both men recognized the younger son of Elarin. The man paused, found Estuarde sitting in the shadows, waved. Estuarde smiled. It was such a blindingly happy smile it took a moment for Ruse to process it.

"Uncle?"

Estuarde looked at him, still smiling, his eyes misting green. "He's getting married. In two months. And the next day she leaves with me. For Vladaya."

Ruse sat blinking at his uncle with his mouth hanging open. With a whoop he lunged across the table to wrap his arms around him, both of them roaring with laughter born of relief.

"That's unbelievable! Does Dad know? Sandcat?"

"Both were told just a few days ago. We had to be sure she was still fertile."

No woman could be adopted in Vladaya unless she was fertile. It was a law based on their beasts, but one they'd talked of changing recently. Too many City women decided late in life they'd chance the Truxet. Some, like Elarin, took a long time to separate

themselves from their human obligations. Yet warriors were denied the comfort of these potential mates because of the women's biology. Just like the recent changes in sharing some of the truths about Truxet society with the Cities, this Council was altering the way the two cultures mixed.

"You'll stand at our ceremony as witness?"

"Gladly! Estuarde, I'm so happy for you!" He was shouting, reverting to Clan ways here in the City. People were looking up at the balcony from the street. They didn't care.

"Thanks! Thank you." He looked over at the open windows with their flower boxes and waving curtains. "I think."

The overwhelming need that crossed his uncle's face was like watching him take a blow. The pain, the sorrow, the ache. His uncle's fingers passed over the shredded table top absently. Grooves ripped into the wood from hundreds of nights watching that window.

"Do you need someone to stay with you?" He offered his concern carefully.

It took a moment for Estuarde to focus back on him. "Not yet. Soon. I think, when it's within a moon, I'll need watching. Or I'll give over the watch to Dev and go back to the Clan."

Dev was another of his uncles. Ruse nodded. "I'm here for two more weeks. I'll leave my new address."

Estuarde nodded, his fingers still stroking the splintered wood. Ruse reached over and gripped his uncle's hand, stilling them.

"Guard. Protect. Defend."

His uncle nodded at the unofficial slogan, the mantra of every Trux warrior. He turned his hand and gripped Ruse's hard. "I've got it. Crazy that it gets worse when I know she's within reach, isn't it?"

Ruse thought of all his sleepless nights, wondering if the fleeting pleasure of paid women, of the shared sleep with others' cubs, was all he was going to have in this life. None of his three uncles had ever been brought to mate choice. His great-uncle had been brought to mate choice twice and remained unchosen. His older brother Doth went to every darkmoon dance there was to meet the few women who were awaiting adoption, and had since he'd matured. He said he wanted them to know him in case he was presented as a choice. He wanted any edge.

And now there was Amaya. Ruse had held her in his arms and shared pleasure with her twice. He'd touched her daughter. He didn't think it crazy at all, that control was so much harder, when the possibility was most real.

* * * *

It was surprising to her. The day before, some of the girls who worked out of the same house had come to see her, worried about the abrupt change Ruse had ordered. Today, several of her clients sent notes and gifts. If she needed help, just get them word. She sent reassuring letters of thanks back, touched.

It showed she had friends here. People valued her. She'd come a long way. She cringed when she remembered her younger self. The childish, wasted self she was before Eledi. Last night, she'd laid that young woman before Ruse and he hadn't even blinked. She barely knew anything about him. Not even what element he called. But he was good man. She knew that.

Eledi was shrieking with anger in the courtyard below. Amaya looked over the banister, frowning. She was bossy sometimes, and the other little girls were not going along with her today. She let the children sort it out, glad when Eledi didn't melt down from not getting her own way. What would it be like if Eledi was one of a handful of children? Only one other girl to play with. Surrounded by boys so much stronger than she, and when they were older, with volatile beasts inside them. *Why are you even thinking about it! Stop torturing yourself.*

Biting her lip, she returned to hanging the wash along the banister. A dark shadow moved out of the alley, hovered at the entrance. Eledi saw it and went screaming toward him. She launched herself and he caught her. The look of wondering joy on his face caught at Amaya's heart. The other little girls were screaming, too. They ran toward the doors around the courtyard, toward their homes. She saw a woman rush out onto one of the side balconies, gasp.

"It's all right! It's fine! He's fine!" Amaya called urgently.

The woman looked at her wild-eyed, disbelieving. She whirled inside and slammed the door. Eledi was bouncing in his arms, petting all of the cats on his leathers. She didn't seem to notice or care that her friends had run away. It was so unfair. As if any Truxet had ever attacked a woman or a child. But the old rumors of women sold to them and enslaved were still believed. He looked up at her, Eledi chattering in his arms, and his eyes, those dark eyes... She swayed as if she would be pulled right into them.

This time he did use the stairs. He came into the kitchen, tilted his head, let Eledi down. "Nawi isn't here."

"No, she's working. She'll be back later in the afternoon."

"Come play blocks with me, Ruse! Come play!"

"Will you teach me?"

"*Teach you?!*" Eledi looked at him agape, then burst into giggling glee. Amaya winced. Eledi was so loud. She couldn't keep the smile from her face though. Eledi's laugh was so infectious, so pure. Too often lately her daughter had been listless, sad.

They followed her into the living room and all settled on the floor. Eledi ignored her mother utterly as she seriously set about showing Ruse all the ways blocks could be used.

"You can build a City, then you can wreck it. You can change the City, and make it long and flat, or you can build it square, like a house. You can do a tower. Mommy makes me take turns, to see who puts the last piece on before it falls. I just like to knock it down. You can line them up in matches."

"Patterns, Eledi."

"Petterns. My favorite is red circle, purple square..."

She continued to chatter. He watched her, listened. If he moved a block, she'd take it and put it just so. He smiled at Amaya the third time Eledi did this. Her heart turned over.

"Eledi. Do you want me to play with you?" he asked.

"Yes! We are!"

"You are. But every time I try to play, you move my block."

"You're not doing it right."

"It's my way. If I play, I get to do some things my way, and you get to do some things your way."

She stared at him, aghast. Her face closed up. She kicked a block, pushed the beginnings of a wall over at him. "Fine. You do it."

“No. We’ll do it. What shall we build? Another wall?”

She shrugged, her lower lip twisting.

“That’s what we had before. I’ll put this block here. When you feel ready, you can put blocks on either side of mine, then it’s my turn.”

She reached for his block. He touched it first, holding it in place with one large finger. “That’s my block.”

“Turn it over here.”

“You want it to face you?”

She nodded.

“Why don’t we sit side by side so that it faces both of us?”

Her whole face lit with relief. “Good idea!”

Amaya contained her laughter as the huge man maneuvered himself. Then Eledi carefully considered the blocks and put two down. They began to extend the wall.

“You’ve been around children before,” she said.

He looked up from watching Eledi balance a block. “There are several children in my Clan. They are loved by all.”

She nodded, not appreciating the pressure of last night’s discussion appearing so soon.

“When is it your mother’s turn?” he asked Eledi.

Eledi seemed surprised. “Mommy is going to play wif us?”

“She’s sitting right here. It would be rude not to ask.”

“Oh.” Eledi considered his serious face under her lashes. “Mommy, do you want to play?”

“I’d like that. We can play until the blocks are used, then it’s lunch time, then you can have a nap.”

Eledi scrunched her eyes. After that she only placed one block at a time instead of the two Ruse had given her leave to use. The adults smiled at each other over her head.

When at last Eledi could delay placing her last block no longer, they all admired the wall.

“Shall it stand till after naptime? Or shall the wildlings smash it down?” she asked her daughter.

Eledi screamed like a crazy person. “SMASHHHHH!” She kicked at the blocks furiously, whirled and tugged on Ruse’s hand. “Get it! Get it!”

He obliged by nudging over a section of wall. She howled with bloodthirsty glee. Amaya sometimes wondered about that look she got in her eye. When they were strewn across the room, Amaya said, “Pick up time.”

“Time me, Mommy!”

As Eledi snatched up the basket and began to race, Amaya went to finish hanging the wash to dry. She counted slowly and loudly. Eledi finished at twenty-two.

“Ohhh!” She threw the basket down in disgust.

Amaya looked at Ruse. “Her fastest time is twelve.”

Eledi’s face was growing darker. Amaya considered how best to distract her.

“So, little warrior, explain what went wrong.” Ruse’s low voice was a rumble that ruffled her nipples.

“What?” Eledi stared furiously at the basket.

“Why did this time take longer?”

"I was too slow!"

"You weren't. You were very fast. Why did this time take longer?"

Eledi stared at the basket, mystified.

"Warriors learn from their mistakes."

"*Everyone* needs to learn after they try something." How dare he start putting the idea that her daughter be a warrior in her head! And to call a pickup race a mistake!

Ruse met her eyes. Cocked his head at her anger. "Indeed." He looked down at Eledi. "Think about where the blocks were when you started."

Eledi's eyes traveled the room. She looked up at him, arrested. Her face lit with understanding. "They were everywhere!"

She turned in a circle. Seizing the basket, she dumped it in a practiced twist so that all the blocks fell underneath it. Kneeling, hovering over the pile with the basket at her side, she looked up at Amaya and demanded, "Time me, Mommy!"

Amaya counted. Eledi had them in the basket by six. She looked up at Ruse with shining eyes. "I'm fast!"

He crouched down next to her. "You are. But even better, you learned." She launched herself at him in a hug. "Stay for lunch!"

"You need to ask your Mother."

"Mommy, make Ruse stay for lunch!"

"I don't think I can make Ruse do anything."

"Ask! Ask nicely."

Amaya laughed to hear her own advice turned back on her. "Sir, would you like to stay for lunch?"

Ruse bowed. It was a Royal bow, with one leg extended forward straight, the other bent at the knee. He should have looked ridiculous. He looked beautiful, powerful, graceful. A cat stretching. "I would be delighted."

Eledi sat with Ruse while he cut the bread. Amaya was surprised that he'd offered to help. She laid out the cheese and fruit. She wished she had meat to offer him.

"Will you be my friend?" Eledi asked suddenly.

Ruse stopped cutting and looked at her. "I would like that very much."

"Will you be Mommy's friend too?"

Astonished, Amaya looked up from setting the tray on the table.

The look Ruse pinned her with was anything but friendly. It looked like he was going to stand up and pin her to the wall. "I would like that very much, also." His voice wrapped around her throat. It was hard to swallow.

"But you were my friend first."

Both adults blinked at each other. They laughed, while Eledi demanded, "What? What's funny?"

After lunch, full of Eledi's questions about cats, what they looked like, what they sounded like, what they felt like, what they smelled like, Amaya sent her to the bathroom.

"It's naptime," she warned Ruse. "Now would be a good time for you to go."

He didn't move a muscle, hands folded on the table. "Oh?"

"Naptime is not popular these days. I think by the winter she'll be done with it."

"I'm not afraid of an angry Eledi."

"I'm just saying..."

"Did it bother you, when I set her right with the blocks?"

She was surprised, but not. “No. You were wonderful. I didn’t like the warrior bit, though.”

“Being a warrior is a state of mind, not an act of violence.”

She blinked at him. That sounded like a platitude, but the slow pacing of his words made her understand that he meant it. Eledi pounded up the stairs.

“Block time!”

Amaya rolled her eyes.

“Naptime first. Lay down for one hour, Eledi. Then you can get up and play blocks.”

It began. They went round, and round. Eventually she was in their bed, shoes off, wiggling, pouting, quieting. Amaya lay on her side, smoothing her daughter’s fine, dark hair back from her tiny face.

“I want Ruse.”

“He’s not a doll.”

“I want him to nap with us.”

Amaya’s breath caught. She’d like him to nap with her, too.

“I wasn’t going to stay with you today. We have a guest.”

“It’s not fair that you get to play with him, while I have to nap!”

“Eledi.” Ruse filled the doorway.

Amaya flashed back to the feeling of sprawling across that massive body, laying nude in the night.

“Ruse! It’s naptime!”

“That’s true for you. Remember, you can’t make people do what only you want.”

Eledi turned to Amaya. Her deep brown eyes filled with sincerity. “Mommy, can you and Ruse *please* nap with me today?”

Amaya’s heart seized. If it was in her power to give, when her daughter looked at her like that, she’d do it. But this was not an option.

“I’d be delighted to. I didn’t get much sleep last night.” Ruse sat on the edge of the bed and began to undo his calf-high boots.

Amaya gaped at him over her shoulder.

“Scooch over. Mommy.” His voice was low and dared her.

Eledi giggled, scrambling closer to the wall. Amaya found herself pulled by little hands and gently shoved by giant hands. Then he took off her house slippers. Pulling the blanket up from the base of the bed, he lay down, a wall of heat at her back. Her heart began to pound.

Eledi sighed happily, laid her head on Amaya’s shoulder. Automatically, Amaya lay on her back and wrapped her daughter in her arms. Great strength lifted her up until her head was nestled in the hollow of his shoulder. Then his hand came around to rest on her stomach, while the other settled lightly on Eledi’s back. Her heart pounded harder. Any minute she’d start to hyperventilate.

“Eledi?” his voice rumbled at her spine.

“Yeah?”

“Did you know Sandcats live in a pack?”

“A bunch?”

“Yes. Many families, together, in the same place. They sleep together, eat together.”

“Do they play together?”

“Oh, yes.”

“That’s nice. This is nice. We’re like a pack!”

“We are. It is.”

Eledi snuffled her face against Amaya’s tunic. She sighed, and shifted, and within moments, slept. Very slowly, Amaya turned her head. Ruse was laying still, his eyes closed, a slight smile on his face. His heart was steady under her, his breath even.

“Ruse?” she whispered.

“Yeah?”

“What element do you call?”

“Earth. My specialty is soil.”

She focused on breathing slower. On breathing despite the weight of his hand burning her stomach. The heat he generated brought a flush of moisture along that side of her body. And she’d thought Eledi’s little body was warm.

This was insane. A strange man was lying in bed with her sleeping daughter. A feared Beast, bringer of justice to dark mages and criminals, was asleep with his hand on her stomach. She closed her eyes. It made his heartbeat that much more vivid and she opened them. She lay there for over an hour. Fighting to keep from relaxing. Fighting the hope that she could find some way to defend her own desire and allow a future between them.

She fought the hope when Ruse woke instantly, moments before Eledi stretched and yawned. She fought it when they played blocks again, and looked at Eledi’s flower book, and Eledi did her chores of helping to wash up lunch and set out dinner. She fought the lift of happiness every time she looked up and shared a look with Ruse over something Eledi did, either good or bad. She fought the sense of utter rightness that he was kind, firm, fair, and gentle with her daughter.

By the time Nawi came in and paled upon seeing him, she’d lost the fight. Pulling Nawi into the bedroom, she closed the door.

“What is he doing here? I said no more! Why are you leaving Eledi out there with him?” Nawi’s eyes were huge in her thin face.

“Nawi. Unless you’ve become a dark mage behind my back, you’re being ridiculous.”

“What?!” Her friend’s mouth flapped, then firmed under her outrage. “This is my home, Amaya! I don’t trust him, and I don’t like him, and I don’t want people seeing him here!”

Amaya considered her friend. “You’re right. This is your home. You’ve been good to share the space with me, although I remind you I pay our way. How long would you need to find a new roommate?”

Nawi visibly sagged in relief. “I think that’s best, Amaya, if you’re going to start bringing them here.”

“He’s not a customer.”

“That’s not what the other girls say.”

“And the other girls would know.”

“You’re paid up till the end of the moon. Would you need more time than that?”

Her decision was reckless and would most likely break her heart. She made it suddenly and absolutely. “I can leave tonight.”

“You can?” Nawi was shocked. The last color drained from her lips with realization. “No.” She grabbed Amaya’s arm. “Amaya, don’t go with him. Stay. I’ll help you find a

new place.”

She was both infuriated that her friend had so little spine and touched that she feared for her. She covered Nawi’s gripping hand with her own.

“Nawi, he is a good man. We will be fine.”

Nawi took her hand away. Stepped away. Staring at Amaya she whispered, “Listen to yourself. You know he’s not a man. Put clothes on the Beast but don’t deny it.”

Amaya stared back. “I don’t deny it. But he’s not just a Beast. He’s more than that.”

“All it takes is once. One slip of his control. The scars he could leave on you would ruin you for work. Think of Eledi.”

Amaya had a vivid recollection of the faint bruises on her hips, the red punctures she’d healed with satisfaction. “Oh, don’t worry about that. All I’m doing is thinking of her.” Bitterness laced her voice. She ached.

She left Nawi in the bedroom and went to the living room. Eledi was on the floor playing with her slate and sponge, leaving wet designs and random letters on the board. Ruse was fairly vibrating on the couch. His hands were clenched into fists on his thighs. Of course. He’d heard every word. His eyes burned into hers.

She admired her daughter’s letters then said, “Ruse, would you like a drink in the kitchen?”

He stood, slowly. “Thanks.”

When he passed by her, she shivered. There was that lightning again, riding under his skin, singeing her. “Eledi, come sit with me on the couch here. I have something to ask you.”

Eledi clambered up on her.

“Ruse has invited us to live with him.”

Eledi was quiet. She’d moved several times in her life. It was hard on her. She did not look on it as an adventure. “Do you want to go, Mommy?”

Oh. What a darling. “I do. I’m nervous, though. And I don’t want you to be worried. You told me he had kind eyes.”

Eledi nodded. “He does. I’m not scared of him.”

“You wanted to be his friend. If we live with him, he will be like Nawi, or Flik, your babysitter. There will be times when he is your friend, and times when he is the grown up and in charge.”

Eledi fiddled with Amaya’s hair. “When will we go away?”

“I’d like to leave tonight.” She felt guilty. It wasn’t enough of a warning. Eledi hadn’t had time to say goodbye. She abruptly changed her mental plan.

“We’ll stay over tonight, just to try. Tomorrow we can talk about it more, and come back here.”

“How long will we be?”

“What do you mean?”

“Before we leave again.”

“You mean from Nawi’s back to Ruse’s?”

“No, before we have to leave Ruse.”

Suddenly, she knew what Eledi meant. She wanted to know when they’d have to move the next time. “Oh, darling. I don’t know. I think... I think we can stay in this place for awhile.”

“A moon?”

Amaya's heart twisted. He'd be gone before then. But he'd said the apartment was hers. "More. I think."

"We can visit Nawi?"

"Oh, yes. And she can visit us." Not that she would until Ruse left.

"You said that about Ahnu. We hardly see her."

Amaya bit her lip. They were both working smoothskins, working out of different houses now. "You're right. Sometimes friends have busy lives. They change. But they're still friends. Let's try to see Ahnu sometime soon."

"Jensy has my dolly."

"You let her take it home?"

Eledi nodded.

"Well, we can get it tomorrow."

Eledi's eyes filled.

"All right, go get it now."

Eledi dashed her arm across her eyes and hugged Amaya tight. She took every bit of her daughter's strength, her heart churning as hard as her stomach.

Eledi ran down the stairs, shouting, "Bye, Ruse! Be right back!"

Ruse came in. He crouched down in front of her, took her hand.

They stared at each other. Her hand started to shake and she knew he could feel it. He gripped it tighter, brought it to his mouth. His lips were so soft.

"Tonight, I make love to you."

Her lungs stuttered. "Eledi..."

"Has her own room, will be close. I can hear her."

"Will she?"

"Overhear us? Perhaps. If you want me to keep you quiet, I can."

Her lips parted. He licked her hand, a burning, dry rasp. She gasped.

His voice was low, private. "There's no use hiding for long something that will be so much a part of us. But I agree, it's early."

He licked her hand again.

Her tongue came out to touch her lips, an echo of his. "I—I don't believe strangers can make love."

"Then by tonight, you'll have asked every question you can think of, and I won't be a stranger."

"That's not..."

"Quit running scared. Don't back down from me, from us." He looked at her through those long, two-toned lashes while he nipped a knuckle. "I want to imagine it. I want to plan it. Tell me how you want it."

She was in danger of hyperventilating again.

"Tell me what positions are your real favorites. How do you want us to share our bodies tonight, Amaya?"

She was no stranger to sex talk. But with this man kneeling before her, lips dragging over her skin, she was blank.

"Truth. Tell me."

"I don't know."

He stilled, raised his head like a hunting predator.

"I don't know what I want with you. I want it all."

His lids abruptly lowered. Now his lips parted.

"Then you shall have it."

She smiled faintly. Because she was feeling faint. "All in one night?"

"At least the basics."

She swallowed, feeling her breasts tingle.

Mommy! Alarm flashed through her as Eledi called to her in pain on their magepath. She leaped to her feet.

"What is it, Amaya?" Ruse rose with her.

Eledi's footsteps pounded on the stairs. She hurried to meet her, Ruse following, immediately tense.

"Mommy! Mommy!"

Eledi pelted into the room and threw herself into Amaya's arms, sobbing, her dolly clutched in one fist. Amaya hefted her, clutched her tight.

"Baby! I'm here!"

"Jensy said to never come back. She said I'm disgusting. She called you horrible names and her eyes were so bad! She had bad eyes, Mommy! She said Ruse was going to eat me up, and keep me on a chain, and..."

"Eledi." Ruse's voice was calm but firm.

She gasped, buried her face in Amaya's chest.

"Eledi, look at me."

Amaya cradled Eledi's head. "Sweet, sweet. Shhh."

In a few moments, Eledi turned her head, her eyes swimming with huge tears. She looked at Ruse, studied him. He looked back, serious.

"Jensy's a liar." Eledi's voice quavered, then she launched herself into Ruse's arms.

He caught her, holding her to him, rocking slightly. There was regret on his face, until he opened his eyes. Amaya bit her lip. Green mist swirled over his black irises, but did not cover his rage. He settled into a cross-legged seat, right there in the kitchen, loosened his grip on Eledi. Nawi came to the door. Amaya shook her head and she backed into the bedroom, closing the door again.

"Do you know what I am, Eledi?"

"You're a Sandcat Beast."

Amaya sat at the table and gripped the bench cushion so hard she was sure the seams were going to tear out any second. She would let him do this. She trusted him to do this.

"You are so very smart. Do you understand that Beasts are different from you?"

"Yes. You help us. Mommy says you fight wildlings and wild animals and awful things in the Dark."

He nodded. "Cityguards do that too. But I'm different."

Eledi shook in his arms. "You won't eat me!" Her voice was certain, but wobbled. It was all Amaya could do not to snatch her back.

"Never. Never. Never, never, never." He chanted it until she stilled, her little hands relaxing around his neck.

"You wear Sandcats on your clothes." There was a question in her small voice.

"I do. Because Sandcats are very important to me. I share my body with one. He is with me everywhere I go."

Eledi sat up, ran her eyes critically all over his face, neck, and shoulders. She picked up one of his hands in both of hers and studied it, frowning. She looked so tiny against

him.

“Where is it?”

“Inside me, until I let him out. Then we change, and I look like him.”

Eledi frowned harder. She looked at his leathers. “You look like these kitties?”

“I do.”

“You do not.”

“I would not lie to you.”

“What element is that?”

“It’s different from calling an element, but you’re very smart to see that it’s almost the same. I am Earth, and I can call it. I am also Sandcat, and call him, too.”

“Will he eat me?” Her eyes were huge, pleading.

“He is me and I am him. We would never hurt you, Eledi. Never, never, never.”

“Because you are my friend.”

“Because we do not hurt people unless they are very bad.”

“Would you eat Jency?”

“No. We have only hurt people who were much, much badder than Jency. I have never eaten anyone, Eledi, and don’t plan on it. I think people would taste funny, don’t you?”

Her mouth twitched, but she didn’t veer from her focus. “Did you put them in chains?”

“I did not. I gave them to the Cityguards so the laws of the City could judge them.”

“You don’t live in the City, really.”

“No, I only live here for now.”

Eledi whipped her head around to Amaya. “We are leaving the City tonight? To go the Sandcats?”

Amaya felt her world tip sideways. “No. Just a new house, over near the Garden, Eledi.”

Eledi slumped in relief, but her face looked disappointed. “You have flowers where you live. Different flowers.”

“I do. And it is my hope that you get to see them someday. They grow wild, wherever they like, however they can. They are free.”

“Flowers?”

“City people keep each of the flowers together, let them grow just in certain places. My people, the Truxet, we let the flowers grow where they want.”

“But, wild is dangerous. Wild is...”

“To me, and my family, the wild is beautiful. I can work the wild and make it safer.”

“You are a guard, too.”

“I am. I like to keep people safe. It makes me feel proud, like when you help your Mommy with the dishes.”

“You are a good guard. You are not a bad guard. Why am I disgusting?”

He lifted a huge hand and drifted the backs of his fingers over her round cheek. “You are a gift, Eledi. A smart, funny, precious gift. Jency is scared, because I am different. People can get angry when they’re really scared.”

“Two feelings at the same time. Mommy told me about that. Sometimes I am happy with Nawi when I miss Ahnu.”

“Yes.” He swallowed, clenched his jaw, breathed deep. “If you and your Mommy

live with me, this might happen again, Eledi. People might be scared and angry around me.”

“Like Nawi.”

He nodded. “Like Nawi, and Jency.”

“But Nawi didn’t get bad eyes.” Eledi shivered.

“You should always pay attention and tell us when you see bad eyes, Eledi. That’s a very smart thing to do. If people are mean, no matter what their eyes, it’s best to tell us, and to look away from them, and to leave the area.”

“Like Mommy and I do when people shout things at her about her job.”

For the first time he looked away from her daughter and met her eyes. “Yes.”

“I already know about that.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry, that people can be so mean.”

“I don’t understand why they get angry at her. She does the best job she can.”

Amaya saw him swallow. “I know, wild flower.”

Eledi looked at him, surprised. “I’m a wild flower?”

“You are. You are strong and beautiful and growing so well, without any garden whatsoever.”

Don’t cry. Amaya chanted. *Don’t cry.*

“But I love the Garden!”

“Of course you do. But you don’t need it.”

“Which wildflower am I?”

“Elediflower, of course. No other flower is like you.”

Eledi chewed on her lip, traced the cats.

“Can I see your sandcat?”

He froze for so long, she peeked at him.

“I would like that, Eledi. He would like that very much. Not now, though. Later, when your Mother says it’s time.”

Naturally, Eledi immediately turned to her. “Can I see the kitty now, Mommy?”

“No, baby. Not today.” She cleared her throat. “Are you feeling better about Ruse, now?”

Eledi laid her head on his chest, sighing. “Ruse is my good friend. Jency is a bad friend.”

Amaya reached out a trembling hand and stroked her daughter’s curls. “Shall we pack for a visit? We need nightdresses, and toothbrushes.”

“Dolly!”

“Of course.”

“Blocks? My book?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say it was just for one night, but she looked up at Ruse, still watching Eledi so intently. “Bring whatever you can fit in a basket.” Because it wasn’t really for just one night. If she could forgive herself, it would be for the rest of their lives.

Eledi yelled in delight and scampered all over Ruse, climbing out of his arms.

“Not the laundry basket!” she shouted after her, knowing her busy brain would work out which was biggest.

Ruse looked up at Amaya from his seat on the kitchen floor. No, his eyes *climbed* up her body, molded and stalked, burning on her waist, her chest, her neck.

"Tonight," he rumbled at her.

She swallowed. Lowering her eyes to her clasped hands she nodded once. "Yes." And she was glad. She was so eager, and glad.

* * * *

When Eledi was finally in her own bed, a magelight burning next to her, he took Amaya up to the roof. She'd been sidling away from him all night. Her lips were puffy from her constant nibbling.

"She's rarely slept alone in a room before. She might not last the night."

"Then she'll join us. Her room is too small for us to join her."

"Maybe we should wait."

"No."

"If..."

"She won't interrupt us. I'll hear her. Our door has a lock."

He pulled her down in his arms. He was nearly shaking with the memory of the night before, her body made pale in the faint light as it lay sprawled, bare, on his.

"Ask your questions."

"Ruse..."

"Ask. Our bodies aren't strangers. Our spirits aren't strangers. The only thing that's holding you up is your brain."

"That's not true. I can't think of just myself."

"You never would. You're not. How old are you? I'm thirty-four."

"I'm twenty-four."

He waited, content to feel his cat pace, pace, pace beneath his skin, while her warm body nestled against him. Her scent, her scent was so good. His penis lifted, twitched.

She cleared her throat. "Tell me about your family."

"My Clan is small but we're known as one of the loudest. We argue a lot, get mad fast, forgive faster. We know how to have a good time. Privacy is pretty much a lost cause, but they make up for it. We're one of three pack Clans in Vladaya. Our Alpha is the best. He's my father's age, has been Alpha for most of my life. Our Shield is getting ready to step down. All the other alphas are nervous about it."

"I don't understand all this."

"You will. You asked about my family. I'm just telling you."

"The whole Clan is related to you?"

"Not technically, but that's not really how we work. My blood family isn't necessarily who I'm closest to. Of course, I love them all. I'm the younger brother of two. My father and mother are great. My mother is the loud one. You'll be interested to know she came from this City, too. She was in the Water Guild, in charge of the City's wells.

"My dad is the second of four brothers. He's the only one that mated. Well, until now. My oldest uncle is about to finally get his mate after waiting for her eighteen years."

"That's incredible! Eighteen years?"

"I'll tell that story another time. It's depressing." *And not going to happen to us.*

"My grandfather and grandmother are slowing down. They are out of duty rotation now in the Clan, and spend a lot of time relaxing, traveling, helping with the children. My great-uncle has never been a happy man and his health is really failing now that he's given up duty work." *That is also not going to happen to me. She will not pass me over.*

"My best friend is Kaz."

"Kaz of the Cats?" Amaya was amused.

"Yeah. He's just a few months older, but we were the only ones born that year and I'm closer to him than my brother, who's seven years older. I'm also very close to one of my childhood mentors, who's a bit older than my dad. Then there's Grundy, the Bear that's been my spiritmage ever since my first souldance with him, he's been like a second brother. We've kept in touch."

"Is it common for Truxet to souldance? In the Cities people only do it if they are extremely devout or troubled."

"It's required when the Change first comes. Then, you can request it whenever you feel you need guidance. Some in my Clan have done it nearly every year." He shrugged. "It is an intense experience. I'm not sure I'd ever be able to do it that often, with whoever was assigned to me."

"Your family sounds... solid."

"Yeah. They are. We'd do anything for each other. Anyone in the Clan would. Do you miss your father?"

She grew tense in his arms. *Stupid. Keep it about you.* He stroked her skin, grateful her tunic was short-sleeved.

"I hate him. He... was more concerned about duty than me. Us. He was always just a presence in the house. The family was really my mother, my sister, and I. When Mama died, Basa tried. But she hated him, too. I was angry, she was sad. She was underage when she ran away. Only seventeen."

"She was selfish, to leave you alone there."

"She was. She's apologized. But sometimes you have to live for yourself."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

She stilled again. *Lay off the pressure.*

"What else do you want to know about me, Amaya?"

She laughed, a bit wildly. "Everything! Too much to learn now."

"We're starting."

She took a huge breath, laid her hand on his chest. *Oh, yeah. Yes, yes, yes* beat his heart. His cat rolled over in glory at her acceptance.

"We are starting. You were wonderful with her today."

"It was hard, to see her scared of me."

"Yes."

He sat, content to smell her, feel her weight against his.

"What do you do, Ruse?"

"What we all do. Guard. Protect. Defend. I'm just an average warrior, Amaya. No one special in the Clan or in Vladaya. I've served on the Food Supply Subcouncil for a couple years now. I help at River Mountain's fields and orchards on a summer duty every year. I take random duties as my Alpha asks, among the Cities. Mostly Seventh, which is closest to Grasshome, and Sixth.

"When I'm home, I pace the boundaries, keep the Clan's magic up, hunt anything dangerous that gets too close."

"Dangerous?! How dangerous?"

His hands tightened on her arms, as he pictured her standing before an array of the monsters he regularly hunted. "Our Clan lairs are ringed in protections and constantly

guarded. They are safe enough that I would bring Eledi there. The wild creatures are dangerous. Dangerous enough to clear from our territory. I've trained to hunt them carefully. They're nothing I can't handle. The last time we lost a Sandcat in a hunt was when I was a child."

