



Spirit Within

A Bonded Fantasy (Book 6)

Mima

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Blurb

Her final purpose was to save him. The slave woman never flinched from releasing the hawk in her care. If the only way out was to become a darkmage, then that's what she'd do. Her entire goal was his freedom. When her goal was achieved, she was left nameless, tainted, lost.

The hawk named Tydus endured believing he must reveal the darkness's hidden depths to his people. The slave who cared for him became his partner, one he wouldn't leave behind. When he finally stood free of his chains, he looked down to recognize his mate ... and a darkmage.

Friends help them find a way back to civilization, but no one who hasn't lived through what they did can understand it. Clinging to each other, their connection saves their sanity. Struggling to shed the emotional poison they were infected with, they discover passion can transcend fear. In order to heal, there can be no lies between them, especially in bed. He thinks it's his task to heal her, but she knows what he's hiding.

How does a shattered woman face a dominant man's needs?

How does a guilty man fight through his wounded woman's fear?

Hope born in darkness glows brighter from the shadows.

Dedication

Dedicated to anyone who was in the tri-state area on 9/11. No one else can really know what it was like. We own that moment, the people who saw the ash and smelled the smoke. It is our shadow, and we recognize it in each other. The grieving silence of the streets on those days never fades in our memories. Viva New York City.

Prologue

The Temple was a peaceful place. In the early days after his mother's suicide, Thad had spent a great deal of time here, in Seventh City's shrine to the Sacred Couple. He wasn't worried about being recognized, since he'd been so scrawny and sniveling back then. Being back built the rage all over again. The priests' and priestess' morning chant wound through him, wrapping his tension tighter. With every extended note of their prayerful voices blending in unison, he ground his teeth, thirsting for their blood.

He knelt with the other dawn supplicants, and closed his eyes to the intricate blonde brick courtyard. The fragrance of the ancient trees' delicate, newly-emerging foliage mixed with the precious beeswax candles, an extravagant use of real fire. When he and his Dark council had driven the Beasts out of the Cities, when he had sent the Guilds into distrustful chaos, when his lizard-birds fed well on the anarchy they introduced from the skies, he would enter this City under his real name, through the northern Main Gate, and he would march directly here, and burn this place. They would not sweetly sing for wisdom then. They would scream and wail, and he would drink deep on pain. He would triumph.

The High Priest rose and struck the gong as the sun, Skyfather's embodiment, slipped over the horizon. It would be the Priestess' job to honor the Earthmother at night. Here in Seventh City, the sun and the sand mixed for a more brutal understanding of the Sacred Couple than in the other six Cities of the Royal Kingdom. Thad idly wondered if his interest and aptitude for darkcraft had benefited from his being honed in the harshest of climates.

The crowd rose from their knees and began to disperse, most to their breakfast, others to duties. Guildless stood from the shadows of the compound's brightly painted walls and began to sweep again. Winter was slow to leave this year, and last night had seen another brutal sandstorm. His gaze swept the crowd and lit on the one he hunted. She was young, and proud. She was lovely, devoted, and earnest, despite being born to the Temple. He licked his lips. When he had come here three days ago and risked one single small darkspell to choose prey, her soul was one of the few that shone bright. Certainly, of those that shone like fatted pigs, she'd been the youngest and most attractive.

It was easy to smile as she padded toward him, blushing. "Good morning, Michael. I trust you weathered Earthmother's wrath last night?"

Her golden skin was a product of generations of desert sun, but her blonde hair, a silky waterfall to her waist, was a remnant of other places. It was unusual in Seventh City and along with her sharp green eyes, made her a beauty. He'd sought her out at dinner his first night, playing a lonely, rare traveler seeking the comfort of a consistent faith in a strange City. She'd been ridiculously easy to please. A few smiles, a compliment, a soft brush of gentle fingers, and ardent faith had bought him several kisses on the second day. Last night, his third, he'd lowered her robes and licked her chest until she'd flushed and moaned. He'd imagined his tongue was a knife and almost come himself, murmuring prayers to her flawless skin all the while.

"Skyfather lent me strength to face his wife, and I meditated on the nature of a

woman's strength." He winked at her, and she laughed, ducking her chin. Her trill made heads turn. Then again, they often turned her way. None of these sheep knew it, but they sensed the strength of her soul.

His dick thickened just thinking about bringing her into his Fortress and watching her eyes when she felt her spiritcraft evaporate under the yoke of darkcraft's mastery. "And yourself?" He trailed his finger down the slender length of her arm, from shoulder to wrist, then twisted his hand and laced his fingers with hers. Her breath stilled, and he stepped against her. "Did you rest well? Did your skin suffer any damage from the ... storm?"

She bit her lip, her free hand rising to play with the lovely gold bangle that adorned her throat. Matching bangles wrapped her bicep and her ankles. He really liked this tradition of Seventh City's. Habituating women to wearing manacles under the guise of self-decoration was incredibly clever of the men. He wanted to see them made of thick, rough steel, attached to chains. And he would.

He made up his mind. Tonight, he would take this young priestess and rape her. He would drink down her cries to the Sacred Couple and cut her and laugh and grow strong.

"No damage," she shook her head, and her thick hair swayed against her shoulders, glimmering in the strengthening morning light. "My skin seems to be more sensitive from the ... energy in the air, but is quite healthy." Then she winked back.

He chuckled, charmed. Fuck, he loved the hunt. He even enjoyed pretending to be pious, since it would make the pain of his revelation that much worse. "Have breakfast with me?"

Suddenly, he wanted to take her now. He loathed this Temple and all its sanctimonious pronouncements. It would be so very sweet to take something of theirs. It wouldn't equal the harm they'd done him when they'd pronounced his mother weak, obsessed, and selfish. She'd been dead that night. So much for the vaunted sacrament of the souldance. The Temple was full of judgmental, arrogant politics, and his mother had gone to them in need at the very bottom of her strength. For one brief moment, he wondered what might have happened if his mother had met this composed, kind woman. He dismissed the thought, instead wondering if he would rape her in the sifting chamber of the lake beneath the Fortress, or here in her own Temple first.

"I'm sorry," her voice thickened with regret. "I'm scheduled to lead the acolytes in a morning lesson, and then my friend Sinthy asked me to take her place roaming the market."

All the Temple personnel were expected to take turns being available in the City's market. In practice, it was the lower ranked members who took the duty that could bring them into contact with shy Guildless afraid to enter the Temple.

"I'd think she could find a lower level priestess to take over her slot."

She shrugged, green eyes serene. "I actually love being in all the hustle and bustle. Market duty is where I've had the best conversations."

"Really? I've just had the strangest urge to go shopping. I think I need to spend a great deal of time looking for the perfect bangle. Something about," he lifted the hand he still held and circled her wrist with his other hand, "this big." In truth, there were still two contacts he hadn't met with, acolytes of his own, others eager to experience the true power that could be gained through pain and death. Work before play, and all that.

She smiled up at him, eyes clear, cheeks round and rosy. "Your eyes are the exact

color of the sky. I look into them and feel like floating."

He tapped her nose. "I'm blue and you're green. I like how we match the sacred colors of our spiritual family." His gaze drifted from the small swells of her tits stabbing at her thin, white linen Temple gown to her reed-slender waist. "Family is important to me."

Please, Mama, please get up. Small hands tugged on blood-slick wrists, the shredded skin rough under his fingers. Please, Mama, stop staring. Look at me! I'm here, Mama!

She licked her lips. "Michael? Are you all right?" Her free hand lifted and her petal-soft, privileged fingertips traveled down the planes of his face, tickling him with the energy she fed him. He pulled from her touch, trying to control the disgust he felt at the thin buzz of her spiritcraft. It was nothing like the rush of bone-rattling power he'd get when he beat her unconscious.

"I will be," he kept his gaze averted.

She was too perceptive. This was the third time she'd sensed his dark thoughts, despite the potion that cloaked his darkcraft and allowed him to move through the City, even with the pompous Beast guards sniffing with their animal noses. He breathed deeply, and tried to wear the mask. It was getting harder. He'd definitely take her today.

"Would you like to pray with me?" she tightened her grip on his hand, pressing their palms tight.

"I would, but I do actually have to go to the Masonry Guild's compound again today. I'll find you at the market, and perhaps we can have dinner together?" He'd try to get under that dress to those toned, long legs before dinner if he could.

She nodded. Thad's heart kicked in his ribs, his blood thickening. He would drink deep with this one. All of the council could, and the shadow that was left would make a strong slave in their Fortress. Ducking his head, he stole a quick hard kiss from her lips, swallowing her gasp. "Until later, my desert dove."

She walked away from him, shoulders back, chin up, waving to a group of giggling girls near the Temple well.

He moved to the side gate of the compound, and noticing that no one stood near, took a brief, satisfying moment to pinch out the incense burning there. Whistling, he walked out to begin his day.

Chapter One

Slave clenched her fingers around the stone until the roughly sharpened edge bit into her skin. Crouched in the hot, dusty, stone corridor, she rocked. Her arms tightened around her folded knees. Her tears had disappeared weeks ago, along with hope and fear. The only emotion penetrating her determination now was the occasional flash of rage. She tried to summon it. Tried to use it for strength, for the purpose Ty had given her. Slave needed to kill a man. Right now.

Her beautiful golden hawk, assigned to her for a week, had been so agitated yesterday. He'd smelled the prior captive, the last hawk they'd ruined, when the slaves had moved him out of his torture room to the killing room. She'd told Ty the man's time had come, his body destroyed even beyond the use of the darkmages. After all, when a captive had no more pain to give, and his beastspirit couldn't be broken, then all the former person was good for was death.

Ty had tipped his corded throat back and bellowed. It had hurt, to hear the misery of futility in him, the same rage she'd learned to live with in the three months since she'd been made Slave. In the week she'd been ordered to wash and feed him, he'd become a beacon to her, a reminder that there was life beyond this place, hope that the monsters would someday be killed. Ty hadn't cried for his friend. He'd whispered one simple sentence to himself: *I wish I could keep him from them.*

But she'd heard, and she knew it was a good way to make her death matter. Not only would she spite *them*, which was most important, but she'd give the man peace. Even though she'd never met the other hawk, she knew he'd hate that the darkmages fed from his death, the final insult. And Slave would also fulfill Ty's wish. Although he hadn't called for his friend's death, it was truly the only way to 'keep him from them.'

So she crouched here in this tiny alcove near his death room, struggling to control her heart. Gripping this pathetic weapon, she prepared to commit yet another unthinkable act. The open archway cast a U-shaped arc of light. She'd crawl to the entrance and face the man. She had to do this. Otherwise, it would be a bad death, one the darkmages would gorge on. After the beatings, burns, whippings, cuts, and breaks, they were going to rip chunks off of him, slowly, until he died. There wasn't anything he could do to stop it. They were done extracting information and experimenting with his nature and his will. She couldn't even drag him into the shadows to die on his own. He'd been bolted to the wall, one thick iron spike through each shoulder, then capped with a wide flat disk.

Not much was left of the wounded beast warrior a lizard-bird had brought back to the Fortress shortly before she'd arrived a few months ago. Still, he wasn't a slave, like her. They'd tried, of course. Just like they tried with all of them. But *he* hadn't broken. He wasn't weak like her. He was free, his spirit blocking the slave command that controlled the humans here, even when his body could no longer stand. The pain he couldn't help but feed them was forced service, but he was no slave.

She fisted her free hand in her tattered dress, both covered in the fine red-brown grit of this Fortress. Her knees were scabbed, bruised, scarred. The last time Tattoo had beaten her, she'd landed hard against the wall, and one of her knees was still a bit swollen, even a week later. She ground her head into the stones behind her, hating.

Harvesting his final breath would make them even more powerful, for a time. And they didn't deserve his death. Slave understood she would die here. It was all right, because this would make it count. For Ty, for this destroyed man Ty called a friend, she'd spend her life to give him a better death. Then she wouldn't be forced to watch, wouldn't be forced to care, as Ty, strong, beautiful Ty, became the skeletal shell this man now was.

She licked her lips, turned her poorly made knife over in her hands. This was it. She'd slip in, open his throat, and go. They'd be able to tell who did it, and then it would be her turn. She just had to open her own throat before they came for her. Maybe she should save them the hunt and just do herself right in the room, right next to the warrior. Yes, that was a good idea. She'd—

Footsteps. No! Their meetings usually lasted longer. It was too soon. She froze, shrinking into her small niche. Should she run? Should she dash into the room? A massive man moved down the hall, graceful despite his form. It was the Monster's pet bear, a beast warrior he'd captured and broken before she'd come. He was a bear, with a bear's brain, even when he wore human skin. It meant he was dangerous, but in his simple wild brain, not nearly the scariest thing in this cursed maze. Pausing at the door he snuffled in her direction. She closed her eyes, held her breath. Death was sniffing her out, but she wasn't ready for it to find her yet. First, she had to do something that counted.

With a grunt he went into the room. She was so shocked he'd ignored her, she remained frozen. A low rumbling came to her ears, but she couldn't make out the bear's words. He was speaking? Since when was he a talking bear?

Then, faintly, she heard the mangled warrior rasp, "No."

There was a small crack, and then a horrible, long, wet sound, with harsher cracks. Her heart rattled tremendously in her chest. She struggled to hold her breath. Silence. A shadow rose up in the door. The bear paused, looking down the hall away from her. One of his hands had become a paw tipped with curled claws, the dark fur dripping wet with blood. The claws gripped a lump of flesh. The man-bear moved off down the hall, a small trail of wet drops marking the stones behind him.

Slave sucked in a noisy breath that scoured her dry throat. Gulping to try to summon moisture, she tipped forward onto one hand, her legs screaming as her circulation returned. She crept, shaking, to the doorway. Closing her eyes, she took two quick breaths and glanced in.

Whipping her head back around the corner, she pressed herself against the wall. Too late. The sight was burned into her brain, yet another nightmare that would follow her to her end. A skeletal man, body destroyed. Two massive iron caps the only covering at his shoulders, thick, dark old blood painting his sides. His head lolled to one side, eyes staring. And in the center of his body, a hole dripping a vivid wash of red, white bones sticking every which way.

Using the rough stone at her back, Slave stood, forcing her knees to hold her. She stumbled away to one of the slave doors and ducked inside. She rolled the stone across the opening. Crumpling to the ground, she breathed in small pants, aching as if she'd run for days. The Monster's pet bear had taken the warrior's heart. Why the bear had granted the warrior the mercy of breaking his neck first, she didn't know. It was done. The warrior couldn't be tortured by the Merry Three, or any of the other skulking horrors, any more. He was finally gone from this nightmare.

The thought of offering a prayer passed through Slave's mind. She couldn't do it.

She couldn't send Skyfather or Earthmother the smallest request, because it would morph into a terrible damning rage. She was done with tears. She was done with prayer. She'd have to find another way to make her death count, so she could be free, too.

A pulse of pain settled in her shoulders. The slave command rose through her body. The compulsion to obey the directive she'd been given wasn't something she could fight. Clean her prisoner's body in the early morning, feed him in the evening, after the day's experiments and torture. It was time for the afternoon round of pain for him, thus she had to go make the gruel. Her small window of freedom between tasks was over.

Moaning, she found the will to stand again, the bloody ruin of the warrior flashing before her eyes. She bit her lip. The darkmages would be so very, very angry. It would be satisfying to stay here, and listen to their howls of rage through the stone. They would be furious their fun had been taken from them when they left their meeting. But they might find her, and she wanted her death to count. She wondered if this odd action would mean the death of the bear.

She walked, stooped in the low tunnel, to the slave hub. Scurrying through the round room with many doorways, she went into the tunnel leading to their sleeping cubbies. She fell to her hands and knees and crawled along the even smaller passage. In the stinking room of the third dead slave, she hid her stone knife. She'd have to try to sharpen it more tomorrow. For all the tightness of her grip, it hadn't cut her skin today.

Crawling back to the hub, she stood and went toward the kitchen. The nagging, building pain of ignoring her slave command faded from her spine. The brunette was there, trying to cook meat with one hand, since her other was broken. The swollen mess of her broken hand was held carefully from her body. As always, saliva burst into Slave's mouth at the scent of roasting meat. She hadn't tasted it since before, long ago. Meat was only for them, the darkmages.

Slave nodded to her when she glanced up, but the slave order not to speak to the other slaves kept her throat frozen. She took down her usual pot from its hook and flipped it. Standing in front of the stone sink, she froze. There were marks on the inside bottom of the pot. It had been so long since her brain had processed anything but survival, it took her a minute to figure out they were letters, words.

Take your hawk to the guarded room. Go.

Slave leaned forward and filled the pot with the flowing water always streaming past. The mud letters blurred and disappeared. She hung it over the mageheat, and turned it on high. The brunette cook did not look at her again, and for some reason, Slave knew she was not the one who left this message. Sitting next to the pot, she pressed her hand to her heart, feeling it pound. Who could have left this command? And would she obey?

* * * *

Greg focused on keeping his nerves steady. Thad was winding himself up, so it was very important to control his own emotions. Fear in this crowd was deadly, pure and simple. The handsome blond man walked with agitated steps across the large cavern. The magelights hung at staggered heights around the circular room whose stone walls were decorated with gorgeous carvings of animals. This was Greg's favorite room. In this room, they almost felt like a true collective, a Guild of their own. The floor was covered with thick blue rugs, and a dark wooden table, glossy with age, filled most of the space. There were eleven seats around the edge, each with a plain stone stool built into the floor.

Six of those seats were taken.

When they had a proper meeting, nine seats should have been filled. But Thad was stalking the perimeter, and as usual, the triad of insipid bitches would stretch out their insolence until forced into respect. Two women shared one chair, while a third sat on the table facing them. Their elaborately braided dark heads bent together as they giggled and whispered. Greg loathed them with all the passion an ugly man could accrue in a lifetime of being mocked by beautiful women.

Across from them sat a cloaked, older woman, composed, reserved. The Matron supported Greg, and had helped him with the training of the lizard-birds. Three other small, slight men of varying ages filled some of the other chairs.

The smallest and oldest of the nine, a bald man whose scalp was covered in swirling tattoos, finally broke through the tension, his deep voice overriding the girlish titters. "Our three trial attacks failed."

He breathed in, calm, controlled. This issue did not touch him. It was not his fault.

Thad kept pacing with long, stiff strides. "I was told the lizard-birds were ready. By the Couple's stinking toes, I'm sick of skulking!" Striking a valiant pose, his golden hair glowing in the magelight, he threw his arms out angrily. "We have this Fortress. We have a solid complement of skills. We have created a new mage-beast for the first time in centuries! That bodymage we were so close to capturing is helping them proliferate like rabbits. The Pearl Guild's daughter has opened communication centers for women and families to ask questions. More women are volunteering to be breeders for them every day! It must be stopped! They betray our history, our very race, by joining them."

Spittle flew from his mouth as he paced past the table. Greg indulged in an internal chuckle over Thad's issues with saliva. The other people sitting there tracked him with the bored eyes of ones who have heard similar words too often. Keeping his hands on the table, Greg focused on remaining still.

Thad continued his tirade, his voice echoing in the stone room. "It's time to show them all. Human men are more powerful than Beasts can ever be, if they simply study the old ways. It was the Beasts who forbade the old ways out of fear of us! To keep us down!"

Pretar, with his vivid red hair, spoke up. "It is because of our very strength I call for us to continue training the lizard-birds. Time is not of the essence. Indeed, it is on our side. They cannot find us here, no matter how they troll the Cities sniffing, and they cannot begin to guess the scope of our resources." He threw a glance at the dignified, contained woman with downcast eyes.

His heart leaped at Pretar's supportive statement. *Quickly, expand on it. Minimize the recent failure.* Greg wiped his large nose on the back of his hand. "We are safe here. Even though they found one of the lost sifting stones we hid, they have not been able to trigger it despite studying it for years. We have time to perfect the birds' ability to target those who have had contact with the Beasts."

Little round Russ pushed his glasses higher. "The first lizard-bird sent to Royal City might not have failed. There are conflicting reports that it may have injured a Beast's child before attacking him."

Greg could have kissed him.

The dark-skinned girl sitting on the table pouted. "I'm not sorry one of the birds brought back a new hawk when it wasn't supposed to. I want more hawks. We have such

fun.” Slyly, she glanced at Thad. “And you were so close to breaking that last one, to being able to call forth its beast for your own service.”

Their erstwhile leader stopped abruptly. Stroking his chin, he pivoted and glared at her. “And if someone hadn’t cut too much meat off of him, I could have perfected an effective slave spell for the beasts. As it stands now, we’ll drink down his death tomorrow.” Green magefire erupted in his eyes.