"I don't like that. The idea of you in the True Wild. You go with a group? In a pack?"

"We always hunt at least in pairs. More if needed. It's not usually needed."

"Are you in a dangerous duty right now? On this assignment?"

"No. We're concerned there's a new predator that's emerged without our identifying it. Weird things are happening in the foodchain. We're just gathering information from some of the people who've traveled between Cities recently. Buttering up the Mage Guild, the Couriers."

Her hand moved up to his neck. He swore he felt her pull lightning out of his body every time she touched him like that, thoughtful and gentle. She could. She called Air. He wondered if she was doing it without knowing. He didn't care. He'd gladly fry for the chance to finally, really, love her.

"Ruse?"

"Yeah?"

"I sense Eledi is sleeping."

He tilted his head and spread his senses, even though he hadn't heard anything. "All quiet."

"Good." She stood up in front of him, pulled her tunic off. She wore no chest wraps. Her nipples pebbled in the night air. He felt his own chest tighten in response.

"Then I would like to take this night..." She undid her skirt's tie, and let it drop to around her feet. She wore no underwear. His mouth flooded with saliva.

"To show you, Ruse of the Sandcats..." She toed off her simple leather slippers, knelt before him. He forced himself to stay still.

"That I don't think you're average at all." She reached for his waistband and he let her. Just sat there, drinking her in.

Leathers didn't undo as easy as her skirt and it was a few moments until she bent him to ease him out.

"No. Not average at all," she breathed, as she looked a bit glassily at his cock. He was pleased with that look.

"Amaya."

She looked up at him, licking those gorgeous, perfectly bowed lips. He couldn't see the greens and golds of her eyes now, in this light. Her eyes were the colors of the prairie at home.

"I've been imagining this all evening." He tried to focus on what he wanted her to understand, and not that her nipples were less than a breath from his fingertips.

"If this beginning grows true, follows my dream, all the other hands that have gone before, they are ghosts to you now. I want you in my arms every night for the rest of my life, Amaya. Tonight I want to drown you in me. I want to show you I can provide you whatever pleasure you need."

She looked up at him, her lips glistening, the pulse pounding in her neck. He could smell her woman's scent. He'd be there soon.

"Ruse. My warrior Ruse." She reached out and drew his hands off his thighs, placed

them over each knee, palm up. She stared at his hands while hers gracefully drifted across the swells of her breasts.

“Look at your hands, Ruse. I see them. I’m going to touch them. Kiss them. Learn them first. Your hands have already marked my body in passion, cradled and protected me and my daughter. Their strength is amazing, and I want to claim it. I want all the curves of women’s flesh *you’ve* touched before to become ghosts to you.”

He couldn’t recall a single woman he’d had before at this moment. He didn’t feel as a virgin, but he knew that all of the prior shared pleasure he’d had was a dusting of sand before the emotional mountain he faced with this woman.

“Amaya, You walked a path you had a right to walk. I know that. But I want you for myself. Your body’s pleasure is my job now, not yours. I’ll give you pleasure and take pleasure in joy, never coin.”

She looked back up from his hands, and he saw a tear skim down her cheek. Crap. No. He started to reach for her head, but her hands came up like the wind and pinned his wrists to his thighs.

“After I learn these hands, I get to swallow you down. Your first cum tonight is mine to taste. I can already remember it’s smell. But I want to learn the taste of you, too.”

“That’s good. I’d like that. Then I’ll be able to go longer, give you more pleasure, afterward.”

She shivered. Then she bent to his hands. While she learned one with her mouth, her other hand roamed his. The pads of her fingers were soft and lightning strong, dipping across his palms, the hollows of his knuckles, the sensitive tendons at his wrist. Her tongue trailed every callus, every scar. Her lips were like clouds.

Switching, she sent hard nips over the other hand, while his damp free hand now felt the lightning of her touch. Her velvet tongue stroked harder, flicked and crawled in every crease. He stared, fascinated, glad of her braid so that he had a clear view. His penis throbbed, bobbed in the night air. It could just wait.

He burned the image of her learning his hands into his brain. *She’s ours now. Ours.* Eventually, she slid her lips around his middle finger. She closed them, suckled lightly, her lips working against the webbing, her tongue undulating along his length.

She swallowed every finger. Some got chewed, some licked, some slurped. Soft and hard, he watched her face roll across his hands. She turned one hand over and pressed soft, open kisses across the light hair on the back of it when he felt the beginnings of his claws. He raised his free hand, pulled against her grip. She looked up at him, and his cock surged. She looked completely drugged, her mouth swollen and wet.

“Thank you, Amaya. Thank you. You have to stop now, because my cat is too eager.”

“No. Not just yet. I didn’t get to learn that part of you.” She pulled on one of his wrists, the hand she’d been most recently neglecting.

He let her study the nails, the transformed fingers that were slightly longer. The pads at the end of his fingers were slightly engorged. The nails were not retractable like in his beast form. But they were massive sickles like his cat claws when fully extended. And as sharp as needles.

His heart stopped when she bent her face down. “Amaya, no.”

“Yesss.” Her voice murmured over his skin like a touch. “I will learn all of you, Ruse.” She focused on his forefinger. Then she licked his claw, from base to tip.

He'd never felt pleasure in his claws before. They felt impact; they felt pain when pulled the wrong way for too long. But he felt the pressure of her tongue, so faint, in the base of his claw, for her entire lick. And the delicate feeling was as pure as if her tongue had touched his skin. Watching her lick along the bone-like curve made his cock leak.

Then she opened her mouth wide, raised her eyes up to his, and closed her mouth over his finger. When he felt the claw fold slightly against the pressure of her mouth, along with her hot wet flesh surrounding his skin, it was all he could do to hold utterly still. One twitch and he'd scratch the roof of her mouth. She opened wide and backed off his finger. Panting softly, she looked up at him.

"I want it inside me. Just like this. It would only leave a thin cut going in. Do you think you could do that, Ruse? Could you push it in as far as you can reach, then control it so that it goes away? I want to know that I can take you in all your forms."

An image of him in battleform, bending over her in a dark cave, came so clearly into his brain, so suddenly, he didn't doubt it was a vision for a second.

Her scent saturated the air. "Please, Ruse?"

"Yes, Amaya. I'll do that for you. Later."

She pushed his hand off his lap, shoved his legs apart and dropped her mouth onto his cock. She took him deep in one dive. Then she swallowed. And swallowed again. *Crap. Crap. Crap.* He wanted to last. He wanted to hold onto this, to remember it. She swallowed, and swirled her tongue along his underside, and set her teeth at his very base.

"Amaya!"

His hands gripped her head, firm, and he bucked, just a bit. She'd made his hands so sensitive that his slightly damp skin felt the brush of her silky hair as keenly as her warm, wet lips around his cock. She swallowed, and he thrust, and came, roaring in the night. The deep *hun-ka hun-ka hun-ka* of a full grown Sandcat in triumph blasted through the night. Someone somewhere down below may have screamed. All he knew was that her hair was soft, her mouth was softer, and hot, and each pulse out of his cock was beauty.

When she'd licked him clean, she sat back, her tongue licking her lips. He chuckled, thinking she looked very catlike.

"You took me so easy, Lady. I am going to enjoy your skills tremendously."

"You're delicious, Ruse. Sharp. It's weird that something so sharp tasting can be so smooth and thick at the same time."

He groaned. Reaching for her, he pulled her into his now damp lap and kissed her deep. He loved his taste in her mouth. Later he wanted to come all over her, then lick it all off. Him. His.

She was a very good kisser. Her mouth held a rhythm of aggression and submission that roused, then soothed. Her tongue was strong, her teeth sharp. As they should be. There was no urgency, no rushing. He held her carefully, aware of his claws, while their mouths melded. Their breathing matched. Their taste was one. Her mouth was smaller than his, and he wanted to see it on his cock again. Stroking him this time. So he could feel her lips along every beating vein.

Finally, when he felt his cock twitch again, he pulled back. He held her face gently in stiff-fingered hands, the tips of his claws just catching on some of her loose hair, while he searched her eyes.

"Are you ready?"

"Oh. Ruse. Yes."

“My Clan has a weakness. We are very quick to draw our claws. Too quick. So every man is given caps, for when we train. And sometimes, when we love.”

He reached over the side of the chair and drew a small bag up between them. He opened the drawstring and began to put on the stiff leather finger jackets that sank down to his first knuckle.

“Do all the men do this with their women?”

“There’s a greater need to do it with men who aren’t mated. Our beasts are riled, desperate. Right now, mine is lunging and twisting and leaping inside me.”

“He is?”

He nodded, continuing to attach the sleeves. “He knows you’re meant for us. He knows we’re a match. He wants to claim you.”

“Well, you are claiming me.”

He stopped and looked at her. She looked a bit like Eledi just then, sitting in his lap with her head tilted curiously. “A true claiming would be when I’m in your ass, in battleform, in front of my Alpha and all my family. That’s when he’ll finally be satisfied. Until then, Amaya, every time we’re together, I have to keep it together.”

“You could hurt me.”

“I could scratch you, yes. But I’ve got my caps tonight.”

“You didn’t hurt me before, in the alley. Even though your claws were out.”

He considered her. “How do you know my claws were out?”

“Because there were little pinpricks.”

Horror skated down his spine. “I broke your skin?”

“Just a tiny bit. You didn’t rip me at all. There were no scars.”

He grabbed her and pulled her in tight. “I’m sorry. Now you see how it is. I never even knew I did that. They are so sharp, and I would never forgive myself if I hurt you.”

“Unless I ask you to.”

He looked down at her. She smiled mysteriously up at him.

“Which is why you’re only going to put one more cap on. And leave that last finger free. I want to feel that claw on my body. Inside, outside. I can call a bit of Body magecraft. I trust you. I’m not crazy enough to say take all the caps off, but I’d like the danger of that one.”

“Amaya.”

“Your hands, Ruse. Your hands on my body. Only yours.”

His cat gave such a hard lunge inside him he grunted. He was shaking when he dropped the last cap back in the bag. His free finger throbbed with sensitivity. He drew out a strip of leather.

“Do you want this? It won’t keep you silent, it will just remind you to keep it down.”

She looked at the muzzle, considering. She licked her lips. “I don’t want her to hear us. Not until she’s more at home here. For her to wake in the night and hear me moaning... I don’t want that, Ruse.”

“Then we’ll be silent. Turn around. Lift your braid.”

She did, revealing a smooth line of nape that made his teeth ache. *No biting*. Maybe he’d need a second muzzle. *Control yourself*. He set her jaw in the pouch, tied it behind her head, being careful of her hair. It was made for a beast in battleform so the nose piece was much too big. He untied the side ties and took it off entirely. What usually just covered the bottom of a man’s chin covered her up to her nose. There were slits in the

leather. She'd breathe fine, she just couldn't open her mouth more than a slight gap.

He stood, picked up her hand in his fully capped one. "Take it off if it bothers you, all right?"

She nodded, eyes shining. Seeing the muzzle on her made his beast snarl. It didn't like it. It didn't like seeing anything bound. He led her down to the bed. He locked the door. The sheets were new, and freshly washed. The pillows were soft and deep. He turned down the cover, and she crawled into the middle. He watched her ass sway. She gracefully rolled, and lay still, watching him.

He breathed carefully. Arched feet, long smooth legs, bald mound gleaming slightly, wide hips dipping into a tiny waist, generous breasts tipped with large, tan nipples. When he'd looked his fill, he held his hands out. He stared at them, drawing up the image of her dark head bent, her mouth on them. His exposed claw shone like a razor in the single magelight. She was here, in the bed he'd chosen. She'd taken the first step in becoming his mate. He would love her with all of himself. He would keep it together.

He moved her legs open, and sat between them. It took a few minutes for her smell to work its way down his throat. He pushed her knees up and gestured for her hands to hold herself open. She was furless. Her skin was utterly smooth. *Skinlicker*. He snorted at the supposedly derisive term for paid pleasure workers. Sounded good to him. He began at her ankles. And he took his time, loving the rasp of his rough cat tongue on her silky skin. He did her hands too, when he got to her knees. At every juncture, he switched legs, to keep them even. She was shaking by the time he drew up the crease of her thigh on her second leg.

He was on his stomach now, his face inches from her gaping vagina. He blew on her gently, watched the folds contract, like a little mouth, begging. He decided to give her a taste of her own medicine. He buried his face in her softness and unfurled his tongue. She made a high sound of pain in her throat and he pulled out abruptly, frozen, watching her up the line of her body. He knew he hadn't hurt her, but sometimes the pleasure was too strong.

When she'd panted a few moments, she nodded. Taking pity on her, he went in slowly this time, and savored. Every. Lick. Her taste was soft. It reminded him of when he tasted the Earth after every harvest. There was a dry richness to it. He went over every fold, lifting up on her hips to get under her, pushing down on her thighs to get at the sides. He cleaned her until only the core remained. He considered the thick taste in his mouth at this point. He considered the erection his cat was dragging. Time to slow things down.

He waited until she looked down at him. He held up his bare finger, tilted his brow in a question. She stared at it. Closed her eyes and nodded.

He set his claw to her opening with his palm up. Pushing hard so that all his force was on the back of his finger, he sent the claw inside her. His cat went wild when he saw one tiny bead of blood on her upper fold. He paused, assessed. She had wanted this. He wanted it too. He sent his finger in to the next knuckle. He felt the slight give against his claw, watched her stomach ripple. He looked up at her. She begged with her eyes above the leather muzzle. Watching her, he sent his finger as deep as he could reach. And saw her come.

The shudder softened her face, sent her hands twisting in the sheets, wrapped her vagina tight around his finger. Too tight. Abruptly he closed his eyes, and brought up his

will. *Manform. Manform.* She's here, she's ours, we're hurting her.

When his claw was gone and the caps on his other fingers were flicked off, he scrambled up onto his knees. He worked another finger in and pressed with his free hand down on her mound. When his fingers met, he sent a wave of healing into her.

When he felt he'd done enough, he fell to his belly, shifting his hips to get his hard-on comfortable. Then he sent his tongue back into her. He tasted the hint of her blood, and how her cum was a bit different from the desire he'd cleaned off her outer folds. He licked and sucked until she had nothing left to give, then closed his teeth gently over her clit, trapping it and worked it hard with the rough side of his tongue. She came again, so he went back up her hole to gather up the treasure. She tasted so sweet.

Rising over her, he knelt, looked her in the eyes, and slid his cock home.

Watching her eyes dilate in the faint light, he remembered the heat, the tight desperation of the alley fuck. It had been so good. This would be better. He'd make every time together better for her. He drew out and slammed in hard. Her breasts shifted, just scraping his chest. He closed his eyes, and took her. Her. Deep. Hot. Soft. Wet. Sucking. He opened his eyes when he felt her come.

He watched her writhe, her neck so taut he knew she was holding back her sweet moans. She was the one that wanted to be silent. So he would be. But he wouldn't pull back just to make it easy. He fucked her through her orgasm. Eventually, he had to shift his hands so that they topped her shoulders, holding her in place. Her head had gone over the edge of the bed, exposing her throat. *No biting.* Her braid dangled to the floor.

He dragged himself out of her perfection. Agony. Straddling her hips, he came on her chest. He watched the ropy strips of white land like lashes. She reached for it but he grabbed her hands. Held them in his until he was done. He stood, heaved her back into the center of the bed, and proceeded to enact his fantasy. Him. On her. His. He rubbed the cum in. She smelled like him. She was his. She was part of him.

Oh, Cat liked this. A lot. He lay, rolling in ecstasy, as Ruse bent and began to lap her. Her breasts were beautiful. The only sign of her pregnancy were faint stretch marks on the undersides. Her belly was clear. Not that he would have minded. He licked her haphazardly, but thoroughly. Chest, belly, shoulders, neck. She clasped his head, scratched his back, clawed his neck. He didn't mind. His tongue was brutal on her soft human flesh and he loved it, the lines of red stripes he painted.

When her body was heaving and twisting under his, he flipped her over. His claws were out again by now. He sat between her spread thighs and carefully put the caps all back on. He kept his free finger raised off her skin as his hands drifted over the contours of her back. He drew her up on her knees, sank his beating cock into her. This time he tortured her. He'd never done it slower. By the time he'd finally seated, sweat poured down his temples and back. He was hard as stone. He drew himself out just as slowly. He thought perhaps it took half an hour altogether. He was shaking when his glans cleared her darkness, a long strand of pearly need connecting them.

He smiled grimly when he saw it. He pushed on her back until she folded over, knees tight under her. He eased her legs wider, then put his on the outside of hers. He put that glistening tip against her ass and pushed in. Folding his body over hers, he drove his hands under her, banding her tight against him as he shoved in. She was hotter in this hole, and her grip at his base was so tight he was nearly blinded by pleasure. He curled over her, tightened his grip, checked that his free claw was against his own arm, and

began to thrust. The position made it less vigorous than the pounding he'd given her before, but no less intense. She came quickly, but he knew he wasn't going to go for a long time. He settled his weight over her, laid his head on hers, and continued.

He breathed through another orgasm of hers, stilled her struggles to get to her clit with his strength, and continued. Her ass was clamped so tight on him he began to chafe and didn't care. He ground in, punched in, rocked in, each lift feeling his balls hang, each push feeling them compress against her sopping soft heat. Once she made a sound, and he stopped, lifted his head to check on Eledi, then nipped her shoulder and continued.

Amaya. Amaya. Amaya. He wanted to say it out loud. He was angry that he couldn't, but let it pass. He worked her until she was limp beneath him. He could hear her breathing, knew she was all right. He worked her until his thighs began to tremble, then he pulled out. He came on her back this time. He didn't have as much cum. But it was enough.

Tenderly, he stretched out her limbs. He massaged the red marks from his weight from her arms, soothed her legs that had borne their weight. He licked his drying cum from her back, and continued to softly, slowly lick her salty sweat and his until she slept. He gently untied the muzzle, and rolled her over. She blinked, yawned, felt her chin. He kissed her neck until she slept again.

In the bathroom, he cleaned himself, then took a cloth and gently cleaned her. He put a towel around himself, and went to Eledi. He crouched by her bed and watched her sleep, her little face slack, her hand curled loosely.

Back in the bedroom, he locked the door. He sat at the foot of the bed and watched her. Amaya. She'd lost her family, lost herself for awhile, but was strong enough to climb back into control. She'd built a life for herself in the harsh reality of the Guildless, was a wonderful mother. He was so proud of her. Proud to belong to her.

When a few hours passed, he delicately sent a still-capped finger into her heated folds. He drew it into his mouth, concentrating on the smell until he was hard. He repeated the stolen sips until he was throbbing. He crawled up and gently nudged inside with soft pushes. He'd smoothly stroked her four times before she woke. She focused on his face, smiled. His heart rolled over. He kissed her, sucked her tongue, and she came. The tightening of her eyes, the bow of her mouth, it was perfect. He pulled back and smiled at her, continuing to move.

"Ruse..."

He covered her lips with his, shook his head when he drew back. She wanted silence. He wanted her to come another twenty times. He rolled, sat up and laid her back on the bed. She was relaxed enough, supple enough to do the deep back bend easily. He stared down at their exposed joining. He watched his upper half push into her hole, her little clit spearing toward his stomach. He reached for her hand, drew it up and placed it on her smooth, bald mound.

He continued to shift easily in her wet vagina while she fingered herself softly, then hard, pushing, grinding herself in circles. She came, her free hand going to her mouth as she clearly fought the desire to cry out. He loved her then with his own hand, adding his own expertise to what he had watched her do.

After she came, he shifted position so he could get some good drag and friction for awhile, working up a sweat, unwilling to give in to the pleasure that attacked his balls. As she came once again, he ground his teeth to keep from following her. Then shifted again, rolling, so she could ride him. Watching her bounce and gasp above him, he'd never felt

more at peace. She was incredible. Wisps of her hair stuck to her face, her chest. Her braid teased his thighs. A bead of sweat dripped down her tummy. He held her thighs gently as she clawed at his chest, crushed his hips, clamped him tight. When she came, he thought he might cry tears of happiness.

She collapsed over him, boneless, exhausted. Tightening his abs, he raised up enough to pull himself against the headboard, then lift her, turn her, and sink back in when he got her legs to sprawl open. It was the same position they'd been in last night, with him reclining slightly and her sprawled open on top of him. Only this time he was inside her.

He reached his hands down and pushed hard on her lower belly, just over her uterus. Feeling his tip shove up into her with each thrust from the outside was a thrill. He began a pattern, working with his cock and his hands. She opened her mouth and drew breath to scream. He immediately stopped and pinched her nipples viciously. She came anyway, but the scream was silent as she lunged in his arms. He was distantly aware of his thundering heart, his laboring lungs, the sweat that soaked the sheets. Nothing mattered but that he keep going. Keep plunging in her body, keep her coming, saturate her.

He lay her forward and came over her, loving her pillowy ass as he slid and dug. This position meant it was just his tip slipping in and out the front of her channel, but it was good, so sweet, so hot. He reached under her and cupped her breasts, molding them, squeezing his fingers into her flesh. She finally wiggled an arm down to her clit and he let her. She came. Time to switch.

He'd turned her onto her back, pushed one knee up and was doing her at an angle, a little bit harder, starting to think about when he'd come again, when he heard Eledi. A purposeful rustle of cloth. The creak of the mattress. Soft footfalls. He checked the drapes. There at the edges was a faint hint of dawn. Sadly, his cock aching, he separated their bodies. He hoped he'd proved himself. He would finish her later.

Kissing the corner of her mouth, he breathed, "Thank you, Amaya."

Her eyelids fluttered. The tears that had seeped out of her eyes over the last few positions continued. He nibbled them softly, greedily, with his lips. The delicate skin around her eyes was too fragile for the touch of his rough tongue.

He rose to sit on the corner of the bed. He closed his eyes, and controlled his body. It took longer than he would have liked. He may have to beat off soon, or it would come back. When he was at least foldable, he drew on his leathers and went out to greet Eledi as she came out of the bathroom. His whole heart bloomed to see her in the morning light, creases on her face from the sheets, her hair matted, and her eyes heavy.

"Good morning, Wild Flower. How'd you sleep?"

* * * *

She didn't think he ever would have stopped. If Eledi wasn't there, he possibly could have fucked her until she was unconscious. Or dead from pleasure. Not fucked. Loved. Even the hard pounding of their first joining was full of love. She was used to men with stamina. She'd had Beast lovers for a few years. She enjoyed sex.

This wasn't sex. It wasn't the wild passion of the alley, or the gentle, fragile discovery they'd traded on the roof the night before. Claiming. That's what he'd warned her of. Had said this wouldn't be it. Earthmother help her, for she wasn't sure she could survive the real one. Every muscle ached. Yet every muscle was loose. Her bones had

melted. Her skin was raw, so sensitized just sitting up in the sheets had her biting her lip to keep the moan of pleasure in.

When he'd sensed Eledi, he'd just quit. He wasn't unaffected, but he mastered himself, respecting her wishes. And that was that. Done. She knew a sippy cup full about living with the Truxet. But she thought she was going to learn. She thought she was going to do it. She thought of her defense of her sister last night. *Sometimes you have to live for yourself.*

Moving slowly, she put on her robe, gathered her clothes. She peeked at the door until she was sure Eledi was occupied then dashed to the bathroom. It was so incredible to have one to themselves. She'd never known this, not even in the Guild. When she was clean, and dressed, and still shivering in aftershock, she went into the kitchen.

Eledi was at full excitement level, as she had been last night.

"Mommy! Ruse can cook! He said I don't have to take a bath till tonight! I forgot my hairbrush! I did my buttons by myself! Can I go on the roof?"

"I said no to the roof, Eledi. Not by yourself."

Amaya felt her body throb at the timber of his voice. *Oh, oh, oh.* He seemed even bigger today. She was surprised that that huge body had moved on hers all night. *All night.* She sat at the table, repressing a groan.

"Eledi, we talked about this with Nawi. When one adult says no, don't ask the other adult hoping the answer will change." She held up a hand when Eledi opened her mouth. "Not even if the answers do change. What the first adult says goes."

Ruse had stopped working near the mageheat. His eyes were traveling back up her body, as if she were nude. She shivered.

"I didn't think, even with the banister..."

"Absolutely, Ruse, thank you."

He stiffened slightly as he turned back to the counter. "I wasn't sure how you felt about me supervising her bath so I left it for you."

She looked at his massive form stirring something in a pot. She'd never seen a man cook before. Cooking for her and Eledi. "Why don't you join us tonight, so you can see just how we do it. Then you'll know for next time."

Eledi shrieked with laughter. "Ruse has to learn new too!"

He smiled at the girl, a rueful grin that lit his eyes. "We always have to keep learning, Eledi. Even as grown-ups."

"You know how to take a bath!" Her voice told him he was ridiculous.

Amaya's heart swelled. Moments like this, a dozen times a day, when Eledi's little individuality just shone like a jewel in the sun. A dozen key questions flashed through her brain, of things she wanted to know about Ruse's people, about their sexuality, their rites, their laws... things she had to know before she could let herself hope any more. She had to know Eledi would be safe.

"Here you go. One Eledi dream breakfast." Ruse set the food tray on the table and Eledi's face glowed with greed.

Looking over the foods, Amaya realized he must have planned this, for indeed, it was all her favorite things, including things they couldn't afford very often. Amaya looked up, up at him as he handed her a bowl. He met her eyes and nodded gently to her, a reassurance. Her breath caught, as it always did around him. She recognized the swelling feeling in her chest. So much like the love she had for Eledi.

Amaya looked at her bowl, blinking quickly. *Oh, please*, she thought to Skyfather, *let his answers be the ones I need to hear.*

The morning passed in a blur. She felt sometimes as if she was observing from far away. She'd be laughing at Ruse's antics with Eledi, and a memory of his sweaty, heaving face lunging over hers would fill her vision. She'd be watching the play of muscles visible in his sleeveless tunic and remembering how she'd thrilled to trust his claw inside her softest depths, when a terrible *what if* question would pop into her brain, freezing her in terror. She imagined Eledi in a strange place surrounded by wild, strange males of all ages. She would look out over the rooftops, knowing she could name every street for each ridge of roofs, name every store on each corner for as far as her eye could see. This City was her home. She looked at the treetops, great heaping mounds of green life, and imagined seeing nothing but those around her, for as far as the sea had stretched. She shivered.

When Ruse announced, again after cooking for them, that it was naptime, and they'd return to Nawi's after that, Amaya thought she was even more disappointed than Eledi. But Eledi was in love with her flowery bedroom, and exhausted from the night before and getting up so early today. She lay down without much fuss, listened to Ruse to talk about the grasslands around his home, and fell asleep as he described the wind sounds that grass could make.

Amaya was half asleep herself, as she cleaned in the kitchen. Ruse closed Eledi's door softly and leaned against it. When she'd finished rinsing and sent the water back down the used sluice, she turned to him, smiling nervously.

"Get on the bed, Amaya." He spoke very quietly.

Her nipples stabbed into her tunic, and her ass clenched. She shook her head regretfully. "I have questions, Ruse. I'm ready to ask them. We need to talk."

His eyes flashed with delight and a small smile tipped his lips. "I'm so glad, Amaya. We'll talk after we finish. Get on the bed."

The utter demand in his voice brought a small trickle of dampness to the tops of her thighs. She swallowed, shook her head. "Let's go upstairs."

He moved toward her. If she hadn't understood it with her brain she would have said he floated, his limbs worked that smoothly. His hand drifted up her arm, over her shoulder, and settled on the nape of her neck. Heavily.

"I wasn't finished. You weren't finished. Now we finish. Then we talk. Your pleasure is my job now, remember. And I finish what I start. Make sure the job's done right."

She gasped as his grip tightened, turned her body, and propelled her. She thought briefly of being angry, but then decided he'd earned this after his magnificent performance last night. She could be gracious.

She started to raise her tunic when he locked the door, but he squeezed her nape.

"I said, get on the bed."

She huffed when he gave her a little shove toward it. Crawling up onto it, she realized that she was uncertain. She hadn't been uncertain around a bed in a long time. She was also excited. He pulled off her slippers, then sat on the bed and took off his boots. He peeled his leather pants open at the hips. She licked her lips to see him beet red, swollen. He growled. She could see the dusting of hair around his base. His fat tip was shiny with pre-cum.

“That looks uncomfortable.”

“Pull your skirt to your waist.”

She started to gather the fabric, lifting her hips. “I’d be happy to kiss it better, Ruse.” Her voice was breathy, playful. She’d affected that voice many times, but with him it came naturally.

“Pull one of your legs up to your chest. Fold it in tight.”

She did, feeling the pull around her thighs from last night. She clasped her arms around her knee, shivering when it pressed into her aching breast. He stood at the side of the bed, his erection huge, thick, straight. He stared at her sex. She saw his chest moving heavily. Her heart began to beat hard, thudding as if trapped under her knee.

He looked at her, and in the daylight of the open curtains, she saw the brown in his eyes, the rich color hidden in his dark hair. “Last night was the best night of my life. I never wanted it to end. Your body is the sweetest I’ve ever known, but more, I tasted your spirit, and it was rich. Perfect. Like the best kill, the clearest sip of water, the most exotic spice. I don’t want to taste you, Amaya. It makes my cat insane. I want to swallow you, devour you, reform you inside of me. I want your blood and your sex and your daughter and your spirit. Then I want to turn it all back on you and give my own into your keeping.”

He was panting now. She could feel her juices on the back of her up drawn cheek. She was panting, too. “Ruse.” She was going to come any minute. She felt her vagina ripple, desperately seeking something to grip. Her clit throbbed, aching for pressure.

His face flattened, tightened. His neck thickened, his nose sank as his cheekbones rose, his upper lip shimmered and split to reveal teeth forming into daggers. He flowed onto the bed, his shoulders rolling. She heard the fibers of the covers rip under his claws. She glanced down. The head of his cock was nearly as big as her fist. He crawled over her, so that he angled across her body. His legs were on the side of her drawn up knee, and his torso lay across hers, his arms on the far side of her. He dipped his hips and his cock butted her. He pushed, and she moaned.

If she hadn’t known better, she would have said he was trying to punch through skin that had no opening. He pushed, shifted his hips, nudged.

“Tilt your hips up!”

At least that’s what she thought he said. His words were garbled. He was still pushing, and she burned. But she wanted it. She tilted her hips and shoved with her one extended leg, and he managed to breach her. They were both gasping for breath. His hands were extended as he kneaded and ripped at the covers.

She turned her head to look at his face next to hers. His ears weren’t quite where they were supposed to be. They were higher on his head, rounder. What was happening to him? She didn’t care. It was Ruse.

He was still pushing, always pushing, little growls rumbling from his chest. She could feel them near her belly through his body. It felt like she was being split open, drilled into. His legs shifted, bunched, drove. He won another inch. He got his hands around the edge of the bed, heaved his body and drove in a few more inches. She moaned. He snarled, his jaw snapping in her direction.

She felt a crazy laugh rise in her throat. Did he think she was complaining? “Ruse. Quit fucking around and get in. I want your balls crushed between us. Do it!”

His head tossed back, his back bowed up, and his body burrowed into her swollen

vagina. She felt him meet her cap and he pressed farther, pushing the last secret inch her body would stretch. His balls were soft against her updrawn leg. She felt the slight fur there as texture. Her lips were burning, pulled wider than they'd ever been. His tip was still pressing deep, holding her body to the length of him when it wasn't quite meant for it. Not in this form.

When he turned his head to meet her eyes, she saw that his pupils weren't human anymore. They were vertical. Just as the realization thrilled over her, she saw them expand and contract, unfocused. A shiver skated over his skin. He'd come. She'd just watched her Beast come and he was in her and he was amazing. With a thin high whine of pleasure-pain, she arched into his hip, grinding her clit against the bone of him, feeling his cum leak down to her ass, and she came, staring right back. The black of his eyes pulled at her, lured her, and she didn't just let go. She jumped.

When she woke up he was dressed and washing her gently with a warm cloth. She tried to speak, had to clear her throat.

"I've never passed out from sex before."

"That wasn't sex." His voice was low, calm.

She swallowed, closed her eyes. Remembered what she'd felt when she jumped down into his abyss. When he'd surrounded her, caught her, loved her.

"Are we... Was that a mating?"

"If my Alpha had been in the room, it would be. But he wasn't. So as far as the Truxet are concerned, you're still fair game, unclaimed. My Cat is going to shred me." He finished petting her and pulled her skirt down. Then he bent and began to put on her shoes.

"I can do that."

"I want to."

"Will the Cat inside you really hurt you?"

"It's mental, but it's real. Like a headache, only more active. He doesn't really leave damage. It's just very distracting."

"What happened to you, Ruse? That wasn't mental."

He twisted to look at her, face serious. "Let's go upstairs."

"Eledi will be waking soon."

"It's been fifteen minutes, Amaya."

She blinked. That wasn't possible. Was it?

"I'll listen for her. Come on. I have to get you away from the bed."

He took a mug of tea up with them. The sky was so bright. They sat in the shade of the awning in their chair. She loved being held by him.

"Did I frighten you?"

"No."

He smiled. "That's my girl. Like daughter, like mother."

She smiled back, pleased, if uncertain what he was referring to.

"That was my third form, which we call a battleform."

"You could call it the 'advanced sex form'." Her joke fell flat when he looked at her sharply.

"I didn't see any tearing. Do you need healing?"

"No. I'm fine." Sore, but fine.

"I lost control. It's very dangerous for you. Worse, after I shifted, I still moved onto

the bed. Then I dared to look in your eyes. I could have bitten you, badly, if I wasn't already out of my head with the best orgasm of my life."

"So, that's not what sex is usually like for you?"

"Never before. And I better get it together enough so that the only time it ever happens again is when I claim you as my mate."

Amaya bit her lip. She was relaxed from the sex and his warmth. She didn't really want to have this conversation. But she was a mother. She needed to.

"Ruse. I want to go with you."

He froze beneath her. She felt his erection swell under one cheek. His hands tightened and she had a vision of him hauling her over his shoulder and leaving right then.

Alarmed, she put a hand on his cheek. "But! But I have to think of Eledi."

He was still stiff under her. "Maybe you should go to your own chair."

Her stomach tightened in sorrow, hurt. She nodded. Peeled her body away from his strength. Four days and she barely had enough strength to stand alone anymore.

She licked her lips. "How did you know I was your mate?"

He cocked his head. "Your scent. Your daughter. Your eyes. The call of your spirit. A vision."

Well. That explained nothing. Even if it was the same experience she had.

"What happens if some man sees Eledi, and smells her, and wants her as a mate?"

"It wouldn't happen until she matures."

"Physically, it's possible for the female reproductive system to mature by age ten."

He considered her with something like sorrow on his face. Again, her stomach impacted in pain.

"You think... you think we would do that?"

"Ruse. Don't judge me for my fears. You're not human. I know better than to believe the old rumors of enslavement. I know more than most because my sister blabbed a lot of your secrets, which I have kept, by the way. I respect your people, but I don't really know the way you live among yourselves. You have an animal as part of your spirit and your body. You see the world differently."

Her voice was shaking by the end of her little speech. But she felt like she defended herself.

"Amaya."

She met his black eyes again. It was all she could do not to leap for his arms.

"I love you."

She did leap. She launched herself with the abandon of Eledi, and he caught her close. He held her tight, she squeezed him tighter.

He breathed in deeply, dragging his nose over her head, down her face, burying it in her neck.

"Amaya. You know our laws that a woman be given a choice among mates. What you may not realize is that I am breaking the spirit of the law right now, by staying here with you. I should have immediately retreated, and another Trux would have come and asked you to consider adoption among us.

"If I had found you in Vladaya, I would have learned your name, your spiritmage, and made sure he knew I was a match. I would never have loved you physically, shouldn't even touch you. It would be worse there, surrounded by men I would consider

direct competition.

“It was the reason I moved so fast to get you away from your previous clients. When I understood you knew something about my people, I went looking to confirm you had Truxet patrons. And there was no way I could allow that to stand. This kind of territorial impulse is part of our beastspirit. Human women seem to either love it or hate it.

“My people know a male’s control becomes unstable around a potential mate. The women are housed in a separate lair at River Mountain until all their choices have been found. Then, and only then, can their choices be presented, and they have contact with their match.

“Let’s do a worse case scenario. Let’s pretend that Eledi is ten. And she begins her woman’s passing. One of our Sandcat younglings, a boy who has begun to Change but hasn’t passed his trials into full warrior status, begins to think she might be his. He might be unsure of what he is sensing and fail to come forward. There are two things that will keep him from hiding this. One, his lack of control. He won’t be able to hide automatic erections every time she’s near, nor keep from the beginnings of battleform, nor keep his mouth shut. Even if he had the soul of a slug and wanted to hurt her, which I would never, ever believe of my people, the Clan is always there. Even more than others, because we’re Pack, and we’re small.

“She won’t ever sleep alone, Amaya. If she wants to sleep in her own space, she can, but there are two sleeping rooms for our Clan: pairs and family. Two for us to choose between, but only one possible for her. We work together, eat together. No one would send one youngling boy off with a girl child. We wouldn’t do it, and if it will make you feel better, Sandcat can announce that’s your rule as a mother.

“Now there’s the second thing that will keep Eledi from being raped or mated against her will. Mac, the Sandcat, our Clan Alpha, knows what moves in the heart of each of us. He’ll know. He’ll sense it, and he’ll confront it, and protect her as fiercely as I would. When you meet Mac, I hope you’ll love him as much as I do. He is... the best man I know. And Kris, his Shield, the other alpha allowed in Grasshome, is also a man I would trust with my life, with Eledi’s.

“If it was a warrior who thought Eledi could be a mate match, he would leave the Clan, and live at River Mountain, until she’d passed her trials. He would wait until she had taken adult status, and a spiritmage had found her other choices. He’d live apart from the Pack, in great sorrow and loneliness, until she matured. He’d do it gladly, because our first and strongest instinct is always, always, protect. Protect our mate. Protect our Clan. Protect children.”

He cupped her chin and tilted her face. “Does that answer your question?”

She swallowed. “When I go to Vla—Vladaya. I won’t get to see you? I won’t be with the Sandcats?”

His eyes burst with green mist. “Amaya, you have to stop doing that.” His voice shook to match the tremor in his arms.

“Saying that I want to be with you?”

He abruptly stood, deposited her in his warmth, and paced away. He stood with his arms folded, his shoulders tight, for many moments.

Turning back to her he said lowly, “Yes. We would live apart until, *if*, you chose me.”

“Do I have to if there is no way under Earth or Sky I’ll ever choose another but

you?”

Claws erupted from his lengthening fingers. “Amaya!”

He fell to his knees. “Lady, my Lady, my beautiful mother, will you share your spirit and live with my people?”

Crying, her heart so full she struggled to breathe, she met him on the ground, her arms clasping his shoulders as they kissed. Hope, joy, strength, promise. She tasted them all on his lips. She gave them back.

Their kisses passed from pure love to heat into passion. His claws were pricking her scalp where he cradled her head with one hand and her ass where one of his huge hands palmed an entire cheek. His teeth, still human, dragged and nibbled between rough laps of his tongue on her neck.

“Ruse.”

“Mmmmm.”

She giggled at the rumble she felt against her breasts, stroked the cords of his neck with her nails. “So, would I? We? Do I have to go through that choice ceremony?”

He nipped hard enough to tear a gasp from her. “Yes.”

“All right. I can wait. But you visit us, all right? Please?”

He opened his whole mouth over the side of her throat, set his teeth and lashed her pulse wildly. She moaned.

“Yes.” She wasn’t sure if it was a statement about her neck or request.

“Ruse?” Her fingers traveled his ears, delighting in the soft lobes.

“Mmmmm.” He lapped along her collarbone. Rocked his erection into her tummy.

“If your Clan has only two tents? Where will we make love? In the wild?”

He chuckled. Dragged his teeth the length of her collarbone, sucked the base of her neck. “We can. We will. But the second tent is for mated couples and the paid women only. There’s several sleeping nests.”

“So... oh! Right there, Ruse!” She pushed his head hard against the perfect spot at the meeting of neck and shoulder. “So, everyone is fucking in the same tent?”

“The scent blows your mind.”

“But, won’t they see...”

He stopped her question by latching his lips down hard on that perfect spot and sucking. Hard. And swallowing.

She writhed in his arms, scrabbling at his shoulders, but he held her well. With every pull of his mouth, he pressed his erection to her. It burned her through their clothes, and with every pulse at her neck, she ached. She wanted it, gloried in it. He pushed his thigh between her legs and she viced her legs tight around it, began to grind.

“Yesss.” It was so easy, so perfect.

When she slackened, he soothed the angry sore spot with a few gentle passes of his lips. She blinked at him. He smiled with absolute blinding joy.

“Thank you, Amaya. I love you.”

“I love you, Ruse.”

He closed his eyes, rocking a bit.

“Ruse?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want me to finish you?”

He chuckled. “I just did.”

They looked down and there was a blackened damp spot near the waistband of his pants.

“Oh.”

He laughed outright. “You sound so disappointed.”

“Well, last night, you were really terrific, but I was pretty overwhelmed. I’d like to show you that I can rise to the occasion as much as you.” She winked at him.

He groaned at her bad pun. “We really shouldn’t...”

She slipped her finger between his lips, pushed into his mouth. “Shhhh. Caps. And you’ll be on bottom. All you have to do is keep it quiet.”

His nose flared sharply, his eyes narrowing as he drew on her finger, curled his tongue around it tight. She drew it away, painted his lips.

“This will be our last time, Amaya. It’s not right that I keep risking you.”

“Being together for two weeks without sex isn’t going to make me happy, Ruse.”

“No. As soon as you can close your affairs, you’ll go without me. The sooner you souldance, the sooner the ceremony can pass. I’ll ask my Dad to escort you. Until then, you can stay here, but I’ll be back at the shared Truxet house.”

Loss and unease shot through her. She’d just made the momentous decision of her life for him and now he was leaving her when she’d barely had any time at all with him.

“Shhhh. Amaya, you’ll see me every day here. And at least weekly in Vladaya. I’ll be with you, Mama Flower. You’ll have guides, and mentors, other women to talk to. There’ll be children, and I can arrange for Eledi to meet the little girl our Clan already has, Daynay. She’s seven. She’s been with us for six years, and you can ask her mother all your questions.”

“Ruse...”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to do this. I’m going to take Eledi out of the City and go with you, be your wife. Your mate, I mean.”

They were kneeling, holding hands tightly as they faced each other.

“Yes. Thanks to each of the Six, yes.”

“I’m so scared.”

“Yes. Lady mine, I know. I’m so proud of you. I promise you, I promise, you’ll see that it’s good. The jobs aren’t so different; they’re just not set by Guilds...”

Again she interrupted him by raising her hand to his lips. This time she just traced the lower one softly.

“I’m not scared about living there. I’m confident I can handle change. I’m scared about us. I feel so desperate, so yearning. Like it can all go wrong when something so right is finally before me.”

He stared steadily back at her as he pressed a kiss to her fingertips. “I know *exactly* what you mean.”

“How easy is it for a spiritmage to find enough matches? How fast can they do it?”

“It’s rare to do it the first month. It’s not unheard of for it to take over a year.”

They stared at each other, horrified. Grim.

“Tonight...” her voice trailed off. She didn’t have the will to finish. *Tonight could be all they had for more than a year.*

He was burning up. His skin stretched, shimmered. He stood, towering.

“I wish you hadn’t said that, Amaya. I have to go.”

He moved so fast he was gone by the time she gasped. She sat on her knees. Her fingers still held the warmth of his skin. She reached up and touched the throbbing ache on her neck. She felt the heat there, knew it bruised badly. She could heal it. But she wouldn't. She stood, went to Eledi's room, and watched her daughter sleep.

* * * *

He didn't go to her that night. He didn't dare. His cat screamed continuously until he wanted to beat his head in. Checking in with his Marten and Wolf colleagues, he decided he'd be able to wrap this duty up early and return to River Mountain before two weeks. He didn't tell them about Amaya and Eledi because he didn't want to take crap over continuing to see them. Just before lunch the next day, he went back to the house.

Amaya was distant. He was worried but not surprised. What surprised him even more was how distant Eledi was. He didn't know if she was picking up on her mother's mood, or if she was mad at him, too. After an awkward greeting, and an even more awkward cup of tea, they went up to the roof.

He sat in a chair watching Eledi draw on her slate.

Amaya had been silent since they came up, but finally spoke to him. "Will you watch her? I'd like to begin making arrangements. It would be easier without her."

"I'd be happy to. I have to go out for a few hours before dinner. Can you be home by mid-afternoon?"

"I can be back by then." He didn't miss her correction of the word home.

"Amaya, you know why I didn't come to you last night."

"Eledi was crushed. You said you'd be here for her bath."

He'd remembered. "I remembered, I just thought it wiser to stay away."

"That is so stupid."

"Pardon?"

"As if you can't control your dick around Eledi. Around me when we aren't in the bedroom. This crap about being in charge of my pleasure now. Well, you aren't. I'm responsible for my happiness, sexual and otherwise."

"You moved my trunk out of my night house. You directed the mistress to close my accounts with my customers. And then you abandon me within forty-eight hours."

His cat snarled and lunged. His breath was coming much too fast.

"We talked about this, Amaya. Until my Cat knows our claim is solid, he's unpredictable, constantly enraged. I'm not even supposed to be here."

"You just blithely agreed to watch her. How is that different from ignoring us last night? If you couldn't trust yourself around her last night, why should I trust you with her today?"

He ground his jaw. "I've had time to cool off..."

"Please. This is so typical of men. They get their way then they walk all over you. It's all well and good when you're in control of the sex, but when I want control, you suddenly disappear. But not without making sure you've burned all my bridges to other men. The first time you made an appointment with Eledi, you broke it."

"Mommy, look at that birdy!"

"Are you saying you would have gone to another man last night?"

"I'm saying I have the right to go where I want. I'm saying you were all about making yourself my only "path" but then I learn I'm going to be isolated for months. I

don't even know how to get ahold of you!"

"Mommy, I never seen that big birdy before! Look!"

"You're clearly having second thoughts. Amaya, I'm sorry I didn't have the control to come last night, but that is by no means an indication of my feelings for you."

"You didn't even send word." Amaya crossed her arms.

"Mommy, look!"

"Yes, Eledi!"

Amaya and Ruse stared at each other, both breathing heavily.

Her bitterness cut him, because it was based in pain and fear. "You claim my body all night long. I agree to go with you, to leave everything I've ever known, irrevocably changing my daughter's future, trusting that she won't be harmed in your world. And the very next thing I experience, is you so terrified of your ability to control yourself you can't join us for the evening. I didn't even know who you were a few days ago, Ruse. Maybe my decision was too hasty."

"Mommy!"

"Eledi..." Amaya turned toward her daughter, just a few bodylengths away, and was paralyzed in fear.

Ruse was sprinting even as she gasped. The world slowed down. Between one wingbeat and the next, the creature went from the far row of houses across the street to hovering at the edge of their rooftop banister. Ruse's deep brown hair, his powerful body leaning hard, was halfway across the roof. Talons of a creature opening, reaching. Eledi, standing, staring, her mouth gaping open. Screaming, as the talons closed around her, spearing her thigh. Blood spattering the roof, Ruse leaping with a roar, the force of the creature's wings tipping the tented awning, blowing her hair as her brain and mouth echoed Eledi's scream. Pain, pain, her leg buckling, her knees jarring as she fell to the roof.

"AMAYA! Catch her!"

What?! Ruse was changing, monstrous flattened face, elongated limbs, claws sending bits of skin flapping in a wash of blood. The creature keened, beat its wings, and was over the courtyard beyond them. Blood dripped off Eledi's legs, hands, hair, as she reached for Amaya, screaming. The creature had a neck too long for its huge head. It turned and struck at Ruse where he clung to the leg above Eledi. He leaped, dodging the blow, clambering higher, shredding the back of its neck until bone showed. He seemed to be sitting in a nest of deadly spines as long as his arm. He no longer looked human.

She heard her heartbeat, *thump-thump*, and the soughing of her lungs filling with air, and then she stood. She closed out her daughter's agony, ignored her man's peril, and summoned the wind. She was of the Guild who had cared for Royals for centuries. She was powerful, and she was furious.

Ruse had almost gotten Eledi free before that first strike of the creature's beak drove him away. The leg holding her was broken, dangling by sinew. The talons had come open, but Eledi was holding tightly to one, while speared through with another. So Amaya took the whole thing. With a tornado, she summoned her daughter to herself, foot and all. As soon as Eledi was over the roof, she clasped the bloody foot in her arms, laying her daughter down in its cage. Pushing all her weight on her daughter's thigh, she knelt at the blood point, stripped off her shirt, and tied a tourniquet.

"Ruse, Ruse, Ruse," Eledi was sobbing.

Sparing a glance as the pulse of blood slowed around the talon, Amaya saw nothing in the sky. No monster bird, no Ruse, nothing on any of the nearby rooftops. She took off her skirt, laid it out and moved Eledi and the claw onto it. Wrapping her like a babe, she tied the cloth tight. Eledi screamed, pushing at the jagged, bony stump of the upper foot. Amaya grabbed Eledi's bloody face in her bloody hands.

"Eledi! I have you! I will never let you go!" From one blink to the next her daughter's eyes focused, believed. That's when she took her mind. Amaya ruthlessly grabbed it and wrenched it into unconsciousness. How she did it, she knew not, nor cared.

Then she hustled the bleeding bundle of her daughter into her arms. She rushed down the roof stairs to the balcony, hesitated, looking down the distance. She decided she didn't have the control to lift them both to the ground with her wind. She barreled down the stairs, cursing them with every step. She wasn't going to leave her daughter. She couldn't.

When she made it to the street, people were screaming, running everywhere. She paused, struggling to remember where the closest bodymage shelter was. She'd known where the closest one was near Nawi's... She turned and strode down the street, staggering with Eledi's weight, adjusting her grip, sobbing for breath.

"I have you, baby. I have you." She kept up the mantra. Sometimes people saw her and stopped, staring shocked, shouting things, encouragement or questions she knew not and disregarded them anyway.

Once a man tried to come up and take Eledi from her but she snarled at him.

"I'll run ahead and tell them you're coming!" He sprinted off and she was momentarily thankful before directing all her energy to running as fast as she could, a woman in her underwear, covered in blood.

When she rounded the last corner, he was there with two bodymages and a cot. She lay Eledi down and the bodymages converged with knives, cutting away the skirt, Eledi's pants, and finally the foot. Amaya followed them, helping them to lift her so they could pull the foot away, leaving only the tip of one monstrous toe stuck through Eledi's leg.

More bodymages arrived, and the man pulled Amaya, fighting, back from Eledi's side.

"We'll stay right here, but you have to give them room!"

She beat off his hands, before she realized he was trying to give her his shirt. His leather shirt, embossed with long slender furry things that looked a bit like chucks. She didn't like the nasty rodents that swarmed in the night in the bad parts of town. She took the jerkin and pulled it on.

"There was a man on the thing that did this..."

"Ruse sent me. He's alive. He's being taken to Vladaya, and he wants you to come as soon as Eledi is stable, because our bodymages are better. Our bodymages will be here any moment."

"He's hurt?"

The man hesitated, and then two Beasts rushed into the room. They went right to Eledi, working seamlessly with the five human healers already there. Two of the human healers pulled back, then turned to her.

"And you, Lady? Are you hurt?"

"I—No. I don't think so." Strangely, her teeth chattered.

Two more Beasts, Truxet, came in. One was carrying a leather contraption, with sticks coming out of it.

“How soon to sift?” The smallest man asked grimly.

One of the men bent over Eledi said, “An hour at least. Stand down.”

The first man, darkly tanned and lean, turned to her, touched her shoulder gently. “There’s a chair here, Lady. Sit, and watch.”

She sat. He came with a bowl of water, began to bathe her hands, her lower legs, of blood. Eledi’s blood. She ignored him, focusing on every rise and fall of her daughter’s chest. She watched as they eased the claw out, as the huge hands of the Beasts clasped the gaping hole in her leg. She watched when the sopping, strangled blouse was cut from her daughter’s leg, as the blood seeped out of the wound again, slower now. She watched when the wound was bound tightly, as they discussed setting the broken femur. Her teeth wouldn’t stop chattering. Someone brought her a skirt and she put it on.

A man wearing wolves came forward and knelt near her. “Lady, I’m Biren. I’ve been trained to carry wounded. They’re almost ready to move her, and I’m going to take her directly to our best Council bodymages. I can run very fast, but smooth. Because I can travel so much faster than you, I’d like to go on ahead. Gloneld will pace with me, just in case.”

“I can take you right behind them,” the still shirtless chuck-man said.

“You—you are taking us to the Truxet?”

“River Mountain, our Council’s gathering place.”

“But—I haven’t...” *packed, said goodbye, prepared.* What did any of it matter? Eledi lay bloody. “Let’s go.”

Biren nodded. He took up his contraption and within a few contortions and shrugs, Eledi was hanging off his body in a leather sling, tied securely, her leg splinted straight. The other man followed him out. She hurried after them through the streets, but already fell behind as they wove like water through the crowd that had gathered at the door.

The other man put his arm around her shoulders as he shouldered them through. He trotted ahead, while she ran behind. They hadn’t even gotten to the wall before she had to stop and rest, a stitch in her side.

“Shall I carry you?”

“No.” Amaya was mortified at her weakness.

“What’s your name, Lady?”

“Amaya. And you?”

“Grent.”

“Do you know Ruse?”

“I’ve been working with him for weeks. He’s a good man.”

They set out again, this time at a quick walk.

They came to a gate in the wall. Amaya had never been anywhere near one of the four gates before, but could have cared less as Grent spent a few moments in the guardhouse while she caught her breath. Then he led her through the massively thick wall and out onto a wide road. To her shock, there were people outside. There were houses that looked quite sturdy, piled one on top of the other as if the planner had several afterthoughts. There were a few people begging on the other side of a stout fence, ragged and filthy. Beyond them, there were hard-eyed men standing in the shadows of one overhang.

“What is this place?!” Amaya was astounded. She remembered stories. “Are these Wild men?”

“Almost. These are wildlings. They don’t have much but they have a sort of society.”

“But how did they get here?”

“Exiles. Criminals. But most were born outside of the walls and your people just won’t let them in.”

“Aren’t they dangerous?”

“Not terribly. We stay on the road a bit here, then we’ll get to the sifting stone.” He touched her shoulder. “Best not to stare, though.”

Amaya felt her world twist. There were people outside the walls! Living! In houses!

He picked up the speed again and by the time she needed to rest, there was nothing but a dirt track with trees and thick bushes all around. Amaya wasn’t proud that her breathing was harder to get back due to her fear. When she had something resembling normal breathing, Grent twisted her world again by heading into the bushes.

“Grent!”

“Come behind me, Amaya.”

“No! Where are you going?”

He popped back out through the bushes. He’d just walked right into them! “We’re going to Vladaya, the territory of the Truxet.”

“In—in *there*? But the road is here!”

“We would be days and days to get to River Mountain by road at a full run. Our sifting stones take us. Come, Lady, I will guard you, but really this part of the wood is perfectly safe.”

He pushed back some of the branches with one hand and held the other out to her. She stared at him, horrified.

“Eledi came this way?”

“She did, although the men were in a hurry so they entered the woods much sooner to go in a straight line.”

Amaya considered the muscular young man. A bit younger than her, with gray eyes and light brown hair.

“I’m a Marten, Amaya. I’m a warrior with honor, and within the hour you’ll be with your little one again.”

She reached out and seized his hand. She clung to it when he tried to take it back. Past the thick tumble of bushes, the woods were more open. The ground was spongy in places, there were roots and sticks everywhere. Once she saw a cobweb as substantial as her hand. There were no sounds around them but the crackle of her own passing and wind above her. Once she heard a bird and jumped.

When they got to the stone, a humble, shoulder-high plain gray rock, he lay his hand on it and said, “Steady.”

His hand gripped hers tighter. Her world twisted, this time literally, heaving beneath her feet and swirling around the edges of her eyes. She blinked, and they were in a cave lit with golden magelights, in front of a smaller stone. There was a man against one wall, shirtless, skirted.

“The Sandcat Ruse?” Grent asked.

“Alive.”

“The girl child?”

“Alive.”

Grent nodded and led Amaya through the open archway draped in a leather flap and into a hallway, also carved of rock.

“The bodymage rooms are very close. We put them next to the main landing point for just this reason.”

Amaya couldn’t have answered him if she had to. There were men everywhere. Some had no shirts, some did. They were relaxed, laughing. Once she saw a woman walking by herself. Another glimpse down a different hallway caught a man walking with a boy sitting up on his shoulders.

When they turned into an open archway carved with bones and gruesome, skinned bodies, they came face to face with a man who seemed to be waiting for them. Amaya bit her lip to keep from screaming. She’d seen this kind of Trux a few times before in the City. He was a Lizeed. His bald, scaled head and black eyes were terrifying.

“This way.”

He led them through a maze of much narrower halls until they came to a room where men were all bent over Eledi.

“*Oh, baby.*” Amaya’s heart leapt in her chest. Eledi was laid out on a high table. They’d taken her clothes off, revealing massive bruising around her ribs, and a gash across her upper arm. They handled her gently but firmly. She didn’t appear to have awoken. Nothing could have kept Amaya from going to her. She gripped her daughter’s good hand tightly, terrified.

“Are you the mother?” One of the men asked without turning to her.

“Yes.”

“She’ll be fine, Lady. We have her, and she’s stable. All we’re doing now is putting the details back right. Her leg will take awhile and her blood loss will keep her low for a few days. Why don’t you let us work please, and come back in a few hours. You can wake her up then and talk to her.”

Amaya felt her knees tremble. “I’m staying.”

“That’s not what she needs most right now.” One of the men looked back at Grent and he came up and lay his hands on her shoulders.

She sifted through her daughter’s congealed hair, touching her temples gently. She picked up a nearby damp cloth and wiped her little face. Tears blurred her eyes, but she blinked furiously.

“Come away, Amaya. We won’t go far at all.”

After a moment, she managed to turn and go back to the hallway with him.

“What can we do for you first? Food? Something to drink? A bath?”

“Ruse.”

She caught his hesitation. “All right.”

He led her through the maze of thinner hallways to a large room with low tables and cushions. “Sit anywhere. Let me find out where he is.”

He left her, but she didn’t sit. She just stood and stared around the cave.

Grent trotted in moments later. His face was grim. “Lady, it’s not a good time to see Ruse.”

And just like that, Amaya fell over, sitting with a plop on one of the knee-high tables.

“What is it?”

"They're still working on him."

"They were working on Eledi, too."

Grent looked at the ground. "He sent me to find you just before he lost consciousness. He said, 'My mate. It had our daughter. Find her, bring her.' His last thoughts were of you."

Amaya blinked at him. Breathed. Breathed. "He's alive!"

"He is... But it isn't sure he's going to make it."

Her thighs twitched at the instant thought to go to him. "What happened?"

"The... thing... got in a strike, and he went down with it. He wasn't able to control the landing for himself. His arm... is gone."

"What?" Amaya blinked at him. Breathed.

He stayed silent.

"What?" Her voice was too high. "What do you mean?"

"He lost his arm, my Lady. He broke both his legs, his pelvis, and most of his ribs. He lost a lot of blood."

"What?" Amaya whispered, but she knew. She knew she was being a coward. *Ruse. Damaged.*

Just like on the roof, Amaya's feelings clicked off. She stood up, solid.

"Take me to him."

"It's no place for you, Lady."

She pushed past him and moved down the hallway. Hearing the sounds of frantic voices, the flurry of people huddled around one of the doors, she hurried forward. Grent grabbed her arm and swung her around. She grabbed his ear in a vicious pinch like he was four.

"I will see him. I won't stay long, but I *will* see him!"

"It does him no good to be seen like that, Lady." Grent wasn't backing down.

So she kned him as hard as she could in the balls. He fell over sideways against the wall and forward onto his hands, gasping. Whirling, Amaya pushed through the men, ignoring calls of dismay for her to stop.

She kept her eyes on his face. His face that was as bloody as Eledi's. His eyes were glassy, his breath too fast and shallow. A man stood at his crown, gripping Ruse's head with both hands. Bending, she kissed the blade of his cheekbone.

"Ruse. It's Amaya."

Hands pulled at her but she squirmed and kicked without looking away from him. They withdrew long enough for him to focus on her, but he didn't seem aware.

"Ruse, Eledi is safe. She's well. She's fine. You saved her."

A smile bloomed on his face slowly, the most perfect, pure smile she'd ever seen on a man. He blinked once at her, panting softly.

"You will live. You will live, so that you can live with me, with us."

She felt a desperate need to give him something to hold onto. To focus on. She had no idea if he knew his arm was gone.

"I'm here, Ruse. I'm right here. I'm waiting for you, so you hold. Hold to your cat spirit. Don't leave us. I just found you. Do you understand?"

The room had gone silent but for urgent murmurs among the men at his opposite shoulder.

Everyone heard his single whispered word.

“Love.”

He coughed, screamed with a kind of hopelessness. It was a soft scream, and she swore she could hear the grinding of things inside him as he did it. His eyes rolled up, but settled back center, focused on the ceiling. He panted slower.

She moved back, her hands pressing tightly against her lips to hold her screams in, and hands gently passed her out of the room. Which was good, since she didn’t, couldn’t, see the door. She stood in the hallway, staring at the rock wall, for long moments.

“Amaya, come away.” Grent was standing, stiffly, near her arm.

She looked at him. “His Alpha.”

“Has been called.”

“His parents.”

“I’m sure Sandcat will bring them.”

“Who else would he have ties to, that would hold him here?”

“His Alpha will be best for that.”

“Kaz. His friend Kaz. And a bear, that he shared a souldance with.”

Grent nodded. “All right, I’ll request a runner for both.”

She turned and went to Eledi’s room. The men seemed knowledgeable, intent. Her daughter was still unconscious. She leaned against the wall, fingers gouging her arms to keep from going to the bed. Eventually, some of the men left, and a woman came.

“I’m Reglifnor, a bodymage. I’ll stay with you, Amaya. Come, we can go up to her now.”

Amaya lunged for Eledi. She sent her hands all over every bit she could reach. Tears blinded her. There was no longer a cut on her arm. The bruising around her ribs had faded. Reglifnor set down a basin and they both began to clean the blood away as three men continued to work around Eledi’s thigh.

“What is her name?”

“Eledi.”

One of the men looked over at that, assessing her. When they had cleaned her, when Reglifnor had given her a chair to sit in, when she’d drank a cup of water handed to her, another man came in and relieved one of those present. She watched him lay huge hands on her daughter’s ribs. Feeling ridiculous, she closed her eyes and sent her own small bodycraft into Eledi through the hand she held. The man’s hands left her tiny ribcage, leaving only red imprints of his touch behind.

Eledi opened her eyes, and screamed. The terror in her voice stopped Amaya’s heart and she swooped, folding herself around Eledi.

Eledi strangled her with her strength, tiny arms tight around her neck. They stayed like that for a precious eternity. Her daughter, in her arms. Her daughter, alive, whole. She held the tiny being tight, crying. Waves of gratitude beat at her.

When her daughter slept again, after endless minutes of body wrenching sobs, Amaya could not let her go. The men that had been there were gone. Her hands stroked over her little body, free of blemish. The woman came up with a simple dress, and helped her put it on Eledi’s slack frame. As soon as she was dressed, Amaya gathered her up again. She was getting big. It was an effort to lift her now, and her arms were shivering from the strain. But she adjusted her grip so Eledi’s head was on her shoulder, and held on.