Pleasure curled through Greg’s motionless body. It wasn’t true, of course. Karu’s violent play wasn’t what kept Thad from breaking any of the hawks they’d played with. He waited for her to mouth back, for her to become the target of this meeting.

She eased into a chair and folded her hands on the table, saying nothing.

A smaller, more delicate member of the trio of braided women asked, “Where is our charming bear anyway? Meetings are much more fun when he’s here.”

Everyone looked around for the one beast they had successfully broken to their will.

Thad threw himself down onto a stool as well. “I sent him to go hunting. He was looking thin.” He drummed his fingers on the table. “Fine. The lizard-birds continue to harvest hawks for us while we perfect their training. The experiments at breaking the beastspirits continue, but I want the specimens to last longer now. They should be good for at least a dozen attempts before they die. No more torture just to drink their pain and rage. Every day we spend with them should be focused on shattering their control.”

Allie and Dionne huddled together on their shared seat and whispered.

He roared at them, “Enough!” Thad’s fist crashed onto the tabletop. A spell popped into being around it, the air glowing green, speckled with black flecks. “Drink on your own, I say! No more prisoners, or slaves, for that matter, are to be lost to your personal greed. Feed in the Dark’s alleys outside the City Walls.”

He glared at them. “In a year’s time, the shearing begins. We will cull these beasts from our Cities, control the Royals, and retake the Mage Guild, spreading the old ways until we are ready for the final battle. Hopefully, we’ll destroy most of the beasts here, in the very seat they created.” He breathed deep, seeming to become empowered by his vision. “Their clanhomes will breed man-beasts no more, but only the powerful mage-beasts we choose. Their traitorous women will be our whores and slaves and we will feast on the terror of their young.”

Greg licked his lips and wiped his nose again. And again he despaired at how Thad had assigned him the training of the lizard-birds, which played such a large role in that vision.

The knuckles of Thad’s fist gleamed white as it shook, belying his quiet words. “We continue our plan.”

“Agreed.” The soft word rang like a bell in the open space. The Matron placed her own fist on the table. Her more delicate, smaller knuckles gleamed with the force of hatred equal to Thad’s.

One by one, the nine darkmages placed their fists on the table, eager to grow their power. Greg breathed easier. The first three birds had failed when released to attack the Cities and bring back humans who had contact with the Beasts. But that didn’t change the fact that he was still one of the nine, one of the gifted, one of the chosen who would usher in a new era.

The tallest of the braided trio, Dionne, popped up jauntily. “I believe we have a dying hawk to play with one last time. Who shall join us?”

Pretar dusted his hands. "I'll pass up the dregs. It is my day with the new hawk, and I am very eager to test some new poisons I've been working on."

"Suit yourself," the woman shrugged.

The trio of ladies put their arms around each other's waists and skipped out. The sluts' breasts jiggled under their thin, silk dresses. Greg dreamed of slicing their nipples from their bodies. Greg stood with the other men to follow the trio, nodding to the Matron. She nodded back to him, drew her cloak close, and slipped out a smaller arch in the back of the room that led to the underground lake and the sifting stone there. His bones aching in relief, Greg walked out behind Russ.

"Greg."

Russ, and probably Sverre and Pretar too, had to have heard, but they kept walking. Bastards. He thought of continuing, but knew this moment would be played out. Thad would have to have his little moment where he waved his cock around to intimidate. As if Greg had wanted the lizard-birds to fail. Idiot. He'd done the best he could, and with the Matron's help, too.

Greg stopped and turned in the doorway. "Yes, Thad." His cursed beak of a nose always ran here, bothered by the salt in the air.

"If you would sit by me." The blond remained at the table, frozen.

Greg hovered in the doorway before moving to sit within arm's reach of the more robust Thad.

Thad spoke mildly. "At least we managed to kill one beast in the test, based on the reports."

His shoulders eased. "Good. I mean, yes. Even though we lost a lizard-bird, it seems they lost a beast, too."

The silence spun out and he shifted his legs. "Well, I guess I'll be—"

"Sit." Thad's word rolled around the room, pushed with power.

Greg stilled. *No fear. Do not show fear.*

"It was your task, to train the lizard-birds to attack associates of the beasts."

"I—I—it went smoothly." Fuck. Don't stutter. You have just as much a command over pain as this prick. "The training was sound, you were there for the final rehearsal. They ignored Bear and attacked the slave every time."

"And yet one is dead, one came back empty handed, and another came back not with a new slave, but a hawk it shouldn't have hunted."

"You want to do this without a spell. Conditioning a creature is much harder than forcing it." His shoulders hunched.

"I am not interested in excuses. If the training, your training, had worked correctly, the beasts wouldn't now have the dead body of one of our precious birds in their possession. If the training had been set correctly—"

"I did! It was! They performed perfectly here." Greg moved to the far side of his seat. He got ready to run if he had to.

"Greg?" Thad lifted one brow. "What use do I have for failures?"

His blood curdled. Thad's blue eyes were as empty as the sky. His thoughts went ten different directions. Should he prep a spell? Thad wouldn't take pain from him, surely. Should he run yet? Perhaps he should explain the hours he'd put into the training? Abruptly, he decided he was sick of this. He was one of the nine. He was the one who had found the first sifting stone in the Dark alleys.

Sneering at Thad, he said, "Why don't you train them yourself if you think it's so fucking easy? It's not like you're perfect either. Seventh City is still crawling with double teams of Beasts since you chose to hunt in the very Temple last spring."

"Greg."

The only sound was Greg's sawing breaths.

"You disappoint me." Thad's words were quiet, haughty with disdain.

"I'm a watermage. An earthmage would make much more sense. You should have tried Allie or Pretar."

Thad carefully flattened his hand on the table, each long finger spread wide. "Should I have?" he murmured softly.

Greg stood abruptly. "The training was solid." He'd lost control and could feel his fear bloom in the room. Not good.

"The training failed, and because of you, the test failed. Now our enemies have a clue they have no business contemplating. This group hasn't grown by making mistakes."

Casually, he scooped his hand in the direction of Greg. Greg lunged, but didn't escape the blast of writhing shadows that hit him in the hip.

Icy pain mixed with crawling fire. He couldn't believe it. Time stopped as he absorbed Thad had attacked *him*. "AHHHHH! No! No!" Greg fumbled into a petrification spell and threw it at him, but Thad brushed it away with a graceful sweep of his arm.

"No! Not me!" Greg thrashed, summoning a clarifying spell and casting it upon himself. The shadows crawling up his chest and down his legs paused, and then seemed to sink into his body, like water in a sponge.

Panic struck hard, and he cast another, struggling to slow the spreading pain, frantically thinking how to kill, how to stop, how to—ah! The burning! His bones were being ground to dust. He fell to one knee, brain racing, breath choking, staring at Thad still sitting at the table.

Thad closed his blue eyes, head tipped as if smelling a delicate flower. He inhaled, smiling. "Fuck yes, you fucking fuckhead, by Skyfather's blue balls I love this."

Greg crumpled, then jerked into contortions, flailing and flopping on the ground. High, agonized shrieks poured from him continuously, his eyes swelling. Pain. His body was shutting down, he couldn't hold still, couldn't breathe, couldn't stop screaming long enough to think.

Thad stood, straightened his blue velvet jerkin, and stepped away from the stone chair. Greg watched him come, flopping and gurgling, but he couldn't stop it. Thad drew back his foot and kicked with all of his muscular might directly into Greg's groin. In the silence, his body in a reflexive ball, Greg finally understood he was going to die.

"That's for getting one of my lovely lizard-birds killed."

Thad drew a pencil-slim stiletto from his sleeve and casually straddled him. He could only see him through a haze of nausea and spreading numbness that was almost welcome. Thick, dark blood poured from Greg's lips.

"This is for failing." He drove the round, needle-tipped knife a finger's length into Greg's eye. Greg screamed, unable to move, the smell of his rapidly rotting skin harsh in his nose. Thad laughed. Withdrawing it with a wrenching movement, he drove it back down into Greg's ear. Heat erupted there, setting the icy pain free.

Greg wheezed. Thad laughed. A splash of color in the red stone room jumped out

from his stunned brain. There, at the edge of the rear door, the Matron watched, her cloak pulled close around her face. For a moment, hope overcame the pain, and he focused. She smiled. Thad struck down with his knife through Greg's shoulder, and he realized she'd stood there all the while.

That bitch. Just like all the other cunts. She'd set this whole thing up. She wanted the lizard-birds to fail... There were no more thoughts. Just pain, blood, oozing poison, and hate. Thad took his other eye and Greg was forced to listen to the tinny echo of his laughter as he continued to kill him one inch at a time.

* * * *

Ty stared the darkmage down, pleased the man wouldn't meet his eyes. Pleasure was hard to come by. He had to hoard the moments. Even though Ty hung in chains, the human crap-hole was cautious. He didn't have a cupful of the bravery his little Sunshine had. *Don't think about her now.*

Today he was with the redhead again. The Giggling Braids worked as a unit, so over the last seven days he'd hung here, he'd met most of the nine darkmages. He didn't know why the cloaked woman hadn't taken her turn at torturing him. All because of his own stupidity, this smarmy little shit was feeding off his pain. *Don't think about that now.* The red head made a notation in the oversized book, then picked up the flogger he'd laid precisely next to it. He dipped each of the five metal tips into a different little pot of the many gathered there, some clay, some glass, some wood, and one little bowl made out of half a skull. Without meeting his eyes, Red swung the flogger out, swung back to gather momentum, and rolled his arm up and around, sending it streaking down in an arc.

"Hunh!" The sound was torn out of Ty despite his clenched jaw, the pain driving the air from his lungs for a moment.

Stepping forward, Red drew a veil of magecraft down over Ty's form, assessing something Ty didn't see. Ty would rather be whipped another twenty times than suffer the disgusting scan. His gut rolled and he dry-heaved, despite his empty stomach. His skin flushed hot and his muscles jumped frantically. Smarmy Red's darkcraft was disgusting. His hawk beat his wings, desperate inside him. The mage gently laid the black-handled weapon down on the simple wooden table bolted to the floor, and made a few notations.

This time he dipped the five metal tips in a blue glass pot. He swung out, swung back, and lifted the whip around and down. On this, the sixth swing, blood flew, spattering. The darkmage hissed and fussed, wiping at his sleeve in distaste. He scanned Ty, and Ty felt one of his knees give. For the first time, when the little man made his notes, Ty let himself rest against the stone wall at his back. It was going to be a long afternoon.

He tried not to focus on Sunshine. The woman who came to clean and feed him every day fascinated him. Through her, he knew a great deal, even though he'd never left this room since the lizard-bird had snatched him out of the sky and taken him here a week ago. Through her, he controlled his rage and despair. Through her, he knew he'd find the strength to not only survive, but escape. For she was his friend, and he was going to take her from this place.

Thinking about Sunshine kept him from puking the next eight times he was scanned. It was just after his legs had given out on the ninth stroke when the fit blond man stepped

into the room.

Mentally cursing, Ty summoned the will to get on his feet, using his hawk's mental wings to raise himself up and lock his legs. He would not show weakness in front of their leader if he could help it. Deep inside, hawk folded his wings back proudly. He tipped his chin up, fists clenched in the manacles drawn high above his head.

The man walked right up to Ty and grabbed his chin. "And how is my freshest meat doing today? Enjoying being weak and helpless, mighty beast?"

As always, Ty desperately tried to summon his bodycraft, his special affinity to blood and flesh, one of the Six Elements. As always, no power came to his call. He kept his eyes steady and hard. None of his panic at this man's achievements would show. The day he'd spent with Blondie had been the third, and the worst.

"How goes the testing, Pretar?" With a disdainful push and a sneer, the younger man dropped Ty's chin.

"None of the poisons so far have a distinct effect, but he is noticeably weaker as they accumulate. Further testing will be required to see if there are combinations that can deliver this effect faster."

"You moron, it's probably just blood loss. The fuckers have a natural immunity to poison. Just test the biggest combination now. I want you in the main chamber for a ritual to use the last beast's body."

"I need to be meticulous in judging the permutations—"

"Mix all of them. Now. I'm curious."

Ty was disgusted by the shiver that ran through him. None of the potions had harmed him. He'd been here a week and withstood beatings, burnings, and lashings, not to mention several horrible dark spells. He could survive this. Still, his heart thundered as he watched Red's hand patiently dip each sharpened metal fob in every pot.

The confident blond turned and idly drove his finger deep into a gash on Ty's chest. Ty's pecs jumped at the pain, and his gut rolled at the man's pleasure.

"Look at you, all sweet with fear." The man tipped his head, his golden lashes falling over blue eyes as he inhaled deeply, seemingly lost in rapture. "I never get tired of it. How many hawks have my lovely pets brought me now? Eleven? Thirteen? I could drink your fear and pain," he twisted his finger deeper into Ty's muscle, "forever."

Ty knew he was the fifteenth. Fifteen of his Clan's warriors fallen, dying under these disgusting games, and the man didn't even bother to keep an accurate count. He bared his teeth at the man, and the man bared his right back.

Withdrawing his finger, he sucked it clean. "I'm going to bring your people to their knees. No. Their bellies. Yes, I'm going to destroy you and your precious Clans." Thrusting his face down, he licked across Ty's chest.

Ty's skin shriveled. He hoped the poisoned lashings killed the man, but that would be too easy.

"Death will come for you. And I will drink it deep." He yanked a handful of Ty's hair and wrenched his head around so he could hiss in his ear. "It's clear to me who's more powerful. Yet your laws say I'm not good enough. You told her I was too weak."

Spittle from the man's rage peppered Ty's neck. It landed like tiny coals, worse than the poison-tipped lash. Ty pulled on his neck, but the man shook him, pulling his hair until the strands ripped. "I wasn't. I was never weaker than you. You, who think you're too good to adopt human men. You, who reject women with human sons. Well, how's

this for weak?"

The young blond raised up his hand, seething shadows twining around his flowing fingers. Flexing and folding his hand, the spell came up. Ty couldn't stop himself from trying to escape it, shouting hoarsely. He lifted his legs, but the heavy ball weights on his ankles and his weakened state saw that he only had the strength to kick at the man's knees. He jerked his head, leaving a lot of hair in the man's fist, but the darkmage only grabbed his throat. He jerked and bucked, his ripped and bleeding body straining to get away, while his hawk flapped and hopped wildly inside. He tried to let it free, to pull up his battleform, but the oppressive spell dampening all but darkcraft held his hawk as chained as he.

The bastard laughed, and slapped his splayed hand over Ty's heart. *Horror*. Ty screamed, Hawk screamed, until their breath died. The darkness was wrong, disgusting, filthy. It swarmed into his chest, into his blood, into him. Tainting him.

"No." The cry was faint, but came from the very depths of him.

Then his heart beat. It was a pump, and it was pumping the darkness away. Ba-dump. His struggles surged, the thick chains clanking above his head as his arms strained. Ba-dump. Fresh wet heat ran down one forearm from the manacle cutting into his wrist. Ba-dump. His shoulders burned, his thighs shook. Ba-dump. Bucking and twisting, he tried to dislodge the hideous touch. Ba-dump. The dark taint eased out of his blood. Hawk's wings snapped to their widest, a full soaring spread, and Ty grabbed onto the majesty, the memory of freedom in the air.

"Fuck! No. I had you!" The mage pushed off of Ty, panting.

Ty collapsed against the stone at his back, his body shuddering in relief.

"By the Earthmother's slimy cunt, I had you!" The blond's face twisted into an ugly mask of hate. He screamed the words at Ty, his face red.

Whirling to the table, he snatched the dangling whip out of Red's hands. "I had you!" He drew back his arm.

Ty managed to lift his chin, although the rest of him was hanging limply. "You're never going to be strong enough to take down the Trux. The only one of us you've broken is one weak, rogue bear."

Screaming, throat corded, the blond brought the whip down. Ty turned his head to the side at the last moment, and he felt every single one of the fobs land deep. His cheek, his neck. One tricep, just below the hollow of his underarm, and vertically across his collarbone.

"Hunh." The sound that tore from his throat was so mild compared the complete pain across his body. Then skin ripped as the man jerked the fobs free. "Huuuuunh."

Still screaming, the man drew back and hit him again. This time, the lashes landed mid-chest, among the ruin from Red's work. And again, this time across his belly, hip, and one thigh. Agony was now a shimmering constant paralyzing his throat. Ty gritted his teeth, burying his face as much as he could in his shoulder. Another lash over his pelvis, gouging into the skin above his dick, but missing his groin. He angled his hips back, trying to protect himself. The whip sang again, slashing so the tips scraped across his hipbones. He had no more breath to scream.

"Sir."

Again, and this time, one of the metal tips lodged in his thigh. When the blond pulled the lashes back, a deep chunk of flesh went with it. Ty's breath sounded harsh and wild.

He was so angry at himself, that he couldn't control his fear. All it did was feed them, energize them.

"Sir, you need to cease. Let me scan him to see if the poison combination was effective."

Blondie spun in place and screamed in a spray of spittle. "Shut up!" Turning again toward Ty, he drew his hand back.

"I'm afraid I must insist. You're caught in bloodlust. One moment, and I'll be done, and we'll have more information."

The whip flew, hitting higher on his chest, baring one rib.

"Sir."

"I said, shut up!"

Red stepped up and jerked the whip out of Blondie's grasp. Blondie screamed in rage, and fell on Red, his hands going for his throat. Red was considerably smaller, but he threw out a spell, some sort of shimmering fog. Blondie staggered back.

"Skyfather's balls, Thad, your mother died a long time ago. I think you should get over it."

Ty was frankly astonished Smarmy Red, otherwise known as Pretar, had the balls to take on Blondie. His breath rasped as he peered through the haze of pain shimmering his eyesight.

Blondie returned his comment with a strike of pure green light that shot out like a sword. "How dare you interrupt me!"

Smarmy Red side-stepped the strike. "You were within your rights to kill Greg, although doing it alone so you were the only one to drink him was shitty. You owe us."

Fierce delight thrilled through Ty. Big-nose was dead? If only they'd kill each other off a little faster.

Red set the whip down on the table by the big book. "Calm down. How dare you kill off our last Beast in a snit. Don't think I didn't hear how your bear killed the dying hawk this afternoon, too. This one may be the last one we get, since the birds are to be used to attack beast associates in the Cities now."

Ty's heart thundered. He forced himself to keep breathing through the pain. But Red's casually spoken words curdled his blood. The Clans had been hunting the lizard-birds unsuccessfully for two years. Now they were going to attack the Cities, the women, with them? Ty jerked his hands on his chains, but it was only a weak twitch.

The two darkmages began to circle each other.

Thad spat, "You criticize me? You exist because I allow it! I ate that hawk's heart, and I'll eat yours!"

The room was full of rotting stench, shadows, and biting cold. Ty focused on breathing. *Oh Erich, buddy, I'm so sorry.*

Ty prayed they'd kill each other before he bled out, just so he could see it. He called to each of the Six in turn, breath sawing, throat and eyes burning from the stench in the room. *Fire, give me your energy. Air, bring me peace. Water, take me far, and Earth, gather me tight. Flesh, be strong, and Spirit, hold. Hold for Clan, for honor, for hope.*

Then another darkmage entered the situation. Glasses stepped into the room. "Oh. Oh, dear. Dear, dear me."

A ridiculous urge to laugh rolled through Ty's shuddering body. He was going to die at the hands of idiotic darkmages led by an insane cock named Thad.

Glasses pushed his lenses firmly to the bridge of his nose. "Sir, you said to come get you if you were late for the ritual."

Blondie never looked away from Pretar. They circled, green fire dancing on Thad's hands, answering swirls on Red's.

"How dare you even mention my mother! Don't for one second think your quest for strength compares to my quest for vengeance." Thad threw a one-two hit high and low, but Pretar blocked both.

"Russ," Red called over his shoulder to Glasses. Red didn't even seem out of breath, which made Thad look even more unstable. "He said he already ate the hawk's heart. Is that true?"

"*Shut up!*" Thad screamed, choking.

"Really?" Russ, also known as Glasses, shifted his weight. "Oh, dear. He told me Bear ate it." Russ lifted his hand and flicked black light flecked with green at Thad.

And that simply, Thad was frozen. Ty tried to control the convulsions of his body where he lay against the rock wall. The eight darkmages he'd seen here in the course of his week were always bickering like children, jealous and competitive. But he'd never have guessed after his basic torture session with Glasses' knife, that Glasses had these abilities. Even as a bodymage, Ty had to expend massive energy to take control of someone's body. Glasses didn't even have to concentrate. Ty's blood chilled.