She’d been fighting with him. She’d doubted him. She’d lain awake in the strange

bed that smelled of them and been hurt, furious that she'd had to make excuses for him to Eledi. She'd fought with him, and he offered his life, unhesitatingly, to save Eledi. Eledi, her baby.

Finally, she had to lay her down on the bed in the corner. She curled her body around Eledi, her fingers stroking her sticky, congealed hair. She closed her eyes. *Eledi. Ruse.*

When she woke up, people were whispering behind her. She was aware she'd slept, but woke with the full knowledge of all that had passed. Lifting her head, Amaya looked over her shoulder. An older woman had joined the bodymage. When she saw Amaya watching, she stopped, and returned the stare.

Amaya knew she was looking at Ruse's mother. There was nothing in the face to tell her this, although their mouths, perhaps, were similar. She just knew. She looked at Eledi, still sleeping, and rose. She gestured to go out into the hall, and the two women nodded.

"Ruse?" Amaya's voice was gritty from crying.

The mother looked down, her face pinched.

Reglifnor said, "Lives."

"What can I do?"

The women looked at each other, their eyes speaking of caution.

"What?"

"I am Saxi. My Alpha will want to speak to you, Lady."

"Amaya, please. You are Ruse's mother."

"Yes." The woman's voice broke. She swallowed, said more firmly, "Yes."

"I'll speak with him, but I won't leave Eledi. Is he with Ruse?"

Saxi nodded, her short brown hair swinging gracefully along her shoulders. "I'll tell him you're awake."

When Saxi had turned the bend in the corridor, Amaya asked Reglifnor, "What is it?"

"He's dying."

"I know. How long did I sleep?"

"Not long. An hour. Many men have come and gone. They talk of..."

Reglifnor looked both ways down the corridor, gestured back past the flap of cloth. They ducked in and she whispered, "They have such good hearing. The talk I've heard has been of his beastspirit. Something's wrong."

"What?"

Reglifnor shook her head, her eyes concerned. "I don't understand what I heard."

"It's rejecting him."

The rumbling voice made both women jump. A man stood holding the flap up, his eyes assessing her. His eyes were a soft brown that seemed to capture light. His hair was also light brown, cut so short that it looked like soft fuzz. He was tan, perhaps a bit lighter than Ruse, with a lined face showing several scars. The scars trickled down his bare shoulders and arms. When she saw that his claws were out, her eyes jumped back to his, but he was looking at Eledi, his face soft and... caring. He looked at her as if he were relieved to see her whole.

"Lady, will you leave us?"

Reglifnor nodded in a strange way, pulling her shoulders back as she stretched her head down in a smooth motion. She squeezed Amaya's hand once and left.

"Amaya."

“Yes.”

“And this is Eledi.”

“Yes.”

“She enjoys a gift herself this day, a gift of life.”

Amaya trembled deep inside and fought to maintain her dignity. Now she was feeling his power. It was like standing next to a temple priest. She wondered if he was a spiritmage. A thrumming came from him, like a second heartbeat.

She cleared her throat. “Ruse saved her.”

“You both together did, from what I hear.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“In a manner. Please sit.”

He was huge. A head bigger than Ruse at least, and bulkier. He flowed to the chairs pushed back against one rough stone wall and sat. She hurried to sit too, but left a chair between them.

“I am Sandcat. Do you know what that means?”

“You are the Clan leader.”

“That. But much more. I hold every Sandcat beastspirit in mine. Mine is the Alpha for the Clan. I’ve tasted every man’s magescape, have a door into each. They honor me, and I keep them.”

He rubbed a hand over his shorn, fuzzy head. “Lady, Ruse dies. I am the only thing keeping his Sandcat from abandoning him.”

Sweat drenched her neck under her hair, ran in a line between her breasts. Her heart, already hammering since his entrance, began to thud painfully. “What can I do?”

He sighed. His eyes closed with sadness, and opened again on rage. “That is not the right question. The question is, will you? Will you do what it takes to save him?”

Amaya’s lips parted, dry skin pulling along the seam. She swallowed, held his challenging eyes. Ruse’s deep brown had looked at her much the same way the first time she’d seen him, standing on Nawi’s balcony a lifetime ago. Kind eyes, steady, deep. Her gentle, passionate man.

“My daughter first. After that, anything. If I did not have Eledi, I would offer my body and spirit, but I cannot go that far, for her sake.”

“Yet that is what it will take to reclaim this cat.”

Amaya felt like screaming at him and his riddles.

“If you need my death for his, I will not help. I will not leave Eledi.” She knew that death magic was the greatest of all. And the greatest perversion.

“Not your death, Amaya. We have no darkmages here. But all the life you have in you.”

She ground her teeth. “Does he have time for this?”

“Will you fuck, and dance, with strangers in this strange place? Will you braid your soul to Sandcat, while you open up your body?”

“I would fuck a dozen strangers if it would save Ruse. That is as nothing to me. What do you mean ‘dance?’ Souldance?”

“Yes, and more.”

“Speak plainly!” She hissed at him, still aware of Eledi sleeping in the corner.

“I said it already. I need to braid you with us.”

“Braid.” A braid takes three, at least.

“Yes.”

“Yes.” She didn’t hesitate.

“You do not understand.”

“I understand it won’t kill me.”

“It will change you. It will make any true choice of mates for you in the future impossible.”

“They were already unlikely.”

“Ruse is damaged, and will remain damaged all his life.”

Horror skated down her spine. Her memory supplied a vision of the Guildless deformed-born, the demented-born, drooling at their fence in the City corner. “Your people will exile him?”

Sandcat reared back. “No!” It burst from him and she gestured angrily for him to lower his voice. He did. “Elements, no.”

“He’ll have adjustments. He’ll have needs and anger, and-and-I don’t know.” It dizzied her to think of his reaction to living without an arm. He was a warrior, so physical, vibrant. What would this do to him? “But he’ll have his family? He’ll have the pack?”

“Of course he will.” Sandcat seemed highly insulted.

“Well, then. Let’s braid.”

He squinted at her, his eyebrows lowering, brown eyes darkening. He considered her harshly, and she squinted right back. His lips twitched.

“That is... generous of you. I must say, I still don’t think you know what you’re offering. Have you ever endured a souldance?”

“No.” *Endured?*

He opened his mouth, suddenly concerned, but she held up a hand, as imperious as her father.

“It doesn’t matter. I have excellent concentration and I’ll learn fast. Ruse even wanted the experience for me. Particularly with his friend the Bear.”

“Grundy?”

“Yes, him.”

The man sat back in his chair, thoughtfully staring at the floor. His white claws tapped in a ripple across his massive thighs. She looked at Eledi, resisted the urge to go to her. She needed a bath when she woke. Amaya prayed to the Sacred Couple and the Six Elements combined that the next time Eledi woke the terror would fade.

The big man sighed deeply. “I see what a magnificent mate you’ll be for him, Amaya. I will be proud to adopt you into Sandcat. Braiding is a rare ritual. Usually, the beastspirit drains away if the human body is too damaged. If the human body cannot support the beastform, the beastspirit chooses not to linger. The strain of the spiritual damage kills the Trux. I believe you are the only thing inspiring Ruse to help fight his Sandcat’s fading. But there is no matebond, and he is physically unable to complete the ritual. This will lend him our strength, and heal beyond any magecraft. There is much for me to learn. I’ve never done a braid before. I’ll need a few hours.”

“I’ll be here.” She had a sudden concern. “Eledi... My sister Basa is adopted in the Wolves. Can she watch Eledi for me? How long will we be?”

“I will try to get her. I have no notion of how long the ritual takes.”

“My daughter is traumatized. I can’t be away from her for long. She woke beyond

terrified before.”

“I am sorry for that, Lady. There’s no need for such suffering. If you will allow her a spiritmage, I know they can help her.”

“What do you mean?”

“They can help her look at the experience from a distance. They can dull the memories, the fear.”

Amaya was swamped with misgiving. Memories of haughty temple priests with judgmental eyes burying her son rose up.

“Are you a spiritmage?”

He laughed loudly and abruptly choked it back at her angry gesture.

“Not I. I don’t have such a thoughtful, understanding personality. I’m more of a ‘burn it down’ kind of warrior.” He looked at her, his mirth fading, and she saw compassion.

“We Truxet depend on our spiritmages. We’ve all tasted them, and know the honor they bring. Imagine looking at all of a person, all our pettiness and selfishness, and leaving only peace behind. They let us see ourselves clearly, so that we can learn. If it would make you feel better, I can ask Eledi be assigned a female spiritmage.”

Eledi stirred on the bed, whimpering. Amaya stood.

“I’ll leave you.” He went to the door as she sat by Eledi, gently holding her hand when she wanted to clutch her close. Her eyes flooded with tears, but she blinked hard, not wanting Eledi to wake and see her crying. *Master the wind, bring it down.* She no longer let herself flutter through life. She chose her own direction. Eledi started to cry in her sleep. Heartbreaking hiccups of deep sorrow.

Amaya looked up at the door, where the Sandcat stood quietly. “What is your name?”

“Mac.”

“Please get my sister, and a female spiritmage. Move quickly, Sandcat. I have no intention of losing him.”

“Neither do I, Lady.” He gave that formal, slow head bow, and left.

Eledi woke, sobbing. No matter how she soothed her or what she said, Eledi cried harder until she’d worked herself into hysteria, clawing at Amaya’s shoulders and back to get closer, her little arms shaking with fatigue.

When a slim, quiet woman came in and knelt by them, Amaya had given in to the desperation of Eledi and was crying with her.

The woman forcefully took Eledi’s face, prying it from Amaya’s neck, and captured her dazed eyes. A shudder shook Eledi’s tiny frame, then blessed silence, but for her panting.

“She’s only four. You must be gentle, please.” Amaya whispered hoarsely.

“I have her now. Lay her down.” The woman’s voice was matter-of-fact.

When Amaya did so, the woman kept hold of Eledi’s chin, their eyes solidly connected. The woman began to breathe deeply, and by the third inhalation, Eledi’s breathing had matched. Her free hand came up to Eledi’s forehead and drifted down over her face. As her scarred hand passed over Eledi’s eyes, Amaya let out a shaky breath to see her daughter’s tear-spiked lashes close, and her face relax. The woman turned brown eyes on her, her face sprinkled with odd scars.

“The little one and I are going to dance. If you stay, you should not touch her.”

“What is your name?”

“KarRa.”

“I am trusting you with my daughter’s very soul, KarRa.”

“You are. And I won’t fail either of you.”

The woman’s manner was one of action and confidence. Amaya swallowed, nodding to her. She breathed in time with both of them, taking several breaths to summon the strength to let go. Essentially, she’d just given her daughter’s mind and spirit over to a stranger. What would this do to her watchful daughter? What would this change in her? She wished Ruse were here to reassure her, to explain.

She eased back off the bed as KarRa eased on, laying on her side next to Eledi. The woman’s long braid fell over the side to the floor.

Reglifnor was at the door again. She gestured silently for Amaya to come. Amaya frowned, looking at the seemingly peaceful pair. She went to the door, glancing over her shoulder once before dropping the heavy curtain.

“Your sister’s not in Vladaya. She’s with her husband in a City, so she won’t be coming as quickly as we’d like.”

“Thank you.” Amaya turned to go back into the room but Reglifnor touched her arm.

“There’s been a request that you speak with some Council warriors. They’ve pieced together much of what happened with what others saw both at the attack and earlier, across the City. Ruse’s partner Grent, the man that brought you here, shared what they learned, although he thinks Ruse might know some other details.”

“I’ve known Ruse for a very short time. He didn’t share anything about his investigation.” Except to say it wasn’t dangerous. Once again she turned to go into the room but Reglifnor’s voice came more quickly, more worriedly.

“They are very concerned that this bird-thing attacked Ruse, who was leading the investigation into its existence. They’ve been so elusive we’ve never even seen one. This one came into the Royal City itself, and went right for him. He must have known something important.”

Amaya stopped, staring blankly at the smooth, spotless stone floor. She was fiercely glad Ruse had killed it.

The bodymage twined her hands. “Eledi is safe in the souldance. I’ll stay right here and monitor the room. No one will get in, and I’ll come to you immediately if your sister comes or they end the dance. Please, go talk to them about what you saw, about anything Ruse told you. It shouldn’t take long.”

Amaya ground her teeth. Everyone was conspiring to separate her from her Didi. She closed her eyes and thought about Ruse fighting for her daughter, now fighting for his life.

“Please. Come get me at once.”

“I will!”

“Where are they?”

“Just down at the lounge here in the bodymage lair.”

“The big room with low tables?”

“Yes.”

“I can find it.”

Amaya went through the halls, cautiously passing one man and a pair of others talking. They nodded to her and kept talking.

She walked through the archway of the lounge and felt a pulse of power. If being in the room with Mac had felt intimidating, these men were terrifying. She'd never felt such power combined. They all stood, quieting, facing her. Some were bare-chested, wearing a sort of skirt. Some were older, but most were middle-aged. There wasn't an ounce of fat on any of them, each scarred and muscled.

A man wearing tall black boots and a black skirt with nothing else, bowed his head to her. He gestured for her to sit at a green pillow.

"Amaya. Thank you for coming. I have every faith that KarRa will help Eledi."

She sat, using her smoothskin skills to gracefully fold herself into a controlled kneel. Another man poured her some hot tea, and another slid a plate of fruit, cheese, and bread to her. She smelled the cheese and her mouth flooded with saliva.

"Please, eat." The men sat all around her, one reaching for his own stoneware cup. "I'm Dom, the head of the Truxet Council. We've been investigating this creature for over a year. This is Hawk, named Delavega. He's lost several good men and is invested in this search. Next to him is Grif, the Owl. Here are two leaders of our best tracking teams. Rory is a Marten and Tydus is a Wolf.

"We've debriefed Grent and talked with a few other witnesses. We are very uneasy with the coincidence of this attack. We'd like you to describe the attack."

Amaya swallowed, staring blindly at her mug. *One beat of its wings and the great body was past the whole house.* "I'll try."

At her silence he prompted, "What time of day?"

"Late morning."

"Take us through it."

"There isn't much to tell. Eledi saw it coming, but Ruse and I were arguing. I looked up and it was there. It was the size of... I've never seen a living thing so big. It was maybe three bodylengths long, with a long neck. It had a long, pointed beak. With teeth."

She stopped, swallowing. She'd seen it strike at him. He'd dodged so gracefully. But sometime after she'd gotten Eledi, he hadn't.

"We saw the creature, Amaya. You needn't describe it. Do you remember seeing its eyes? Did it seem to be intelligent?" Dom asked.

She thoughtfully ate a roll. "I really don't know. I didn't look at its eyes. It flew right at us, paused to pick up Eledi, then Ruse was on it. He immediately caused it to bleed, so the creature attacking him seemed natural to me. I couldn't say if it wanted him in particular. It didn't seem to care about me."

"It picked her up? That's why it was missing a foot," the Wolf said.

Amaya was amazed that she could calmly eat a roll while discussing this. "Ruse attacked it there first. He didn't try to get Eledi out of the claws, he tried to separate the foot from the body so she'd fall away."

"He knew your level of skill could save her?" Dom asked.

"He did." *Put her down. Eledi, come to me.* Her first words to him.

"So the creature flew right to a brand new house of yours, bypassing dozens of opportunities for other prey. It didn't try to eat Eledi, just carry her away." Hawk seemed thoughtful.

Grif asked, "What about mage skill? Did you get any sense of power from the thing?"

Amaya took a swallow of the tea. "I'm sorry. I was totally focused on Eledi. I didn't

sense power, but it all happened so fast. From the time I saw it to when I held her again was perhaps... three minutes. Possibly less.”

Dom sighed. “Did Ruse talk to you about anything he’d learned?”

“No. He told me he was tracking the rise of a new creature. That’s all.”

“Did he seem at all worried or excited about it?”

“No. He actually seemed impatient with it. Like it was a formality.”

They all fell into thought for a few moments while she ate.

Dom cleared his throat. “Amaya. Is there any possibility that something Eledi did brought this creature to her?”

Amaya’s head whipped up. Her first instinct was outrage. Her next was fear. *Look at the big birdy, Mommy.*

“She saw it coming for a few minutes before we did. She called to us about it a few times.”

“What did she say?” Hawk asked intently.

Amaya told them. They all seemed disappointed. Again she was angry.

“Did you think a four year old summoned it with a Dark command?!”

“Of course not,” Dom said quietly. “It’s just that we’ve learned she’s a child of uncommon mage strength.”

Amaya swallowed hard on a sticky piece of cheese. She was good at avoiding facing Eledi’s gift. She hadn’t wanted the creepy Mage Guild to scent her.

“Excuse us, Dom.” A tall blonde warrior stood in the doorway with a chubby blonde toddler on his hip. “Hawk, Owl.” He nodded formally at the Clan leaders, and once in the general direction of the other two warriors.

Basa walked around the corner, wearing a long cloak over a knee length skirt and sleeveless top. She was holding the hand of an older toddler, and was very pregnant. Amaya’s heart stopped. The blonde was saying something else, but all she knew was her sister’s face.

“Basa!”

“Amaya!”

* * * *

They called at the same time, Amaya stumbling to her feet and Basa tripping over a pillow as she rushed forward. They hugged hard, Basa laughing, Amaya choking back tears. Her sister’s hair was shorter than when she’d last seen her, her scent different.

“Three!”

“Yes! This is my mate, Dog-boy.”

“Basa...” the man groaned.

She laughed again. “All right, you can call him SabaEl. And this is Fritz,” she tugged on the hand of the wide-eyed little one by her side, “and that’s Shane.” She nodded toward the boy in SabaEl’s arms. “This is going to be Rezekaf.” She cradled her stomach. “Where’s Eledi? I heard she was injured with your promised, a Sandcat.”

Her sister always reminded her of a whirlwind. There was strength and love in her, but not a lot of tact.

Dom’s low voice broke in. “Amaya.”

She looked at him, her hand still in her sister’s.

“Thank you for your time. We wish you well in the ritual, that you’ll bind Ruse

safely.” The men were all standing and walked out.

Her sister turned and head-bowed, so she tried it too.

“What ritual? How is he? How is Eledi? How are you?”

“Basa, let her breathe.” The man put the squirming boy down. The toddler ran and flopped onto a stack of nearby pillows. His brother joined him.

“I’ve been better. Eledi’s been better. Ruse is dying. He lost his arm and tonight I’m going to do a braiding ritual with Mac.”

“Braiding ritual? What’s that?” Basa looked to SabaEl, who was clearly shocked.

“Something that will keep Ruse’s Sandcat in his body.”

“Who’s Mac?”

“Ruse’s Alpha.”

“Well, that’s interesting. I’ve found that most ceremonies here use sex.”

“I think this one will too.”

“See?”

Amaya felt her face ease into a smile. “Oh, Basa. It’s you.”

Basa beamed at her, and they hugged again. “I’m so glad you’re here. Is that bad? I’m sorry about the attack that brought you here, but I know you’ll love it here.”

“Eledi is down the hall. I’m going to go check on her.”

“Of course!”

“She’s in a souldance. I couldn’t get her to calm down.” Amaya felt like she was offering a guilty confession to her sister. She tensed to see her reaction.

“Oh! How awful for the little one. Well, the souldance will really help her. You’ll see. She’ll be better.”

Her sister’s instant acceptance lifted a load of fear from her shoulders. “You’ll watch her for me while I’m at the braiding ritual?” She flicked a glance at the big blonde. He looked up from the tumbling boys and nodded seriously to her.

“Of course we will! The boys will get to meet their cousin!”

“If she’s up to it. Slow down, Basa.” SabaEl cautioned.

“You’re right. We’ll see how she is first. But at the least I’ll be with her.”

Amaya nodded. She couldn’t stop searching her sister’s face. Her daring sister, always challenging their father. Running away from the Guild, returning from a year as a skinlicker with the Beasts. She seemed softer now, happy.

Amaya left them and went to peek in the room, nodding at Reglifnor, sitting on a chair in the hall. They were in the same position, laying relaxed on the bed. She knew that the bond they were forging on their magescapes would heal Eledi. She forced her stomach to quiet, to trust the other woman.

Amaya ducked back out. “Anything?”

“No, it’s been quiet.”

“My sister has come with her family. Do you mind staying?”

“Of course not.”

“We’ll be in the lounge.” Amaya offered the kind stranger a shaky smile. “Thank you.”

She sat with her sister and her mate for over an hour. They ate, and talked. She got to hug her nephews, hold their chunky baby weight. Basa and SabaEl tried to explain what it was like to souldance. She struggled to understand their intense emotion. It was like coming home, they said. It was like seeing your true face in the mirror for the first time.

It was terrifying, and peaceful. It was freeing, but bound you to a path to a better self.

Reglifnor came to them, the first person to bother them. "I hear them stirring."

Amaya rushed through the hall, but then stopped to cautiously peek in at the flap. The woman sat on the bed, and Eledi sat next to her. Both had their legs hanging over the side. They were holding hands, silent.

Eledi whispered, "Can I give you a hug?"

"I'd like that," KarRa whispered back.

Amaya pulled back, biting her lip. She sank into the chair Reglifnor had left, debating when or how to enter.

She heard some more whispering, and sat, feeling miserable and uncertain. She jumped when KarRa slid soundlessly through the edge of the flap, Eledi's hand in hers.

"Here you are, Mommy!"

Amaya closed her eyes to feel Eledi's excited hug. She held her daughter, rocking her softly. "Oh, Eledi."

"This is KarRa, Mommy. She's my friend."

Amaya let Eledi pull away. She felt nothing but gratitude when Eledi hugged the other woman as well. She was usually so much more cautious around new adults.

"Thank you." Amaya put her heart in her eyes when she looked at the lithe woman.

"You're welcome. Mind if I stick around for a meal and a bath?"

"I'm *gross*. I want this stuff *off*, Mommy!"

"Of course, baby. Aunt Basa is here. When we're clean, we'll go meet her for dinner, all right?"

"Aunt Basa is here? Where are we? Where is Ruse, Mommy?"

The women's eyes met. KarRa nodded, encouraging the truth.

Eledi cried to be told he was hurt. She cried again when she saw the strange bathroom. She cried to get into the deep circular plunge pool, clinging to KarRa on the side before exchanging her death grip to Amaya in the water. She cried when Amaya told her she had to go soon, to help Ruse. Amaya was so tired by the time they straggled into the lounge, she wanted to cry herself. Her daughter seemed better about the attack, but the souldance had not magically made all the other problems go away.

When Eledi met Basa's family, she would not let go of Amaya's leg. Basa, bless her, didn't push for a hug, just spoke kindly to her. She'd laid out a proper dinner, with deliciously fresh-roasted, herbed meat, some buttered vegetables, rolls, and milk for the children. Eledi eventually got caught up in watching the boys enough to eat herself.

Amaya forced down a few bites. She could barely keep her eyes open.

"What time is it?" She thought to ask the third time she yawned.

"It's late at night. Why don't we find out where you can lie down for a bit?"

"I guess that would be best. I don't know when they'll come for me."

"It's time I headed home," KarRa said.

Eledi started to cry. "No! No-no, KarRa! Stay with me!"

Amaya sighed, exhausted to the marrow of her bones.

And in that perfect moment, Saxi came in. "Amaya! We're nearly ready. Can you come? Oh! Eledi, how nice to see you up, darling."

Eledi, who'd been sobbing on KarRa, now hurled herself onto Amaya, howling. Amaya knew by the escalating tone that a meltdown was imminent.

"Eledi." She used her mother tone, taking her face gently but firmly in both hands,

pulling her around so that she could meet her eyes.

“Didi, stop it this minute, young lady.”

Eledi continued to struggle and wail. Amaya puffed a quick blow of air in her face. Eledi blinked, surprised. Amaya grabbed the moment.

“You are my most precious baby, and I am not leaving you. Ruse needs me. You have Aunt Basa here, with her Wolf, SabaEl. He can tell you stories about the forest, and they will keep you safe. I won’t be gone long. Now hush, and be brave, for Ruse.”

For a second, Amaya saw understanding in Eledi’s eyes, a desire to help. Her little lower lip trembled, her eyes filled, and then she fell into Amaya’s arms, sobbing once more. KarRa took her. It sent a physical spike into the center of her chest to have to pry her daughter’s desperate arms from around her neck. She swallowed shakily at her sister, exchanging her strong hug.

Her sister spoke in her ear over Eledi’s gasping wails. “Go on. She’ll cry herself to sleep and maybe you’ll be back before she wakes.”

“Where will you be?”

“Probably in the Wolf caves. We won’t leave River Mountain. You’ll find us. Just ask.”

She nodded to SabaEl and KarRa, and forced herself out of the room. Saxi’s eyes were swimming with tears as well. The sympathy there caused her own tears to spill over. She accepted the woman’s hand, holding to it tightly. Earthmother knew she had no strength left to share with Ruse. Skyfather’s winds aid her now.

When Saxi led her out through the body-decorated doorframe, she asked, “Where are we going?” She wasn’t sure if she could still actually hear a faint echo of Eledi’s screams or if it was her ears ringing.

“Down to a ritual room. Not far.”

“How is he?”

“The same. Not good.”

Two men stood from the walls, flanking them. Amaya’s head swiveled to look at them. They both nodded politely. One looked very much like Ruse.

“These are my mate’s brothers, Ruse’s uncles. Don’t fear.”

Their procession didn’t go far along the wide hallway set with magelights. They passed a lovely statue of a hawk in flight, and turned into a room with a rock door that ground ominously as the brothers closed it on a pivot.

This room was round and smaller than the lounge she’d been in. The lights were lower, and the room was full of sweet smoke. There were people all around a big pile of furs in the center, kneeling, whispering. Through their bodies, she caught one glimpse of Ruse’s lax hand. Her knees abruptly gave out.

One of the men lunged and awkwardly stopped her fall inches from the floor. He lowered her down, crouching near, but all she could see was that hand. *His only hand.* Images of her kneeling before him on the roof, the warm air drifting green around them, swirled through her mind. Her hands holding his, kissing his. Her lips closing around a claw. She was abruptly terrified, enraged, and utterly exhausted.

She knew this feeling. She’d felt it in the days after Eledi’s birth, after the burial, after she realized how she’d ruined Eledi’s chance at a better life. Loss, and absolutely no idea how to cope with it. Soul-deep loss, with nothing to do but breathe. In. Out. Keep breathing.

Saxi wrapped Amaya in strong arms. Crying, the women clung, rocking on their knees.

The man hovered next to them. "Can you do this, Lady?"

Amaya squeezed Saxi. For a frozen moment, the word "No" hovered on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to crawl away, back to her baby. She wanted to run, back to yesterday. Or was it two days ago now? She didn't know. She wanted Ruse to come and carry her away.

Saxi was pulling away, her calloused hands wiping tears from Amaya's cheeks. "You must, Amaya. You must. *Please*," she choked.

Amaya could only nod. She couldn't give any other answer, but had strength for no other response. The man scooped her up. In two arms. The strange hands reached for her as they neared the pack. The bodies parted, and Amaya saw.

It was Ruse. And he was beautiful. There was angry red skin, but he was whole. There was no ragged, ripped flesh, no blood. A cap of shoulder balanced his upper torso, and scars traced the length of his ribs. She was shocked. Already, this was simply how he was. Her fear melted away. The rage remained. She reached for him.

"Give him to me!"

The man lowered her down next to him. She slid her arm around his good shoulder, cradling the reddened flesh protectively in the hollow of her body.

"AAAHH!" cried a man's voice behind her.

What caused that voice's pain she didn't care. She only knew Ruse. He was clammy, sweating and cool. With her free hand she brushed his hair from his face, laid her fingers on his heart. Realized he was nude, and people were pulling her own clothes away.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when she noticed the pack had gone. There was someone moaning behind her, male. There was a man lying still as death an arm's length away on Ruse's other side. He was even bigger than Ruse, with a great shaggy head of gray hair.

She focused on Ruse, the lines at his eyes. She wanted to see the black depths that pulled her in. Her heart swelled, closing her throat. She loved him. She loved his passion, his protection, his intelligence, his spirit.

"Ruse. You hold. I'm here. I'll always be here."

"Maya..." Her heart leaped, but it wasn't him, it was the man behind her. She craned her neck to see. It was Mac. He was sprawled on the furs, as if he'd been thrown down. Sweat gleamed on his body and his chest heaved.

"Maya, you must build a door, and let us in. Dance..." he broke off as his body was wracked by a tremor that escalated his panting.

Amaya swallowed. Turning back around, she gripped Ruse in her arms, and lay back with his weight on her shoulder. She stared at the domed ceiling. She must. For Ruse. For them.

Closing her eyes with something like despair, she called up childhood lessons of focus. She centered her energy, steadied her breathing, and rose into her magescape of sitting in a tree. Amaya had never sat in a tree before, but she had stared endlessly up into the ones in the park as a child. Mostly, she could imagine the feel of the bark, the curve of the branch, like a rounded bench under her nude form. And the wind blew through the leaves. The breeze was warm with summer but cooled by shade. It rustled and murmured and gentled her. This magescape was her innermost self, a visual symbol of her airmage

craft.

Reaching out with her hand she traced a door in the air. Then she pulled it open. A man stood at the edge of her consciousness. It was not Mac. It was a man she'd never met.

"Greetings, brave Lady. I am Grundy. Do you take me in?"

She stared from her perch, not sure he'd fit through her door. She wasn't worried about how he'd fair stepping into air. This was her magescape. Sky was under her control here. Licking her lips, she let herself check in on her physical body, holding Ruse's burning heat tightly. Back in her magescape, a construct just as real as the physical world, she nodded, summoning her passive openness that she used when she was working.

He stepped in. She moaned, shuddered. The intimacy of another person in her magescape was more shocking than a naked body. He stood watching, waiting for her to adjust. He was warm. It was so hard to place, but his spirit was warm inside him, and now inside her. Like the air, only deeper. Another person's soul was in her keeping and she didn't like it. He had brown eyes too, but they were nothing like Ruse's. They were tired, and kind, with no pull at all. He didn't belong here.

"I regret this, Amaya, that we don't have more time. Now you must come to me."

He turned to go back through the door.

"Wait! What do I do?"

He didn't wait. He walked out and instantly she was alone. Her relief was profound, yet she was... lonely? She'd been stretched, and now she was hollow. It was like afterbirth.

He disappeared through her door, which, though still open, had gone opaque with a shimmer of light. She stepped off her branch and glided to it. It beckoned. It welcomed her. For Ruse, she would give herself over.

She stepped through and was *in* Grundy. But Grundy was not alone. He had an animal inside him, alien and wild. Screaming, she whirled to run, but he lunged for her, wrapping her in massive arms. His muscles were steel despite his age. The strangeness of his spirit, his spiritbody, and his Bear spun her mind until her consciousness rolled like a drunk.

She fell, and was lowered to a soft bed. It was musky, too strong. Her head scrambled for something it understood. Everything about the air was wrong. Knowledge about this stranger loomed all around her like a nightmare waiting to spring. She didn't want it. His shoulders were above her. Her hands lifted high and wide to grip them.

"Grundy." Instantly, echoes of every person who called his name flashed through her mind. Moaning, she writhed at the love, the respect, the need they poured into his memories.

"Amaya." His voice came from inside her. From the ghost of warmth he'd left in the air around her tree. "Do you braid with me?"

"Stop it! Make it stop!" She pushed against his chest, as if his spirit-body's distance would affect the spirit she was drowning in.

"All right. We can. Just know that this means the death of Ruse."

"NO!" She struggled to grab onto his shoulders again.

"Then open your eyes, and open your legs. What the spirits feel, make real."

Sobbing, she pushed away a memory of a violent argument with his brother, then gasped, shrinking, from a brush of the Bear. In desperation, she did as he asked. It was

the bravest thing she'd ever done. If she hadn't had such experience with lesser, bodily, acceptance, she doubted she could have found the strength. She surrendered. Her legs twitched as they slowly dragged open and her lids lifted. Grundy's massive, softly furred thighs brushed her inner legs and she jerked. Wrong. So strange and wrong. His forearms braced alongside her, and his brown eyes blazed satisfaction.

"We are going to save Ruse."