Pretar straightened, sighing. "Thanks." He ran a hand through his damp red hair. "He's getting worse. He would have killed this hawk, and we've only had it a week. After just telling us this morning to make them last longer." His voice dripped disgust. "As it is, between fighting Thad and healing the damage he wrought, I'm going to use up all the pain I'd gained today."

Russ remained hovering in the doorway. "He better not have eaten the heart, after killing Greg, too. But the bear did maul the body. I saw it. Thad is punishing him even now. So maybe he was just taunting you."

Good. Satisfaction filled Ty to hear the bear was being tortured now, too. Damn traitor. The rogue made Ty furious every time he saw it. Not only was the bear a failed warrior lost to honor, but he'd been weak enough to be ensnared by Thad, who now had the beastspirit functioning for him. Killing the bear topped Ty's to-do list.

"Well, that's what he said when he was raging at the hawk." Pretar flapped his hands toward Ty. "Just look at the mess he made. And all for no purpose. Let me at least gauge where he is now."

Pretar walked around Thad's frozen form and moved toward Ty.

Without meaning to, Ty said, "No." Then almost bit through his tongue at revealing his despair.

Pretar never paused. He raised his hands and sent the darkcraft scan over Ty's flesh. Ty hung in his chains and shook, trapping his moans deep in his throat. When the filth faded from his skin, he puked, spitting to the side. The thin stomach bile, all he had, burned his throat.

Red went to his book and made a note, quill flicking perkily. Ty determined he'd get that book and shred it before he left.

"You know, Pretar..." Russ glanced into the hallway, checking both ways.

"Yes?" The man was capping his pots of potions.

"We could, right now, maybe—"

“Spit it out, Russ.”

“Take the hawk. For ourselves.”

Pretar paused and closed his book thoughtfully.

“You could conduct all your experiments as carefully as you like. All this one’s anger and pain would be just for us. The girls want to rape him tomorrow.”

Ty’s gut rolled, and he almost puked again. Blood was pooling around his feet. Oddly, the rivulet trickling over the back of one knee itched.

Russ continued on, huddled in the doorway, thin arms wrapped around himself. “Sverre wants to use the crazy Water girl on him. Perhaps the hawk will give deeper access to his beastspirit if women are hurt for his lack of cooperation. We already know the girl won’t cooperate if we torture others in front of her.”

Everything inside Ty stilled. They kept mentioning this other woman they had. But if Tattoo tried to hurt Sunshine in front of him, it could very well break him.

Pretar scratched along his jaw, clearly fascinated despite himself. Sighing, he shook his head. “It’s no good. It would declare our opposition to Thad’s madness too soon. The plan to create havoc in the Cities is actually a good one. Despite the birds’ failure in bringing back this one last week, I believe the one that died a month ago did manage some sort of attack in the City. When the Beasts have been banished, then is our time to move and wrest control of the Fortress from Thad.”

Pretar walked over to Ty and laid his hand on an unmarred patch of skin. The tingling warmth of bodycraft was something precious to Ty. It was part of him, an unleashing, a stretching that awoke his senses and filled him with joy. This healing wasn’t anything like his own magecraft. It was foul, painful, an abomination. Hoarsely, he screamed, jerking against the wall but without the strength to truly fight. Pretar chuckled, almost fondly. Finally, Ty’s skin was whole, although he was so weak, his head hung on his neck. The *skreee* of his hawk echoed faintly in his ears, calming him. Pretar turned. He and Russ went off, talking softly.

After a short while, Ty was able to raise his head. Despite the sting in his nose, he did indeed feel steadier. Pretar had instilled blood replacement also. Thad remained poised in his circling crouch, hands held like claws, face contorted. Frozen. Helpless. Pushing off from the wall, Ty almost dislocated his shoulders straining forward. One bodylength away, his enemy waited, back exposed. Ty shifted, straining *down*, trying to pull the chains off the wall above his head.

After a few minutes of effort, one he’d failed dozens of times already, a new idea popped into his head. Maybe he could knock the man closer. He tried to angle his body as far from the wall as he could. Then bracing himself, he began to rock one leg. Bit by bit, he was able to increase the swings of his foot weighted with the short length of chain and the heavy iron ball. Forward, the ball skittered over the bloody stone floor, then back, his thigh burning, muscles stark as he pulled back a bit farther than before, increasing the momentum.

By the time he was able to swing his leg forward hard and fast enough for the weight to lift off the ground in a low kick, he was dripping with sweat and had reopened the cuts on his wrists. But adrenaline pounded through him when he saw the ball come *so close* to the madman’s leg. Drawing his leg back until it hit the wall behind him and he could get no more swing, he pushed, straining, sending his leg out in an extended kick with all his faded strength.

The iron ball failed to hit the frozen man. The chain attaching it to his ankle wasn't long enough. Ty fell back against the wall, chest working deeply, eyes boring a hate-filled hole through Thad's back. Every muscle in his body snapped taut. This man had gathered eight other darkmages in a stone Fortress unknown to his people. A Fortress so similar to River Mountain, Ty was sure it had come from his people, the Truxet. Sometime in the lost eons of history, the eleven Clans of shapeshifters had abandoned this Fortress. Now the darkmages operated with impunity, since they no longer had to even hide their magic in the Seven Cities. They could retreat here, wherever here was, and create the beebees which had captured so many hawks over the past years. They abused humans as slaves and tortured his Clan brothers to death. They worked to destroy his people, and rule the Seven Cities.

Thrashing in his chains, he demanded his hawk's presence. *Come to me!* Opening every gate in his mind, he focused on his magescape, the mental landscape that was the source of his magecraft. The craggy mountaintop filled his inner eye, and he built the image of his hawk perched there, detailed down to the russet red feathers on his wingtips. His curving black talons left fresh white scratches in the gray stone. Ty held the image, breathed the cold, thin scent of the air, and tried to pull the hawk into his body. Pain burst through his shoulders, agony pounded in his temples. Gasping, his inner vision fell back to the golden magelights of the small rounded stone room. He stared at the frozen man in front of him and tasted bitter defeat.

Chapter Two

Slave carried the gruel to Ty's room the long way. Whenever someone died in the Fortress, there was upheaval in the routine. Undercurrents and adjustments in the power ladder flowed faster than usual. Today, she came to an intersection of hallways where a niche held a statue of a sleek, long-bodied animal with a pointy face and rounded ears. His short paws were delicate, but tipped with razor claws. The carvings that marked the hallways of this place were so detailed, they seemed to be living creatures merely trapped in stone. She'd asked about this one and Ty had told her it was a marten.

Like all humans, Slave had spent her life in a City and had had no idea what the cute creature was. Wincing, she banished the fleeting thought of the City from her mind. She was Slave. She existed. If she remembered, she'd go insane. Easing down the staircase to her left, she breathed through the tingling in her spine from ignoring her slave command. She wasn't facing Ty's direction anymore, so the compulsion to go feed him built. One turn of a hallway and she carefully braced herself at the corner of the next crossroads. Nose flat to the stone, she slowly eased her face far enough past the wall to see with one eye.

There was a small room, a room like any of the dozens in this maze. But this one room had a guard. A slave stood in the doorway. And he didn't face out. He faced in. Waiting, bare sword ready. *Take the hawk to the guarded room. Go.* Yes, whoever sent her that message meant this one. This small, tiny room that held nothing but a lump of stone. She'd been past it on her explorations, avoided it. Her heart thundered as the pain grew tighter. This was a way out? And possibly a way in, since they had set a guard to watch it.

Pulling back from the view, Slave scurried back up the stairs and continued toward the captive she'd been assigned to. The lovely, powerful, doomed Ty. With his eerie golden-orange eyes and light brown curls burned gold by the sun, he dazzled her. The blades of his cheekbones and jaw, the point of his chin and strong nose all came together in a handsome blending. After months of seeing the Monster stride these halls with his strong, golden form, she knew handsome didn't matter.

No, it wasn't Ty's face, or his bare, sculpted body the color of golden cream that drew her. It was the life that fairly seethed around him. Sometimes when she first glimpsed him upon entering his room, she could almost see the cage of darkcraft pressing and bottling his vibrancy down around his skin. Yes, on some days, she thought she'd seen him *glow*.

Back on her path to Ty's room, the pain stabbing her shoulders faded. At the sound of voices, Slave stopped, crouching down against the wall. She was near the heart of the Fortress. A lovely hall of carved pillars in some shimmery red stone opened between two grand rooms. One was a meeting room with a round table, and the other room she thought of as the temple, due to its altar. She was at the edge of where the plain, brown stone hall opened up onto the elegant, open, shining red stone floor.

Lights shone from the temple, while the meeting room was dark. She strained to hear.

“—understand I was in the throes of bloodlust. It is to be expected—“

Ugh. The Monster was droning on. He sounded subdued.

The higher, halting voice of Glasses came. She couldn't hear it. Hands aching from clenching the hot, heavy gruel pot, she crept into the hall, staying tight against the far wall. As much as she wanted to hear them and what they were planning, she was too cautious to go up to the temple doorway. Yet as she scuttled past, she caught a piece of conversation.

"Well." The girlish, breathy voice curdled her stomach. "Tomorrow is our day with him, and I think I speak for all of us when I say we have the right to perform our own experiments. I don't want you popping in to muck everything up. It ruins the mood."

Slave's stomach sank. *Oh, Ty.* The Merry Three were the scariest. They were alien in their utter evil. The darkmages each took turns torturing the hawks. But because the Merry Three worked as a unit, that meant all three of them had him over three days. They'd cut him, bit him, drunk his blood, and tortured him with nightmares. But he'd known the illusions for false fears and they hadn't broken him. Slave had seen the nightmares break other slaves, and she'd been proud of his intelligence and strength. It was true, Beasts were stronger than humans. At the least, she knew he was stronger than she. Mostly, she'd just been relieved to see him still whole when she'd visited him on the third evening, having survived their initial attentions.

Scuttling past the temple room, Slave came to the corridor where they kept their prisoners. She swallowed. Yesterday, there were three. Today, there were two. The image of the last hawk's destroyed and wasted body flashed before her eyes. Her teeth clenched, but she forced her jaw to loosen. Emotion was dangerous. Hide it. Hoard it.

Crouching, Slave peeked through the gaping stone arch into Ty's room. Joy burst through her. For at least one more day, he was alive. She assessed the room. Today had been the whip, still resting among pots of what were probably poisons. There was a lot of sticky blood on the floor, and his body was coated with it in dried rivulets and flecks. As usual, he had been healed, although fresh blood seeped from his bound wrists. Many new scars marked him, including one on his cheek. Darkcraft healed, but not with the purity of bodycraft.

The image of him caught her breath. The filth and the scars didn't change his essential presence. He was magnificent. His torso was a study in musculature, lifted shoulders spread and mounded, flat sweeps of his pecs topped with tiny brown nipples. His ribs were coated with thinner muscle, and his abdomen rippled endlessly down to the light brown curls around his genitals. His hips were so slender compared to the width above, and then his thighs flared out. They were huge, striped and stark with powerful layers of muscle. His knees even looked strong, connecting his massive thighs to rounded calves leading to long feet. His legs were dusted with dark hair, as were his forearms, lifted high over his head. His chest and jaw were bare and smooth. Chin lifting, his honey-golden gaze captured hers.

She eased up from her crouch and stepped around the door, staying pressed to the wall. The heavy pot pulled at her shoulders and rested hard on the bone of her hip.

"Hello, Sunshine."

His soft tenor was gentle, such an incongruous greeting in this place. He'd charmed her with those words, the same he'd greeted her with every day. Her greeting was the same, too. She simply nodded. Bile churned inside, that he was here, chained.

He fell into their pattern. "I'd appreciate any information, if you can safely share it."

“You were worried about the hawk, when I told you he was near death.”

He breathed in deep. “I heard that scum of a bear killed him.”

“Yes. It was a good death.”

Ty stilled, tipping his head slightly. “It was?”

“Yes. He broke his neck quickly.” She wouldn’t tell Ty she’d heard the man say, “No.”

Ty closed his eyes, resting his head against one bicep as big as his face. “That’s something.” Then his jaw popped with clenched tension and he fought, rattling the chains above his head. “Not enough. Erich. Not enough.”

Slave didn’t like hearing the hawk’s name. It was so much easier without names. But Ty had insisted on telling her his. Her slave command to feed him raked down her ribs at the delay.

He calmed, chains falling silent. “What’s the story about his heart?”

Sighing, Slave moved toward him. She put the lid on the ground and hefted the pot so it balanced in one arm. She scooped up a little of the soupy rice and oatmeal mixture. Bland, at least it was filling. Slave wasn’t allowed to touch utensils of any kind. The agony for ignoring that order was immediate and caused violent spasms. The brown-haired woman stirred the food in the kitchen, instead.

“The bear took it.” She lifted a small portion up to his mouth, just at her eye level, and he lowered down to take it. His lips closed over the tips of her fingers, soft. The sensation was a shock of heat every time. Gentleness was unsettling in this place.

“He didn’t eat it?”

Slave grimaced. She scooped up another bit, and fed him it. “Not that I saw.”

He stilled. “You were there?”

She froze. Their eyes met. His eyes seemed to dance and shimmer with life. What he saw in the flat depths of hers, she couldn’t guess.

“Sunshine?”

“I was near.”

He stared at her, but didn’t say anything as she fed him another bite. She made the bites small so she could stay longer. He knew it but never commented, no matter the fact he must be starving.

“You checked on him for me, didn’t you? During your free time.”

Her free time was a period of relative freedom if she finished her morning kitchen duty fast enough. Mostly she’d used the hour to explore, spy, and sharpen her tiny piece of stone. When she’d told Ty about her free time, it had been to volunteer to spy for him. He hadn’t liked it, but he hadn’t outright said no.

“Yeah, I checked on him.” She’d planned on doing a lot more than check on him, but Ty didn’t ever need to know.

Their eyes met again, and the clarity of his made her heart pound. Unless he already knew what she’d intended, and approved.

“In a way, you were his friend. You were there, watching over him, at the end. It’s good to think of.”

She disagreed. She thought it was all really, really awful to think of.

“Thank you, Sunshine.”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped, pulling her fingers sharply from his mouth. “I’m Slave. Just Slave.”

“No, you’re not.” It was an argument they’d already had a time or three. “Don’t let them define you. You’re a woman, and you’re a victim, and you can reclaim yourself.”

“It’s my name for myself. It’s just the fact of what I am. Don’t make me remember. I’ve found a way to live, and you’re picking at it, tearing me down.” Her voice was hard, but she still held her hand up for him to take his bite from her fingers. She was tall for a woman. There weren’t many men she’d met who were taller.

His lips touched her knuckles, warm, his teeth dragging back across the pads. He swallowed the bite. “I’ll never call you Slave. And I’ll never answer to anything but Ty or hawk.”

She set her teeth firmly on her tongue and concentrated on not continuing the conversation. She was a shell of what she had been, would never be that person again. Her goal was to survive until her death would matter, or at the least, spite the Monster.

Ty spoke with satisfaction. “They killed one of their own today. Big Nose.”

Sunny gasped. *Large hand plastered over her face, pinning her head to the table. The knife scraping over her scalp, cutting her long, shining tresses away, blood burning her eyes.* “Perfect.” Maybe that’s what the Monster had sounded so subdued about. “However, they’ll be more agitated for awhile. Even the death of a slave causes them to scurry, whisper and plan.”

The message on the pot thrust through her mind. She’d love to take this hawk and go. Her eyes drifted up his arms, hesitated on the blood shining wetly at his wrists, and went up over his wide, strong hands to the thick links of iron. Up, up, up. Each link was the size of her hand, and the chain connecting his wrists was draped over a deep, strong hook bolted to the ceiling with four rusted bolts.

He followed her gaze up past his hands. “The easiest way to get me off that hook, I’ve decided, is for you to bring something for me to stand on, creating some slack. Then you could climb my shoulders and lift the chain off the hook.”

It was the first time he’d outright suggested she help free him. *Don’t meet his eyes. Don’t engage. Not yet.*

She scraped up another bite and fed it to him. “I could. The problem is there’s nowhere to go.” Especially with massive weights hanging on each foot, and his hands chained together. She licked her dry, cracked lips. “I have an idea. But you need to tell me the truth about some Beast secrets.” She kept her eyes on the gruel as he took another bite. She was so glad he didn’t refuse it. Because then she’d be slave-bound to force feed him. It had happened to another slave, one they’d assigned to the prior hawk. The woman had cried while she’d done it. Slave had cried with her as she spied. It had been awhile ago, when she’d had tears.

“Oh? What secrets do you need to know of?”

Feeding him another bite, she offered up her forbidden notion. “There is a room not far from here. A tiny room down one floor, near the huge main space I think of as town square.”

He stayed silent, his lips drawing smoothly off her fingertips. She hated the life he pumped into her. The sensations, and the emotions.

“It is very small. One of the smallest. It has nothing except one waist-high pillar of stone, uncarved.”

She felt the change in his watchfulness, how he froze, how his breath caught. Energy sparked inside her, terrifying and uncertain. He knew exactly what she was talking about.

She met his eyes, those amazing golden-orange eyes. "What is it?"

He answered immediately, voice hushed. "If it still functions, it is a way to escape. By touching the sifting stone, I can transport us away."

The pot dropped from her grip and lunging, she managed to catch it by trapping it between their bodies. Her hand brushed his thigh as she wrestled it into her grasp again. He was warm, hard with muscle, the hairs on his skin crinkly.

Breath panting, she cradled the pot and stared at him. *He'd said "us."* "You said 'us'."

He smiled. "Of course I did, Sunshine."

She blinked, stepping away.

His smile faded. "Here now. Shhh, little one."

The gentle tone of his voice did nothing to stop her galloping heart. Her breath came faster, making her words choppy. "You're just saying that."

Shock flared through his eyes, and then his face changed from the warm, confident Ty she knew. Here was the warrior who survived daily torture. The shifting of skin over his cheekbones, along his thick throat, the slight lift in his chest, it all combined to change him from powerful to terrifying.

"Listen to me, Sunshine. You were assigned to me through no choice of ours. But it was done. You are my caretaker, but from the first day, you were much more. You've been my ally and my friend. You've cleaned filth from my body, given me dignity and focus, kept me sane. Don't ever doubt that I would not be this strong right now if I didn't have your support twice a day. They made an enormous error in assigning you to me, for you have kept hope alive, with the information you have shared. I am surviving this for a reason. I'm learning so much about these hidden enemies of our people, with your help."

The chains clinked as he flexed his fists. "When we escape, we'll come back for the ones we can't take with us. But never doubt that even if you'd been as cold and silent as a shadow, I'd take you with me. I'm a hawk warrior. I would never escape to save myself, and not take as many innocents with me as I could."

"If you can't... If you can't make it with me..." *If I'm dead...* "You'll still go."

"Sometimes a warrior makes hard decisions in the short term for long term gains."

He thrust his head down toward her, arrogance strong on his face. "If we leave some of the others, I will return for them. On my honor, on my hawk."

She swallowed, and the world dipped under her feet. Hope sprouted from a seed inside her ribs and it hurt. She dipped her hand into the mash, and lifted it up to him. She wouldn't meet his eyes, keeping her gaze on his lips. After a moment, they softened from their thin displeasure, then opened, reaching for the small sustenance. They were soft and strong on her fingers.

"Sunshine. What made you ask about this room, out of all of them?"

For some reason, she didn't want to tell him about the secret message. Had it been another slave? Someone who knew about Ty's honor and gambled he would take others with him? Or, could it possibly be a trap? "They've set a slave to guard it, with a sword. And he isn't there to keep us away. He's there to keep others from coming in."

Ty was silent through the next bite, and then shifted restlessly. "The new stone. It has to be." He took the next bite impatiently. "Sunshine, a few years ago, a lone changeling took a powerful watermage for a mate. Together, they came upon a poisoned spring hiding a new sifting stone, one unknown to the Clans. It was an amazing

discovery. We embarked on an exploration, trying to systematically find more missing stones, possibly hidden for centuries. But my Clan's focus was on tracking the beebees, and our efforts have been around the Cities."

"Beebees?"

"The lizard-birds like the one that took me down and brought me here." This was said with some bitterness. "About a month before I was taken, a sandcat killed one when it attacked his child. They both survived the fight. She named them 'big birdies'.

Warriors can't go around calling them that, so we're using beebees."

The ridiculous name startled a huff from her.

"Was that a laugh? Did you just laugh, Sunshine?" His voice teased her.