Thick, blunt flesh met her core and pushed inside. Just like that, the whirlwind of Grundy's spirit stopped buffeting her. She blinked rapidly, shocked at the intrusion, and the peace. It hadn't hurt. She was simply filled. Then his Bear fell across them like a shadow. She froze, but he smiled, a grin actually.

"We won't hurt you."

The bear dissolved through Grundy's body, and formed around him, like a suit of clothes. Furry, invisible clothes. And the bodies along hers, filling her, pushed deeper, felt heavier. She was panting now. Her nails biting deep into fur and skin at the shoulders hovering over her.

"Amaya. Pay attention. Grab how this feels. Soon you'll call to Ruse the same way."

She swallowed. She didn't understand. She did not have another *thing* living inside her to wear like a cloak. Then he pulled, and her spirit rushed toward him, as a fish caught on a hook. Without moving, her spirit rushed to her core, entwined around his phallus. She thought she saw a giant set of teeth gleam above her. He pulled again, and her spirit crawled down his length and spread across his groin, creeping to his ass like another set of hands.

"What...?!"

He pulled again, and *her*, the bit of her that was still her in this otherworld, sank into his spirit-body torso. She tasted the heart of Grundy and his Bear. *She knew him.*

The intimacy was both lovely and horrifying. They came together, a spike of light. The orgasm brought three silent screams of satisfaction and wonder and peace. She relaxed from the wave of shuddering pleasure, sighing. His Bear retreated.

"Oh. Grundy..."

"Amaya." His voice was hoarse. It echoed around her, inside her, the same moment she heard it.

He pulled his cock from her body, but she knew it was just a construction of their binding. He was still with her. He lifted her up and they walked across a lovely expanse of beautiful rugs to his door of shimmering light.

"I won't leave you, but I'll sink back for now."

Her relaxation was being nibbled at. She was in awe of this man's great heart. Pieces of other souls he'd tasted drifted like ghosts, adding to his strength. Something twitched behind her eyes. She remembered.

"Ruse."

"He needs us. He needs even more than the braid we've built."

She felt no alarm at this. She tilted her head, considering her love of Ruse. Its newness had no connection to its strength. And then she felt *his* ghost. The memory of Grundy's dances with him, the path to Ruse's door. She ached to grab onto Grundy's memories of those moments, but knew she'd never betray him that way.

"Mac." Her voice was dreamy, peaceful. She had no desire to repeat this terrifying process. Even if Grundy was so beautiful in the end. But Ruse was waiting. She was

waiting, to get to Ruse again.

Their arms trailed apart as she stepped back into her lonely air around her whispering tree. Grundy smiled at her as he closed his door. Sighing, she took a moment to gather her breath. Then she closed her door. Felt the softness of the air, listened to her tree. She opened her spirit door again.

Mac snarled as he lunged across the threshold, leaping to the branch. He shuddered when he landed. The strangeness of seeing a massive, nude, clawed warrior crouched in her tree matched the strangeness of his presence inside her. Concerned, Amaya walked to him across the empty space of sky, her hair loosely floating around her.

"Does it hurt? To be in my magescape?"

"Not in the way you mean." He adjusted his legs and she saw the erection. He was very thick, and so hard his crown bulged violet with blood. Mac's power thrummed like a heartbeat. The air around him roiled. Where Grundy had been soft and warm, Mac was searing and sharp. He was like hot wax on her psyche. Something about him called to her, as Ruse did. It wasn't as strong, but the calling was there.

He reached out and touched a leaf on the tree, rubbing it between his fingers. Her toes curled. She could feel every brush of his skin.

With a leap, he was gone again, diving past her and out the door. She breathed one sigh of relief. The gap he left behind felt cooler, safer. Turning, she saw a sheet of fire seething at her door. She licked her lips. Mac. For Ruse. She could do this. She *would* do it.

She let her hands trail down her body, curving under her heavy breasts, following the flare of her hips. She lowered her chin, laced her hands tightly, and stepped through the flames. Her skin prickled, but did not burn.

Mac was shielding her. Somewhere in the depths of this rolling, innocent field was a stone box. Mac was trying to spare her, packing most of himself away. She immediately felt the pressure bowing the sides of the stone box, like someone had stuffed too much dough in a bag, and the yeast was expanding until it was about to pop. It was too soft an analogy for something that felt like a dagger trying to burrow into her brain.

She fell to her knees in soft, fresh, spring-green grass. Her alarm about the hidden stone box holding something away was mixed up in the raging power that was Mac. Feelings bombarded her. A memory of laughter around a campfire, another of the deep comfort in a pile of bodies around him in the cool air of night. Mac was never alone. He was terrified of being alone. All that he was, was meant to be gathered up, gather in.

Her head was pounding. She'd been here for all of three breaths, and desperately wanted to run. She thought she might faint, the way her head whirled.

"Amaya. Braid with me."

He was kneeling in front of her. So many scars. Flashes of each fight that had left one of those scars grabbed at her, spun her. Knowledge of how to stop this whirling fear and emotional bombardment leaped up from inside her. She'd do anything to stop the feeling of looming danger all around her, and it was a simple sharing she'd done many times before. Only this time it meant so much more. She lunged at him, knocking him back. With a flick of her leg she was over him, and driving down on his erection. Her hands planted hard over the slopes of his pecs.

Panting, she struggled with his presence against her flesh. The dizzying rush of him had stilled with her claim. She shivered. Had she thought this simple? His hands slid up

her arms, tugged gently at her shoulders. She lowered herself down into his arms, her breasts pillowing a gap that left her head to lower to his shoulder.

“So beautiful.”

His words tugged at a memory of Ruse looking up at her in Nawi’s courtyard. Mac pulled at her soul. A long, guttural moan scraped from her throat. His phallus felt like it was centered in her tummy, he was so deep. And it burned like a fresh coal. She struggled to understand the fire of him, the way she danced over him and didn’t burn.

He pulled at her again, and she flowed along the column of his private flesh to encase his balls. Oh, here was fire that scared her. Sweat erupted all over her body, making their embrace slick. His arms tightened in a band over her back, his hips thrust up, and he *pulled* at her soul once more.

Mac’s heart shattered its box. Sandcat screamed in fury. She was not meant to be this deep in Sandcat. Only one woman in all the world could comprehend this power, and it was not she. Sandcat was many. Sandcat was one, but so giant, she cried out, shied away from the abyss. She teetered on the open crest of a vast hollow mountain, with thick liquid heat bubbling and oozing below.

The lava spilled up, climbed the rock walls, poured up her legs, and seared her lungs as it splashed in her body. It was pleasure, with too much pain. The pain rode the edge of what she could understand as her body melted. She screamed. Grundy was there, holding her together. Eledi was there, and Basa, distantly. Ruse was even more distant, a ghost that she reached for, but eluded her.

She was shuddering, shivering, sweating. Opening her eyes, she was back in that false, innocent green meadow, shuddering over Mac’s powerful body. Beyond their coupled human form, she saw Sandcat pacing, shoulders rolling beneath golden fur, tawny eyes staring at her in anger. His huge, thick, darker ruff of hair surrounded his eyes and muzzle, draping his head and neck. Step, step, step, turn.

Mac was in her, holding her, rocking her. She turned away from Sandcat, from all the other Sandcats diminishing in his eyes like a pair of mirrors reflecting each other. There were men in there, too. Mac had as many ghosts as Grundy, in his own way. So many souls he was bound to in love. They comforted him. He would never be alone.

Ruse’s was just there. At that particular turn of the mind, at that call of Sandcat. He was weak, draining them. Mac poured command and power into him, but Ruse’s Sandcat doubted. It was part of Mac’s Sandcat, and wanted to come home. Mac denied it, but he was tired. The only will holding Ruse’s Sandcat away was Mac’s.

Amaya’s brain ached. Her legs were wet with their cum. Her heart was her own, but her soul swirled with new additions. The time had to be now. But she truly didn’t think she could follow that animal’s path to Ruse. She just didn’t have anything left.

Both Mac and Amaya gasped when Grundy stepped into the shaggy field of grass. The braid had already been forged between them, but Bear and Sandcat would never welcome the other. Flashes of their joining came to her in a sequence of heartbeats. Claws. Beat. Teeth. Beat. Fire on Spirit. Beat. Tasting deep, taking deep pleasure. Beat.

Grundy’s hands lifted her from Mac’s body. Mac was too fatigued to even lift her up to him, but the older man took her with ease.

“I burned, Grundy.”

“I know.”

He did know. He’d suffered that pleasure, too. She knew he had, felt the tight

pleasure-pain deep inside him as Mac arched over his back. Grundy waited until Mac used Sandcat to pull himself to his feet. He lurched to Grundy, and Grundy's massive thighs held the three of them as they straggled to Ruse's door. A simple stone door at the edge of Mac's field that would lead them all into the very heart of Ruse's damage. Mac's arm fell from Grundy's shoulder as he reached out and opened a sheet of flames.

Cool, damp earth scent rolled toward them. Amaya sobbed in relief to smell him. She craved it after surviving Mac. Grundy stepped through the golden flames first, then Mac followed. Mac knew this spirit. He'd claimed it when Ruse's Sandcat first sprang into being. Grundy knew this spirit. He'd danced with the man before.

Amaya knew this spirit too. She'd seen it gazing at her out of cat eyes when he'd taken her in the afternoon. When she'd taken him. The only reason she had no path to this earthen cave was due to his Sandcat, curled far away. Terrified, wounded, angry, unsure. Stubborn Sandcat with no knowledge of three legs. Stubborn Sandcat that wanted Alpha to see their mate. Stubborn Sandcat that had never backed down from challenge, and had set his will on returning to his source. Sad Sandcat, who mourned his man, and their almost-mate.

Amaya moaned when Grundy set her down in the soft, loose earth. Ruse did not swirl her senses like Grundy and Mac had. Ruse called to her. He whispered to her, and she let the tendrils and vines come up out of the ground and pull her back. They cradled her, caught her, lowered her to the soothing thick soil, bound her down. They thickened, the leaves sprouting to feather along her ankles and forearms. Ruse's spirit filled her, air that could never be captured. He surrounded her, and she did not fear. She was in his burrow, and she had no intention of leaving until her own breeze had drifted through his very heart.

Grundy knelt on one side, his hands spread wide as they settled to imprint on the soil. Mac knelt on the other side, and he too laid his fingers on the earth. Mac looked at her and said, "Sandcat."

Amaya could almost see the image they made as if from afar. The ceiling of the stone room flickered with golden magelights. Her nude body, breasts eased to the outer edge of her chest, lay spread on black, moist dirt, trailing vines. Mac, gleaming with a mantle of Sandcat, crouched opposite her body, his upper lip lifting in a challenge. And the three of them, seen from above, so beloved and welcomed.

From somewhere deep in Ruse's magescape, Amaya became aware of Ruse's Sandcat struggling to his feet. Summoned by Alpha, he stood, shaking. He had four feet, but his front left foot was faded, ghost-like. He tried to take a step, but his chest fell to the earth as he could not reconcile his body to the missing limb.

Mac's Sandcat growled from Mac's throat. A tear trailed out Amaya's eye and into her hair. He was so beautiful. He had rounded ears, with thick, long tufts of fur at his cheeks and throat. The wild, tangled mass of his mane on the crown of his head was lush. He was dark tan, a suede color, with paler paws and belly. His tail was long and thick, with a tuft of darker, silkier fur at the end. His paws were enormous, furred beneath for protection against sharp grass stubble, hot sand, and crumbling rock.

She added her voice to Mac's. "Sandcat!" Her feminine voice, the presence of Amaya in this place, brought the creature back to its feet. He swayed, unsure of which paw to lead out with. She could feel how he wanted to come. This time he fell immediately. Watching him struggle to get his back legs under his body caused another

tear to roll out of her eye. Ruse's despair thudded with his frustration. The cavern shrank in on them, as if it would be a tomb.

"Sandcat!" Mac's voice held less command this time. More matter-of-fact, he simply stated his summons, calmly expecting it to be fulfilled.

Ruse's cat rose, and this time, his hind feet shuffled first, allowing him to take one hopping step. Everyone froze as shock echoed through Ruse. Exhilaration swelled. The cat shuffled its feet and tried again, but fell. This time, he didn't wait to be called. He floundered until he stood.

Amaya smiled as another tear eased out of her other eye. He looked so cute, concentrating fiercely, his whiskers forward. She was so proud of him. His right hind foot slid forward, and he hopped. He remained standing, swaying a bit. He concentrated, and hopped again. His tail waved crazily. He fell many more times as he made his way from some spiritual distance through a tunnel to where they waited in Ruse's cavern.

Amaya remained utterly aware of the cat, and Ruse, through the whole thing. Sandcat drifted out from around Mac and approached Ruse's cat who lowered himself into a crouch, and Sandcat licked the crown of his head, then stroked him with his cheek. He bounded back to Mac. Both cats faded from sight, and from her consciousness. They were there in both men, but subsumed somehow. Beneath.

Without warning, Ruse strode out of a tunnel. He stood, nude, feet planted at hers, and looked over the three of them. Memories of his that had been seeping into her like daydreams sharpened. The perfect scent of the grass sea at day's end in summer. The consuming orange glow of the setting sun gilding the bloody carcass of fallen prey. Cool morning sand leaking away under his running feet, as the pack laughingly struggled up a dune.

Ruse knelt in the gap of her legs. He looked at Grundy, who reached out and clasped his shoulder, then settled back on his heels.

Grundy said, "Amaya accepts Ruse."

Grundy, laughing as they splashed a third man, in a black-watered lake.

Ruse came forward onto his arm over her, his eyes looking moist. The vines melted back into the earth.

"Amaya?"

"I told you I'd be here." Her hands slid along his throat to burrow in his thick brown hair. "Ruse. I'm here, with you."

He swallowed, nodded, holding her eyes. "Close your eyes, love."

She searched his beautiful warm dark depths, confused. He lowered down and kissed one eyelid, his tongue softly tracing her brow. When he pulled up and looked down at her again, she smiled.

"All right." It's not like she needed sight in this place. She was inside him. She closed her eyes, and he lowered his body down. She felt him hesitate just above her skin, her nipples just brushing the heat of his chest, his breath soft on her throat. Then he closed the distance.

She'd already forgotten how big he was. He completely covered her torso, his chest flattening hers. His lips were soft along her cheeks, her jaw. She felt them close around an earlobe and a rough tongue rasped over it. She caught a glimpse of them laying together through Grundy's eyes. Her hands on his shoulder blades, her knees rising to cradle his hips. Ruse kissed down her neck, nibbled her chin, and closed his whole mouth

over her ear. She sighed, the sound muted, as he traced the whorls with his dry tongue. She moaned to feel him probe the canal, nibble the rim. Goosebumps lifted the hairs on her arms and her nipples pebbled between them.

He spent so long on her collarbone she forgot where she was. It was only when he lifted his torso and rubbed it across her breasts in a firm move that she became aware again of soft soil against her back, the hard deeper earth below, the throb of the Sandcat from one side, and a peaceful reassurance from the other.

Her collarbone ached from the tongue lashing it had taken, the skin so sensitized the still air of the cavern felt like a caress. His mouth drifted over the slopes of her breasts.

Soon, the pleasure gathering there would roll through her body. She let her hands trail from his nape, across his collarbone, and down his chest. Her fingers found his small nipples and tweaked them, then rubbed gently with a swirl of her thumb. Her hands stroked the outline of his heavy muscles, and ignored the scars on his left side. She sent one hand up to pull gently at his earlobe, the other to cup his smooth jaw, where her thumb stroked his lip. When he tilted his head in a shiver at her nails scraping the sensitive skin behind his ear, she slipped her thumb into his mouth. It was wet, and soft. His tongue danced, and she flicked at it, playing.

He hummed. When he sucked gently, she moaned, lifting her hips into him. She moaned again to feel his erection against her belly. He nipped down the meat of her thumb, nuzzled her palm.

Something wasn't right with his nose?

Keep your eyes closed, Grundy whispered in her head.

His teeth dragged along the raw line of her collarbone. She moaned again, swirling her hips to feel his balls against her heat.

His mouth sipped down the center of her chest, and down, past aching breasts, and down past her quivering stomach, and down over her smooth, hairless mound. He stilled at the very apex of her valley, his lips feathering, his tongue teasing her slit. One massive hand cupped her ribs, his thumb nestling in the fold of a heavy breast. She moaned at Mac's view of Ruse's dark head between her golden thighs. Ruse's face... wasn't right. *Keep your eyes closed*, Mac ordered, gently.

Ruse's hand rose up to one breast, enveloping it. It was like his fingers were made to fit her. He pressed down, crushing her nipple in his palm, rolling her breast. Oh... His tongue lapped along the seam of her labia. She jumped when Grundy's big hand curved over the middle of a thigh, at the same time Mac's hard hand scooped under a knee.

Ruse's fingers feathered up to the tip of her and so softly dabbled at her nipple. The men pulled her legs, and the seam of her lips opened in a peel of moisture. She felt Ruse inhale her scent. She knew his memory of sitting on a bed, watching her sleep. Her scent drew the Sandcat closer. Because it wasn't just her he could smell. It was Grundy, and Mac.

She moaned to feel a pricking at her nipple, tiny pinching stabs. Her hands were on his head, his long, silky hair pulling through her fingers. The men moved their hands up her legs, to her soft fragile skin. Thick warrior fingers pulled her flesh wide. Her clit throbbed. His hand left her breast to rest on her stomach, pinning her restless hips flat. His mouth opened and blew so softly on her core.

Her moans were getting lower, longer. Ruse laid his lips over her vagina, and pressed a gentle kiss to the mouth of her. Mac's eyes saw Ruse's lips covered in cream, saw his

tongue wipe it away. Her private skin was peeled open, dark magenta. Ruse lowered his face into her valley, and kissed her again. This time his lips opened, and he sucked gently at her hole. His eyes opened and she saw herself, the view up her flat tummy, the straight plane between her splayed breasts, the taut line of her throat with her tossing jaw.

Something about her throat, some yearning, crossed her awareness, and then Ruse set his mouth harder against her, the edge of his teeth catching the slick valley as his tongue taunted the rim of her. She tried to toss her hips up, but the three hands held her in place.

Over and over he dipped inside, kissed gently, spread his jaws and gnawed delicately. When her hands were shaking, gripped in fists, two of the hands left her pelvis to find her raised knees. They pulled and her hips tipped up, higher, until she folded in on herself. The position burned as it pulled her secret skin taut. Both men's hands brushed her breasts as her knees bracketed her chest.

Ruse's tongue flicked once around her opening, then flattened on the skin below her hole. His tongue pressed hard, and stretched, sliding down, down her valley, until it settled on her anus. He lapped up from her tailbone to her vagina, flicking his tip across her opening teasingly. The roughness of his cat tongue burned. He did it again, causing a sob. Again, causing a moan. Again, causing a higher moan. Again, stopping her breath at the ache.

Then his tongue dove in. It pushed in the tight flesh and wiggled. She gasped, head tossing. She caught a glimpse of how Sandcat's fur prickled under his skin. He pushed his tongue in another inch, and wiggled it again. Lifting his head, she felt him pull away and wailed. Both of her reaching hands were captured, clasped.

"Keep your eyes closed," Ruse rumbled. He crawled over her body, maneuvering somehow... ah, he was straddling her torso, facing her feet. In a moment a gorgeous man scent washed over her. She breathed deep, feeling moisture trickle inside her. Earth, musk, Ruse. When his soft, soft, soft head brushed her lip, she opened instantly, tipping her head up. He fed his head, so thick his flared crown caught on her teeth, inside her lips. His body lay down on the backs of her folded thighs.

One man's hand left her leg to gently stroke the curve of a pressed breast. One man's hand cradled the back of her neck, supporting her head as she arched her neck. Ruse flexed his hips and she closed her lips tight. He stroked an inch up and down, her lips gripping him smoothly. Then he sank in another inch, to the back of her throat. She clenched her fingers tight around the hands of the men holding her. All four of them held their breath.

Ruse closed over her clit and unleashed himself. Down to her anus in one long lick, where he sucked hard, and up to her clit where he sucked hard, a tongue flicker there and he bit her inner thigh in a stinging nip. His tongue was suddenly a fingerlength down her vagina, and his springy hair met her lips with a thrust of his hips. She swallowed.

He withdrew his tongue and sucked at her, lapping quickly. She swallowed again, crushing him in her throat. His tongue was everywhere in a rough, wet pleasure-pain, his teeth nipping at the curve of her ass. She swallowed, breathing through her nose, which was buried in his soft balls. He lifted himself up and she tormented him with her tongue, closing her teeth to keep his head from leaving her mouth. He grunted, and drove his tongue into her lower rosette. She drove her tongue into his tip. He jerked above her, closed soft lips over clit, and sucked hard. His weight and the combined holds of the bracketed men couldn't hold her body when it bucked.

Her vagina ached, tightening, needy. He sucked. Her abs ached, tightening beneath her lifted hips. He sucked. Her lips ached, stretched around his incredible width. He sucked. Her hands ached in the men's tight grip. He sucked. Her breasts ached, one feeling the rub of her own thigh, one in the tight hold Mac's hand wedged under her thigh. Ruse's lips folded down and pinched around her clit, and she screamed around his cock, her body vibrating with joy. Electricity snapped and crackled around them.

She sobbed, awash in another wave of pleasure when he lifted off her aching legs. She moaned when her mouth was left hollow without him. She shuddered with another pulse of echoing pleasure to feel him crawl back between her splayed legs. He was enormous, settling over her again. Gigantic.

"Keep your eyes closed!" Grundy's voice was rough with strain.

Ruse's skin was under her palms again. She let her hands drift up the huge slabs of muscle on his back. She sighed, understanding now. Ruse wasn't quite Ruse. He was cat-Ruse, like before, and they thought she would be afraid. She opened her heart, to all three men. She showed them how she saw him. He was cat, and man, and cat-man, and whole. Nothing in the change of his flesh bothered her. Not in missing limbs, not in form. His spirit was the same. Hers.

Ruse's cock settled against her ass. He pushed, and so did she.

"Uhhhhh," they both groaned in unison. She was almost too tight around him. She could feel her heat clamped brutally under his crown. Her ass burned. She never minded a little back door bite, but he was swollen in this form to inhuman proportions.

Her legs rose and closed over his ass, heels clamping under his cheeks. He pushed in further, her saliva on him and his on her easing the way. Her hands began to claw at his back. He pushed in and in, until her ass kissed the hollows at his hips.

"I want to see your eyes, then," Ruse said inside her.

It took a strange amount of effort to lift her lids. His face was shadowed above her, his longer hair curtaining around them.

"No. Your real eyes." He jabbed his hips against her ass. She felt the coolness of the earth against his balls. Knew how he thought it was a thrilling contrast with her heat.

She lifted her real eyes, half expecting to see the magelut stone ceiling.

Ruse's face filled her vision. His eyes were brown-black, just light enough to see his cat pupils. He had a snout, and whiskers, and tufts of silky hair that erupted in a strange beard around his ears, down his neck and on his throat. His throat was too thick, his shoulders flexing with extra muscle no man had. His upper lip was split, and his dagger teeth gleamed in rows.

"Ay-ah." He gurgled in his strange cat throat.

His hips drew out of her in a smooth glide, then pressed back with a burn.

"Ruse!"

He lifted up again, keeping his chest pinned tight to her, and swung his hips to find the force to get back in. She swore he was lengthening, thickening. Lightning zinged down her arms, and he jerked, snarling. He pumped in her ass again, and she felt her fingers sizzle. With a twist of his neck, his head reared up and struck down.

Pain interrupted her appreciation of his next stroke, as warm blood spread across her skin, dripping down her nape, into her armpit, pooling at her throat. His tongue swirled during his next inward stroke and she caught her breath at both sensations. He pulled out a bit farther and slid home a bit harder, swallowing at her neck. The lightning gathered at

her clit, which rubbed against his rock hard stomach. He set his teeth in her flesh, and his tongue worried the open wounds as he slammed tight, pressing his stomach down on her. Her lashes fluttered. He licked at her neck, followed the trail of blood down. He licked up her sternum. And abruptly closed his mouth around one breast and bit at the crest, his teeth surrounding the areole.

He began to pump in short strokes, hard, shifting her much slighter body beneath his. Her thighs lost their grip on his hips and her legs splayed out on either side of his. His tongue gathered the storm inside her, pulling it from her fingertips and her clit, centering it on her nipple. He lashed it, swallowed, and slammed his hips against her ass with an audible slap. The pleasure was at an absolute crest. Why didn't she shatter?

Within three strokes, she knew. He was pulling on her blood, but to finish off the braid, to ride the lightning, she had to pull him. She stretched her legs out and her arms up above her head. She let her body go lax. Acceptance. She was skilled at this. This warrior was hers.

When she'd let her body float on the sea of pain and pleasure, she centered her magecraft. When he swallowed in time with a deep drive, she clenched her ass tight and *pulled*, grabbing his round plum tip with her body, and entwining his soul in hers. It was dizzying to grab him like this. But the other men had prepared her for the shock of feeling two inside, at least.

He roared, choking against her breast. He lifted his head, his whole lower face awash in blood. When their eyes met, she pulled at him again, mentally grabbing at the base of his spine and hauling through his pelvis, passing through balls beginning to churn, aching.

He buried his face between her breasts, his one hand curving under her shoulder to hold tightly. He was shivering violently, his cock, stone. She pulled one more time, and felt him taste the heart of her spirit. They came on a scream of joy. Lightning erupted around them. Satisfaction rolled through her. The blood was sweet, their Alpha's gaze sweeter. She'd given all of herself, and he knew she held no pity, no shame. His cat shivered in satisfaction at the sharing, the depth of the tasting.

Then she was Amaya again. Spread, lax, bleeding. He eased, feeling decidedly more slender, out of her body, but he was still a shadow in her heart. She tipped her head when Grundy's hand cupped her nape, smiled at him as he frowned in concentration. Mac's hand covered her breast, bringing a faint groan at the force of his healing bodycraft.

"Sandcat sees."

Ruse laid his face over Mac's hand, rubbing his cheek and nose against his fingers. Ruse's hand covered her other breast, gently rolling the nipple. The three men drifted through each other, fulfilled, braided tight. Braided around her. She felt their respect for her. "I love you, Amaya."

She closed her eyes on a soul-deep sigh of contentment, and was gone.

* * * *

Amaya slept for over three days, waking only to use the bathroom. He and Eledi laid with her whenever they slept, too, which was often. He was moving slowly. The braid ritual had healed his body to a miraculous extent, but he was still recovering from blood loss. Bodyimages came daily to work on internal touches at his shoulder and his pelvis. Something about "drainage" that involved pain, was all he got out of it. Thankfully, the

work they did on Eledi involved no pain for her at all. His lost arm tickled and itched, which drove his cat insane. And his balance sucked.

When Eledi was awake, he held her, and listened to her talk about what she remembered of the attack and the aftermath. She had an endless list of questions.

“Where did it come from?”

“Why did it want me?”

“Did you kill it?”

“Where did your arm go?”

And the most heartbreaking... “Will it come back?”

Too many of his answers were “I’m not sure.” He had to be honest, although it made him ache.

They explored the Sandcat lair, but she was quiet and watchful around the other men. Mostly they stayed in the room next to Amaya’s and looked through botany books from the library that Kaz brought them. He ached to sleep with Kaz and his family, but knew his ladies needed him. Taking meals with the pack was the best he got. He sent thanks to the spiritmage KarRa that Eledi slept without nightmares. All the strangers that helped them in their need, Biren, Gloneld, Grent, Reglifnor, all the bodyimages that worked with him and Eledi, all the warriors that had helped him first at the scene, he sent them all gifts of his Clan’s special art form, straw baskets.

In all of Vladaya, there was only one other surviving Trux with an amputation. The Groundbear was missing his back foot. He was mated with two children when it happened. That an unmated Trux survived a more serious loss astounded everyone. That he’d lost his arm bringing down one of the mysterious creatures that had been killing Hawks was worthy of celebration. He became a minor celebrity around River Mountain. It made him feel grateful he had an excuse to hide in the caves, when he heard that a dance was held in his honor.

The ruling representative Council convened on the mating of Amaya. No matter the dire circumstances, the fact was that her right to choose a mate from soulmatched choices was violated by their laws. Sandcat was fined for violating a woman’s right to choice. Because Grundy testified that she had already chosen and begun to bond with Ruse in the City, it was decided she was owed the minimum payment. Ruse was fined for maintaining contact with a potential mate and endangering her with sexual relations. Both men filed their payments with the subcouncil gladly.

Late on the afternoon of the fourth day, he was drying a squirming Eledi, using a technique that involved trapping the busy child between his legs as he sat on the bed, when he knew Amaya woke. When he froze, Eledi did too.

“What is it?” Eledi whispered, fearful.

“Nothing bad, wildflower. I have a surprise for you.”

He got her dressed in record time and led her into Amaya’s room. Brightening the magelights, he gazed on his mate. He swallowed. He had bathed her himself, dressing her in a loose, black gown. One-handed, it had taken a long time. He hadn’t minded. Eledi tugged her hand from his and climbed up on the wide double bed.

“Mommy?”

Amaya stirred, blinking her eyes, groggy. He lowered the lights a bit at her squint. An identical smile bloomed across both their faces. Relieved, happy, loving. Amaya pulled her arms from the blankets and gathered Eledi in close.

Eledi sighed, “Mommy.”

Amaya inhaled deeply over her still damp hair. She pressed her lips to Eledi’s head, then lay her cheek on the crown. Opening her eyes, she met his directly. The color dazzled him. The brown blanket, the brown of the stone behind her, the black of her gown and hair—all were a perfect frame for eyes that swirled with green and blue and gold.

“Eledi, my baby.” She reached one hand out to him and he took it in one step. He sank to his knees beside the bed. She pulled his hand up to her lips. They were slightly chapped from her long sleep. She’d had very little water. She smiled at him, her eyes darkening with awareness of the change between them, binding them. He nodded.

His hand stroked her hair. His ghost hand ached to lay softly on Eledi’s back. Fingers that weren’t there prickled and burned. Amaya cradled their daughter close. They were frozen like that for an eternity of peace. His ladies, here. Halfway home.

Mac came to the door. “Oh ho,” he called through the long thick weaving, “now that Mommy is awake, the fun can really start!”

“Come in, Alpha.” Ruse didn’t take his eyes off of Amaya. Eledi pressed closer to her as Mac stepped up to the bed.

Amaya smiled at Mac. Ruse felt the braid twitch. His Alpha soothed his beastspirit. His woman soothed them both. Mac leaned down behind him and let his knuckles drift over her cheek.

“I’ll send one of our bodyimages, Claire, in. I’m so glad you’re up, Lady.”

“Me, too, Sandcat. How long has it been?”

“Three days, Mommy!” Eledi’s indignation was clear. She held up three tiny fingers accusingly. “This many, Mommy!”

Amaya laughed. He’d only ever heard her laugh with that openness and simplicity with Eledi. He couldn’t help but smile to hear it.

“Well, I’m up now.”

He sat on the bed near her hip as Claire cleared Amaya to get up. Eledi was stacking a mountain of pillows in the corner for her to lay against, and he was just finishing sharing the outcome of the Council when his mother called from the hallway.

“Saxi!” Eledi shrieked excitedly. The three women she’d gotten to know suffered none of the caution she held around the rest of the pack.

Saxi ducked in with his father holding the curtain back. She had a vast tray, as did his brother. They set them on the table and approached the bed.

“Dinner is served!” Saxi sang out loudly. “Nothing but soft foods for now.”

Ruse went to embrace his family, sighing at their touch.

“I’m not a baby!” Amaya exclaimed.

“Give your body a chance to catch up with your brain, mate.”

At his label, she stilled, glancing at him from under her lashes. “You’re right.”

He was so proud of her poise when she lifted an upturned wrist to his father. Laughing, he took it and bowed low, then kept it as he sat by her hip. She was enveloped by a hug from Saxi. The women sighed happily.