She didn't know where he found the strength, standing in drying pools of his own blood, chained for his enemies' amusement. She scowled at the pot as she scraped up the last morsels. "Of course not." The words were tired, flat. She lifted the last bite up. "Are we going now?" Her thighs trembled with the desire to run.

He took it off her throbbing fingers, his breath warm. "No."

His word shocked her, stabbed her. "No?"

He sighed. "You need to try to gather as many others as you can."

She shook her head, her stomach sour with her own selfishness. "We can't speak to each other. It will be painful to communicate this. And what if they have a compulsion to report me?"

"Have you ever had a similar compulsion when you observed erratic behavior?"

She remembered the man who had given her his dinner for three days when she'd been caught spying once and had her food taken away. Remembered the woman who had held her through that first night as a slave, knowing she'd lost the battle for her will and their compulsion had taken hold of her soul. The awful memories reminded her of what awaited him if they didn't get out tonight. "No, but you really need to leave tonight."

"I do?" His voice was sharp. "What did you hear?"

Licking her lips, she bent and picked up the lid to the pot. His portion was too small for what he needed. She could tell he was already thinner than when he'd first come. "Tomorrow," she whispered, "the Merry Three have you again."

"Ah." He paused.

His chuckle made her astonished gaze fly to his.

"Great nickname. I'd been thinking of them as the Giggling Braids."

"Don't laugh. Tomorrow—" She couldn't even say it. Her skin crawled with memories she fought to suppress. "We need to go tonight."

"I heard my schedule for tomorrow already," he said gently. "Sunshine, I'll survive them. I need you to do something for me. Find the other woman they're holding here during your free time—"

She interrupted him, furious with his bravery. "She's just two rooms down!"

He continued across her. "—and see if she can be taken with us. If you can make a plan to free her quickly, it will save crucial time when we're moving."

"Do you think it will simply be sex? Just a humiliation?" She spat at him, terrified.

"Of course not. I've no doubt I'll acquire another nightmare. But for one more day's suffering, we gain the chance of saving more people. You said you think there's a dozen slaves here?"

She nodded weakly, sick at his nobility. "Yeah. When I first came, there were many

more. But several died.” How many had she seen die here? *Don’t think about it. Don’t remember.* “And now we’re down to twelve. They hold that number. When one of the twelve die, they get another.”

“All right.” He sighed. “I’m not sure I’m strong enough to sift thirteen people. The most we train for is six.”

Ice streaked down her spine. *Oh, to be left behind, watching Ty disappear into freedom.* “If you can get me away from the darkcraft dampening field, I can charge you. You could go back and get the rest, couldn’t you?”

“What?”

“Will you be able to go back once you’ve left?”

“Yes, but I meant, what did you mean, charge me?”

She looked at him directly. His inhumanly rich eyes were a shock every time. They made her ache, made her remember hope. “I—“ It was so hard to say. So hard to admit. “I was a priestess.”

The silence was absolute as both of them held their breath.

“Sunshine.” His eyes drifted down her frame. “I’ve never met a spirit I wanted to meet more.”

His reference to her craft, working with people’s spiritual energy, probing their memories and subconscious, sent such pain cascading through her body her knees trembled. *Don’t think of it. Don’t remember.* “You really have the magic to move us, to sift us through space to a completely new place? By using that stone?”

“Yes.” But his eyes dimmed, and his lips thinned. “If I still can. If that hasn’t been stopped as well.”

Bile churned. The dampening. Of course. This could all very well be a trap, a game of theirs, to toy with them. After all, who could have left her the message in the bottom of that pot? She suddenly knew the stone wasn’t going to work. They would get to it, and he wasn’t going to be able to cast his spell. None of his Beast magecraft worked here, just as hers didn’t either. The only craft that functioned here at all was darkcraft, spells worked with pain and death.

She closed her eyes.

“Don’t look like that, Sunshine. It’s like breathing to a Trux. We learn to sift at age six. If it doesn’t work, we’ll run. Every Truxet Fortress is riddled with escape routes. You told me the main entrance is spelled shut, but I bet I can find others. Once we get outside, I can survive in any kind of wilderness.”

What a funnyman. Yes, that would work. Because if it was as easy as walking out, she’d have been gone by now. She shook her head.

“Hey.” His chains clanked. “Hey, now, let me see those pretty green eyes.”

She opened her eyes. She saw him so clearly. He’d survived an attack by the Monster’s pet lizard-birds and eight days of torture. The skin under his eyes was bruised, his new scar was angry red, and he was thinner, weaker. When Glasses had assigned her as his caretaker, she’d raged at being put so close to the torture and destruction of a new hawk. She’d seen the last one after her arrival, so proud, so fierce, but eventually he faded and died. She’d been afraid to watch Ty change, to be responsible as part of it.

Then she’d met him. She’d walked in to face his cocky smile and twinkling eyes, his sharp mind and gentle manner. And she’d become obsessed with dying before having to watch him go the way of the last hawk. Erich.

Ty knew how to get them out. Ty could get himself out, and others too. For a moment, she dared to see it. *Herself, under the desert sky again, with her garden around her.* No. *No, no, no.* When Ty walked them and whatever ragtag group managed to come together up to the sifting stone, his Beast magic wouldn't work. He wouldn't be able to take even a few of them away, because none of the six Elements worked here. She understood what it would take to leave here. Slave would get Ty free. She knew how. All she had to do was damn herself.

Ty frowned at her, sharp eyes searching her face. "What's that? What is your busy brain thinking?"

"The first twinge of my slave-bond, directing me to leave and clean up." It wasn't a lie. "Let's timeline this. I will try to get the word out tonight. I'll meet with you tomorrow morning." The darkmages liked to pretend the others hadn't had him. He was to be sparkly clean for each new torture session they referred to as 'experiments.' The task of cleaning his body was another aspect chipping away at the distance and sanity she'd built around herself. She'd have one more morning with him. One more. "At that time, I'll describe two routes to the stone to you, turn by turn." In case she wasn't there. "If I can get the information on how the woman is held by then, and gather some of the others, will you go tomorrow morning?"

He hesitated. Nodded. "Yes. But Sunshine, I have to warn you. If we are detected on the way out, I'm going to fight. If I can, I'll kill as many as possible. If I fail and am killed instead, or if we're caught because I can't work the sifting stone and we don't escape, it could go badly for you." His eyes were hard but steady. His voice lowered, hoarse. "You could be killed."

She held his eyes in return. "There are worse ways to die." She'd seen several. A sharp pain in her tailbone caught her breath. "I have to go. I'll try to get the message across." And an amazing message it would be. *My hawk is leaving. Are you coming?*

The pot seemed to have doubled in weight since she'd first picked it up in the kitchen. She turned from him.

"Sunshine. What's your name?" He asked her every time.

Every time she ignored him. "See you tomorrow." It was a promise she'd live through the night, one she now knew he understood. She was fiercely proud she'd been able to be a source of strength for him. She hoped he remembered the good when she betrayed him.

"Sunshine." He called to her when she was in the door. She took a deep breath. Some of his hardest, most personal questions had come now. He liked to ambush her when she was weak from anger at having to leave him. As always she hesitated, held by his command.

"Which ones have hurt you?"

Each evening, she answered his call for honesty, no matter how hard. Tonight she was glad she hadn't turned to face him. He wouldn't see how dead her eyes were. "All of them."

Rounding the doorway, she steeled herself to trick the slave command and set to take the long way back to the kitchen again, because it sent her past the woman prisoner's room. She'd never seen the woman, because this room, unlike most others, had a stone door that pivoted. Looking up and down the hall, she put the pot down and pushed at the door. Opening doors she had no assignment with was against her slave command, but in

her exploration during her free time, she'd discovered she could take the level of pain that came with breaking this particular rule. The stone moved under her skinny body's weight while lightning played through her gut.

She peeked into the room, dread in her throat. The woman had been here longer than Slave, so she half expected the skeletal, desperately abused state she'd seen the hawk in. What met her eyes was relative luxury the likes of which she'd only seen in the mage's rooms. The floor was carpeted, the bed deep with furs. The shelves were bare of knickknacks, but the table set was lovely, carved and dark with age.

The woman was older than she expected, as the men routinely referred to her as 'the crazy Water girl.' She looked to be a few years younger than Slave, which would put her about twenty. She was rounded, her body lush in a way that Slave had long since given up envying. Her face was deeply bruised, with a mass of scars across one side in various states of healing. Other than the enormous collar on the woman's neck which had left bloody sores on her shoulders and collarbone, and her facial bruises, the woman appeared whole.

Then she stood from her seated position at the side of the bed and spoke. "I hear the rats." Her voice was light and soft and not quite right.

Slave swallowed, the hair rising on her nape. There was more to break on a person than a body. She needed to get out of here.

Thankfully the slave command not to talk to other slaves didn't seem to extend to talking with prisoners. She was able to speak without pain. "We're leaving tomorrow. Can you come?" Saying the words out loud to a stranger sent ice through her body. Old rage. Tight and seething. Slave wanted to smile but didn't know how.

"Priestess, I cannot but I will." The woman turned with a rattle and shrugged her thick, blue robe from her shoulders. Since her jet-black hair was in an elaborate crown braid reminding Slave of the Merry Three, she had a clear view of the woman's back. Bile surged in her stomach.

The woman was chained to her bed. Each of the four bedposts had a link through the wood, and those thick links all led to four rings embedded through the flesh of the woman's back, two at her shoulders, two at her hips. The large chains were so heavy, the flesh pulled and stretched with their weight, yet the skin was unbloodied, having healed around the piercings.

She shrugged the robe back up as she turned to face Slave again. "The wolf chews off its own foot," she murmured gently.

This woman was terrifying. Slave nodded to her, and started to duck out. The Water girl lifted one hand urgently. "Tomorrow, take his rape for yours, and neither will so dance."

Slave blinked at the woman, a chill that had nothing to do with the slave-command rippling the skin of her arms, lifting the short, filthy, hacked hairs at her nape. She let her eyes fall from the strange black gaze of the black-haired woman and eased the stone closed.

Her shoulders visibly shivered as she tried to set the woman's words aside. No one would be raped, because they'd all be leaving well before the afternoon torture session. Glancing over her shoulder, Slave looked at the faint golden magelight shining from the open doorway to Ty's room. He was so close. But even the thought of returning to him brought a searing strike of agony to the top of her head. It cascaded through her skull to

beat behind her eyes. She swallowed and picked up her pot. She'd have one more morning. There were so many things to set in motion. It would be a long night.

Chapter Three

Nights were bad. First he had to quell the adrenaline that exploded every time Sunshine walked out. It burned bitter in his mouth, knowing the risks he'd asked her to take tonight. She was brave, with the strength and resolve of any warrior he'd ever met. He marveled at his luck in discovering such a good friend here. He wouldn't consider failure tomorrow. By this time on the new day, he'd be home, and he'd have taken at least Sunshine with him.

Ty spent most of the long, cold hours building detailed memories of everything he learned, trying to connect the dots with what was happening here to a bigger, more important picture. Then there were the memories of his father, his mother, his half-brother Teju, his cousin, his friends, his Alpha. He held each of their faces in his mind, drew up their scent, their laughter, their touch. Memories of the last time he'd trained with his Dad, of his Mom's laughter as they all went swimming in the river, of the joy of his Clan soaring together last Autumnal.

As he hung in his chains tonight, the thought that these darkmages were using a lost Truxet Fortress as their hidden base while they worked to destroy his Clan made him tremble. He wanted to kill so badly. Blood that wasn't his needed to fall. *No, don't think about the pain. Not now.* He wanted his battleform's beak and talons to rip and shred. The long hours between when Sunshine left him with his small daily meal and when she came back to clean his body were often filled with bitter personal failure. *No, don't think about what they'd done to him while he hung useless. Not yet.*

He'd only been interrupted once in the night, by a fly. It had buzzed around and around his bloody skin. When it landed on his belly, his hawk eyesight had watched its legs wash its eyes, and it had given him hope. The fly came from outside. Somewhere, there was still outside. That had been on his second night, the night Sunshine had left after telling him there was another hawk, but he was dying. It had been a reminder of life he'd needed after counting the months since Erich's disappearance. *No, don't think about the screams he'd given up, pleasing them. Not here.*

Tonight, the wrists he'd re-injured after his healing stung, the cuts opening whenever he shifted. His stomach had finally stopped growling and cramping. His body was in constant pain from his position, especially his feet and his shoulders. *No, don't think about the length of time he'd been here, the agony, and how long it had taken Erich to die. Not now.* Tomorrow he'd leave. With her. Little Sunshine, with her bony body and matted hair, her guarded eyes the color of old grass. He would be playing with her life, and the life of everyone who came with them, on the slim chance he'd be able to trigger the sifting stone.

Clenching his hands around the chains, he lifted himself off his feet for a few moments, just the few inches his ankle weights allowed. He shook with the effort. Shit. Nothing but a few bites of gruel for days, on top of the pain and lack of sleep. Hawk hunched, fluffing his feathers. Ty grunted with agreement. Letting himself back down, he stood on his toes, moving his arms into as wide a stretch as he could. Fire streaked down his spine. *No, don't think about the time they'd peeled his back off, teasing him that they'd make him some wings. Don't. Not yet.*

Tonight, for the first time, he'd learned details of how she'd been hurt. Three little words: *All of them*. So much pain. Hawk careened inside of him, as despairing as he was. *Don't imagine Smarmy Red's hands on her. Don't imagine the Giggling Braids holding her down. Don't!* He crashed his head back into the wall, the shock sending dancing bursts of light across his vision. The hiss of an angry hawk flew from his throat. He'd go insane if he thought in terms of specifics, if he started to imagine her torture.

She wasn't his responsibility. But she was his friend, from the first morning she'd cleaned him. She'd knelt at his feet, her wet rag in hand, and she'd looked him in the eyes and said, "No shame." She was his from that moment on. How she was his, he wasn't quite sure. But the basic sense of ownership that came from a Trux caring deeply for someone was there. His. What they'd done to both of them didn't matter, wouldn't matter. They'd get out, together. Tomorrow. How amazing he'd finally mentioned the possibility of escape, and she'd known of a sifting stone.

The ankle weights clanked. They would be a problem for moving quickly if he was lucky enough to fight. Oh, how he wanted to kill them all. For several long minutes he was lost in a pulse-pounding vision of bloodlust. First, Thad. Then, that bear. Just the brief views of him had been enough to fire a deep, driving need in Ty. Rogues died. Period. So lost in their beast they were nothing but an animal, even in their two-legged form, they were an abomination to be ended. And this rogue was being used by darkmages. Even worse.

When Ty was able to think beyond death again, he was shaking. He focused on the wooden table across the room, the one where that damned book, the record of his failure, still sat. *All right, that had been bad*. How much time had passed? An hour? Four minutes? Hawk was pounding in his head, determined to get out, but they were both trapped. Nights were the worst. But tomorrow, he'd go. He'd go, he'd fight, and he wouldn't die, not with others relying on him. Cycling through images of his family, the sky, the bear dead at his feet, he breathed through the pain and waited for Sunshine.

And she came. He smelled her before he heard her quick breaths. Sadly, she stank. Her body's natural smell didn't bother him, but the thick bitterness of fear did. And then she was there, always peering from the bottom corner of the door. Her messy tangle of hair might be blonde when it was clean. Her torn, loose brown dress was shredded, revealing golden skin darker than his. She was slim and tall, her head reaching his jaw. At his size, most women came to mid-chest. He liked her height.

She eased in, carrying her bucket of warm water with a stick and a rag in it. Muscles in his jaw relaxed. "Hello, Sunshine."

She nodded, her amazing eyes directed at the floor.

Desperately, he wanted to hear her say his name. And he wanted to say her true name in return. "I'd appreciate any information, if you can safely share it."

She came to him. Dunking the rag, she twisted it out, then lifted it to his wrists. Up on tiptoe, she strained to reach his cuts. The harsh soap stung. He breathed deep of her scent. Hawk preened his wing feathers, settling. He could believe she'd been a priestess. She had a stillness around her, a control.

"I wrote a message in the kitchen. I was able to get seven slaves to see it. Two didn't respond to it, but five nodded to me. We agreed on a meeting place, although how they'll defy their slave command, I'm not sure."

She looked more tired than usual. Lines of pain bracketed her mouth. He knew it had

cost her to go against the commands they'd placed on her. *Don't think about it. Not here.* She finished one of his arms and switched to the other. Her touch was light and gentle and always soothed his hawk.

"I spoke to the prisoner you asked about, the woman they call the Water girl last night. She's a woman, not a girl, and she'll come, too. They have her chained to the bed. The chains go right through her skin. She's not quite sane, but she's willing."

The fuckers. Diabolical, horrible fuckers. Still, to deprive them of a prisoner they strangely valued, he'd rip her free himself. After all, as soon as they were free from here, he could heal her. "There were no other traps on her?"

She wrung out the rag. The water streamed pink. "She has a thick metal collar on her neck, but it's not attached to anything. It could be spelled."

Standing before him, she met his eyes for the first time today. They were stunning, vivid, and he loved how they swirled with emotion now. When he'd first met her they'd been flat, dead. "All right, Sunshine, good work. I know it was hard on you, and I'm so proud of you. You've done what you can." Time to go. Too late for Erich, but he would deal with that later. "I can stand on your bucket to create some slack. Get me down."

"Now?" Her voice was thin, small. Fear spiked in her, and something that smelled like despair.

His heart twisted, and hawk keened. "Yes. Now we go."

Her lips parted. They were plump, dark, with stark points and a full lower swell. Cracked and peeling, he still found them stunning. She dropped the rag in the bucket and picked it up to upend it. Sound carried to him from the hallway.

He froze. "Wait."

She stopped, poised to tip the water.

"Fuck." Disgust drained him. *No time.* "Go, little one. Go now." He knew when Sunshine could hear them too by the way she crouched, hunching, ready to run. The water sloshed when she dropped the bucket to the floor, but didn't spill.

The sound of high, girlish laughter echoed down the stone hall. They were chanting a childhood rhyme, which was sickening. "Pick the peppers! Put them in the pot! Pickle the peppers! Now you're stinging hot!" Sweat broke out on his spine. Three days with them and already they'd trained his body.

Sunshine turned to him, and the look in her eyes was terrible. "No," she said, eyes wide and blank.

"Go," he ordered.

"No," she said again.

His knees went weak. "Sunshine. You've got to leave."

"No." Stiffly, she fished her rag out again and stumbled over to him. The tattered leather on her feet softly shushed on the ancient, smooth floor.

He rattled his chains, sudden and strong, hoping to startle her. She wrung out the rag, letting the water sluice over his stomach. His muscles leaped and jumped.

"Put it down. Just leave it. Go now!"

The singing grew louder. She raised the rag up to his face, and he jerked away. Ignoring him, she moved to his chest and worked in small circles, wiping the dried blood away. He made his voice hard and vicious. "What do you think you're doing?"

She ignored him, wiping lower over his ribs.

They were too close. He bucked, twisting, grinding his teeth. And then it was too

late.

“Oh! What is this we spy!” The voice was melodic, perfectly lovely. Dionne, the tallest of the three entered, trailing the others by linked, swinging hands. The three brunettes stood across the open doorway, breathless and giggling. His breath was audible, rough and fast.

Today they wore matching pink silk shifts that stopped at the knee. And just as he’d seen them before, nothing else.

The dark-skinned one, Karu, waved the gray wand in her hand. “Look what we’ve found this morning, Allie.”

Allie of the vivid blue eyes tipped her head. “Ah, the skinny slave girl. Delightful.” She too carried a gray wand, thicker and shorter.

He looked stupidly at Sunshine. He didn’t know what to do. Feign disinterest? Taunt them as he had before? Beg for her life? She bent and rinsed her rag again, ignoring them.

The tall one, Dionne, gasped. “Ooooo,” she cooed mockingly. “See how he looks at her? Allie, Karu my love, I think I have an idea.”

“I love your ideas!” The woman with mud-colored skin stroked the wand from her throat down between her breasts to her stomach.

And gorge rose in Ty’s throat when he finally understood that it wasn’t a wand. It was a phallus, a dildo. He twitched, almost jumping out of his skin when Sunshine touched the warm rag to one hip and cleaned down his thigh, wiping away the gummy blood from yesterday.

“I know you do, Karu. We came to hurt him, correct?”

Blue Eyes sang out, “Pick the peppers!”

Dionne continued. “He needs to be reminded his body isn’t his. He needs to know his foul Beast cock is ours now. His ass needs to know the pain of our domination.”

Blue Eyes jumped up and down, clapping her dildo in her hand. “Yes, Karu, yes! We will drink his rage and pain. He will never be a man again!”

Tall Dionne shook her head. “No, we mustn’t rush the torture. Remember, now that Thad won’t let us play so often, we have to make him last. We’ll take his balls, one by one, and later we’ll take his cock. Today we’re just here for some games, and to drink his lovely, lovely fear. Smell it, girls?” She tipped back her head and inhaled as if she were in a garden. “Oh, he’s so upset. I think it’s her, don’t you?”

Dark-skinned Karu giggled. “Truly, Dionne, I love your mind.”

Sunshine finished wiping around his ankle manacle. She rinsed the rag in the bucket. He took a breath to roar at them, to distract them, pick at them, focus them on him. A sharp pinch on his inner thigh took his thought. He let his breath out shakily, managing to not look down at her. She was up to something. He prayed it was more than suicide. Calmly, gently, she washed his other thigh. He flexed his thigh muscle in irritation at her. She slid up and down it, reassuring him. Hawk hissed, unconvinced.

“Allie, go get a bench.” Karu demanded.

“Why me?” Blue Eyes whined.

Karu turned and lashed a clawed hand through the air. Three red gashes opened on the smaller girl’s face. She screeched and flew at Karu.

Dionne waved her hand. “Stop!” Both slowed, moving hard as if the air was thick. “Hey, I’m getting better at that one. Now, no bickering. We have two mostly-fresh toys

to play with.” She waved her hand again and they both staggered, released.

“Karu, the next time you take pain from me, I’m going to shave you bald in the night.” Allie turned on her heel and flounced out.

Karu lifted her chin and met Ty’s eyes. He narrowed them and let her see death. She smiled. He hated.

The woman studied the hand she’d struck her fellow mage with. “I just love how you’ve lasted a week with all that spirit. The others were more desperate by now.” Wolfshit. None of his brothers would have broken easily or quickly.

She strolled forward, coming within reach of Sunshine.

His stomach was rock solid, his arms straining, human-weak against the chains.

The dark-skinned woman ordered down to Sunshine. “Slave, clean his cock, quickly now.”

The label and the order brought his lips lifting from his teeth. His hands clenched uselessly around air. Sunshine’s touch on his groin, as always, was gentle, quick, and firm. She washed his base, his balls, and beneath. Then she put the rag in the bucket and was still.

“I see you haven’t had a chance to mop yet. Such a mess Thad made yesterday. Go ahead and mop, Slave. The blood is beginning to stink.”

Sunshine wrapped the rag around one end of the stick in her bucket and began to mop. She stood to one side of him, pushing the stick behind his feet, then in front. Karu stood just beyond the sticky pool, entirely too close. He didn’t take his eyes off her.

“Here’s what I think we’ll do. I think we’ll have you be in charge of this slave’s rape.” She beamed at him, clapping her hands. “Doesn’t that sound fun?”

The word was very easy to say. “No.”

Tall Dionne laughed, opening the book, wetting the quill and writing something. “‘No,’ he says! Stupid Beast.”

Karu tapped one of her long nails against her lips. Her braided head was neat as a pin. One thin braid swooped over her forehead in an elegant detail. “Oh, yes. Please do resist. It makes it so much more delicious.” She held his eyes as she turned away, smirking at him over her shoulder. Her back, so very close, taunted him.

Dionne closed the huge book, then hopped up on the table, perching on the edge with legs crossed. Karu leaned back against the edge of it next to her. They looked at each other and giggled.

Sunshine took up her bucket and tossed the water across the floor, flooding the stones to dilute and thin the blood. The thick, warm feel of it on his throbbing feet made his abs jump.

Allie came to the door, carrying a wooden bench perhaps an armlength long, and knee high. She set it in the middle of the floor. “The room with Bear in it is starting to smell.”

“I know, isn’t he just gross?” Dionne shook her head sadly.

Karu pointed. “Slave, go kneel on that bench.”

He ground his teeth, dug his nails into his palms.

Allie rubbed the dildo she still held gleefully. “Ooooo!”

Sunshine put her makeshift mop in the bucket and carried it over to put it next to the bench. She knelt on it. Ty met her eyes, hearing his panting breath, feeling his thundering heart. Her eyes were no longer dazed, as they had been when they’d first heard the

Giggling Braids. They were clear, and calm. His toes curled against the wet floor at the complete patience in her green gaze.

Karu pushed off from the table, and strolled toward him. A memory of her peeling a strip of his muscle out of his thigh flashed through him. *No. Don't remember. Not now. It isn't important now.* She walked right up to him, her head coming to the middle of his chest. She grinned, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

He clenched his teeth, wrapped his hands around the chains, and stared into her big, brown evil eyes.

"Here's how the rape will go. You will tell me what to do to her. It needs to be painful, and it needs to be mean. If it isn't, I'll slice her eyes open. If you do it good and right, we'll only do what you tell us to. But if you don't play good enough, we'll keep cutting her. A lot. Don't worry, you'll like it. We'll know if you like it, because when you hurt her enough, you'll come."

Lifting one hand up to his torso, she set her sharpened fingernails to his skin and harshly dragged them down to his navel. She jabbed hard at the tiny dent. He kept his raised arms from flexing. The scratches burned. He never flinched, holding her stare. The subtle shift around her eyes warned him when her delight turned to displeasure with his confidence. She lifted her other hand and slapped it wide over his heart.

His breath stopped at the foul push of darkcraft that seethed into his body, coiling around his lungs, his bones, wriggling through his blood. It wasn't at all the same sort of spell Thad had tried, when he'd wanted to rule Ty's beast. No, she wasn't interested in taking over Ty's beast or his soul. Just his body. His body he'd always had perfect control over as a bodymage. He hissed as the power hit his hips. He clenched his ass, struggling to hold himself still and not give her any satisfaction. Her fingers dug harder into his chest, and five cuts bled around her nails.

The power *pushed*, swelling from the small pain and larger hate he couldn't control, and he groaned as agony swelled in his balls. Heat boiled up his cock, lifting it, thickening it. He wanted to scream, to writhe. It was disgusting. The boner hurt, but at the same time was sensitive enough to send gooseflesh down his legs. His balls hardened, lifting, surging, and then she smiled. Her hand on his chest lifted, her long, sharpened nails rasping lightly over his skin. She quirked one eyebrow. The instant he understood, she slashed her lower hand down and cut four gouges across his dick. The shout couldn't be held back.

He breathed through the pulsing sting, watching as she sashayed away. The two other women were at the table, laughing. His cock pounded, and impossibly, grew tighter. *That bitch.* She'd tied his erection to pain. Visions of her torn throat, her ripped spine, her shredded abdomen rushed through him. His cock tightened with his visions, and he wanted to puke.

Dionne held out her dildo, and Karu took it. She walked over to stand behind Sunshine, and rested the dildo on Sunshine's shoulder. By the Six. No. *He would not do this.*

"Well, hawk Beast? How shall we hurt her first?"

Time stopped. He could tell the woman how to molest Sunshine, or he could watch them cut and mutilate her. Either way they'd drink her pain. If he participated, some core of himself would break. If he didn't, knowing he could have spared her some of the agony, he'd never be able to believe in his honor again, knowing what a coward he was.

“Shall I take her eye instead?” Karu flicked one dagger nail across Sunshine’s cheek, leaving a red welt.

He saw spots on his vision, he was so close to hyperventilating. His gut hurt from the strength of his erection. Hawk’s beating wings were brutal against his ribs. Meeting the deep green of Sunshine’s eyes, the whirling in his head stilled.

Her face was flat, but her eyes glowed. They glowed with strength that humbled him. They glowed with a strange blank calm, very different from withdrawn terror. Why wasn’t she raging, crying, or at least shaking like he was? From his whirling brain came the revelation she’d shared with him yesterday. *She’d been a priestess*. She knew what it was to give herself into the trance, and see through the eyes of another. Maybe, just maybe, her experience with suppressing her own will would help them both find a path.

“Take off her dress. Her hands go behind her back.” The words were quiet, low. But they were still his words, his choice.

Karu laughed triumphantly, and the other two clapped and giggled. She reached down and tore Sunshine’s filthy, ill-fitting brown dress over her head. Sunshine moved her hands behind her. She was so thin her ribs stood out. Despite her obvious starvation, he found her stark clavicle beautiful and elegant. Her breasts were tiny mounds, the same deep gold of her arms. He guessed with a natural skin tone like that, she was of Sixth or Seventh City. Her nipples were the rosy red of her lips, also tiny, and up-tipped.

Oh, Bone and Tears, he had a horrible thought. It was what he really wanted to do, but by acting in his stead, the darkmage would pervert it. His breath left him, long and slow. It was bad enough to please them, but he thought he could live with it. “Bruise her nipple.”

Karu leaned over Sunshine’s shoulder and grabbed her sweet nipple. She cruelly clenched her fingers around it, pulling with a clearly crushing grip. Hawk screamed at the sight, and his stomach heaved as his erection thumped. The woman ground the bud of flesh in her fingers, until one of her sharp nails slashed the skin above it and blood trickled.

His chains rattled with the force of his lunge. “Stop. No cuts if I’m directing you.”

“Oooooo,” Dionne taunted. “He liked that. Did you see his dick jerk?”

But Karu did let her go.

Ty’s talons throbbed behind his fingertips. His battleform was so close. So desperately close. If he could free it, nothing in this Fortress could stand against him. Hawk flapped and floundered within. But Sunshine met his gaze, her eyes clear and accepting. His breath shuddered inside him as he inhaled. The only fear he smelled was his. She dipped her eyelids, a subtle encouragement.

He didn’t want to do this. His mind scrambled over her exposed flesh. Her shoulders, her folded thighs where she sat on her knees, her ribs. There wasn’t a part of her he didn’t find precious, but they’d want something more overtly sexual. He wanted to keep them away from her hips for as long as possible. *Don’t think about that now. Not yet.*

“Her ear. Tip her head and bruise her earlobe.”

Sunshine reached up and tucked her shaggy, matted hair behind one ear. A simple gesture, revealing the hollow behind her ear, and the long lines of her throat. Saliva burst into his mouth. It was like she was offering it to him.

Karu harshly took up the dildo and lifted it high. Ty’s heart stopped. His lips drew back off his teeth to snarl, but it was already over before his roar burst out. She smashed

the stone cylinder against Sunshine's ear, rocking her on the bench. Sunshine went white, while her ear bloomed red, flushing from the blow. Pleasure whipped around his groin, weakening his knees.

The trio of women laughed. The little one reenacted the blow, whipping her braided coif to one side. They weren't looking at him, too busy sharing admiring glances for how Karu had altered his words.

"See, Beast? No blood, just as you directed." Karu smacked the dildo into her palm again and again, satisfied, and clearly eager to swing it again.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't think of brutality after brutality and watch them toy with her, while she just knelt there and let them, for him.

Karu licked up the dildo, her tongue long and grotesque. "I'm waaaaaiting." She flicked her tongue over the tip of the thing and beamed at him. "My choice, then?" she cooed. One sharpened nail tapped against the stone.

He looked at her, his heart thundering in his ears so that he could barely hear his own voice. But he could hear her screams of agony in his imagination. Looking back at Sunshine, he saw her straight shoulders, strong and stark from her position with her arms behind her. Her head was down and to the side, taking the blow as an opportunity to hide. From him? The line of her throat was long, the muscles stark. With his hawk eyes, he could easily see the fluttering of her wild pulse. Not as calm as she appeared.

His hands curled above the manacles, aching for her slender, warm skin to be in his own grip. He wanted her life in his hands, his to test, his to protect. "Wrap your hand around her throat. Choke her."

Allie jumped off the table. "Now he's getting it!" She skipped over to him. She knelt at his feet.

He spared a quick glance at her.

She stared at his bleeding cock, licking her lips. "He's hurting, Karu. Oh, he hates this. He's so mad and ashamed and upset." The woman leaned in close enough for him to feel her hot breath on his erection.

Putting his eyes back on Sunshine, he saw that Karu's hands were so tight around Sunshine's throat, her knuckles were white. Sunshine openly gasped for breath, wheezing. Blood ran down her torso in a bright line from the cut above her nipple. She was already covered in other scars. The sight flashed through his body with sharp pleasure, and his balls pulsed. He wanted to gag. He wanted to come. Allie leaned in and wrapped her lips around the side of his cock, sucking the blood from the stinging cuts.

Staring at the strong, dark hands wrapped around Sunshine's golden-tan throat, he felt time stop. His dick swelled with pleasure. The small woman at his feet breathed heat over his damp, aching skin. Something cracked inside, a tiny part of him, an essential part. He wouldn't finish this. Couldn't. Not to save his life. Not even to save hers.

"Let her go."

"Not yet," Karu crooned.

Sunshine's eyes were steady, understanding. But a gagging wheeze came from her gaping lips, and she hadn't been able to keep from bringing her hands up to fight with Karu's. He'd done that. He'd set evil's hands at life's most slender point.

Ty shook his head, and his vision went red. With a roar, his legs lifted around the slender brunette licking at his cock. His thighs moved the massive iron balls as if they weren't even there. She shrieked, her hands clutching at one thigh, gouging him, but he

screamed down at her, clenching his thighs hard, twining one foot to hold her just so, and then wrenched his legs in a scissor-motion. The crack was immediate. He dropped his legs, the weights clanking, and her body fell under his feet.

Dionne screamed, rushing forward, falling at his feet to pull the woman away from him. "Allie! You bastard!"

He looked up at Sunshine. He looked up in time to see her lunge for the long stout stick she'd used as a mop handle. It stuck up from her bucket she'd placed so subserviently by the bench. She took the stick in both hands and rammed it backward with all her might. Right through the belly of Karu, who had been standing slack-jawed behind her. Shrieking in agony, the woman stumbled backwards, tripped, and went down. She howled and squealed and writhed, her hands clutching the stick around the gushing blood pouring from her stomach. Ty's dick throbbed at the sight and gorge surged in his stomach.

Dionne, kneeling over Allie's body, arched up on her knees, clutching her head with both hands. "AHHHH!" She shook from side to side as if she was the one hit.

Sunshine was off the bench, rolling on the floor, screaming in pain as well. He imagined the pain for fighting back against one of the darkmages resulted from a very strong slave command. Her high, thin wails stabbed his heart.

With a hiss, Ty swung his legs out, trying to get Dionne with one of the weights. She swatted him down. His shin exploded with pain, his foot going numb. Strength-enhanced, definitely. When he met her stare, he saw that Karu's wound and Allie's death hadn't hurt Dionne. It had *empowered* her. Her dark eyes were bright green with power, mist seeping from them in eerie tendrils. Lowering her face over Allie's sprawl, she inhaled, long and deep, ignoring Sunshine's and Karu's agonized screams. She stood, panting, and staggered over to Karu. Ty roared, thrashing in his chains as she left even the chance of his reach. Falling to her knees next to the writhing woman, she pinned Karu's head to the floor and bent over her.

"Die, you bitch," she hissed. Then she opened her mouth wide and ripped out the woman's throat.

Ty moaned at the force of the semen jetting from his body. Bile filled his throat, but he swallowed it back. His hips jerked as painful pulses rode him, striking pleasure up his bones. "No," he whispered. But the cum still flew from his body. The last of the darkspell faded with his orgasm, and his cock fell limp, twitching from the cuts.

New movement caught his eye and he blinked hard, struggling to focus on the blue-robed woman standing in the doorway. She wasn't dressed as a slave, in rags, nor did she have the stench of a darkmage. A thick collar sat on her bruised neck. Ah. This was the infamous Water girl. Dionne rose from the floor, her face coated in blood, her chest wet with it.

"Ew," the Water girl, or more properly, the Water woman, said mildly.

"Run," he rasped, sagging against the stone wall.

Dionne raised her hands up, laughing hysterically. It wasn't the creepy girlish laugh of before, but the deep, crazed laugh of a confident darkmage. "Two deaths. Just after yesterday's ritual, and ripe from years of growth. Mine, all *mine*! I will rule you, and I will rule the Beasts, and all the Cities will bow down to me!"

The green light growing around the woman's hands was speckled with black. It seethed and pulsed, expanding into head-sized globes. The dark-haired Water woman just

stood, head tipped, hand braced against the doorway.

Ty's heart thundered. That was no experimental spell of mere torment. "Run!" he shouted.

Water woman looked over at him. And smiled. "Hello, hawk."

He heard Sunshine cry out as he screamed. But there was nothing either could do to stop it. Dionne pushed out her arms and threw two massive bolts of dark power at the woman. *And the power merely dissipated, as if she'd fired at stone.* Ty was aware that he should be breathing, but the moment was happening too slowly. Green shimmered around the blue-robed woman, and then faintly circled her torso and shot *back* at Dionne in a vivid flash of light.

The black-haired woman dismissed the darkmage's blood-curdling shrieks. She looked at Sunshine sitting on the floor, her gaze soft and sympathetic. "You know how to leave. You will take the burden on your soul. It will be one you can survive. We need to go now."

The words were like ice on Ty's spine, even though he didn't understand them. His head whirled. Then Dionne turned, staggering toward Sunshine. Her face was a rictus of wild emotion. Hawk exploded through Ty's body, but couldn't emerge. Sunshine was still crumpled weakly on the floor. Ty roared, feeling the burn of his constant screams in his throat and the fire in his lungs.

The Water woman stepped into the room and said, "I think I need to sit down."

Dionne staggered a few more steps, crookedly, then fell to the floor like a rag doll, eyes staring, frozen in horror. The Water woman sat on the bench with a sigh. *What the fuck just happened?* Ty's eyes jumped to each of the Giggling Braids, all very dead. Then to Sunshine, cowering, bare.

"Sunshine." He whipped her with his voice. It was hoarse, but she responded, her head jerking to face him. "Focus. We go now. Grab your dress, get me down."

She nodded, but he noted she used the wall to stand, and tottered on stiff legs when she went for her dress. When she lifted her arms to pull it over her head, the sight of the thin line of bright red blood streaking her belly imprinted on his brain.

She said to the Water woman, "I need that bench."

The woman murmured and stood. When she turned to go toward the table, he noted blood soaked the back of her blue robe. Sunshine dragged the bench over, finding a way to put it down over the feet of the darkmage that had been Allie. She bent and cradled one of the weights in both hands, and he lifted his foot up onto the bench. They repeated the process, with him taking his weight on his hands, and pulling his body up the chains until he could stand on the bench. This created more slack in the chains he hung from. Pain struck his shoulders at the change in their angle, but he breathed through it.

The hook that held the center link in his chain was deep, almost touching the ceiling. He gave a few tosses of his arms, but the chain itself was too heavy to get off the hook alone. They needed a long pole to lift it up and off the hook. Her mop stick was too short.

"Get up on my shoulders, Sunshine."

She stared at him blankly, and he had a bad moment where he thought she was afraid to touch him. But then she said, "How?"

"Get the bucket. Use the wall to brace yourself, pull, push, anyway you can. Don't worry about hurting me."

She nodded. When she set the bucket on the floor behind him, he noticed Water

woman was reading the foul book. It was as big as her torso.

“Destroy that,” he ordered harshly.

“No,” she murmured, distracted.

He grit his teeth. Then Sunshine put her small hands in the crook of his lifted shoulders and jumped on him. He braced hard, holding tight to the chains, curling his toes on the bench to stay put. One of the weights rolled off and he grunted when it pulled his foot a few inches over the edge. Hot blood poured over his ankle, the manacle opening a fresh, stinging cut. Her feet dug into his waist, and every sharp bone in her body seemed to attack his back, but she managed to stand on his hips. It was clumsy and they both grunted, but eventually she knelt precariously on one screaming shoulder. He could feel her shake with effort as she straightened, using the chains to steady herself as she rose high on her knees above him. He locked his legs, willing them to hold.

“I’m glad you’re tall,” he quipped, through gritted teeth.

He felt her tremors still. “Idiot.” And then the scrape of the chain, the stretching of his arms, and she said, “Look out.”

With nothing to brace themselves on, they immediately swayed. She wobbled above him. She squeaked, and he jumped forward, but the one weight on the bench wrecked his balance. He grunted as the chains fell in front of him with a crash, dragging his arms down. Sunshine tumbled from him, pulling him to one knee on the stone. Pain streaked his thigh and his foot went numb. He blinked, trying to see how she landed, and then the agony of his arms filled him. He fell to the floor, clenched his jaw and writhed, trapping his screams in his throat. After a few minutes, he lay panting on the sticky, wet stone, dizzy from his sudden prone position and the pain.

Water woman bent over his ankles. “If you want to keep your feet, stay still.” She tipped the skull pot and dribbled thick brown sludge on the chains by one ankle, then the other. A sizzle and flash filled the air. “There we are.” Her voice was bright and pleased. She kicked at each of the weights, rolling them away, their base links smoking. “Careful now.”