“Now! Isn’t this better than the last hug we shared?” Saxi laughed joyously. “Thank you, daughter.”

Saxi smoothed Amaya’s hair behind an ear. Emotions crossed Amaya’s face—surprise, longing, sadness. Saxi remained standing, leaning into his father. He watched

Amaya study his father's rusty hair, flecking gray at the temples, and the deep lines at his eyes that made him look merry.

"You must be Ruse's father?"

Doth interrupted, as usual. "I'm the brother, and *you* are a wonder." He bounded onto the bed. Eledi clutched harder at Amaya's arm, shrinking back against the wall. Ruse suppressed a sigh. Amaya was surprised, but not worried, smiling at the man who at a quick glance could be Ruse's double.

"I'm Doth. Most sincere welcome, made-sister."

"Hello, Doth. Nice to meet you. Eledi, greet your Grandfather and Uncle." Her labels brought a thrill to his stomach. His family was theirs now.

"Hi. Jay, Doth." She did not call them by their familial terms. He would be patient.

"Hello, precious button!" Saxi held out her arms and Amaya oof-ed as Eledi clambered over her to go to Saxi.

Doth took advantage of the opening and stretched out between Amaya and the wall, propping his head on his hand as his other went over Amaya's waist. Ruse watched Amaya lift her free hand in surprise. She looked at him standing behind his mother and father, seeking reassurance. He nodded. Her hand settled uncertainly on Doth's hand. His cat sighed happily at the picture of his family altogether in one bed.

The men chuckled to hear Amaya's stomach rumble.

"Time to eat!" His father said.

They all filled their plates and climbed onto the bed around Amaya. Doth was telling Eledi that Daynay was desperate to meet her. Mac came in again, and sat at the table as the bed was overflowing. A few minutes later his two uncles Dev and Hemlo entered and were introduced to Amaya. As his father collected the plates of everyone on the bed, Kaz entered to a great shout.

He couldn't keep himself from setting Eledi aside and bounding to wrap his friend tight in his strange new one-armed hug. He was still so grateful to be alive, that every time he saw his Clan was a wondrous reunion.

"Did I fail to mention I had another son? Lamula and I share our youngest boys. They were practically twins from the moment they could crawl." Saxi boomed out, "Come here and give us a kiss!"

Kaz went round the whole room, greeting his family. He settled into Ruse's spot on the bed.

"Hi, Kaz," Eledi said shyly.

She was getting to like him because he bribed her with sweets. Sure enough, he twirled his arm in a flourish and a small piece of rock-sugar fell to his palm. Eledi's face lit up and she laughed. Everyone laughed with her, because that's how lovely she was.

"Hi, Amaya. As sweet as you were asleep, you are more gorgeous awake. I am Kaz, the better half of Ruse."

"I thought that was to be my designation?"

"Oh no, you are to be known as his comfort and glory." His voice was gentle and serious as they gazed at each other. Ruse felt love for this man swell through him.

"What a talker, a regular poet, our Kaz!" Saxi sang out.

Doth reached over and punched him. "Stop flirting. She's taken."

"She is, and I'm glad of it. But don't forget, big moth-Doth, that by mating our Ruse, she's ours too."

Ruse's lips twitched at the innuendo. He caught the look of anticipation that passed between the two men. Amaya looked at him suspiciously. He shook his head reassuringly.

"Am I yours now, too?"

"Oh yes, Eledi. You'll never get away!" Kaz mock swooped his wiggling fingers toward her tummy. She shrieked, diving onto Amaya.

"Hey, hey, hey!" His father laughed, lifting his plate of seconds higher from the writhing limbs.

Mac met his eyes. Ruse's cat purred, as it always did under Mac's regard. He stepped to him and laid his hand on his shoulder. Mac covered his hand with his own, nodding. *Amaya's sweating face, writhing under the hulking shoulders of Ruse's battleform.*

Mac spoke in a low aside. "The Alphas and Council were waiting for the final call on Amaya's health. They'll want to see you now."

Ruse sucked in a deep breath. Looking quickly at Amaya, he glanced back into Mac's eyes. "Of course, Alpha."

"An hour, main Council chamber."

Mac excused himself, the men all gathering around him to rub and touch as he left. His uncles and parents left next, taking the food with them to Kaz's loud complaints. Doth was sitting at Amaya's feet. Kaz and Eledi were at the table, and he joined them.

"You'll be going soon," his brother said.

He nodded.

"Going where?" Eledi's alarm was clear. She hadn't let him out of her sight since he'd taken her from Basa and SabaEl.

"I have to report to the Council..."

"No!" Eledi hurried around the small square table and climbed onto his lap, latching her tiny arms tight around his neck. "No, Ruse, no!"

"Eledi..." Amaya began, but Ruse shook his head.

"Eledi, I'm a warrior. I have to do my duty, always, even when I don't feel like it. You know I will come back." Her arms tightened and she began to cry. His heart broke. "Shhhh. Shhhh. You're safe here."

Kaz came and knelt at their side, stroking Eledi's back and hair. Amaya struggled to get out of bed and he shot a look at Doth. Doth pulled her to stand, and held her while she found her feet. He kept his arm around her waist and led her to a chair.

"Eledi, come here."

Eledi set a death grip and wailed in his ear. He stood, carried her to Amaya, and crouched, leaning her into Amaya's lap. His balance wobbled at the weight shift. This strange unsteadiness still surprised him. Maybe it always would. *I'll get better. I will.* Doth reached to steady him. He glared at Doth.

Doth bared his teeth in return. "I'd steady anyone with a child in their arms!" he defended over Eledi's cries.

"I don't need your help!" Ruse snarled, gently pulling at Eledi's grip behind his neck.

"Yes, you do!" Doth snapped back.

Amaya said in a firm mother tone, "Enough!"

All three paused for a moment, then Doth stomped out, Eledi wrapped her arms

around Amaya and began to sob. Ruse knelt, stroking Amaya's arm as Kaz reached again to pat Eledi's back.

"How long will you be?"

"I'll send word if I'll be past her bedtime."

She nodded. One of her arms came out and gathered him close. Eledi was escalating into anger. She squirmed to get away from him.

"I'm sorry I have to go. It won't be long and I won't be far."

"I'll be fine. I can feel... you." He knew she hesitated over the word "them." The braid was strong. "We're..."

"Mated. Yes. If you need me, I'll know. I love you."

Amaya looked up at him. Eledi's howls faded for a moment as her eyes sang to him. Such color, such strength. She nodded, swallowing, shifting Eledi, who kicked at him. "Eledi!"

He shook his head at her. Kaz laughed behind him.

"Do you want me to get my mother?"

"I can stay," Kaz offered. At Amaya's surprised glance, he amended, "If you like."

He saw her hesitate. She was used to being alone. She wasn't alone anymore.

"All right. And maybe Saxi could come by in a bit, when she's calmed down."

"I'll be back soon." Bracing on her shoulder he kissed Eledi's head, then met Amaya's upturned lips. The brush of hers on his poured energy through his body like adrenaline. He gripped Kaz's arm on leaving.

* * * *

When Ruse entered the Council chamber, it was crowded. A quick sweep told him the whole Council and all the Clan Alphas were there, with nearly all their Shields. They weren't seated, but gathered around a display. Large drawings hung on the wall. The detailed, lifelike sketches of the bird-thing brought a snarl to his lip. He had to stop for a moment, as a memory of the huge head striking down at him overlaid his vision.

Mac was at his side. He slung his arm around Ruse's shoulders. Sandcat purred, settling. *Amaya's mouth opening on a scream of pleasure, a glimpse of her sharp white teeth between her flushed lips.* They went together through the crowd of powerful men. The table held a simple model of the bird about two hands wide, and there was a knee-high model of the city block around the apartment he'd rented for Amaya. Dom himself led the debriefing.

They were calling it a beebee. After Eledi's term for it: big birdy. Using a map, Dom pointed, directing the group along the beebee's reconstructed path. It had come along the coast, flying perfectly between the Hawk pairs patrolling in figure eights. The crowd muttered at the recon this implied. It was spotted by the human wildlings outside the City walls at a higher elevation. It came lower when it cleared the walls. It was seen at intervals all through the City, and its pace was deduced. Murmurs ran through the crowd. It was fast. Faster than the Hawks over long distances. It bypassed a crowded rooftop not one wingspan to its left as it came up the park. Ruse scowled. It had had a prior opportunity at prey. It adjusted its course when it got to the park. Its trajectory in a line along the path it turned to would have taken it over nothing of importance. It had backbeat its wings as it approached their house. It had targeted Eledi.

From here Dom turned the conversation over to Hawk. Delavega set a red ball on an

arrowshaft in the model City. He moved the red ball to sticks of various heights and places as he talked through the brief battle. So brief. And now his arm was gone.

“The Beebee led with talons open. This suggests caution and intent to take, not kill. When birds of prey strike to kill, they land on their prey, trapping it on the ground, where the beak finishes it, not the talons.

“Ruse was hampered by concern for Eledi. He couldn’t go for an immediate deathstrike because he wanted to free her first. He attacked the leg at the joint, here, and broke it.”

Delavega showed on the Beebee model where Ruse had landed and attacked. “Had you gone to full battleform, yet?”

“No. My claws were out. But it was only by the time I leaped to its back that I fully shifted.”

“So, normal warrior strength was sufficient to break this bone. Remember, bird bones are porous. This is a vulnerability, but the foot damage did not prevent it from flying. One wingbeat took it to here.” He adjusted the red ball to the courtyard, and slightly lower.

“At this point Ruse attacked spines that seem to rise from between its wings. We’ve found three, Ruse. Do you remember how many there were?”

“More than six. I can have Grundy take me under to get perfect recall.”

“Good idea,” Mac said. “Do that tomorrow, Ruse.”

He nodded. “They were splayed in an array, clearly defending that spot. I landed closer to the wing joint, here, and slashed at the skin, but that only caused them to flop, not fall out. It struck at me with its neck...”

Exclamations of surprise echoed and Hawk answered, “Yes, the neck is highly flexible, making its entire body subject to defense from either talons or beak. It hovered another wingbeat here, lifting just a bodylength. Spines fell from the air at this point.”

Ruse remembered. “I had landed on the other shoulder. The spines were like quills, feathered, but hard. I pulled them out with both hands, shredding as much skin as I could, and that’s when I felt the plates.”

“Ruse’s instincts were good.” Hawk nodded to him. “This should have been a safe place to make a killing strike on the spine. But the Beebee’s neck let it keep twisting and striking. Its beak was as long as Ruse. He was able to land again on the spot the spines were in, but there are bone sheets all along the bird’s skeleton from here,” he gestured from the peak of one wing, across its back, to the other wing’s peak, “to here.”

“At that point, Amaya took the foot, and Eledi. It dropped so suddenly I had to leap again. I landed facing backwards on its neck, trying to get around to underneath, to the jugular. I gripped and slashed with my feet, but just couldn’t seem to find it.”

“That’s because its jugular is inside its neck, protected by its spine and strong, thick muscles with skin that shows scores from Ruse’s rear claws, but he never even made it through.”

Murmurs ran through the men again. There were other predators who had such thick skin. They were dangerous.

“Meanwhile the Beebee traveled to here. Ruse’s next move to go for the wing and break it was thwarted by how far the plates extended. As he was slashing at them on the left wing like so, it struck.”

The men fell silent. Every warrior there was in awe of his loss.

He swallowed. Mac's hand took his. *Amaya's scent so thick he could drown in it.*

Mac asked, for the first time, "Will you tell us how it happened?"

He couldn't have stopped the words if he'd wanted to. They poured out like a confession. "I had my arm up in mid-strike. It got my elbow and ripped. But my feet and other hand were buried in the skin, my legs clamped tight. I stayed. My arm ripped away. I went slack at first. I slid to the far end of its wing. I was useless at that point. I just held on out of instinct."

"And this is one of two of our best probable attacks, the other being the eyes if you can avoid the beak. Get the wing from peak to tip, and break it. The bone is not plated there, but unlike the foot, it will prevent flight, at least for any true distance.

"Witnesses say the creature beat its wings three more times, but Ruse's weight tipped its body at an angle, and it circled over the street in a downward spiral. Ruse ripped the wing in half on the second beat, and the blood loss was severe."

"I did?" Ruse was shocked.

Mac clapped him on the back. "Sandcat teeth are strong."

The men laughed.

Hawk finished up, "It fell perhaps three bodylengths, landing partially on Ruse. It seemed to be dead, but Kent sent his arm deep through its eye just to be sure. Ruse was conscious long enough to send Grent to find Amaya and Eledi."

For a moment, the room was absolutely still. Mac roared out so suddenly Ruse flinched. "For Ruse! For Duty! For Sandcat!"

The men roared back, cheering and clapping. It was long moments before he was done being passed around. His wounded shoulder throbbed.

Over the dwindling voices, Dom's Bear bass rumbled. "We have a priority question. Why? We have found no sign of Darkcraft controlling it. Ruse, can you assess its intelligence?"

The glint of a bird-red eye staring at him, a huge bone-yellow beak arrowing down, revealing teeth along its edge. He shook off the dread and took himself back through the sequence. "I'm sorry. Nothing in how it acted or looked struck me as anything other than animal intelligence. Its defense did not speak of tactics, and it was over so fast."

"That's true," Mac murmured. "It should have gone as high as possible, as fast as it could. It could have rolled in the air, to dump him."

"It called out in pain every time I wounded it."

"Could it have been calling for help?" Hawk asked.

"I don't know."

Dom growled. "Tomorrow, I'll send a pair of warriors to record Grundy's walkthrough with you. I want everything, Ruse. From the clothes you were wearing, what you ate that day, each word that left your mouth and Eledi's when that thing entered the City, each placement of your hands during the battle. I want a fire-charred feather count if we can get it from you.

"After that, meet with us again and we'll go over your report of the information you'd gathered in the City. We have Grent's, but he said you hadn't coordinated your reports yet. Every person, every moment of every meeting."

"Yes, Dom."

"We have the body. We're taking it apart layer by layer, learning all we can. This was a huge advantage for us, Ruse. Finally, we know something solid."

Hawk turned to him, his eyes shining with rage. "The best information we've gleaned from its body is that its foot and beak show signs of wear from *red stone*. As in the red mountains that lone Mountaincat found with that rogue sifting stone a few years ago. I have seven Hawk warriors to avenge, Sandcat. I want the flesh of this thing's young in my beak. You've given us something to go on, and saved your daughter as well. Stand proud."

"Thank you, Hawk. I do."

The Clan leaders turned in and began to buzz with ideas, anger, and plans. Mac nodded to him to go, walked him to the door. Then he laid his hand on Ruse's shoulder. Like every time Mac touched him now, potent images of Amaya flooded his mind, as seen through Mac's eyes. *Amaya's head thrashing in rapture as Ruse ate out her cunt, her hair blending with the soil of his magescape*. His cat purred every time. His dick stirred every time.

"Alpha, now that Amaya's awoken, I *need* to get to Grasshome."

Mac searched Ruse's face, looking fierce and solid.

"Please, Mac. I won't believe I'm still me until I'm there. I can return to River Mountain for the reporting."

Mac sighed. "You know the bodyimages haven't cleared you to sift. I don't even want you going through as a passenger in somebody else's push. Get stronger first, Ruse. Amaya and Eledi are still fragile as well."

He ground his teeth, and felt his shoulders sag. "Yes, Alpha."

"Let's see how you feel in a moon. It will give Sandcats time to come together, and plan a proper welcome for Amaya and Eledi into our Clan."

Ruse felt love swell through him. Sandcat rolled happily to think of his family safe at Grasshome. But as he turned away from the meeting, he caught a whiff of the fresh scent of grass. He felt the prickles under his paws. He saw the morning dew sparkling like stars on a misty morning. And tears pricked his eyes.

He moved through the halls toward his family on blind experience only. He wasn't the warrior he had been. For the rest of his life, he'd be less than what he should be. Sandcat didn't even trust him to have the psychic strength to sift, something a child was taught at age six. It was one thing to claim his woman when his life was hanging in the balance, but how would he face Amaya now, when he couldn't be the man at her side that he'd promised he'd be?

* * * *

She'd been awake for over a day now. If she didn't get some alone time with Ruse soon, she was going to attack him regardless of who was present. Her skin craved him, her mouth watered for him, her eyes devoured him. Her daughter and his Clan were ever present. Her thighs had been damp all day, and her nipples ached. And every man she'd been near knew it.

Strange how last night, she hadn't felt this urgency. After a pleasant evening with Saxi, Jay, Kaz, and an unpleasant Eledi, Ruse had returned. She could tell he was dispirited about something, but hadn't had a chance to talk to him about it. When his parents and friend had left, Eledi had been quite done.

They'd lain together on either side of Eledi's dead weight, their hands resting on the other's hip. All night they'd lain awake, silent, watchful. It had been one of the most

powerful experiences of her life. Her man and her daughter were both alive and in her arms.

And she was mated. He was hers and always would be. She'd reached inside him, inside his beastspirit. She had hardly known him, but now knew everything she needed. He was partner, lover, friend.

Endlessly over the quiet hours, she traced his face with her eyes and never tired of it. The magelight left shadows, but she was close enough to him that it didn't matter. She studied every hair in his brow, every pore of his cheek, every dip of his mouth. But mostly, she let herself fall as she never had before, deep into those eyes that pulled at her, always pulled her in.

She never feared, although sometimes her heart would pound. She never cried, although sometimes her throat would swell. They never said a word, but she felt like the still peace of that night bonded them as much as the magescape dreams of the braiding ceremony, and certainly as much as the night they'd joined their bodies in a dozen different ways.

When Eledi awoke, Amaya felt just as rejuvenated as if she'd slept deeply. The day was full of visitors, much good food, the incredible deep plunge baths, and Eledi's tears as Ruse came and went for long meetings. Why her body chose the daylight hours, when they were surrounded by his Clan, to cry out for Ruse's sex, she didn't know. But she loved smiling a secret pleased glance at him every time his nose flared when he approached her. The way his eyes lingered on her throat when she twined her hair off her shoulders. The way his head jerked when she sent her fingers drifting over the curve of his ass as he passed by.

Finally, he was back from his last meeting, looking tired. His family never stopped talking, moving, eating. They were loud, and touchy, and fun. It reminded her of the best nights working in the pleasure house, when the camaraderie wasn't faked. Ruse and she sat on one side of a table in the lounge, and Eledi sat between Saxi and Doth, throwing grapes at Kaz. Laughing, she reached for Ruse's hand, wanting contact. Sharing her affection for his people.

His hand wasn't there. She couldn't hide how her hands reached into the space where his arm should be and instinctively sought the air once before moving on to lay on his leg. Her eyes shot to his, her breath frozen, and he was looking not at her hand on his leg, but at a midpoint in the air. As if focusing on the hand that was not there. She tightened her grip on his strong thigh, her fingers finding little give. It wasn't enough. His despair beat inside her, surrounded by a swirl of rage. She caught her breath, surprised by the sudden pain after her peaceful day of discovery. He stood and strode away from the boisterous group.

Amaya's eyes shot to Saxi, but it was Kaz who was nodding.

"We've got her. Go before she notices."

Amaya jumped up and slipped out of the lounge. She followed him as he loped away, away, out of the lair into the hall, and across a main hall and down a long flight of stairs. Eventually he stopped at a patch of grass and bushes among the rock walls. The green was startling, lit with the golden light of the setting sun.

He flowed into a graceful sit, legs folded. His head was in his hand. His fingers gripped his hair, pulling it taut. As if he would pull it out. She sat more slowly, within reach, but didn't touch him. Her heart pounded. Everything was in the balance at this

moment. The first time they had confronted his loss as a couple. How she reacted, and how he responded, would set their near future path. For many moments she stayed quiet. The smell of the delicate, soft grass reminded her of days in the City garden with Eledi. Then his words burst from him.

“I’m no one special. I’m a Trux, and I thought it was enough to offer. I was a good warrior, a strong member of the pack. Now... Now, Amaya, I fear. I fear if that attack happened again I couldn’t defend Eledi. I’m not the same warrior I was. How I will work in the pack? I just don’t know. Some things, like my tending of the orchards and fields, will be fine. But others... Shall I be like Grandfather? Retired to watch the children when I’m not sleeping? What kind of a mate is that for a beautiful young woman?” Fear ruled his voice.

“Ruse.” She reached, but he stilled in a minute motion and she let her hand fall to the grass. “I came from a powerful Guild, grew up in comfort. I experienced the height of luxury as a companion to royalty. None of that made me happy. They were the most miserable years of my life. During my pregnancy, the despair I knew was terrifying. If not for my sister and her stories of this magical place, and your magical people, I think I would have... given up.

“I have lived for my daughter as a fallen woman. A lone whore. Our safety, money, a constant worry. I had to give my body over, when my mind was not willing. My body and my mind began to separate as they never had to before. I was an actress. I was desperate.

“You say you are average? Those of the Cities would say I’m not even an average citizen. I’m disgraced. With you I felt I was an equal. I was... valued, and not for my body. When you sought me out, something in the depths of your eyes... You were pulling me off my fragile perch. It was terrifying, and beautiful, and you caught me and held me, us, close.”

She couldn’t stand it and reached for him. He’d stayed so still she couldn’t tell if he was still holding himself against her hand or just her words. She gently laid her hands on his knee. *Reach for me, touch me*, she cried inside.

“I *know* you could, would, rescue Eledi again. You would give your life for her, as you’ve already proved willing to do. You would do that for me, as well, and I think, for anyone you loved. That your heart is that brave, that big... You are an amazing, amazing man, Ruse. To be near a heart like yours, to live as a partner to a man like you, I would do anything to be so honored.

“I know, as few do, that bodies are imperfect. Every body. I have learned to find beauty in all of them, for it kept me sane. The first time I saw you, after, laying there covered in blood, with your chest a mass of gore, I loved you more than when I was a desperate whore who hated her life. I loved you more than when I was a desperate mother who watched you rescue her child. I loved you as a friend I admired. I’m still desperate. But now I’m desperate to stay near you, to make you a part of my life. City, Vladaya, wilderness, I don’t care. Wherever you need to be. I want *you* Ruse, as my husband. To rely on, to sleep with, to laugh and cry with.” She took a deep breath. Something intangible told her he was softening, even though he hadn’t moved.

“When we were braiding your beastspirit closer, there was a moment when I *saw* you. And there was nothing but joy. I’m still not sure what happened, between the physical and the magescape, but there was a moment just before my brain and eyes

agreed on what they were seeing when I was afraid. I was afraid of seeing your wound. But then, a blink later, I realized you were still Ruse. You weren't less. You were as you should be. *Whole*. What you are now, Ruse, is where your heart has led you. Your body matches the man walking his path of honor.

"I'm in love with you. I'm very much looking forward to laying with you again. You've smelled me all day so you know I don't lie. I love you, and I'm still so happy to have found your friendship. Yes, there is still the fresh touch of relief, that my darkest dreams of a Trux to take me away came true, and gratitude for Eledi.

"But that's not why I'm here at this moment. I'm sitting here with you, now, as I always will. If you lay diseased, burned in an accident, weak, I would still follow you. Just so I could sit near you. Your heart is that special. And I am that strong a friend. Don't doubt me. Let me prove myself."

Finally, her heart pounding, he met her eyes.

"Amaya. It's me who has to prove myself. I don't doubt you." His deep brown-black eyes that pulled at her. They looked at her with hope, and still much self-doubt.

Which made her angry. "Yes, you must prove yourself, as well. I won't have someone in our life who leaves us when he fears. You feared your self-control when we were in the City and kept yourself from us. I won't have that. You fear now, that your future will be different from what you've known. You must show us, Ruse, that you're as good a friend in hardship as you are in emergency." Her eyes challenged him.

His hand left his hair, rubbing once at his scalp, ruffling the soft thickness. Her fingers itched to touch it. Abruptly, she felt her nipples against her shirt. He lowered his hand and covered hers on his knee. She almost sobbed at the power of his touch. The feel of his skin on hers, warm, strong. She twisted her wrist so that her palm turned up and clasped his hand tight. She gripped her fingers into the grass to keep from reaching with her other hand. She didn't want to remind him, at this moment.

"Amaya, it's part of me to protect. Part of all Truxet. What I did for Eledi was something any stranger would have done for you. Without hesitation."

She opened her mouth, her eyes shooting sparks at his self-deprecation. He stalled her with a shake of his head.

"I'm proud I was there for you. I'm proud I managed to save her. It makes the loss... easier, to know it was over such an honorable battle. If the loss was simply to disease, I think the anger would be much, much worse. Your words just now... *You* are the amazing heart, Amaya. I'm honored to be your friend."

His voice fell away with emotion, scratchy. He looked down at their hands. Her mind scrambled.

"I don't want you to be honored to be my mate, Ruse. I want your annoying confidence that I belong to you."

His lips twitched.

"I want the passion that made love to me all night, riding my body until I am coated only in memories of you."

He looked away.

"I want the man who rejoiced in spending time with my daughter, and didn't look at it as a lesser experience only for the weak and frail."

He looked up at her, surprised.

She gentled her tart tone. "You can do this, Ruse. The braid is done. We're bound.

We're mates, and you know it. We're going to move forward. So put this doubt behind you. The sadness we'll deal with. Anger, as it comes. I do not doubt your ability to provide for me and be a full partner. I need you in my life as an equal. So we have to find your footing. We have to find your confidence."

His eyes held hers, and she tried to force the burn of her conviction in him through her gaze. She stroked her thumb over the side of his hand, feeling where the thickness of his worked palm met the line of sprinkled hair. And at that simple touch, she saw the change in his plain, dark eyes. She did it again, and this time, she caught a tightening around his eyes and mouth.

"Will you let me prove that your body still pleases me well?"

She heard him swallow.

"Amaya, I know from our bonding that I please you. Believing your attraction is not one of the things I have to work on."

She waited for the words she sensed were coming.

"My balance... I still reach for things with a hand that's not there. I'm not wearing this vest because I'm proud of the scars, but because the flesh under my shoulder still aches. I think... I should wait." His voice was shaking. His hand in hers was moist.

"Look at me."

He looked up.

"Don't you lie to me, Ruse. Don't walk away from me when you need to talk, and don't keep things to yourself. What do you want?"

His face was absolutely without expression. She shook his hand, digging her nails in.

"Prove yourself to me! You need something right now. Tell me."

"I need my Clan. I need the pack around me in the night. I need to let Sandcat out. I think, before I'm ready to be with you again, I need time."

Tears came from nowhere and flooded down her cheeks. Her breath let out in a rush, when she didn't even know she'd held it. "Oh. Ruse. Thank you so much for telling me. For trusting me."

He gently twisted out of her suddenly slack grasp and wiped her tears with a big thumb. "You don't mind?"

She shook her head, choking on a laugh. "No. Of course not. I had you last night, and you've cared for our daughter while I recovered. Go to them. Take all the time you need."

"I want you both with me, but I don't think Eledi's ready."

"To sleep all together?"

"Yes."

Laughing with more ease, she shook her head again. "No. But she will be, Ruse. She'll grow into it. She loves Saxi and Kaz already, and is warming to the other men."

He held his arm out in an invitation, and she crawled forward to curl against him. His hand came around her completely, closing over her back, secure.

"Last night..."

"Yes?" his voice rumbled under her ear.

"Watching you like that, just holding you... It was special."

"Yes."

She knew better than to ask such a blatant reassurance question but did it anyway. "You weren't missing the Clan then?"

“No.”

She nibbled her lip. “You won’t always need to be with the Clan.”

“Not always. And when I do, you’ll be with us too.”

She sighed happily.

“You feel better from the braiding?”

“I do. My energy was fine today. Eledi is just so clingy.”

“She needs time, too.”

She lay against him, breathing his smell, listening to the solid thump of his heart.

“Ruse?”

“Yes, mate.”

She let her fingers play over the swell of his bicep, as big as her face. “Do you remember it? The braiding?”

He moved his hand from her shoulder to below her hair, caressing her neck with strong fingers. “I’ve only got pieces of memory of what happened between Grundy and Mac, and them and you.”

Her fingers stilled. “Grundy and Mac?”

“Yes.”

“As in...?”

“Yes.”

She considered this. “Does that mean that before I came, you and Grundy...?”

“As well as Mac and I. It was a full braid, Amaya. I wouldn’t ask you to do something I didn’t have to.”

“On the magescape?”

“Yes.”

“But you and I were in flesh.”

“We were both.”

Amaya’s brain spun. And spun. And got dizzy. “I didn’t get any of that.”

“We added you last. You might get some wisps of it, if you spend time touching them.”

“Which I probably won’t.”

His huge hand tightened slightly on the back of her neck, pausing in its soothing rubs. “I hope not.”

She enjoyed his touch. “Ruse?”

He sighed. It was a put-upon sigh. She knew he didn’t want to talk about it, but it was just so fascinating.

“Was it good?”

“It was... necessary. I was dying, Amaya.”

“Ruse...” There was a distinct note of whining in her plea. “To think of you and them... Can’t you share any details?”

He suddenly pulled her toward him and rolled. She was on her stomach and he lay half over her, his legs trapping hers, his hand on her throat. His fingers caressed the line of her jaw. His weight on her back was solid, unmoving.

“Grundy was first.”

She gasped at the wash of heat that abruptly made her aware of her lower lips pressed together, her legs trapped under his.

“He had to find me. I was deep in my caves, but we had developed shared paths from

our prior souldances. He found me, and he held me when I tried to hide. He held me for a long time, a lot like I'm holding you right now. When I'd relaxed and steadied and warmed to his presence, he asked me one question.

"Do you want to live?"

"And I said yes. He lifted his wrist up to my mouth and I bit. As soon as I did, he bit me on the nape. His other hand wrapped around me and held my dick tight, and his cock rubbed against my ass. We started to rock together. It was all very smooth, very natural. I felt myself in his hand. I felt him in the hollow of my back. When we came, it felt good, but I was still afraid. I hadn't known about braiding. My Sandcat couldn't imagine how to survive. It wanted to leave me.

"Mac found my Sandcat first. They fought. It hurt. He stood and watched as his Sandcat covered mine."

After he fell silent, she swallowed, her throat moving against his palm, alarmed. "Did his cat rape yours, Ruse?"

"No. It was more... dominance. It may have looked like that to a human, but it felt like the Alpha asserting himself. It also felt like the Alpha claiming my beastspirit again. Like I wasn't allowed to crawl away alone. I belonged to him.

"After it was done, I was laying there all exhausted, feeling just as claimed and beaten as the Sandcat, and Mac just strode up into my cave, grabbed me by my throat..."

Ruse's voice trailed off. His fingers curled gently in the hollow of her ear, thoughtfully. She let him think.

"He said, 'You're mine.' He was holding me pinned to the wall of my cave. The stone was warm against my back, but cutting into me. His fingers were crushing my throat, but I didn't need to breathe. He stared at me, shifted into battleform, and kissed me. His teeth ripped up my lips and tongue, and his blood was on his mouth as well, from the shift. We kissed hard, and I felt his respect for me, for the battle, yes, but even more for holding on. I felt his need for me to live, the pain I caused him in fear for me.

"My Alpha is... everything. Mac is..." Ruse's voice choked off.

Amaya dipped her head to brush her lips along his fingertips. "I know."

"No. You never really will, but I know you understand a bit of it. Of his power over me. We kissed, and it was but a moment. In that moment I saw him fucking Grundy. I saw you, looking fierce, agreeing to the braid. I understood what you were all going to attempt. And I believed in him absolutely, that it would work. I was just still so afraid, and Sandcat still had no hope whatsoever."

His fingers stroked over her lips. She panted, shivering with the cool grass scent mingling with Ruse's leather, his warm breath bathing her ear.

"Does that settle your curiosity?"

"Yes. Thank you for sharing that Ruse."

He hummed. His face was in her hair and she felt his deep inhale.

"Do you want to know what happened to me? With them?"

He stilled, stiff. "No."

She was surprised. He pushed himself up. "Let's go see how Eledi is. She's afraid of separation now."

"You know I only did it for you."

He led her out of the little park and into the hall. "It's like she doesn't trust us to come back."