Ty propped himself up on numb hands and saw how the sludge had eaten through the metal. He carefully moved his feet away from the smoldering spots on the floor. “Convenient. Thank you.” His feet were free, his hands mostly so. He could run, fight. Finally.

“You’re welcome.” The woman turned, bent again, and poured the rest of the potion onto the face of the woman that had been blue-eyed Allie. She tossed the skull down, dusting her hands with satisfaction. A sickening stench filled the air. She smiled, a wide and happy smile much like the one she’d greeted him with.

Watching her carefully, Ty stood, maneuvering so he was between her and Sunshine. Sunshine sat looking up at him, her green eyes once again dazed. He backed up next to her. “Hey now, Sunshine. You were magnificent. Time to go.” It would be good to hold her, to check her for injuries from that bad fall, but he’d learned the wounded did better with purpose than sympathy when action was still needed.

“Now?”

She’d asked him that before. Small and disbelieving, afraid to hope. Before she’d chosen to stay with him, to face his torture when she didn’t have to. Before he’d been part of brutalizing her, betraying her. “Yes.”

Gathering the chain, he breathed through the pain and trembling weakness in his

arms and draped it around his neck. He put his hand out to her. And even though stabbing needles flayed his skin, when her small, thin hand lay in his, it was one of the happiest moments of his life. He lifted her to her feet, and reluctantly let her cold grasp slide away. Stalking to the book, he angrily picked it up.

“Yes.” Water woman waited by the door already. “Take that. It’s important.”

He hesitated, staring at her strange black eyes. The leather was thick in his hands, smooth and strangely warm. It made his gut churn, and he knew the book was a tool of darkcraft.

“Well? Come on!” The woman shifted impatiently. “My back hurts.”

“Follow me.” Sunshine slipped past her and hurried away, holding her stomach and limping faintly. He hesitated only one breath before following. If he didn’t have time to destroy it, he’d try to take it. Water woman seemed to know more about what was going on. It was so big he could barely tuck it under one arm. It made his ribs ache, but he tightened his grip and hurried out.

He looked everywhere as he followed the women. His hawk senses flared to the limit of his human form’s abilities. They were moving away from the scent of the bear, unfortunately, but everything was still. Sunshine had told him they spent most of their time in their private rooms, being most active during dinner time. When they came to a corridor, he caught a faint wisp of a scent he knew ... his gut cramped. Erich. Erich had been past here recently enough to have left a scent.

“Sunshine.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, eyes glittering with life.

“Are you sure he’s dead?”

She nodded once, mouth tight.

“I can’t leave him here. You must be positive.”

“I swear, Ty. He’s gone. They even had a ritual last night to use his body.”

He nodded in return, heart pounding. It was on him. He was too late. They ducked under a small arch, and were in some sort of hub room, with many hallways leading away. Eight people stood waiting. Two were on the ground, groaning in pain. One, with a badly broken hand, clutched a spoon. One had a homemade stone knife.

“It’s the slave command,” she explained, looking at the bodies on the ground. “Help them.”

He made a brutal decision. “I can’t. I need to be free to move quickly if we’re caught, to fight.”

She nodded at the others, and some of them bent to help the incapacitated to their feet. He saw what it cost her to even have that small contact, the way the bones around her eyes stood stark white, her gasp and hunched shoulders. Leading the ragtag group, she hurried down a hall so small he had to crawl, awkwardly dragging the foul book, and then they were in a main hall again. Everyone poised, hushed, but he shook his head. “I smell no one.”

They went down the hall. Even in their attempt at silence, they were louder than a pack of younglings. His heart beat nearly louder than their ragged breathing and stumbling steps. At any moment, he feared *they’d* appear and the humans would become collateral. He also feared the darkmages wouldn’t notice them at all, and he’d just walk out without a chance to kill any more of them.

As they left a flight of descending stairs, Sunshine called softly over her shoulder.

“There’s a guard with a sword up here. He’s one of us. If you can keep from killing him, try.”

He nodded. Thrusting the book at the nearest person, he raced ahead of the group, his loose chains clanking with every step. The links he’d tossed over his shoulders, he lifted, gathered. By the time he was using Truxet speed, the guard finally, stiffly turned, raising his sword. His eyes were wide with shock. Ty threw the chains around the guard’s sword, and let his body fall to the ground, taking the man down in a slide. He caught the sword as it fell, and straddled the man, shoving his head into the floor.

“Do you yield?”

“Slave... Command.” The man gasped, struggling feebly.

Ty sent the sword hilt slamming into the man’s temple. He slumped. Breathing hard from his first run in a week, feeling the burn of lost skin from sliding on the floor, he looked up and came eye to eye with a sifting stone. He’d been right. Home. But to leave the darkmages...

The crowd clattered up to the door, some of them hanging, moaning, slumped between two others. He could not leave these people to go hunting. And as much as he hungered, he still was held to his human form and without his craft.

“This is a stone that will sift us through space. Gather around me, you have to touch me.” Counting himself and the unconscious guard, twelve. *Fuck*. Maybe at his strongest, or when he was young and stupid ten years ago, he might have tried twelve on a dare. He felt their touch on him like a weight, each one more burdensome than what he’d worn on his ankles. Instinctively, he knew the firm touch on his right ribs was Sunshine.

He put his hands on top of the stone, sent a prayer to the Blood, and reached for River Mountain, trying to *sift* through the Six, pull on their power. *Nothing*. His pulse beat in his temples. *No*. All the darkcraft in the world would not keep him from accessing the magical traveling points of his people. His clanhome was one mental push away!

Then the single magelight set in the wall flared from standard gold to bright green, and the iron scrolled sconce twisted, alive. *A darkcraft trap*.

“Uh-oh,” said Water woman.

One of the slaves bent over and puked. Another sobbed.

“I want that knife.” Sunshine’s voice was cold.

But he heard the tremor in it. He was dizzy, shaking, furious. She pulled the knife from the man’s hand. Confused, Ty watched her grab the arm of an older woman with a horribly cut face.

“I take this pain, I claim it under my will, and command it to feed me.”

NO! His mental horror froze his blood. He lunged, but his shock had cost him. She was already striking the blade deep through the soft under-skin of the woman’s forearm, who stared at her, slack-jawed. Sunshine gasped, her head snapping back on her long, lovely neck. Then she leaned forward and gripped Ty’s forearm, clasping hard. He choked, coughed, but couldn’t help but return her tight grasp. Vile, twisted power pushed into him. But unlike the other darkcraft spells he’d endured, this foulness had no purpose. It pulsed through him, sizzling.

“Now!” She spat. “Go!”

He reached for the space between space, the mental gate, the pulse of his Clan. And found it. Felt it. Ty reached ... and failed. It was like trying to soar with jesses still attaching him to a perch. The light from the sconce flared brighter, greener, sending sick

shadows over the terrified, damaged faces around him. Someone cried out.

"I have it now, but there's too many," he gasped. "I'll make two trips."

Several of the slaves cried out at his words. Hands clutched harder at him, scrabbling into his skin. A snake uncoiled from the sconce and stretched, tongue flickering. Shit! A venomous cobra, and soon it would be in striking distance of that man's leg.

"No." Sunshine jerked on the woman's arm. The woman cried out, and blood splattered on the floor. Sunshine pushed more darkness into him, more ugliness, and for a second he saw her satisfaction at controlling the woman's pain, converting it for her own use.

He hesitated, fighting back against the darkcraft as he always had, always had to. Hawk called, high and pained. Against his will, power and strength flooded his body. Rejecting it, he still tightened his grip on her arm, not quite able to fling her away. It was Sunshine.

Then tears flooded Sunshine's eyes, and the green from the darkcraft's magelight meshed with her own. Her face convulsed with a mix of emotions too fast for him to gauge. "Please," she begged. "Be free."

He took her energy, used the violation, twined it with his memories. It hurt, with a ripping pain, to pull everyone in to him, to hold so tightly to the darkness she was shoving at him. But pain was the least of his focus. This was about home. He reached through space and love and time and *sifted*.

Tyodus of the hawks landed kneeling, surrounded by eleven former captives. Three of them wretched. Two crumpled, unconscious. One began screaming, high and thin, and several cried. Piteous wails mixed with choking sobs.

Instantly, hawk exploded into a frenzy inside him. *Fly*, his beastspirit commanded. Ty trembled. A Trux warrior stood, astonished, in the doorway, but Ty ignored him.

He only had eyes for Sunshine. They were locked forearm to forearm, a warrior's grip. Her other hand fell away from the scarred woman's badly bleeding arm. The woman moaned, bending over her wound. And still, throughout the chaos, he knelt, knees aching, ankles and wrists stinging, head pounding, gut churning. *Fly*. He stared Sunshine in her wide green eyes. He breathed, and without the dampening evil of darkcraft, knew her scent to be that of his mate. He swallowed, pushing back the bile of her dark-tainted skin. His shoulders jerked as his body worked to reject the last of the dark she'd poured into him, offered him.

His mate. He'd found his mate in that evil place. He hadn't been able to protect her. *Skrreee*. The echo of hawk's enraged cry shook him. Her arm was thin and cold in his grip, the bone close to the muscle. Their mate. Hawk mantled his wings, hissing, and Ty knew the terrible choice. The need to get out and fly boiled between his shoulder blades, but the need to stay and protect her filled him with every harsh breath. Confusion and bile over what they'd done, together, to get here held him frozen. Then the chipped-stone knife clattered to the floor from her slack fingers. It pulsed with darkcraft, a beacon pointing to what they'd done.

"Please," she said again. One tear spilled over, igniting her lashes into gold, clearing a trail in grime down her face. Her cheek was scraped, her neck was bruised, her eyes haunted.

Ty felt the moment his body cleared the thick, sickening darkcraft from inside. His hand loosened and fell from her arm. Reaching past her, he picked up the bloody stone

knife, and hid it in his fist. *Fly*. Now hawk's demands didn't conflict with the need to protect their mate. He looked up at the warrior staring at the human men in shock, and knew him for an owl from the carving in his leather vest.

"To arms, brother. Full guard on all clanhome stones, *now*. Summon the Council mages."

The man nodded and whirled away, the low, urgent call of an owl a sweet echo to his ears. Ty stood amongst the ruined humans. He tipped his head back in the tiny stone room in the heart of his clanhome, in the heart of his people's land, and his hawk joined him, mixing their two spirits into their battleform with a wild roar.

Strength churned through his blood, cleansing away all the foul stench, the burning taint. His body swelled, and it hurt, but he loved it. His face shifted, his hands erupted with talons, his body seizing and growing again. Iron manacles at his wrists and ankles burst like dried reeds, and the pitiful metal fell, clanking. When the battleform settled around him, he opened his eyes. Hawk's vision was sharp, wider than his human form. People were desperately scrambling away from him.

Except for Sunshine. She held motionless, kneeling at his feet, while he hid their shame in his talons. Still, he couldn't quite leave her. Reaching, he extended one massive, curving black hook, and brushed it down her cheek. She tilted her head, and leaned into his touch. Wonder filled him. *Mate*. Looking down at her small, thin form, ragged and bruised, strong and sad, the seething emotion inside him exploded. He clacked his beak, and bounded away.

Running, he blurred with Trux speed until he came to a little-used corridor. He ducked into the fourth storage room, picked out a small trunk, and dumped the knife in. Then he ran again, desperate to get across the plaza, out the three-arched gate, and into the light. He launched himself straight off the stairs in an enormous leap, and pulled hawk fully around him. They flapped hard, feeling the pain in their wings from being chained so long, and circled higher, higher. As he cleared the craggy tip of River Mountain, he screamed his triumph, screamed his pain, screamed his homecoming. Free. But damned.

Chapter Four

Her back was killing her. Literally. Rowan stood in the chaos of the new, tan stone hallway, holding her hands tightly. Glaring yellow magelights tossed bright shadows everywhere as people swarmed around the entrance to the small room. Her eyes darted from person to person. The Beast warriors with their confidence, training, and muscular poise were going from slave to slave, assessing the eleven people who had landed unannounced in this secure, sane place, compliments of the hawk that had freed them. Yes, the hawk and his woman had generously taken others with them when they escaped. They'd even taken *her*.

Free. Finally Free. The song filled her blood, making her light, as if she could hover in happiness. Agony. Throbbing agony. The counterpoint to her song pulsed in time to the blood gliding down her ass, the backs of her thighs, her ankles. Free. The main melody held the lead, but she didn't trust it.

A year ago she'd been taken from the Mage Guild's golden cage to the darkmages' more brutal one, and now she would have to fight to keep from being returned. Her destiny was so close she could feel it on the tip of her tongue. Here, with the Beasts. She only had to find her Wolf. He wasn't just any wolf. She knew the one that belonged to her was the leader of the most populous of Clans. Of course. Nothing was ever easy for her.

The escaped slaves were a mess. Most crawled or slumped around the hallway, hysterical or deeply in shock. She watched their savior, the woman of unbelievable courage, crawl along the edge of the wall. The tall, thin woman curled into a ball, attempting to hide. Rowan knew a little of what the woman had faced. Rape, beatings, lashings, darkspells. They were out now, away from the darkmages who had taken them from the Cities. But like her, the woman wasn't really free.

A man walked past wearing a shaggy dog at a full run carved in his vest. Her hand darted out for his shoulder but never connected. He spun and had her wrist in a tight grip before she could blink.

"I must speak to Wolf."

The man narrowed his dark eyes at her. She knew she looked suspiciously different from the others. They were filthy, dressed in rags, covered in bruises and half starved. She was clean, with shining hair neatly braided, dressed in a luxurious silk robe.

She kept her arm motionless in his grip, passive. "It is very important."

"I'll pass the message on." He released her arm more carefully than he'd grabbed it.

Pain. Free. Pain. Free. The hall tipped under her feet, a mixture of her elation and growing blood loss. The two songs were twining now. She needed to speak to him soon. Wolf. The Wolf. The Dominant of the Packs. Her dreams had told her he'd save her. He'd save them all. And now her journey had brought her here. To his territory. To his very doorstep.

Water's compulsion rose in her, a sudden swelling. She gritted her teeth. Loopy poetry and cryptic messages would not gain her audience with the leader of the largest of all the Beast Clans. But it spread, and tightened through her mind, and she knew if she didn't let the words be, she'd pass out. Damn Water's relentless whims. "Bonds that seal

brother and woman will cross the dark's divide."

She saw the exact moment his thoughts went from puzzled to pitying and dismissive. Nausea churned. They were True words. They were always true. She just never knew how, or when, or where. But only the wrong people ever paid attention.

"Help will be with you shortly, Lady. Wait here."

Her jaw jumped as she watched him move away, no doubt already forgetting her. A brown-haired man came up to her, bare-chested and wearing the skirt that denoted the Beasts' most powerful guard. It made no sense that the most powerful showed off by wearing the least protective clothing, but this was their tradition. One that let a woman admire a great deal of prime male physique.

"I am Devron, a Council firemage of the Wolves. I'll be your guide here, Lady. What is your name?"

"Rowan, of Fifth City. Devron, it is so important that I speak to Wolf." Joy surged through her. So soon, she'd found a wolf!

"I'm a wolf."

"No, Wolf. The Wolf."

He gestured her to walk ahead of him, asking, "Do you know Wolf?" He used the animal as a name and title too, which meant her information had been correct.

She stepped in front of him, and spoke over her shoulder. "No, but I have crucial information."

"Lady! Your back!"

"Yes, I will need physical healing."

"Of course. Immediately." He threw up a hand and called out through the milling, chattering people. "Laing! Over here."

Another man of Devron's large, muscular build hurried over, also wearing nothing but a leather skirt and tall boots. This one was blonde. Devron introduced him, "This is Laing, a Council groundbear earthmage. He is also assigned to you. Laing, she's bleeding badly. We need a bodymage immediately."

He turned to look down at her, his face urgent. "I'd like to put you on a stretcher so we can move you to a safe room faster."

"I—"

"I'm on it." Laing spun and was gone through the increasing crowd of warriors pairing up over the slaves and taking them away. Ex-slaves, she reminded herself. They'd gotten out of the darkmage Fortress. They were out.

Devron caught someone going past and gave urgent orders. Sighing, Rowan folded her hands in front of herself and stood patiently. She'd only met two Beasts before, when she'd been held in her gilded cage in the City, and both were very focused individuals. No doubt these two wouldn't listen to her until they'd finished tending her.

Rowan's gaze caught on the huddled ball of misery that was the woman who had stained herself to free them all. The air still pulsed thickly around her with the remnants of the darkcraft she'd called to power the group's escape. But it clung to them all, just from being in the Fortress. Their eyes met, her vivid green eyes peeking through her arms, and memory flowed between them. They'd suffered together, killed together. She hid her face back in her arms, and Rowan forgave her.

And then Laing was back, laying a heavy canvas cloth stretched between two poles down. "Lay down, Lady."

“I am Rowan.”

“Here, Rowan, kneel, and lie on your stomach. What’s this? Can we take it off?” He gestured at her wide metal collar.

The room dipped beneath her feet. “I don’t know. I need to sit down.”

“We can’t mess with it now. It could be trapped.” Devron slid a hand under her elbow.

She had no problem leaning her weight on him.

“Her bleeding isn’t responding to my bodycraft,” he near-shouted to Laing.

Laing’s voice came back, also raised above the chaos of people in the hallway. “Nor mine. Lady, do you know what this collar does?”

It hurts, that’s what it does. “No. I’ve had it on for years.”

“Is it a trap?” Laing asked sharply.

“How should I know?” she poked back. Then she thought about it. “The Mage Guild put it on me. Your hands smell so good. Clean.”

Laing and Devron paused.

Devron asked, “Your own people did this to you?”

She sighed. “I don’t have any people. Will you help me speak to the Wolf later?”

“Yes, Lady.” Laing raised his hand up, and she watched his arm transform into a broad paw with deadly, long black claws. Coarse fur brushed her neck. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Of course not,” she muttered indignantly.

The metal screeched when he sent his claws over it, frowning. She felt him press against the wide band, and then he shook his head at Devron.

“Well, we’ve got to get her to a healer. To the holding cells then.” Devron slid his hand around the silver collar at her neck and gently supported her head as they guided her to kneel on the stretcher.

She giggled while she knelt. He frowned. Turning stiffly, so as to not twist her back, she stared at Laing, with his handsome face and animal forearms. He was fearsome.

“Wonderful,” she sighed. “Magnificent.”

She’d heard the powerful City sentinels had animal forms, but only whispers of this blended man-beast form. To be free, to be among them, to be so close... She turned on Devron. “I must speak to Wolf Clan leader soon.”

“Not now. We’ve got to get your back sealed up. Lie down. Keep your arms down by your sides.” He directed her, and she leaned forward, letting him hold her head until she was prone. It hurt, to lie face down, and she didn’t keep her gasps and moans in. Settling her face to the side, she sighed to feel the metal cut into her shoulders and press her throat.

Eventually, Laing and Devron lifted her stretcher and she floated down halls and up staircases, always perfectly level and never jostled once. They took her into a more narrow hall and then a small room much like the one she’d eagerly left barely an hour ago. Two tables had been pushed together and lined with a soft fur. They put her down, slowly and gently.

She hissed. Pain. Pain. Pain. Free. Pain. The two songs were melding into a new movement, and her new horizontal position took away her sense of lightness. Her body sank under its own weight, her arms going slack.

“You need to be healed. You’ve lost a great deal of blood.” Laing’s voice was tight.

"I'm cutting this robe from you. Do not fear me."

"I don't. But I cannot be healed by a bodymage. I need physical—Oh!" She broke off when right in front of her table-high gaze, she saw Laing's furred paw with long, sharp black claws. It was breathtakingly beautiful, fascinating, and spine-tingling. He moved it out of her sight and then there was the slightest tug of her robe and the faint zzzzzzt of fabric ripping. But when they peeled the wet cloth from her wounds, she moaned at the sizzling pain sinking into her bones.

A new voice entered the room. "I'm here. Well, look at that mess. Don't you worry, Lady, I'll close up those wounds in a moment."

She heard Devron mutter, "Muscle damage."

Laing growled. "It looks like they drove hooks through her shoulders and hips and then ripped them out."

How astute of him. That's exactly what had happened, only they hadn't ripped them out, she had. The links had been as thick as her finger. She'd only hesitated on the last one. But in the end, there was nothing for it. The time had come to leave, and she wouldn't be held by chains.

She squirmed on the table. "Stop! I need sutures, and herbal wraps. You can't heal me!"

"Shhh, Lady, be calm." The bodymage's hands settled on her head.

Frustrated, Rowan screeched, "Listen to me!"

But it was too late. He poured his craft into her, and her water mirror bounced it back. He grunted, then tried again. His healing rebounded. He stepped away from her abruptly.

"Tarm?" Lang questioned.

"I don't know. I've never felt anything like it. She turned my healing back on me."

Devron squatted down in her view. Tears of frustration swarmed her eyes, and she couldn't wipe them away because it hurt too much to move. He rested his hand on top of her head.

Memories came, of being tied down, the trio of darkmages laughing as they braided her black curls to match them. "I hate these braids. Take them out. Cut them off if you have to, but get them out."

"Rowan, listen to me. You have lost a lot of blood. Tarm is one of our Council's best bodymages. This means he is an alpha-class warrior of great power and skill. Let him heal you."

"I can't." A tear slipped over the bridge of her nose from one eye. It itched.

"Lady, you are not going to be harmed here."

"*I can't!*" She sniffed, fisting her hands where they lay by her hips. "I'm a watermage stuck in perpetual mirror form. Few of the six crafts work on me. You have to sew me together, then bind the wounds."

"Sand and Mist," Laing swore.

"Let go," Devron stubbornly persisted. "You are safe now."

"It's not a choice. I don't control it."

He looked up at Tarm standing out of her sight, disbelief clear on his face.

"Let me try something..." Tarm stepped up and laid his fingertips on her spine.

She closed her eyes in despair. Despair because hope was so cruel. She knew better, and she still held her breath. Something wiggled against her mirror.

Tarm let out a frustrated, “Shit.”

Tears dampened the hair at her temple. It hurt. She whimpered.

Devron shot to his feet. “Let me try.”

His hand was on her head, and she felt the mirror brush him away.

“I can’t even block her pain!”

“Did they do this to you, Rowan?” Laing’s deeper voice asked.

“No,” she whispered. “No, this is all me.”

“Put pressure on those wounds,” Tarm ordered. “I’ll go get supplies.”

“Pressure? But we can’t block the pain!” Lang protested.

“If I won’t be able to regenerate her blood loss, then the bleeding has to be stopped. Get towels and press.”

She heard the patter of running feet, and Devron crouched in front of her. “Hold on, Rowan.”

“I have to talk to Wolf. I have to.”

“What is it?”

She could tell he was humoring her, distracting her, but didn’t care. “He needs me. Through us, the darkmage Fortress will be destroyed.”

Devron eased closer. His thumb brushed gently at her temple. “What do you mean?”

“I saw it in one of my visions. Through our matebond, we will prevail. She will die.”

Devron’s brushing thumb paused. Confusion and surprise flickered across his face.

“Matebond?” His brows came together with suspicion. “Who will die?”

She nodded as best she could, the words falling fast. She was so close. What a journey it had been to get here, but she was *here*. “I’ve learned as much as I could about your people. I know about your laws and structure, your Clans and rituals. I gathered the information when I was being held by the Guild because I saw it a long time ago. It was one of my first visions, and strongest. I would be taken, and I would be freed, and I would mate with the Wolf, the Alpha of all the packs, and we would destroy the last darkmage.” It gave her comfort, stating her purpose out loud, an affirmation of all she’d survived and suffered through.

Devron eased back on his haunches, his dark brown eyes locked on hers. He shook his head. There was pity in his gaze, but not quite the flavor she usually saw. “What?” Urgency gripped her. She drew her arm out to reach for him, ignoring the strike of pain and fresh roll of wetness. “What!”

The warrior took her hand gently, his larger one enfolding hers in heat. “Rowan, your vision...”

“Don’t tell me it was a dream. Don’t. My visions are always true.”

He shook his head faintly. “Lady, our Clan Alpha is already mated. Neena is our Domina, strong and healthy.”

“But...” She stared at him in shock.

He squeezed her limp hand, laid it back down along her body. Footsteps pounded and then Laing tossed a towel to Devron.

He caught it, lips folded tightly. “This is going to hurt.” He stepped closer to her, out of sight.

Laing’s heat was on her other side, and her breath strangled when he laid two towels down on her hip and shoulder. Then he pressed, and she shrieked. Panting, she choked when Devron laid his towels down, and screamed when he seemingly drove them into her

wounds.

Moaning, she gasped until she had breath to scream again, and did. It was a relief to scream. The men didn't need to know it had nothing to do with the pain. The years the Mage Guild held her, experimented on her, controlled her. And she waited. Her terrifying kidnapping by that red-headed shit Pretar. The months she'd been tortured, and she'd waited for the hawk whose love would set him free. He'd come, his slave had come, and they'd taken her with them when they left. All just the way she'd seen years ago, when she'd come into her power.

Writhing, desperate to get away from the unrelenting pain, she struggled despite their frantic pleas to be still. She'd seen the wolf-man in her vision, his own power just the razor-tip of a Clan whose backing force would make him unstoppable. He was black as night, as black as her hair and eyes, his body huge and hard. He looked at her with heat, with admiration. He took her body and spirit and made her into the deadly air that pushed before the arrow of the Beasts. She would be the death strike, and after it was done, they would live happily, free.

Sobbing now, she struggled to breathe through the pain. What had gone wrong? What choice had changed, leading to this wrong future, altered from the one she'd seen and clung to? Roaring with rage now, she buried her face in the stretcher's canvas. She knew better! All the futures she saw were in flux. Whenever one of her cryptic messages popped from her lips, she knew that people could alter it through their choices, unraveling their own weaving or tying it up faster. If they even recognized it as a prophecy. If they could make sense of her rambling. She'd held tight to her own vision, but failed to consider there were other people's choices as part of this future. If she'd gotten a message to him sooner? If she'd fought the Guild and made her own way to the Beasts? If she'd—

“Aaaaahhhh!” Agony washed over her skin in a wave, and then came again with a second strike. Lost in her thoughts, she failed to notice when the bodymage pressed her torn muscles together. Then he began to sew her skin, a pain she'd known a few times before. The room bucked and spun beneath her, never a good sign.

A man was whispering prayers. Devron, she thought. “Wind blow gently. Water wash softly. Fire warm slowly. Earth carry steadily. Spirit glow brightly. Body bear strongly.”

It was a lovely prayer. The words followed her into the darkness.

* * * *

Slave knelt on the hard cold stone. Ty had gone. Had his touch been a warning? A farewell? A threat? People were still screaming, still crying. As if Ty, in his wild strength, was even marginally fearful. She'd never seen anything like it, the bursting muscles, the growth and merging of his hands and face into something not hawk, not man. She hadn't expected it, and didn't remember it clearly. She wanted to see it again.

When Slave realized her lower leg remained pressed against the pillar, she shrieked, leaping in a scrambling fall to crumple against the wall of the small room, heart pounding, stomach churning. Panic that the stone might take her back was instant and complete. The strange stillness that gripped her while watching Ty change and leave vanished, and again she was coated in a cold sweat, her body shaking too badly to stand, let alone run.

Realizing only the unconscious remained in the room, Slave managed to half crawl, half pull herself out to the hall. The farther from that stone the better. Her sudden horrifying sense that the Monster would come bursting into the room at any moment brought her breath to a mad pant. *Away. Get farther away. Out of sight, out of touch.*

The hall that ran along the room was full of people. A man reached for her and she hissed, shrinking. He relented and moved on. Before she'd gone very far, another stood in front of her, stopping her progress.

"Please, Lady, sit. Rest."

Slave folded in on herself, drawing her knees up, eyes flitting from massive legs in leather, some in skirts, some kneeling among the other slaves, holding them, talking to them. Closest to her, a man spoke in a tumble of words, on his knees, clinging with both hands to a warrior crouched in front of him.

"—I didn't know! They killed her! They killed them all! Never talk, never whisper, never in the night! Then the hawks! And the flying lizards! Weeks! Death, every day, and they would laugh, and drink it down like wine!"

It was awful. It was amazing. He was talking, and she heard his voice for the first time. Looking past him, still panting with residual panic, her gaze connected to the older, scarred woman's. The woman shrank into herself, her eyes ringed with white, her hands vivid red with fresh blood.

Ripping her eyes away, Slave glared at the men blocking the hall.

"—just landed. A hawk brought them all in one sifting."

"By Dust they reek!"

"But from where?"

"They're all rank with darkcraft. Put two guards on each. Council warriors."

"It's one of the missing hawks!"

Burying her face in her knees, Slave wrapped her arms over her head. She'd done it. She'd gotten Ty out. Her life was already over, gone, so the actions she'd taken to free him shouldn't matter. But somewhere inside, she screamed as wildly as the brunette with the broken hand. She almost envied the woman her ability to just disappear into hysteria.

Peeking from beneath her arm, her eyes jumped from person to person. Farther down the hall, beyond the doorway to the sifting stone, one small slim woman stood still as a statue. She clasped her hands together at her waist, and her black, smoothly-braided hair reflected the gold magelights. Slave met Water woman's steady, staring eyes, the black of them stark in her bruised face. Hiding, she jerked her gaze to the stone between her feet, shame thick.

She tried to get control of her breathing. Her throat hurt. After a few minutes, more warriors came, if that was even possible. They strode back and forth, carrying people away in pairs. She knew her turn was coming. Would they take her to a torture cell like the hawks had suffered? Would they kill her where she sat? Would she have a trial, or was her guilt in her eyes?

A man in a leather skirt knelt near her. "Lady."

The first thing she noticed besides his kind, low voice, was the hand that gripped his knee was tipped with cat claws. If she looked at his face, would he have whiskers?

"Lady."

The third thing she noticed was he smelled wonderful. Of pine and sun and fresh, clean man.

“Lady, we are going to move from here. Walk with us, or I can carry you.”

Then she noticed the second set of bare, muscular calves standing at the crouching man’s shoulders.

“I am so ashamed.” Her trembling voice was hoarse, scratchy. Guilt poured through her words. It was hard to die. She wanted a good death, quick and clean. A memory of the Monster’s Bear pausing in the doorway, then passing her by jumped up at her. She shook.

His hand reached toward her and she cringed before she could stop it. The reaching hand checked, retreated.

His voice was calm, not like he was about to deal death at all. “You are safe here. We’ll need you to share what happened shortly, but first, let’s check you, clean you.”

She said nothing. *Ty. Eyes of gold, lifting his head to smile at her with a face covered in his own gore.*

“Come now. Let me help you.” He reached for her again and she threw herself away, scrambling desperately when her legs didn’t quite respond. It was ugly and awful and she didn’t care. He mustn’t touch her. Her heart thundered, and she was foul.

In the end, she pressed tight to the wall, arms braced, legs shaking, and stared at his triangular face and brown searching gaze before she remembered not to show him her eyes. He was a powerful man, more slender than Ty, but still harder than most human men. His chest, and that of the man standing behind him, was bare. Both men had shuttered, cautious eyes and tight lips.

He rose in a controlled lift, then surprised her by taking a step back until he stood side by side with the bushy-haired man next to him. “I’m Fynn, a mountaincat firemage. This is Odan, a groundbear skymage. We are going to be your guards while you stay here. We will not harm you.”

He paused, but when she just stared from one to the other, he sighed. “What is your name, Lady?”

Slave. It’s what she was, what she’d become, what they’d made her. Ty had refused that name. But she couldn’t return to her old one. That woman was dead in spirit, and would likely soon be dead in the flesh as well. Where had Ty gone? Why had he run? Had he run from her, and the evil she’d done? “Sunny.” The name popped out of nowhere in her brain.

He tipped his head. Obviously, it wasn’t a typical woman’s name. “We need to leave this location. We’ll take you to bathe, to be treated by a bodymage.” He gestured vaguely at the hall and Slave—no, Sunny—glanced to see that only the babbling male slave near her was left. And four Beast men watched her from the doorway of the sifting room, clearly guarding it.

“Where did Water girl go?”

The two men glanced at each other, then Cat Claws—no, she wouldn’t name them by trait as if they were like the monsters at the Fortress—then Fynn said, “Follow me or Odan will carry you.” And he turned and walked, not very slowly, away.

She stared after him, judging her ability to catch up even after a few strides. Fuzzhead—no, Odan—took a step toward her. She straightened, with great effort, and stiffly stumbled down the hall. He moved away to let her pass, then fell in behind her. Her brain began to fire more quickly. They had said that all the prisoners had smelled of darkcraft. Once she bathed, would the stench of her guilt be more clear? When would the

scarred woman tell them what she'd done?

Following the warrior down the hall that was eerily like the Fortress, she suddenly decided she would not tell them. The act she'd condemned herself with would come to light through others' honesty. After all, she'd already accepted the taint of evil. A lie of omission was nothing. When the woman told, or Ty, then she would face her death. But until then, she would bathe. Hot water for her body, and not Ty's gruel pot... Maybe she would sleep. Nowhere near the stench of the slave beds. And eat, something fresh and warm.

Then Fynn came to a flight of stairs that led *up*. Sla—Sunny stumbled to a stop, staring at them. She couldn't. She was barely managing to walk. Odan moved up behind her, clearly reminding her of her choices. But once again, she had none. The stairs were a mountain, and she was a tiny bug.

"I—I—" She stared at the ground.

"I will help you." Silent Odan finally spoke, matter-of-fact.

He reached for her, to carry her, she told herself. But she held her breath and closed her eyes as his hands touched her body. Strange man hands with strength. She was rigid, hands hovering in air. He didn't seem to mind, taking the stairs easily. When he got to the top she shifted, but he didn't stop. Indeed, they both sped up, long legs eating up hallway upon hallway and steep staircases.

A man met them at the top of one.

"Two are before you in the baths. A bodymage is waiting. Room eight."

They nodded and took her through an arch carved with gruesome images of teeth, claws, talons and beaks. She shivered. That was the death she didn't want.

The long, slender hallway was about the size of the slave halls at the Fortress, only tall enough to walk in upright. Every room had a stone door. The sound of screaming echoed behind one of them. She hunched her shoulders, sinking deeper into Odan's thick arms.

"We mean you no harm," Fynn said, watching her from next to one open doorway.

A man came up to the door from inside the room. He had Fynn's slender build, but his skin was black. He too was in a leather skirt. His hair was a shaggy, silky black, where Fynn's was a rich brown, sheared short and close to his head.

"I'm Tarm, a wolf bodymage. Please come in. I will heal you."

They all stepped into the small room, and Fynn rolled the door shut. There was nothing but a table and a bed. Odan carried her to the small corner bed and laid her on a thick wool blanket, plain undyed cream. She held herself stiff and breathed through her nose.

She mourned when she touched the soft blanket. "I'm filthy."

The dark-skinned Tarm stepped up to her, and she remembered Karu and shivered. "And blankets can be cleaned as well. We're using a secure bathing room, and so we have to ask you to wait. What's your name?"

"Ss-Sunny." She wasn't a slave anymore. She wasn't.

"Are you hurt, Sunny?"

Kneeling on a bench, hands behind her back, willing to take any horror for Ty. Feeling the pain, and watching the pleasure bleed across his face. "No." Well, that was dumb. "Yes." The three men stared at her. Fynn at the door, Odan with his arms crossed against one wall, Tarm waiting at the edge of the bed. Screw them. "Of course I am."

Tarm held his hand out. "Why of course? Where have you come from?"

She stared at his hand. "The Fortress."

"Take my hand, Sunny. I will not hurt you."

She stared at his hand, her heart leaping in her throat. Would he know she'd worked darkcraft from a simple body scan? Or would it take the touch of a spiritmage? She wanted to live a bit longer. She wanted to see Ty again.

"Sunny." Odan said the word simply. A statement.

She swallowed audibly and put her hand in Tarm's, golden skin in black. Her hand was bruised, scraped, filthy in comparison. Oh. There was blood. There, on the back of her third knuckle. Bright, fresh blood. Probably not hers.

Tarm frowned. Her heart stopped. Then he closed his eyes, and she felt the heat of a bodymage's healing gift. It washed over her hand, and up her arm, making it her turn to close her eyes. Peace. Warmth. The simple touch of another, without force, pain, or evil. He didn't know what she'd done. And he healed her. The heat drifted through her neck, easing her shoulders, paused and deepened in her chest, in her belly, between her legs. Her thighs jumped once, and then finally relaxed. Her feet warmed, even her head.

When he stepped away, she was almost asleep. The men moved to the door.

Tarm whispered, but she heard. "Abuse. Starvation, for several weeks at least. Rape, but not recently. Some trauma from within the last day. She's healed. In body at least."

"Thanks, wolf," Odan rumbled quietly. "Hab is coordinating the healing reports. Make sure you see him."

"Yes. Good night."

A scrape of stone, and then another voice from beyond. "You're up next in the baths."

Odan came up to the bed. "Sunny, time to bathe."

Chapter Five

She opened her eyes and stared at Odan, with some effort. A haze of green mage mist lit his eyes. Like a ghostly tattoo, long black lines ran up from beside his nose, threaded between his brows and disappeared across his forehead into the dense, bristling bush that was his hair. Another pair of stripes ran diagonally up his cheeks to his temples. In two heartbeats, the lines faded, and green power faded from his silver-blue eyes.

He wasn't anything she'd ever seen before. A lifetime ago, when she was ... that other person, she would have cried out, cringed away. It now required something much more dire than a hint of strong emotion to get a reaction like that. She was aware of this change in herself in a split second. Noticed his power surge. Noticed the strangeness. Noticed her calmness. Suddenly, she was fiercely glad she'd renamed herself. It was right.

"Walk on your own, or I'll carry you." Again, he didn't speak in a threatening tone. Just matter-of-fact. There were no other alternatives.

"I'll walk. I just can't move fast." It didn't hurt to sit up, but it took a different kind of focused effort. Everything was loose, soothed. She eventually got her legs over the side of the bed. Odan stepped away to wait by the door. Fynn was already in the hall. She stood, like the aged. Tottered past Odan and followed Fynn farther into the narrow hall to a modest sized room. There was no stone door here. A waste chair and a washing sink were against one wall, and a deep plunge bath opened directly ahead, built into the floor. A table with towels and folded clothes took up the sidewall. The room was warmer than the halls, and moist.

Odan went to the table and picked up a towel, offering it. With a flick of his gaze, the water in the bath churned gently. "There's soap on the inner ledge there."

She looked at him standing there, at Fynn standing in the doorway. Facing in. She was reminded of the poor human slave guarding the sifting stone. They weren't here to protect her. They were here to protect others from her. *The scarred woman's eyes wide with horror, her mouth twisting open in pain...* They probably wouldn't touch her, wouldn't rape her. But they suspected she'd been somewhere horribly Dark. Saw her as suspicious. And they were right. SI—Sunny looked into the deep water. Even though she wouldn't be able to wash the true filth away, she wanted that bath. Very simply, she raised up her ragged slave dress. There had been her own white Temple dress for a week. And then there'd been the blue tunic and green skirt. When those were destroyed, she'd been given this. It used to be a pale red but was now an indeterminate brown. The shoes she'd taken off a dead body. She kicked them off now. Dropped the filthy dress over them.

Carefully, she crouched down and sat at the edge of the water. She was a bit afraid. *How deep is it?* she wanted to ask. Didn't. Leaning on one arm, she let her legs slide into the water, but clung to the side. Lowering herself a bit more, she stretched with her toes, but couldn't feel the bottom. Her arms gave out and she scrabbled frantically, gracelessly at the stone, her elbows splayed wide. There. Just there, her toes brushed bottom.

Odan crouched down near her. "When you stand, it should be below your shoulders. You can't swim?"

What an idiotic question. Did she look like a watercoaster, the sleek water wolves that ran the lakes and streams of Fourth City? Did she look like a fish the sailors brought in at the Royal City?

He took her incredulous look in stride. "Put your feet down. If you go under, I'll get you."

Obviously, he meant for her to believe him in this. She lowered her eyes before he could see the contempt in them. What she'd just survived meant she would rely on no one but herself for the rest of her life.

Her nails scraped on the wet, glossy smoothed stone as she sought to put her feet down. Managing to stand, she concentrated on controlling her panting breaths as she got her balance against the tempest of coiling water he'd called. No way would she ask him to stop it. Keeping her palms tight to the edge, she inched her way around to the soap nook. There was also sand, and porous rock, and a bundle of abrasive leaves. She used all of them, scrubbing until it stung. Scrubbing until her skin was apple red. Scrubbing until she had no energy left to continue. Her hair was a solid mat, but she soaped it again and again. Her breath came rougher, heavier, faster. Almost, she worked herself up into a frenzy. Clean. Cleaner. Faster. Harder. The warm water around her was soft, and the soap smelled unfamiliar, of spice and vanilla. The leaves were sharp and astringent. The sand had a faint salty bite.