“I couldn’t help but enjoy it, just as you did.”

“I think it’s just the unfamiliar setting. As she gets more confident, she’ll do better.”

Amaya stopped dead at the bottom of the stairs. She ignored the men passing by them. “Ruse.” She tugged on his hand.

He paused on the step above her, looking down.

“Don’t pretend it didn’t happen. I’m not sorry.”

He stayed staring down at her for an endless moment. Then he whirled and dragged her back to the park. Crowding her into a nook farther back from the hall, he gripped her arm firmly.

“Amaya. I’m proud of what all three of you did for me. I love you all very dearly. You saved my life. Each of you claimed me body and soul.

“I don’t need you to be sorry. Of course you enjoyed it. Don’t think I’m jealous, because I’m not. Each of us will always be connected because we gave something to that experience.

“But I’m not going to talk to you about past lovers you had when you worked. Not the ones you enjoyed, not the ones you suffered through. I’m not going to ask who was the best kisser and who’s cock was bigger. It’s not denying the memories. It’s putting them in the past.”

His eyes dropped to her throat. “When I’m ready, I’m going to fuck you. Just like last time, it’s going to be long and hard and good. So good. You’re not going to be thinking of Mac or Grundy. You’re not going to be thinking of anyone you’ve had before. Neither am I. That’s not pretending it didn’t happen. It’s moving forward. Do you understand?”

His eyes pinned hers. She stepped into him, wide-eyed. “Soon, Ruse?”

He leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. Warm, lingering, it sent her heart winging. “Soon, my Lady love. Just give me a bit of time.”

He was hers. Absolutely, forever, she knew he would always be hers. She could wait. She would. She kissed him, their lips moving perfectly. His mouth was bigger than hers, but she could be just as demanding. Their tongues moved, one soft, one rough, both warm. Their teeth touched, trading nibbles. They kissed, and held on to each other. Alive, together.

* * * *

That night he waited until his girls were asleep. Then he slipped reluctantly from their bed and went into his family’s room. He crawled over the bodies, shivering, heart pounding. He worked his way into a groove between Kaz’s mother and his brother. By the time his heart steadied and his cat was curled content, the wetness had almost dried from his lashes. He was that much closer to home. Finally, the pack breathed around him. Ruse’s soul rested.

That day began a pattern. He breakfasted with his girls. The mornings he went running with Kaz. In human form, they twined through the orchard or ran the mountains. It was work, learning his body again. It began to sink in, that he would never best Kaz again, as they trained. He’d never patrol again, a trusted partner against the predators that roamed. But for now, he couldn’t accept it yet. He continued to train as if he could regain the status he’d lost with his arm. But in his gut, he raged, and mourned. Amaya wanted him, was waiting for him. The thought of confronting her with this body made him sick

to his stomach. As mates, there was no denying the depth of her attraction. He understood it, mentally. But so much of his sexual experience was stymied by his ruined body.

The entire midday was taken up with Grent or Grundy, going over the course of his investigation, fruitlessly. Amaya and Eledi worked with his mother to learn more about the Truxet. He had evening meal with his girls and family. They regaled Amaya and Eledi with all the most embarrassing stories about his childhood. He played with Eledi, never tired of looking up to see Amaya there. Eledi was fascinated by the other children, watching the boys show off for her. He'd lay down with his family, Eledi falling into sleep quickly, while he and Amaya talked quietly. When she too dropped away, he'd leave their bed and go to the pack.

Sometimes he'd just go to sleep with them, but often the men would take his cat out. The first night was both the best, and the worst. The first night he faced in the physical world what his Sandcat had learned in his magescape. To take his Sandcat form with only three legs was by far more arduous than living in human form with one arm.

They went out in the bright moonlight to the rocks far downriver. The rocks glowed white. Taking a deep breath to brace against the dread, he shifted.

Cat rejoiced. So long. So long since fur felt the wind. Scents exploded into Cat's head. Their woman's scent was thick on the man's clothes laying near. They got a thorough sniff. Alpha was greeted cautiously, and Cat did not mind when he was aloof. Father licked over his neck roughly but Cat batted him away, rearing on his back legs to free his front paw. He was too old for such nonsense. Kaz and Doth filled the night with snarls as they played. He was glad they ignored him.

Walking was awkward. Frustrating not to flow smoothly over the land. He paced around the large rock and eyed the river suspiciously. Jumping to the far rock ended with a bad fall. Which required much grooming to correct.

Eventually he learned to hop faster. He'd never really run again, but he could stretch his body out in an approximation of speed. Stopping took a lot longer. He learned not to push too hard with his back legs when he jumped, so that his single front paw could absorb the landing. It was easier jumping to higher places than to lower. Cat had none of the rage and loss of the man. Cat simply was. They had life, they had pack, and they had a mate. Perhaps soon, there'd be a cub.

Well into the night, they caught the scent of prey. So close to the other animal spirits and their men, there was little game near this place. The small furry thing they smelled was more of a toy than a meal. It was good to play. He couldn't crouch and bat at the same time. He reared to bat, and lounged to rest, feeling the satisfying squirm of it under his paw. He tossed it with a twist of his head when he wanted it to run again. Finally, Alpha ate it in one bite. They all settled in to clean each other, enjoying the sunrise. It didn't feel so bad that he couldn't wash half of his own face, when he knew he was helping them wash too.

Padding through the fields his man knew so well, Sandcat rolled in the rich morning earth smell. He paused at the steps to the caves. His man wanted back, but Sandcat wanted to meet their woman. Up the stairs and down the curving hall that did not stink too badly, he turned with a purr into the Sandcat rooms. He pounced on his mother and wrestled with his uncles in their thin human skin and got a good scratch from grandfather.

Taking human-formed Kaz with him, he sat in front of her room. Their woman had a cub. She smelled interesting too. Perhaps she would play. Kaz went in and human voices

rumbled all around. Kaz opened the door and he walked in.

It was so good to smell their woman. She smelled right. When she tried to touch him, he pulled back and marked her hands first with his thick ruff of cheek fur. He marked her knees, the arches of her feet, petting them firmly with the sides of his face. Then he let her touch him. She was too gentle, tickling, and he shook his head. He discovered he couldn't scratch his one ear because of his missing front leg. So he leaned hard and rubbed it against her. She laughed and he startled, looking at her quickly. Happy. It was a good sound.

Finally, he went over to the end of the bed. The little one was on the far side, against the wall. She smelled of fear, and excitement. He lay and washed the side of his face he could reach. Then he simply waited, watching the cub. She watched back. They stared, and she broke first, but her gaze always returned. Kaz eventually came and sat by him, scratching him in that blissful spot under his chin.

The little one came forward and held out her hand. He leaned to sniff it and sat back. She said, "Ruse, you are sooooo pretty."

His purr filled the room, mingling with her delighted laugh. She came to the edge of the bed and petted him, giving his ear a good rub. He butted her, nuzzled her. She sprang forward and wrapped her arms around him. He licked her face to a sharp yelp. Then they played.

The days passed, and then weeks. Grent admitted they had no new information to uncover and had done all they could. He thanked the Marten and they parted after they finished their final report for the Council. Ruse would always remember that he'd been the one to bring Amaya to Vladaya. He'd never have a memory of her leaving the City walls, or her first reaction upon seeing River Mountain. Instead, Grent had rushed her to the bodymage caves, where she'd sat in dread. It humbled him that she had gone from furious and hurt at his absence the second night in their new apartment, to giving all of herself over to strangers in order to save him.

He showed the final report to Grundy.

Laying the report down, Grundy said, "Come walk with me."

Ruse nodded, but inside, he sighed. This wasn't a casual visit between friends. They climbed to the top of a nearby peak, and sat resting in the warm sun. Grundy sat with his legs kicking off the ledge.

"How are you doing, Ruse?"

Ruse sat leaning against a rock nearby, one knee drawn up. "Things are all right, Grundy."

"Well, there's a lie. It's good that you don't resent me for braiding with Amaya."

Ruse chuckled at Grundy's way of both poking at, then encouraging him.

"I'm glad to be alive, my friend. And that's no lie. I have amazing people who sacrificed to save me. I have *no* problems with the braid." Ruse let his voice carry the truth of how he had no regrets for sharing a sexual exchange with his friend. He had nothing but respect for the powerful spiritmage.

"And Amaya?"

Ruse smiled. "I love showing her River Mountain. She's comfortable in the fields and orchards here, and I have hopes she'll grow used to the open spaces at Grasshome. She stills every time Mac touches her, and I can see the echoes of the braid surprise her, but she's all right."

“It’s been a moon since you killed it. Now the Council’s report is done, it’s time you turned your thoughts to what your future will be like. Mac will give you time, Ruse, but start thinking about duties.”

“I already have.”

“And?”

Ruse looked out over the panorama. The bulk of River Mountain was painted gold by the sinking sun. “I have to retire. I’m an unfit partner for any warrior duties, and I’ll just be a liability in City work. I’d be too conspicuous, and too visible a reminder that Truxet are all too breakable, when we can show no weakness there.”

“That’s a hard decision for any warrior to make, Ruse. Talk to your grandfather.”

“I have to be allowed back into Grasshome first.” Ruse bitterly threw a pebble into the space beyond them.

“Mac asked me a week ago. He thought you were ready to handle the sift. I agreed. I think he’s watching Amaya now. There was never really a reason to avoid the sifting stones, Ruse. He wants you mentally ready to see Grasshome with your new reality, with a new family at your side. This time was important.”

Ruse thought of the ache inside him, to be surrounded by Clan. To be home. He didn’t agree.

“Kaz tells me you’re not making love to Amaya.”

Ruse rolled his eyes. He was used to having no secrets in the Clan, but going to Grundy was a bit like Kaz tattling to Ruse’s mother.

“I will.”

“Your matebond must tell you she’s attracted to you. During the braid, it was clear she had no hesitation at all about your injury. There’s no repugnance in her, Ruse, for your amputation.”

The word went right to his solar plexus. His head spun. People didn’t talk about it so clearly around him.

Grundy continued relentlessly. “So I’m guessing the distaste is on your side. Have you touched the stump yet? Really taken a good look at it?”

Ruse had to breathe for a few minutes. Grundy pulled his legs up so he could face Ruse directly, his thick legs crossed. “Does it still hurt? Can you feel your missing arm?”

Ruse closed his hand into a fist. “Stop it. Stop...”

“What. Stop talking about your self-loathing? Your fear? Your rage?”

Ruse stood in a rush.

“If you run, I’ll follow. We’re going to have this conversation.”

“We already had it. A few days after the braid.”

“We did. And we’re going to do it again now, and probably, oh, about a dozen more times until I feel you’re strong again in yourself.”

“Strong. I’ll never be...”

“Don’t fucking say it. My friend, I’m not going to allow that kind of pity.” Grundy stood, topping Ruse by a few inches in both width and height, and that was saying something. His gray hair matched the fast moving clouds of the evening.

They stared at each other, Ruse stiff, Grundy relaxed. Ruse looked away first.

Grundy said softly, “Touch it, Ruse. Right now. Here.”

“No.” The word came out so fast, without thought. He blinked at Grundy, shocked.

Grundy nodded, calm. “Can I touch it?”

Ruse stared at him. His heart was pounding in his chest. “Kaz touches it all the time when we work out in the mornings. Eledi climbs all over me. I hold Amaya every night, and curl with my Clan.”

Grundy simply repeated, “Can I touch it?”

Ruse thought he might be in danger of passing out. Grundy held his eyes. It was clear what he expected Ruse to say. His belief that Ruse *could* say it gave Ruse the courage to breathe, “Yes.”

Grundy took one step toward him. So fast, so simple, his huge hand raised up and clasped the outer curve of his shoulder. He gripped him with strong fingers on the cap of the shoulder, a familiar gesture with Grundy. They’d greeted and parted with this motion a hundred times. Ruse realized his neck was craned around so he could see Grundy’s hand on him. With a sort of stunned realization, he saw that there was no arm in the space next to Grundy’s hand. No other arm to come up and lay along Grundy’s, to clasp his shoulder in return.

Just then an image bombarded him. *That hand wrapped around his throat from behind, Grundy breathing in his ear, “I’m not giving you a choice. You’re going to live.”*

Ruse knew from talking to Mac that the images that he got from the braid were the same ones Mac got when they touched. He wanted to glance at Grundy, but that hand was moving, and he couldn’t tear his eyes away. Grundy eased his hand down on the front of Ruse’s chest, and his fingers sought the scar tissue at the side of the arm hole in his vest. They played over the ridges and dips there. *Amaya being laid down on a sumptuous furred bed, nude, dazed.* Grundy’s hand moved up. It seemed to happen so fast, but Ruse knew Grundy was moving leisurely, not at all with Trux speed. And then Grundy’s hand was on the ruined mess of his shoulder, the underside, with the smooth stretch where they’d pulled the skin tight, and the puckered folds where they’d tucked that skin in.

Ruse’s gaze leaped to Grundy’s face, searching for his reaction. Grundy had his head tipped, a slight frown between his eyes. His eyes met Ruse’s.

“Does it hurt?”

“No.” And then, “Yes. Because it makes me remember.”

“Remember that you had an arm here.”

By scouring sand, he was heartless. And his hand was still moving. “Yes.”

“You are a Trux warrior. You have a mate, and a child. You have honor. Even more, you have a future.”

Finally, Grundy’s hand fell away. “Now you touch it.”

Ruse stared at him.

“You have a mate whose needs you are not meeting. You deny yourself the comfort of her, an understanding of your changed body, and you hide from the man you’ve become. A better man, forged stronger.”

Ruse felt his throat swell. “You’re a good friend, Grundy.”

“We hold a piece of each other, Ruse. You’re mine.”

Ruse licked his lips. Looked away and watched the distant treetops sway. Wind stirred his hair, blew softly over his arm.

“I touch it every day when I get dressed, when I bathe. It... disgusts me.”

Grundy stepped up and wrapped Ruse in a tight hug. *Amaya soft beneath him, head tipped, bright green eyes, mouth open in a grimace of pleasure.* Ruse hugged Grundy back, letting the tight grip sink into his body. Letting his single grip be enough in return.

With his face buried in Grundy's neck he spoke.

"It burns sometimes. It itches and tingles, and I keep reaching like it's there, with a twist of my body. I forget, and there's this... confusion when my arm doesn't pick up the thing I want. We're training, and I see Kaz's movement and I can't block it. There's just nothing there to stop it. All I can do is watch it come at me. Hot water makes it ache. I can lay on it now, it doesn't hurt, but it feels so... weird. I can't figure out how I'll hold Amaya, how I'll touch her, move on her. I want to control her body, but I can't even control mine."

Grundy held him for a moment after his breath trailed off, then stepped back, gripping Ruse's shoulders tight. "Ruse, it will get better. It will. Go to Amaya's bed. Don't worry about control yet. Just share. Tell her. But if you're going to go to her, you've got to be ready for her to touch *you*. Do this. Face it, so you can accept her touch when it happens."

Ruse's claws erupted from his fingertips. Even though they caught on Grundy's bare shoulder, he never flinched.

He took his hand off Grundy's shoulder and stepped back. "Don't look."

Grundy turned and went back to the ledge. He sat with his feet over the side, his hands braced next to his thighs. Ruse stared at the back of him, the solid slab of muscle that housed Grundy's wisdom. Raising his eyes to River Mountain, he picked out the main door out to the gardens. Somewhere in there, Amaya and Eledi grew more used to his people. They learned Truxet laws and studied Truxet history. For him.

He lifted his arm across his body and touched the stump. Covered it, gouging his fingers in tight. He heard his breath panting as if from a distance. Swallowed, controlled himself, slowed it down. He watched a Hawk spiral out of the Eyrie, an elegant, deadly shape, wings soaring. Thank the Six he wasn't a Hawk. A Hawk would never be able to survive without an arm. He moved his hand in a jerking motion to what used to be his armpit. Slowly, he poked and prodded the skin. Discovered there were dead zones where he couldn't feel his own touch from inside. Discovered there was still a ticklish spot, and that there really wasn't any pain. He felt it all over, trying to imagine Amaya's long-fingered graceful hands doing the same. He shuddered, but found it no longer made his stomach heave. Letting his hand drop, he studied the view. Reached up and idly scratched a faint itch on the stump. And felt an enormous weight drop from his shoulders.

Moving to the edge, he sat next to Grundy. They sat in the warm sun, enjoying the warm breeze, at ease.

* * * *

One morning, Amaya woke up alone. She'd gotten used to missing Ruse's presence, but Eledi's small weight against her was a constant. She'd been relieved that her daughter was comfortable enough now to wander the Sandcat lair without her, but Eledi still hadn't achieved the confidence she'd had in the City.

"Eledi?"

The room was empty.

She pulled on one of the lovely tunic and skirt sets she'd picked from a storeroom with Saxi. Eledi's nightdress was on her trunk. She went to the washroom, but Eledi wasn't there, so she went to the lounge. Eledi wasn't there, either. Heart pounding, Amaya went to Saxi's room. No one was there. It was still very early. She could tell

because hardly anyone was moving around. Where were they all?

She went to Kaz's room. "Kaz?" she called. It was rude, but she opened his door flap and looked in. The big bed was empty. Amaya turned and ran to Doth's room. Empty. Then she went to Mac's.

After her mad dash through the hall, it was a shock to see them. They were in an absolute mass of limbs. Some lay side by side, arms about each other, but others lay woven through their feet, and some were tucked under heads. Saxi, Jay, Doth, Kaz, Ruse, Mac, four other cats she knew and three others she only knew in passing, two of the little boys, and there, curled in Ruse's arm, in the middle of the pile, with Mac's hand resting on her calf, was Eledi.

The sight took her breath. Her eyes flooded with tears but she blinked fast. Quietly, she moved out of the doorway, crouching near the wall on the bright colored carpets. She stayed there, staring at Ruse's face, smooth in relaxation. She looked at them all, and ached to join them. These people had welcomed her instantly. They'd fought passionately to save her daughter, and her man. She admired their society, trusted their honor. She was getting used to the sound of their fury and delight. Their raucous life was quick to anger, and quick to forgive. This was what she'd always wanted. She blinked the tears back again.

Eventually, Jay stirred. His hand stroked over one of the little boys by his side, then shifted to Saxi. He pulled her closer with a sigh. Saxi in turn grumbled. Amaya had never met a grumpier person in the morning. Saxi pushed irritatingly at Kaz's mother, Lamula. Lamula stretched in a ripple, which jostled Doth and another man. The man rolled over, his hand leaving Lamula to curve around Clare, the bodymage Amaya had met a few times. Clare opened her eyes and scratched her head. Then she reached out and scratched Kaz, who purred. Kaz's hands swept up and down Mac's arm and soon the whole pile was shifting, yawning, sitting up. Amaya couldn't imagine a more beautiful sight than Ruse smiling so peacefully into Eledi's eyes as she blinked sleepily up at him.

"Good morning, Amaya," Jay called softly.

"It is a good morning, isn't it, Jay," Amaya answered.

That day she and Eledi went to the garden. The garden at River Mountain was nothing like the rigid order of the Royal City's, but it was still a bordered garden contained in beds. The flowers mostly had dual purposes, either medicinal or craft-related. They liked to walk among the flowers in the morning, pausing to watch Ruse and Kaz get sweaty, weaving gracefully among the orchard nearby with shouts and insults.

Kaz and Ruse had added wrestling to their morning workout. Amaya couldn't help but appreciate the grace in the violence they tried to deal each other. She was grateful that Kaz never pulled his punches, beating Ruse every time. Afterward the two men would sit together and discuss what Ruse could do differently.

Before Ruse went to bathe and go to his grueling meetings, they'd often have a snack together, picnicking in the shade. Today they all crept through the strawberry plot, seeking out early berries. She was three rows from Eledi and Ruse when she overheard their conversation.

"I pick faster than you, Ruse!"

"You're fast, wildflower."

"Ruse?"

"Yeah?"

"They have birthdays here, right?"

"We sure do. Yours is coming up soon."

"I'm going to be five. I want to know the whole alphabet on my birthday."

"You will. You're smart, and you work hard on it every day."

"I don't work as hard as you."

Amaya heard the surprise in his voice. "We work in different ways, Didi."

"I want to be a warrior just like you when I grow up. Just like KarRa."

Silence. Her heart clenched. *No*.

"You can be whatever you want to be."

"I know. I'm going to grow flowers."

"A flower warrior?"

Amaya's lips twitched. She could hear the amusement in Ruse's voice.

"Don't laugh," Eledi scolded.

He wiped all mirth from his voice. "I'm not. It fits you."

"Ruse?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about your arm. I know it's gone because of me."

Silence. Amaya couldn't pretend to pick anymore. She sat in the field, covering her eyes with a shaking hand. A quick glance showed Kaz was several rows farther from her. She begged him silently not to interrupt.

"It's not your fault at all, Eledi."

"At first, when you took me from Aunt Basa, I didn't even notice it was gone. And when I noticed, I didn't even care. Then I found out the beebee did it. But you weren't mad at me."

"You're not to blame. Never think that."

"I'm the one that saw the beebee."

"You did. But that's not why it attacked you."

"Maybe it is. You don't know, you said so. You lost your arm, and it makes you sad. Because of me."

Silence.

"Eledi..."

"Thank you, Ruse. For getting me back."

Silence. Amaya loved them both so much.

"Sometimes I want to go home, Ruse. I want to go back to Ahnu's, to the City. But then I think of you. And I know you wouldn't be happy in the City, not even at Ahnu's. So I know I have to stay. Because I don't ever want to move from you."

"Thank you, Eledi. I don't ever want to move from you either."

Eledi's voice grew glum. "Mommy says we might have to move again. To your Grasshome. And sometimes we might stay other places, like back to River Mountain or another City, but she says we'll always be with you."

"You don't like to move."

"No."

"I'm sorry, little flower. River Mountain is just where we're staying for now. It's not my home."

"When will we go to your home?"

"Soon."

“Tomorrow?” Definitely some eagerness in that word.

Silence. “Yes. Tomorrow.” Ruse’s voice was low, rough. “I can’t wait to show you the wildflowers. The fields go on forever.”

“Really? I will get to hear the grass sing!” Eledi’s voice was clear, excited.

“Yes. Really.”

“How long till we have to leave again?”

“Grasshome will be your home, Eledi. You won’t really move from that home until you grow up and go where you want.”

Silence now on her side. “I wuv you, Ruse.”

Ruse’s voice was muffled. “I love you so much, Eledi.”

After several beats of silence, “I have more berries than you, but you can have some of mine.”

“Thanks.”

When it was clear the heartbreaking conversation was over, Kaz helped her up, hugged her hard. She had to fight not to cry all over again, feeling his sympathy. They sat in the shade of swelling fruit trees and ate. She thought she’d remember that burst of sweetness in her mouth, the scent of early summer, the swell of love in her heart, till the day she died.

Eledi and Kaz threw berries at each other’s mouths. She lay with her head in Ruse’s lap, his hand twined in her hair. She reached up and fed him berries, his lips nibbling her fingertips. The sun dappled over them, as they lounged, laughing. It was so good.

Ruse seemed to see the shining joy in her eyes. “It isn’t quite the path I envisioned when I asked you to trust me, Amaya, but I will get you home.”

“The paths of life are always harder than the paths of our dreams.”

She crushed a strawberry against the roof of her mouth, the sweetness seizing her. “My trust is still here, Ruse, rocky paths and smooth.”

Ruse’s fingers massaged her scalp. “My trust is here, too. That this,” he nodded to his scarred shoulder, “won’t stop our future.”

Amaya stared at the folds and creases that covered his shoulder in red. If she concentrated just so, she could nearly see his missing arm. It had been so beautiful... muscled, strong, gentle. Everything a man’s arm should be. She let her berry-stained hand raise up, and gently passed her fingers over the scars. Her eyes jumped to his face. He stared down at her with a narrowed gaze, his hair tumbling over his forehead, jaw clenched. She saw his nostrils flare with a deep breath.

“She was worth it, Amaya. And now you’re here, both of you, with me.” He looked over at Eledi, laughing with Kaz.

Amaya stared at the love in his face and swallowed.

When Eledi was playing blocks with one of the little boys in the lounge that afternoon, Mac joined Amaya at a nearby table. She felt that same pull all the Clan felt when he came in a room. Touch, be touched. He laid his hand on her shoulder and she had a memory of blood in her mouth. Ruse’s blood. It wasn’t her memory. She covered his hand with hers, squeezed.

“She joined us last night,” he said quietly.

“I can’t believe I didn’t wake up when she left.”

“It was a few hours before dawn.”

“She just... crawled right in?”

“Yes. She went to Ruse.”

They watched the children bicker over a block. Mac grunted out a warning. The boy subsided.

“Don’t do that. She may have seemed timid when she first came, but she’s incredibly bossy. The boys don’t need to defer to her or she’ll become impossible.”

“He’s old enough to let a four-year-old have the block she wants.”

“Let her fight that fight.”

Mac considered her. He brushed her cheek with his knuckles, a favorite greeting between them. She remembered straddling his body, discovering the lava that boiled under the innocent grass.

“Are we always going to have these flashbacks when we touch?”

“I don’t know. No one’s alive now that’s been part of a braid. The flashbacks are hot. I don’t mind.” He winked at her. “Why do you mind?”

“Its jarring. They’re... surprising. I don’t think of you like that, but I keep being reminded that I had you like that.”

“That you ‘had me?’ You fucked Sandcat. Hardcore deep. We pulled out some major craft, Lady. Be proud of it. Let it be a good memory. It’s who we are, now. Nothing to be ashamed of. You know what I wonder?”

“What?”

“If Grundy or I find a mate, is the braid going to grow or shrink when we become bonded?”

Amaya frowned. “Will that effect Ruse?”

“Doubt it. His Sandcat is solid now.”

She sighed with relief.

“How are you, Amaya?”

“Tired of waking up alone every morning.”

Mac’s face was surprised.

“Ruse needs his Clan. He needs Grasshome. I’m ready to see more, get out of these rooms. So is Eledi.”

“You think you’re ready? To take your place as a woman of Sandcat?”

“I’ve already taken that place. Do you deny it?”

He smiled. “I wouldn’t dare.” His smile faded. “I’ve been delaying for a reason. When he goes back, I won’t be putting him on rotation in the patrols. It will be a blow.”

She nodded. “Someday he could be in that rotation, though.”

Mac sighed. “I don’t know, Amaya. His body is fully healed, and his balance has recovered. But his tactics are still two handed and he’s at a physical disadvantage. I didn’t braid myself to him just to send him into danger to soothe his pride.”

“I’m not asking you to. I’m asking you to help him train. To let him prove himself if he can.”

“I will.”

“That’s all I ask.”

“How do you feel about parties?”

She studied him suspiciously. “That innocent smile just looks wrong on you, Mac.”

He roared with laughter, his golden brown eyes dancing.

That evening was full of packing. Most of the Sandcats only stayed at River Mountain temporarily for Council reasons, and now they were all traveling back with

them. The excitement level of everyone was through the roof. Except for Ruse. He seemed so calm, even peaceful. Amaya found time to have a goodbye dinner with Basa and her family. She was able to laugh when she hugged her, knowing she could see her within a day if she wanted. Not that she'd be able to take her sister on a daily basis.

That night, Ruse, Kaz, and she were having a late cup of tea. Eledi was chasing some boys around the lair.

"You have plans tonight?" Ruse asked Kaz.

"I'm going to bed early so I can really enjoy myself tomorrow night."

"Will you take Eledi?"

Amaya looked at Ruse sharply, shocked.

Then Kaz met her eyes. He waited.

Amaya looked back at Ruse. "Why?"

"I want you."

She felt her lips part at the shock his words sent through her body.

"Alone," he added.

"I'm not sure. Just because she went to you last night doesn't mean she's ready to sleep without us. I should ask her."

"You're deferring to her too much. Either you trust Kaz or not. She doesn't have to sleep in his bed, she just needs to stay in his room."

Amaya felt a flush of anger at putting her on the spot in front of Kaz, and criticizing her, too. "Can I speak with my mate alone, please?" she asked Kaz.

"No secrets in the Clan, Amaya." Kaz seemed to understand her thoughts. "You've got a problem with her going to me, just say it."

"I'd rather she went with Saxi." Amaya turned to face Ruse, feeling like she was a bouncing ball between them. "Don't tell me I can't ask my daughter her opinion. This is our last night here, and there's been an uproar with the packing. I'm not sure it's the best timing to send her away, with the excitement of tomorrow." Let the ice in her voice tell him she didn't think it was the best timing for bedplay, either.

"I *can* tell you I think you're letting *our* daughter walk all over you. It's been over a moon. She's fine. I don't mind letting Saxi take her, but Doth is probably going to sleep with them."

"Mommy! Ruse! Can I sleep with Doth tonight?" Eledi came panting up to them, holding a battered wooden sword.

"Eledi! Where did that come from?"

"It's Doom Shadow's."

Kaz and Ruse roared with laughter. Kaz actually pounded the table.

Amaya had to raise her voice over their howls. "Whose?"

"Barney's. He changed his name to Doom Shadow. I sat on him until he gave it to me."

Amaya scowled. Barney was a seven-year-old scamp who was always rough-housing the other boys into bruises and scrapes. "I don't want you wrestling with the boys, and you certainly shouldn't be taking their toys if they don't want to share."

"I won it, Mommy. I earned it. Doth said he'll tell me more about the splinter thorn bush they make the corrals out of, but he's tired and going to bed. Can I go with him?"

"If Doth is tired, let him go to bed."

"Mo-oom," Eledi whined.

“Yes, Eledi,” Ruse said quietly. “You can go with Doth. After you give Barny his practice sword back.”

Eledi’s eyes darted from Amaya to Ruse. “See you tomorrow! Night! Night, Kaz!” She scampered away.

Amaya turned to Ruse, scowling.

He smiled that wide smile that changed his jaw from dangerous to charming. “I didn’t contradict you. You never said no. Your lower lip puffs out when you put that face on. It’s sexy.”

Her scowl deepened.

Kaz laughed, and stood. “Good night, fond mates.” He left them alone at the table, staring at each other.

“Amaya, mate of my heart. Please let me make love to you, on the eve of our homecoming. I watch you sleep each night. Don’t think I haven’t wanted to taste you, top to bottom. I watch you with our daughter every evening, and don’t think I haven’t wanted to eat those breasts. I watch you laugh with my family, and don’t think I haven’t dreamed of getting my dick in those lips. And when Mac touches me, every time, I see your sexuality through his eyes. And it’s all I can do not to find you and ram my dick deep between your legs.

“I asked for time, and you gave it to me. Now I want to share my body, alone, before we enter Grasshome and privacy truly becomes a thing of the past.”

Amaya let out a shaky breath. “It’s going to be hard for me to give up making the decisions about Eledi.”

The sexy, pleading look in Ruse’s eyes dimmed. He nodded, cautious.

“It’s also going to be such a comfort to have someone to lean on, and talk to about those choices.”

He stayed quiet, his gaze lingering on her lips.

“I don’t like arguing with you in front of others. It feels disloyal.”

He opened his mouth, but she touched his hand on the table, silencing him.

“I’ll try to get used to it. It’s the Clan way.” She changed her touch from comforting to caressing, a slow press of her thumb. She let heat seep into her eyes, cocked her lips in a saucy smirk. “And then won’t you be sorry, when I put you on your ass in front of everyone.”

Ruse swallowed. “Mama Flower, you can give it back to me any time you want. It’s not disrespectful, or disloyal. It’s honest.”

“Hmmm. I’ll try to see it that way.”

“That’s all that I ask you to do. Try.”

Their eyes met. She was pulled forward by the love in the brown depths.

They kissed. Distantly, she heard a cheer go up from people around her, but it didn’t really break through the first deep taste she’d had from him in so long. Their kisses had been brief, and comforting. This was passion. Her heart pounded, unsure of what to do with the mountain of want inside her.

When he finally broke away, her lips were buzzing and damp, her chest heaving, her sight dim. She stumbled behind him as he pulled her into their room. They stripped as soon as the door flap fell closed behind them. His body was honed, tight. His scars had faded to dark pink. They rather matched his erection. She reached for it, but he took her hand and turned her onto the bed.

Ruse laid Amaya's back to his front. His erection nestled in her ass. She sighed. Was this perhaps the first time they'd been alone in a month?

"Soon, we'll be home. My family will be where they belong, safe in Sandcat territory, in Grasshome. Within reach of the Clan."

She wriggled in protest. He groaned, thrusting against her.

"Ruse, please, just come inside me."

He was laying on his wounded shoulder, so his arm was free. His pillow was folded to prop his head. His hand went to her breast and his thigh pushed hers forward. He nudged in her depths until he slid in. They both groaned, then sighed in unison, which made them both chuckle.

"The last time I had you, I made you mine." Ruse's voice brushed the back of her ear, bringing goosebumps to her chest.

"It was beautiful."

"You were so brave."

"I was. It was all such a whirlwind." She'd been exhausted. She didn't know where she'd found the strength to survive that marathon ritual.

"Your body turns me into a whirlwind. And the lightning you call is so sexy."

"Me! That's not my lightning."

"Who's the skymage in this room?"

Amaya was appalled. "I'm sorry! I didn't even know!"

"I love to take your little hits. When I was in your ass, it was like your hands on my shoulders were connected to the tip of my penis. The lightning sang, and I took it all in."

She moaned, felt herself soften inside. He nibbled on the curve of her ear.

"Mama Flower?"

"Hmm?"

"I've spent a lot of time talking about fucking you with Kaz."

Her eyes snapped open. "What?!"

He laughed. "No, that came out wrong. I meant, I discussed you with him."

She stiffened. "*What?*"

He choked, thrusting a bit against her ass. "No, that's still not right. I mean I asked him to help me imagine this."

She started to pull at his hand on her breast so she could turn and see his face.

"Will you just listen? I didn't know how to make love to you with only one arm!"

She stilled.

"How can I hold myself above you? How can I hold onto you as I move, and not crush you? How can I touch you when I'm inside you?"

"You're doing a very good job right now."

"Well this is one of our ideas."

"Does your shoulder hurt?"

"No, but I'm not really pushing yet."

She wiggled her ass back, curling her legs up so he could angle deeper inside her.

"Well, try." She was breathless with the feel of him in her.

He thrust, rather successfully. She felt him burrowing into her, a shocking burst of pleasure after so long.

"My point was, this might be awkward. The first few times. As we try to work out how my body can move."

“Ruse...” She clamped his hand harder onto her breast. She reached around and clawed at his tight ass, pulling him in. “Shut up and fuck me.” She rolled over onto her stomach, clenching hard to encourage him to follow her. With her knees under her, he draped over her back, his hand still locked on her breast. She bore his full weight, her head turned to the side against the mattress.

“Amaya!” He ground in, and they both moaned. He tugged at his hand. “Baby, give me my hand. I’m too heavy.”

She clamped as hard as she could, while using her whole body to rock back. “Shut. Up.”

“Amaya...”

“I like it, Ruse. I want it. It’s been too long. I want a fuck. Now, deep. Move, by the Fires, move now!”

He shuddered against her, growling. Then he began to hump. His powerful thighs were tucked between hers, his knees knocking her squashed breasts. They were folded, entwined together. His hand tightened painfully on her breast, his fingers holding her nipple to a throbbing point. His drives were more of a grind, and she wailed to realize she couldn’t get to her clit, which suddenly felt like a miniature mountain between her spread thighs.

He thrust, and ground, and humped. The muscles of his chest rubbed against her back, his hot panting breaths against her shoulders, his furred thighs against hers, all of it overwhelming her senses. With a super human lunge, his abs let him lever himself up, and he pulled his arm free of her clutching hands. He hauled up on her hip and she arched her back, sending her ass high. He smacked it hard, sending searing heat down her thigh. Then he was pounding her, grunting with each thrust.

She fell forward with the first lunge, and braced her hands against the wall. By the fourth thrust her body was singing. The tight clamping and deep touches she’d gotten from him before were so different from the zinging drag of his huge length shuttling in and out of her.

“Remember the alley, Amaya?” His voice gasped over his pace.

“Remember how I stuffed myself down your throat during the braid?”

She cried out. One of her hands left the wall to go to her clit. Frantically, she tried to grab it, but it was sopping, slippery.

“Remember how I laid you out on my chest and came all over your stomach that night on the roof?”

Her fingers finally latched onto her clit and she pulled it, twisting, snarling.

“I’m going to do that all over again. At Grasshome. I’m going to fuck you and love you and claim every part of you, and they’re all going to watch. They’re going to see you and know you belong to me, and it’s going to be so real. Finally, real.”

He was pounding her, his hand bruising her hip. He felt so good, but he wasn’t doing her hard enough. He could get deeper if he just let go.

With her own super human lunge she drove her hand deeper under her body, grabbing his balls in her slippery fingers. Her words came out muffled by the mattress, staccato from his thrusts. “Shut! Up! And! Fuck! Me!”

Sandcat roared from his throat, a primal, coughing *hun-ka, hun-ka*. He broke, pummeling her, lifting her hips with each slap, *hun-ka, hun-ka*. His roar was inside her, vibrating her uterus, and she wouldn’t let go of his balls. She molded her whole body to

the clasp of him, and time froze. They were a still tableau, a man on his knees, his body a straining line of strength, a woman folded into a ball, hanging from his hips. He fell onto her as they writhed together, screaming.

They fell to the side, in much the original position they started out in. She snuggled her head under his chin, clasped his hand to her breast, squeezed her vagina around his softening presence at her entrance, and sighed.

“Amaya...” Ruse’s voice was hoarse, gritty.

“I love you, Ruse. You weren’t a talker the last time we made love.”

“You wanted to be quiet for Eledi.”

Amaya sent out a questing mind touch to her daughter, worried their screams had scared her. Sounds from the small sleeping chambers traveled freely through the corridors. She was sleeping.

Her brain caught up with the meaning of some of his sex talk. “So they’re going to watch us?”

“Some will, sometimes. The pairs interested in sex sleep in a tent where the nests face the center lounge. People in that tent are there for sex. And like all things in the Clan, we share. We don’t share our bodies, but we share the experience.”

“Ruse?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not shy about sex.”

“Thank the Elements. I’m so glad you’re experienced.”

The word lit up a series of images from her memory. Other men, more desperate times. Laying her body out to be touched as they desired. Not all of the images were bitter to her, but his label made her nauseous.

“It’s not like you’re not experienced, either.”

“Amaya. You’re the best lover I’ve ever had, one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen, and you’re hot enough to take Mac’s fire and burn him right back.”

Amaya felt a huge smile stretch her face. She threaded her fingers through his. Loved how small and smooth her hand was compared to the strength of his. “I’m glad I’m the best you’ve had. You’re the best I’ve had, too.”

He pinched her nipple. “I’m the last you’ll get, so that’s good.”

“Are you being bossy and jealous?”

“You bet.”

Sighing happily, she closed her eyes, ignoring the cooling cum on her thighs. When she woke in the night, she was rocking. He was over her, his eyes shining in the low light. He was smooth and steady between her legs, propped on his forearm, his torso rubbing her breasts. They stared at each other, trading kisses, as he moved on her body. Eventually his arm started to shake, so he lowered his weight more fully onto her, his arm sliding under her head to pull her mouth up to his. Their tongues danced as his body thrust with less stroke, the heat rising.

“Amaya, I’m sorry I can’t touch you. In my mind, my other hand is between your legs, just barely dabbing at your pretty pink clit.”

She came, a long soft moan trailing as her body went rigid beneath his.

“Oh, my Lady, yes.” He came right after her, burying his face in her neck. It had been one of the simplest, gentlest couplings of her life. But the happiness inside her was huge.

“Ruse?”

“Yeah?”

“The next time my big ox of a mate apologizes to me for his performance during mind blowing sex, I’m going to bite him, really hard, and then I’m going to make him go down on me, and then I’m going to get up and leave. Do you understand?”

She felt him smile against her throat.

“Yeah.”

“So it’s not going to happen again.”

“Right.”

“Good.”

In the morning, she woke to his head between her thighs. He lapped at her with tiny flicks, up one side, around her clit, and down, and around. When their eyes met along the plane of her body, he nipped at her thigh. Then thrust his tongue deep, grinding his face against her so tightly she didn’t know how he could breathe. Didn’t care after a moment. His thumb was rubbing her gently, too gently. She pushed his hand against her, and came. She watched him sit between her thighs and lick each finger.

“Will you wear something for me today?”

“Of course.”

He stood and got something from his trunk. It was a scrap of green leather. Holding it up, she saw it was a halter top. She’d seen all of the women wearing them at one point or another over the past weeks.

“I can’t wear a chest wrap in this.”

“No. And no underwear either, please.”

“You’ll make it worth my while later?”

“Absolutely. After the dancing. Do you like to dance?”

“I do. And you?”

“Love it.”

They smiled at each other. Amaya stood, dressed, while he sat on the bed. He held her hair up while she tied the halter, and was kissing her spine when Eledi burst in. He yelped like a little boy and covered himself with the blanket, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“Mommy! Ruse! Let’s go! We’re gonna see the grass ocean!”

“Sounds good, baby, let’s go.”

Eledi pounded out again, shrieking for Saxi.

Amaya put all her love, gratitude, and awe into one word. “Ruse.”

Pulling her head down, he brushed his lips over her forehead. His voice was a barely audible rumble, but drenched in just as much emotion. “Amaya.”

It wasn’t long after breakfast before they began to help carry the supplies back and forth to the sifting stone room. Ruse wanted to take her and Eledi through last, and Mac had agreed, ending Eledi’s whining.

When the last person had gone through, he insisted on washing his hand, and getting a drink of water, much to Eledi’s torment.

Then he said a lengthy good-bye to a few of the men who were staying until later that night.

Finally, he stood at the sifting stone. He stared at it. His face had that flat expression Amaya recognized as his defensive mask.

“What’s wrong.”

“I need you to hold on to me.” His voice was bitter.

“Ruse! We’re strong enough! Don’t worry!” Eledi’s concern and fervent reassurance brought a lump to Amaya’s throat. Nodding, she simply stepped up to him, and wrapped her arm tight around his waist. Eledi crowded in between them wrapping an arm around each of them. Amaya put her hand on the back of Eledi’s neck. Ruse laid his hand on the stone, and it was done.

They stood in a copse of bushes, dense, and thick with fresh leaves. Ruse drew in a deep breath, and let it out in a shuddering sigh.

“Wildflowers!” Eledi screamed. She dashed out the gap in the bushes.

“Eledi!” Amaya lunged for her, grabbed her shoulder.

“Amaya. We talked about this.” Ruse put his hand gently over hers. “This land is made safe by the honor of Sandcat warriors. She can run free here. She must.”

Eledi looked up at Ruse, her eyes huge and black. “No beebees, Ruse?”

“No, Didi. Go see your flowers. Just stay in sight. Grasshome is right down the hill.”

Eledi looked at Amaya. It took every bit of her will to let her hand leave her daughter’s shoulder. She had to trust the Sandcats, or she’d go mad living here. She clutched her hands together as the girl hurried out of the sheltering circle, more subdued.

When Amaya walked out after her, the sky took her breath away. It was huge. It sang to her, in a bold new way. Somehow, it seemed farther, and closer too, than it ever had before. The hills rolled away. Indeed, the ocean came to her memory. This was a green ocean. They’d ventured out of River Mountain’s caves, but the land around it had been cultivated for centuries. She knew she had been in the True Wild, but it hadn’t felt uncomfortable. The fields there were ordered and purposeful. The flowers were planted in bordered masses, more spontaneous than the City garden, but still contained. Here, they dotted the thigh-high grass. White, yellow, red, pink. Fat puffs, feathery tails, jagged spikes. And as her eyes grew less dazzled to the space around her, the sound came. *Shush-hush-wusshhhh-shhhh*. The grass did sing. No. The *wind* sang.

Stunned, Amaya’s steps hurried, to move farther along the slender beaten path, so that the open space surrounded her. She turned, her eyes skipping from sky to horizon to folds of hills to colors. Eledi started to run and skip, the grass nearly as tall as she. Her dark hair flew and bounced as she ran from flower to flower. Amaya felt her braid slide on her bare back. The wild wind was warm, dry, and the sun shone yellow. She couldn’t believe she’d trapped herself and her daughter in City walls her entire life. She turned her head, laughing her astonishment and joy, seeking Ruse.

He was walking a few bodylengths behind, his trailing fingers spread wide across the tops of the grass. His face absolutely fierce, eyes burning, he nodded. “Welcome home, Amaya.”

* * * *

That night, Ruse watched Amaya. He watched her watch her daughter, watch his people, watch him. He touched her whenever she came close, but she was often pulled away. Cat lounged, purring, content to wait. The dancing was wild. The bonfires leaped to the sky. The music pounded in his feet, through his heart. *Home, home, home*.

His people touched her, carried her, passed her. She was unbearably graceful, swaying to the drums, her spine a seduction. He undid her hair when the night grew

cooler, a living cape for her golden flesh. Eledi came to him, and snuggled, and slept in the curve of his arm. She prevented him from drinking his ale. It wasn't even a choice.

Later, his mother took her from him, as the elders and children faded into the family tent, and the men stripped the clothes from the paid women who lived in the camp, contracted for a year.

Amaya danced with Mac, and their bodies moved as only those who have known each other deeply can. He joined them. Striding to her, he wrapped her arm around his waist, took her delicate neck in his hand, and owned her mouth. Mac was wrapped around her from behind, his hands on her hips. Ruse's head exploded with visions. *Lava seething under a tender spring field. Amaya straddling Mac, breasts swaying, face wild. Amaya crouched in Mac's arms, terrified of Sandcat.*

He met Mac's eyes as he lifted his head from her lips. Love, pride, the ever present yearning for his Alpha curled through him. His Alpha knew his mate. His Alpha knew she was *his* mate. His Alpha owned them both. Sandcat purred.

Mac nodded at him, lifting his ever-clawed hand to bring his knuckles down Ruse's cheek. Ruse tipped his head, and pushed into Mac's hand. Amaya's hands closed on fistfuls of Ruse's ass. There'd been speeches earlier, from the Alpha, his Shield, the elders, his father. There'd been cheers and chants in his honor, his people proud of his battle, relieved for his survival. It was a wonderful homecoming. But this, this touch, at the center of their people's woven homes, was really all he needed.

Mac faded back into the shadows. Firelight danced over her high cheekbones, in her heavy eyes that dared him. All right, maybe Mac's touch wasn't all he needed. The shouting and calling and laughing was a constant din, but one particular chant broke through his attention.

"Kaz! Kaz! Kaz!" There was a crowd of men pumping their fists, bouncing and hollering.

Amaya stepped toward them first, so he followed her lead. Shouldering his way through, they made it to the second row of spectators. Kaz was providing the spectacle. He pounded into a well-rounded blonde, his hands on each of her breasts, his feet digging into the ground for purchase. Sweat glistened on his shoulders and clenching ass, despite their distance from the nearest fire. His head was thrown back, teeth gritted in concentration. The woman was screaming and clawing beneath him, obviously caught in an extended orgasm.

Ruse couldn't take his eyes off her breasts. They were very large, bigger than Amaya's, and shifted under Kaz's grip with each strike. But he had his fingers sunk deep, his palms centered on the nipples. Both hands, on both breasts. Ruse desperately wanted to use the same position, the same power, on Amaya. He wanted to feel her body pinned beneath his grip, her breasts overflowing his hands. The hand he no longer had tingled and burned. He'd never be able to ride Amaya like Kaz could.

Just then, his pants sagged. Amaya had undone the front flap. Her hand slid in, cool from the night air, shocking his penis. He'd been fat and cramped in his pants all night, but her touch brought his dick upright, despite the temperature of her skin. He looked down at her. He couldn't see her clearly, as she stood tight to his front, but he saw enough to know she watched Kaz, and her lips were parted. And her nipples were hard against her halter.

He reached up and undid it. Most of the men and women were topless by now. Her

breasts sagged a bit without the halter's cradle. They were full and round, with delicious nipples big enough for a man to know what he had in his mouth. The only sign she even noticed he'd dropped her top in the flattened earth was her grip sheathing his cock. No more fluttering fingers.

He lifted her breast in his hand, letting the weight settle into his arm. He remembered the night he simply held her breasts like this, each so aware of the other they came without any sexual touch at all. He lowered his head and inhaled the smell of her hair. It had a wild, fresh scent to it now. She smelled like mate, and home. He kissed her temple gently, feathering his fingers over her nipple. She dragged her hand up to his crown, and squeezed. They were jostled by the crowd, and he grunted at her pull on his cock. She slid her hand back down, her skin dragging along his, pulling his tip achingly tight. When she got to the base, he pinched her nipple with a twist. Her head jerked back into his shoulder with reaction, but her eyes never left Kaz's heaving body.

Another warrior slung his mate down in the circle and bent over her ass, sliding home with a full-throated Sandcat roar. The crowd went even more wild, the wailing smoothskin under Kaz completely drowned out. Men leaned down to shout in Kaz's ear. He knew they were upping whatever bet was going on. Now he had to try to outlast the new couple.

Amaya worked her other hand into his pants. Her warmed hand went down under his balls, while he gasped to feel her cool hand grip his cock. He bent over her shoulder, pushing her breast up to her chin.

"Lick it," he growled in her ear.

She did. His body was buffeted by the jockeying crowd. He widened his stance, protecting her as he could. He lowered her breast and used her moisture to paint designs over her flesh. He lightly tapped and flicked her nipple, then dragged his thumb in circles around it.

Her hand had quickly warmed and was stroking him roughly. Her position, with her arms behind her back, had thrust her forward nicely. Her other hand was rolling and squeezing his balls. He circled, and circled, and circled with his thumb.

The mated woman wailed and writhed, and the warrior behind her fell over her back, moaning and shuddering. Half the crowd moaned in loss, and half the crowd cheered. Kaz fell forward, his body catching on his forearms on either side of the woman shuddering beneath him. His back bowed, her eyes rolled, and he came as she passed out. The crowd began to leap and dance. By the Waters, he loved his Clan.

Amaya abruptly turned in his hold, burying her face in his still vested chest.

"Baby?" he asked, suddenly concerned.

The crowd began to disperse. Was she embarrassed about her top? He pulled her close. Her hands thrust back down his pants, both palms engulfing his cock. She tipped her face up and he caught his breath, his head spinning as all the blood he had went to his cock. Her eyes were dark in the shadows, glassy with desire. Her lips were parted, shining

"Fuck me, love me, make me your woman, here, in this wild place. Now, Ruse."

He loved it when she commanded just exactly what he wanted. He wanted to pick her up, but he doubted—she leaped onto his body, kissing his neck in a flurry of damp teeth, one hand gripping his hair and the other wrapped around his shoulders. His arm came underneath her ass out of reflex, and he braced his legs. He found he could hold

her. He was still strong enough to carry his mate. She wrapped her ankles on his ass, crushing his hips, and his trapped cock throbbed with interest. Her teeth were getting sharper, her mouth a burning brand on his tendons. Sinking his fingers into her ass, he moved toward the pairs tent.

A cheer went up from the people lingering in the area.

“Ruse!”

“Ruse is taking his mate in!”

“You get him, Amaya!”

“Nothing like a homecoming fuck, Ruse! Drive deep!”

“Ruuuuuse! Go, Sandcat!”

He thought he felt her smile against his throat. His lips twitched. Someone dashed forward to hold the flap open, and he ducked inside. The boisterous party was instantly muted. The buildings in Grasshome were woven of thorn bushes, covered in thick thatch. Inside, they were lined with heavy, colorful rugs. He stopped in the lounge, taking his hand from beneath her, and she let her legs open to slide down his body. Capturing her mouth, he met her flurry of kisses, and slowed them, deepened them, until she was slack against him, soothed of her immediate need.

“Look, Amaya. Look around,” he whispered. “Shall I lay you down in a nest of our own here, or do you want me to take you into the grass?”

He followed her head, seeing his people through her eyes. He was thankful his mate wasn’t some virginal, supposedly virtuous Guild daughter to be horrified at the couplings. The lounge was ringed with private areas his people called “nests.” Rounded curtains gathered piles of pillows and blankets into small rooms about one bodylength in circumference. There were several men who sat in the chairs and crouched on the cushions of the lounge, blatantly watching the couples.

One mated pair had dragged a small table into their nest. The man sat on it while the woman straddled him, bouncing wildly. Another couple had tumbled out of their nest and half lay in the lounge area, a tangle of desperately wrestling limbs. One of the nests had a post with thick, red silk ropes that hung down. A warrior’s wrists were pulled high above his head as his mate knelt before him, his groin blocked by her bobbing head. There was Mac and a paid woman, kissing and touching. Mac’s gold claw caps matched her hair. Another couple had hung a curtain over the entrance, the only thing visible one woman’s delicate pointed foot, toes curling to the sounds of smacking wet flesh.

Ruse liked the sounds of the Clan making love. And he really, really liked the scent that saturated the air. Including the rich earth of Amaya’s interest.

“Amaya?”

“There’s only one room left.”

“Yes. We’re in luck.”

“There’s only six for the whole Clan?”

At least her voice was breathless. That was a sign she wasn’t unaffected. “Only six nests. People don’t usually stay all night. We go back to our families in the other corral, or into the grass. We only have a few dozen mated pairs. Remember, Amaya, Sandcats prefer to sleep in a group. I won’t ask that of you for awhile.”

She looked up at him. “Take me to the grass.”

His heart seized with sorrow. He’d rushed her. He never wanted her to feel disrespected in his open, rowdy Clan. He’d just wanted to join with her before them. He

squeezed her hand, then gathered up a thick blanket. He handed her that one, then a pair of pillows, and took another blanket himself.

Kaz appeared out of nowhere, a magelight in his hand. "Do you need me to carry anything for you?"

He opened his mouth to say no when Amaya said, "Sure. Bring that light and take this." She stuffed the blanket and pillows at him. Then she bent and took up a water skin, and another blanket. "Mac."

Mac finished a long lick up the center line of his woman's body. He looked at Amaya. "Yes, Lady?"

Ruse choked back a laugh. He hadn't told her it was rude to talk to the couples once they were in the nest.

"Come on. We're going outside."

"That's nice. Have a good time. I'm busy."

"Bring her." Amaya used her no-nonsense mother tone. "Come on."

Mac blinked at her. He looked down at his partner. She shrugged.

Amaya looked at Kaz. "Are you done for the night?"

He grinned at her. The portion of his neck and shoulders visible above the blanket were covered in scratches. "I'm never 'done.'" But the ladies are all spoken for at the moment. I had my turn."

Amaya snorted. "You certainly did."

She stepped out of the tent. Ruse followed, bemused, and confused.

Amaya folded her lips and let out a piercing whistle.

"You have to teach me how to do that," Kaz murmured.

Many of the Clan had dispersed, but the faces left turned toward them.

"The pairs tent is too busy. We're going into the grass. Anyone want to come?"

He saw people look at one another. Some waved her on, while some stood, gathering their own blankets.

She turned to him and said, "Well, lead on."

Ruse led. Amaya, Kaz, Mac, his blonde, two mated pairs, and six single warriors trailed behind.

"Mate?"

"Yes?"

"If you felt the tent was too public and busy, why did you invite people to come with us into the grass?"

"The tent is nice. I'm not worried about it, Ruse. But it's designed for watchers, not to be watched. And tonight you need to be watched."

Ruse shut his mouth with a snap and concentrated on taking his parade up over the nearby hill. His erection had softened when Amaya had asked to leave the tent. Now it hardened again, rising out of his open pants. The night air was cool, but didn't seem to impact his cock. For some reason, the people had fallen quiet as they left the light of the fires. The magelight Kaz held was really for the four women. All the men could see fine by the starlight. There were some whispers, and a hush of expectation seemed to gather.

When Ruse came to a hollow in the dip between rises, he stopped. Facing Amaya, he raised a brow.

She dropped her items and motioned for him to do the same. "Spread out in a circle," she ordered the group. "Kaz, give me the magelight."

He watched her lay out the thicker rug, and trample on it to flatten the grass beneath. The sharp clean scent rose in the night. She put the light to one side of the rug, and lay out the blanket and pillows, with the water skin at a corner. She put the thinner blanket nearby, gave another to Kaz to sit on. She took off her shoes and skirt. She lay down in the center of the nest she'd made, the pillows propped behind her shoulders.

Ruse looked at his mate laying in the center of the blanket, under the banner of stars. The night claimed one side of her face, and the golden glow of the lamp made the other side look like a painting. She was that perfect. Her nipples had drawn up into taut points from the cool air. She spread her hair out in a dark fan above her. She tucked her hands behind her head as if she were going to stargaze, and spread her legs, her knees canted up to splay her thighs wide. Her scent hit him hard. He heard the men around him inhale with interest.

She smiled at him, half taunting, but her voice was rueful. "Let's try this again. Make me your woman, Ruse, here in your Clan's Wild."

He stood, his feet rooted in the earth. His erection surged and thumped his stomach. His eyes trailed down her face, over her throat, to her softly rising breasts, spread wide. Her ribs were there, her belly faint, her hips gorgeous swells. Her woman's lips were lost in darkness, and her legs went on and on, down to arched feet. He moved his gaze to the side, and stared at Kaz. Kaz was watching him, his gaze burning. He nodded to his made-brother, and Kaz nodded back.

Ruse's eyes traveled around the circle. He knew each of these men from birth. He admired them. He'd fought with them and beside them. The men's eyes were glued to Amaya. Mac had his blonde's head buried in his crotch, his gaze steady on Amaya's spread thighs. One of the mated pairs was kissing. The other mated pair smiled at him, as the woman sat snuggled in her man's arms.

He looked back at Amaya. His. She'd come to him, with him, for him. He'd spend his life loving her, proving her decision right. He pushed his pants down, first on the side of his hand, then he had to reach and push the other side down. He had to repeat the reach at his thighs. He'd already worked out a pair of shoes he didn't have to lace, and he bent and undid those, then kicked them and the pants off. Stepping up onto the carpet, he fell to his knees between hers. His erection bounced painfully.

He came over her, bracing on his forearm. He lowered his hips, and slipped inside her. Someone moaned off to the side. He echoed them, her heat brutal after the cool night air. Her chest was cool against his, her nipples stabbing him. He kissed her jaw, her cheek.

"Why do you say I need to be watched tonight?"

Her hands came up to wrap around the back of his neck, toying with the sensitive line of hair at his nape. "I just know it. Maybe to prove to yourself that you're out of the City, that you survived the battle. Maybe to prove to yourself that they still see you, alive and well. Maybe to prove you're still a warrior, a man, and a lover, who will be a vital part of this Clan."

Ruse stared at her face, one eye dark, one eye dancing with green. Both eyes full of love, and need. He bowed his head, dropping his forehead to her chin. His hand shook as it feathered along the curve of her breast. Her vagina clamped tight on him, sucking wet heat that boiled his balls.

Then, he fucked his mate. He drew back his hips, and slapped them back down,

tunneling into her. With his weight shifted onto his arm, he was able to look down at her chest and watch her breast sway with each downstroke. He wanted his other hand crushing that breast. Her hands pulled at his shoulders, stroked his nape, tugged his hair, but he wouldn't lower his face down to hers.

His hips stayed steady for a bit, until he caught the scent of one of the other women nearby. Then his hips came down harder, faster. Someone moaned. He looked up. A warrior had his cock out, and was pumping it in time with Ruse. He nodded at him, his face pulled tight. The man next to him abruptly fumbled with his pants, but Amaya pinched his nipple just then. He let his hips go.

His lower body pistoned with strong thighs, jarring her up on her pillows. She arched her head back, tempting him, and he gave in. He enclosed her throat with his mouth, Sandcat howling inside him with happiness. The scent of her rose over the evening grass, and a ruffle of wind skated the line of sweat that had gathered on his spine. He dragged his teeth up and down, glorying in the fact he no longer feared Sandcat overwhelming him. Sandcat knew she was his, because Mac had already seen the claim and closed it.

He lifted his head. Mac watched them while he fucked his blonde from behind. The blonde's head was buried in her arms, Mac moving his body hard, matching Ruse. Ruse grinned wildly at his Alpha. Looking down, he saw Amaya's face had drawn into the tortured, straining expression he loved.

"Mine. My Lady. Yes." His voice came out in gasps from his brutal pace. But she didn't seem to mind. She opened her eyes, and shattered. Those eyes, connecting with his, then going blank as the pleasure took her out of her body, out of her mind. He drove hard into her valley and held the press, laying his whole body down on her softness. She wailed, writhing under him, as her orgasm extended.

Rolling to his bad side, feeling her breast smashed under him, he took his arm and drove it between their hips he still strained to hold tight. His finger breached her hood and squirmed to flatten her clit. As he pressed it, her vagina almost snapped off his dick, it clamped so hard. Her voice faded to gasping sobs as her orgasm sent her into a small convulsion.

He looked up, met Kaz's eyes, and bared his teeth. Kaz snarled back at him. Kaz had taught him this. Taking his hand from between them and shoving it under her ass, he grabbed one cheek and lifted, canting her hips a tiny bit, then he tightened his abs and dug with his thighs and shoved his cock into her secret space. Her voice escalated into a shriek as her head thrashed wildly, her hair a cloud of scent as lovely as her come. Her nails were embedded in his shoulders, and he smiled down at her slackened, pleasure-wrecked face.

He waited until she took a great, tremulous breath, her body still poised, shuddering on the downward slide of the vicious orgasm he'd claimed. He leaned until his lips were above her open mouth and he breathed, "And I give myself over as yours."

Her eyes focused on him for one moment before he saw them shatter again. He sent his tongue deep in her mouth and exploded, shaking and groaning, his cum wrenched from his very soul. He spurted again, and a guttural, animal groan wrenched from his lovely Amaya. The field beneath them spun from the force of his joy. He spurted again and her fist beat against his arm as she choked.

Alarmed, he pulled his hand from her ass to prop himself up again, rolling off her chest, ending the kiss. But she wasn't choking from his weight. It was her orgasm that

continued to wrack her body. He spurted again as he lowered his head and took an engorged nipple in his mouth. She sobbed, her nails raking down his arm. He felt lightheaded, and his toes hurt, and suddenly he felt like he could fly.

“Shhhh,” he crooned over her breast. “Shhhhh.” He kissed her nipple, then bit it possessively. She moaned, continued to cry. “It’s done, baby. Shhhh.” He laved her skin, circling around and around.

Next to him one of the men came with a sigh. He could tell from the scents mixing in the air that most had already come earlier. He lay his head next to hers, tucking her body under him. Sighing, he listened to his people murmur around them. The grass whispered night secrets, and his woman’s breath steadied as her tears stopped. Bodies slapped together nearby, a woman’s hissed demands and a man’s grunts combining to a mutual moan in moments.

Eventually, a few feet moved away. Someone doused the magelight. Amaya’s body slackened in sleep, and his penis eased from her body on a sea of cream, but he stayed nestled in her valley. Blankets and rugs were shifted, tugged from under them. Kaz lay down at his back, tossed a blanket over all three of them.

Mac lay his woman down beyond Amaya, and snugged her back into his chest. He reached over the blonde’s body to stroke Amaya’s arm, then lifted his hand back to burrow between the woman’s lower lips. Someone was already snoring up by his head, and someone else tossed an arm over Ruse’s calf.

Ruse lay surrounded by Sandcats, nestled in the field, holding his mate. He closed his eyes and remembered the grass on his fingertips. A crystal clear image took his breath. Both of them laughing, brown hair dancing, the soft, green blades feathering around them. He was home. Life didn’t get any better.

The End

About the Author:

Mima is a dreamer in upstate New York. When people query her on what she’s reading, she answers proudly and simply, “A really sexy romance.” She firmly believes women know the difference between fantasy and reality, and need both. No matter how sweet the kids, husband, mother, cats, house(work), and job are. Mima is at runemima@yahoo.com and www.mimawithin.com

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