When her limbs were trembling from the stress of standing in the deep, whirling water, and the strong washing, she ducked herself under to rinse. Silence wrapped around her. Her body hummed. In the dark privacy under the water, she thought of him. Ty. Where was he? Would he ever understand she'd already been dead? That it was her choice to condemn herself? That to free him, to never see his wild, proud golden eyes become the desolate, empty ones of the prior hawk, she would have done absolutely anything?

Standing, wiping the water from her face and taking a deep breath, she saw that Fynn had come up close to the bath. Suspicious of her long moment under the water, perhaps. Scenting her now she was clean, perhaps. Her gut once again churning with bile, wondering at her coming death, the means and drama of it, she put one trembling forearm on the stone floor. It was cool, now she'd warmed to the water. She tried to pull herself up onto her forearms, but even with a little jump, could only hang for a few seconds before her body collapsed back in. Next she tried to lift one leg up onto the stone, using her hand to help her get one toe up, she didn't have the strength to roll her hips up and out.

Fynn was there, his hand extended. She stared at the strong sinews of his exposed forearm and remembered another recent forearm she'd seen. *Grabbing the knife, feeling the thin skin part so easily. Triumph.* Shaking, she put hers into his. And then her other one when he offered both.

"When you clear the edge, put your knees down."

He hauled her up, then swung her over the rock ledge as if he'd been pulling women out of plunge baths all his life. As he probably had. He lowered her arms, and she put them on her thighs. She knelt at his feet and waited for the accusation. These men hunted darkmages for the Royals. Surely they'd smell her guilt now and declare her one.

When she made no move to take it, Odan handed her the towel that was only an arm's reach away. She still didn't touch it, just staring at Fynn's tall boots. They were

leather, with bone toggles, and reinforced soles.

Odan draped it around her without touching her, crouched next to her. "There will be food in the room."

She took in his face, with his odd gray eyes and his bushy, wiry hair that was definitely prematurely gray. Stripes faded onto his skin, painting him with a fierce mask, then melted away. She stared at him, searching his eyes. He was calm, in wait mode. They didn't know. They didn't smell the evil she'd taken into herself, welcomed, controlled.

Slowly, she gathered the towel around herself. Almost, she was afraid to look away. Fynn said, "Sunny."

In here? There were no windows for daylight... Oh. Her. Slave no more. "Yes."

"Dry off. There are clothes here to choose from. A robe, or a dress, or—"

"Don't you smell it?" She wanted to live, but her heart literally rattled her breath.

"Smell what?" Fynn asked gently.

"Me. Darkcraft."

Fynn stood beside Odan, and almost comically, they both canted their faces, and inhaled.

Odan smiled. "I smell a greatly improved woman."

Fynn nodded. "Salt, pain, and fear. Spiced soap, and something like ... hay. No darkcraft, though, definitely. What sort of clothing would you prefer?"

"Anything is fine." She was utterly relieved. They didn't know! But then, as she stood, her knees almost buckled. *What are you thinking? That you're safe? Soon the older woman will tell. Soon Ty will tell.*

She blotted her body, noticing dimly the cut on her breast was gone, no scar. She touched the place softly. Her skin prickled and throbbed. "Your healer was very powerful. It is true Beasts have greater magic than humans." Or maybe they just had greater magic than darkcraft. For every day after they healed Ty to work more violence on him, faint scars had been left behind.

She wondered if it was also true there were no such things as Beast darkmages. That they couldn't be tainted like humans could. Suddenly, she had to know. "Is it true there are no Beast darkmages? Ever?"

Holding the towel to her chin, she darted a glance at Fynn, who had moved back to the door. He looked down the hall, motioning to someone. Focusing on her, he cocked his head. She shivered at his intent stare. "It is true. There has never been a Trux who forsook their birthright in the Six and turned to harm instead."

She stared at him, and couldn't look away. He was strong and lean, with a knee-length, whispering leather skirt embossed with one cat face. She thought of the gore and filth she'd cleaned from Ty. She thought of the Merry Three, laughing down the hall, and how she'd turned from running, and stayed to wait with him. Taking a breath when she had to, the room dipped and swirled around her.

Fynn growled, low and vicious. "Sunny. Where did you come from?"

She knew the tight rage in his voice, knew it as her own. *Ty's face as he clamped his thighs around the darkmage's neck. The hate, the pleasure.* She understood Fynn's fury, knew it was deserved. Was this how it was for them, the other darkmages? An acceptance of their path and a constant dance around delaying their own death? Was this sudden bloodlust to see them slaughtered part of what she'd done? Perhaps the darkcraft she'd

wielded was even now spreading through her blood, twisting her thoughts.

She looked at Fynn's beautiful, dark, long-lashed predator's eyes, and she said, "I am damned."

He studied her, eyes hard as the stone under feet. Then, strangely, his gaze softened. "There will be time to talk later. You are weaving. Food is waiting. Dress." He glanced at Fuzzhead—no, Odan. A nod, and then, "Odan will carry you if you cannot walk."

It was a simple matter to take the long, heavy dress from Odan and slip it over her head. There were new leather sandals to slide into. Leaving her hair a knotted, sodden mess, she walked back to her cell between the two of them. Before the stone was even rolled back over the entrance, the food waiting on the table had her stomach shouting. It was nothing but a thick stew and a slice of bread. A tear came to her eye, but did not fall.

She fell on the table, and ate ravenously. The taste! It exploded in her mouth. The heat! She heard distant moaning, but only after several bites did she realize the sound came from her. And it was a few more frenzied passes before she recognized that the thing lying next to the bowl was a wooden spoon, with a beautifully carved handle topped by a shaggy dog. She paused, with her fingers in her mouth. Not quite able to control her panting breath, she stared at the spoon as she took one more jerky bite. She dipped her hand into the stew, grabbed a hunk of meat and stuffed it hurriedly into her mouth.

"A spoon." Hearing herself say the word out loud brought a flush to her face. She became acutely aware of the two large, silent men standing behind her, how she hunched over the bowl, one arm wrapped completely around it, fist clenched on the bread. She slowly reached out a gooey hand and picked up the spoon. She hadn't touched one since ... before.

Eating just as quickly, almost as sloppily, she hurriedly ate the stew. She licked the bowl once before remembering, then used the fresh, soft bread to wipe at the remnants. The texture of it made her moan again. Holding the bread up to her face, she inhaled deeply. "Earthmother, what a smell." After she spoke the words, she heard what she said. Shock rang through her body. *Earthmother*. So simply, so freely, the pattern of her old self, the one who had faith, slipped into being. No. The Earthmother had nothing to do with this food. Nothing to do with that smell. Nothing to do with sharing her joy in it. No, it was pain that had brought her to this point, forced and taken and bent to *her* will.

Hurt lanced through her stomach. It twisted, making the stew feel like a stone inside her. A too big stone. She clutched at her stomach even as she bit off another chunk. Stumbling to the bed, she sat on the edge, rocking now against the steady ache.

"Sunny? Are you in pain?" Fynn's voice tried to remain neutral, but she heard the concern.

She shook her head. Ty. Where was he? Was he happy? Would he come for her, in anger or retribution?

"You're shaking, and pale. You're rocking, and holding your stomach. Clearly, you are in distress."

Brilliant deduction, Fynn. Go away. You would be in distress too if you'd been held by darkmages for months. But she held the responses in. Out of nowhere, she had an urgent need to push them, dare them. Looking up at Fynn, the one she considered the talker, she asked, "Have you ever raped a woman?"

His lip lifted, showing sharp, even teeth. Before her very eyes, the canines grew, lengthening. His eyes swirled sharp green with summoned magecraft, and he lifted his

chin. His whole face seemed to tighten, sharpen, his cheekbones and jaw standing out starkly.

Sunny was unimpressed. She lashed out. "Have you? Ever seen a lady and brought her to your room and held her down to take what you want?"

"No. I am an honorable warrior." The words were grudgingly given from gritted teeth.

She looked at Odan, who stood legs wide and solid, his arms crossed. She started to speak, but he interrupted her. "Don't even ask. No."

"So you say." Her heart thundered now, her face red, her stomach a tangled knot of pain. "Well, I'm just being clear I don't want to fuck either one of you. I don't want sex, and I don't want to be touched or held or carried or lifted or anything."

They stared silently back, bare-chested and muscled.

It was Odan who spoke. "All right."

Fynn glanced at him, then said, "Lie down. Rest. When you wake, we'll hear your story."

She nodded, not quite believing them, and laid down, awkwardly. The bed was comfortable, supported by woven straps, with a fresh, plain blanket. She had to curl on her side because of her stomach. It heaved and shook at her change in position, but she clamped her jaw shut and willed the food to stay down.

As hard as it was, she had to ask. Needed to. "If you could, please, find information on Ty, I would be very grateful."

"The hawk you came with?" Fynn asked.

"Yes."

"I'm sure we'll hear about him. Sunny, do you need a healer?"

"Stay away from me."

She closed her eyes. The feeling of two powerful warriors in the room was impossible to dismiss. But they were Beasts. Truxet, they called themselves. They were the guards of the Seven Cities, hunters of darkcraft, protectors of the Royal family. And even though she apparently was not a darkmage, they would soon discover she'd worked a darkspell. There would be a price to pay. But guard duty went both ways. As suspicious as she may be, they were also protecting her. Fynn had been clear to say it wouldn't be he that harmed her. So, perhaps she could rest. Perhaps...

* *

The dreams were very bad. There was blackness and pain, worry and hunger, the stinging lash, the hitting hands, the laughing Monster's body lunging into hers.

Then she was walking. She moved through the red rock halls she knew so well, came to a stone arch. Her heart beat faster. She stepped through the opening.

The man with laughing orange eyes hung displayed on the wall. She liked his position. It was lovely, with his arms above his head, his legs in a steady stance, spread shoulder-width. His muscles were everywhere, sleek, and piled. His hair held the touch of the sun, and his smiling mouth was full, red, succulent. She knelt before him.

"Sunshine."

It was all he said, but her bare breasts beaded.

"Sunshine, I'll make it hurt good."

She felt her labia swell, dampen, loosen.

"Sunshine, I'm here for you. Anything you want."

Her lips parted, and her hands stroked her thighs restlessly, her toes curling under her.

"Sunshine, listen to me. Obey. Open your eyes."

She opened her eyes. Fynn stared at her, his brow slightly furrowed. Most importantly, he and Odan were both across the room. Assessing her body, it didn't feel like they'd touched her. Her stomach was tired, achy, but no longer cramped.

Shifting cautiously, she unbent her stiff knees, drew her fisted hands from her chin up under her cheek. But it was impossible to go back asleep. Her heart absolutely thundered in her chest, and her mind's eye was full of the vision of Ty, chained against stone.

What had she dreamed? Why? If she truly saw him like that again, it would break her. He needed to be free. It all had to be *for* something. But the dream had put an ache between her legs. And worse, it had made her feel... She wanted...

Fynn said, "You've slept through the night. Are you ready to tell us more?"

Sunny tried to speak, cleared her throat, croaked, "Ty?"

"He's gone to his hawk. His Clan flies with him. Partial reports have been taken from four of the others."

Gone to his hawk. What did that mean? He was flying? "Ty is free?"

Fynn tipped his head slightly. "Of course he is."

Her breath caught. Almost, she wanted to cheer. Then, she had an overwhelming urge to smack the Beast upside his complacent, innocent head. Instead, she sat up. Pushing herself into the corner, she pulled a blanket to her, curling beneath it. The ache of poor sleep was already fading. Truly, the bodymage had worked wonders. Had he been able to save the kitchen Slave's hand? Help the woman with the scarred face? Erase the cut on her arm that Sunny had given her, hiding the proof of her darkspell?

"Have the others said anything? About me?" *Is it time to die?* She shouldn't care. The mad rush of everything following the escape had settled. Surely, they'd know by now.

Fynn nodded. "We know you used a darkspell, that you claimed pain to generate energy, since the darkmage Fortress has some way," Fynn frowned, "to suppress all Six Elements."

Odan sat on the floor by the door, silent.

Fynn crouched on one leg a little closer to her, along one wall. He said, "Tell us your story, Sunny."

"That's it?" She blinked between the two men. "You discover I—I—" She sucked in such an enormous breath she coughed, choking. "I cut her. I hurt her, and I drew energy from that and I shoved it into Ty, even when he rejected it. And then I did it again." Time stopped.

Fynn nodded. "It was a sad, desperate thing. Something you did not for your own gain, but in expediency to save many others." He rested his pointed chin on his knee and looked at her with those ridiculously kind brown eyes. "You're not a darkmage, Sunny. Now start at the beginning, and walk us through your journey."

It was hard to think, with her mind whirling. If she wasn't a darkmage, would she be able to see Ty? "I think not. There are much more important things to know than my path." *Soft kisses, strong hands. A perfect, stunningly handsome blond, smiling down at her, full of fervor and faith. Biting, ugly kisses. Crying out, fighting gouging hands.*

“There is a group of darkmages, with a presence in each of the Seven Cities. There were nine, but they killed one of their own two days ago and Ty killed three yesterday. They have found a huge Fortress, like this but the stone is red.”

“How do you know this?” Fynn asked intently.

“I’ve been held as their slave for months. I spied. As much as I could. I had about an hour when the slave compulsion wasn’t complete, because I was between tasks. But that’s not important.” *Redhead stood and turned suddenly. “Are you spying, you wretched little bitch? Are you interested in what we’re up to? Well come then, Pretar will share his skills with you. There’s no need to merely listen when you can experience them firsthand! I think with you, I will use heat. Does that sound about right? Say yes.”*

“What you need to know is that they’re thinking long term. The lizard-birds they create, they are all part of a plan to turn the Cities against you. The hawks they took were just for fun, because the Monster is determined to force you to become pets. But then he found a bear, and the bear wasn’t right from the first. So, he was happy with his bear, but it really upset him he couldn’t break a hawk to his will.”

Odan’s voice was slow, calm. “Where are they, Sunny?”

She stared at him, letting him see how unafraid she was of lying. There wasn’t much she wouldn’t tell them, in order to stop the defilers. “I don’t know. Inside stone halls and rooms, like this place. The air was always warm, never cool or hot.”

The men exchanged a hard glance, and Fynn asked, “Who is the Monster?”

“I had nicknames for them all.” Grinding her teeth, she breathed deeply through her nose. *Blue eyes, so lovely and bright, sky blue.* “His real name is Thad. He is a high-level member of the Masonry Guild. Or at least that’s what he posed as in Seventh City. Then, he called himself Michael.”

“Thad?” Fynn’s voice plainly doubted.

Unbelievably, Sunny’s lips twitched with understanding. “Yeah. The leader of the darkmages who are going to destroy us all? His name is Thad.” Michael was a safe name, and she’d enjoyed it when he’d met her, spoke with her, ate with her, kissed her. On a harsh breath, she continued. “Ty killed three as we left, which means only five remain.”

Odan denied her previous statement. “They are *not* going to destroy us.”

“Three! Of the Darkmages?” Fynn was impressed. He should be.

“Yes.” The word came out full of relish and she didn’t care. “The Merry Three. Allie, Dionne, and Karu. It will be a severe blow to their power structure. They were still bickering about Thad killing Greg. Apparently they are concerned the lesser darkmages they are trying to grow aren’t ready or strong enough.”

“They have a training program?” Odan spoke with disbelief.

Sunny shrugged. “I don’t know much about that. I only know the lizard-birds have been created and trained for something big, something that didn’t work out in the last weeks. Their goal is to get the Beasts, sorry, Truxet, you guys, out of the Cities. Then they can take over the Royal family, and the Mage Guild. Then, they think it will be easy to destroy you. Thad is insane, but the others aren’t. They are very, very smart.”

A memory burst into Sunny’s mind. “Do you have the book? The large book Ty brought through?”

The men glanced at each other. They didn’t know.

She nodded. “If it came through with us, it will be full of horror, full of their capabilities. Pretar especially wrote everything in it, and he experimented carefully.”

"I'm sure if it came through, it's been found."

She nodded. "And you have the Water girl safe?"

"She's different?"

"I don't know her real name. None of us could speak directly to each other, due to the slave compulsion. I could speak to her, at the end, because she wasn't a slave, but another captive. But I wasn't assigned to her and never saw her before the escape. That's what *they* called her. 'The crazy Water girl.'"

"Which one was she?" Fynn asked.

"She's slight, around my age, although her manner is young. She has dark, braided hair and black eyes. Last I saw her, she wore a blue robe." Sunny licked her lips. ... *and neither will soul dance...* "And she's not quite right."

Fynn's voice was sharp. "You suspect her of being a darkmage?"

"No." Her answer was immediate. *The dark-driven death blast flew from both hands of the tall woman. The black-haired girl calmly watched it come. The power flew back at the woman. She staggered, then she died.* "Maybe. I really don't think so." Looking down at the thick, soft blanket, plucking at it fretfully, Sunny tensed. "How can you tell who's a darkmage?"

"Sometimes, if it's been a very long time since they worked darkcraft, or if they've used a spell to hide from us, their trails are hard to follow in the crowded Cities. But mostly we can follow them easily, by smell and by energy. They feel wrong. Our beastspirits become angry, desperate to hunt."

Her stomach flip-flopped. But they hadn't noticed her... "What does your beastspirit, your cat, say about me?"

"It says you're afraid, and mean with it, but growing steadier." Fynn asked, "If you don't think she's a darkmage, why are you worried about her?"

"She wasn't a slave, like the rest of us. She was special to them. I think you should be careful with her. Actually, I think she's a Truth-teller." It would be an amazing coup for them to have her, and a spectacular one for the Beasts if they had taken her away from them.

"We'll pass that along."

She had no doubt they'd pass all of it along.

Fynn continued. "Who are the other four that still live?"

"One rarely came to the Fortress, and was always cloaked. I'm fairly sure she was a woman. Then there was Pretar, Russ and Sverre." Red, Glasses and Tattoo. "Again, smart, powerful, deceptive. None of them looked evil. Pretar is very academic, Russ looks like a minor bureaucrat. Sverre is older, and has covered himself in ancient symbolic tattoos."

"Tattoos!" Odan's quiet word made her jump with the emotion behind it. It was surprising, coming from him.

"By Ash and Dust, the arrogance," Fynn bit out.

She didn't understand. "They are gathered in a Fortress much like this one, ancient, but empty. There are levels and rooms and great courtyards and—"

Rock bumped and abraded her shoulders, her head was an agony of pulsing pain. Her pelvis ached, burned. A slave dragged her by one foot. Tattoo must have summoned him to take her back to the slave hub. His arm wrapped tight around her ankle, high against his torso. She flailed the uncomfortably dangling other leg, before bending her

knee and resting it against her body. She struggled, briefly, to try to sit up, to stop the scouring of her shoulders as she was dragged along the hard stone corridor. Craning her neck painfully, she held her head up off the stone. White light filled her vision, and her breath wheezed harshly. It took a few tries, but she managed to croak, "Stop." But she knew better. They weren't supposed to speak to each other. Pain from the slave compulsion exploded through her body, a thin wail escaping before it all went black again.

When she was able to hear *now* again, her first thought was merely spine melting relief it was a dream. A memory. She hadn't gone back. She wouldn't go back. Her second thought was she was breathing too heavy, too fast. She gulped, forcing herself to pause. Then she recognized Fynn sat at the edge of her bed. He watched her closely. She understood she'd lost more time than the memory warranted.

"You are safe."

No, I'm not. She nodded. "How long?"

"Around an hour. Becoming lost in a memory when you've suffered greatly is not uncommon, Sunny."

She pushed herself higher into the corner. He handed her some water, and she drank it, then handed the mug back. Odan relaxed from his stance near the table, and drifted back toward the door.

"I need to go back to our conversation. What did you mean the Fortress was 'much like this one?'"

She sighed deeply, still feeling her heart race, and the sweat under her arms and on her spine. "It was exactly like this one, except the stone was a slightly different shade, a bit more red-brown than gray-brown. The statues, the stairways, those were just a bit different. I explored it as I could."

Fynn turned his head, to meet Odan's gaze. "Groundbear? Is it ... possible?"

Odan's growl rode the air. "Mountaincat, it would be amazing, agonizing, but you know it is possible. Just a few years ago one of your Clan found that lost sifting stone, hidden by darkcraft."

Shining white, curving claws exploded from Fynn's hands. They weren't curved as deeply as Ty's, and were more slender. "A lost clanhome. And they have defiled it. How? Where?"

Sunny held very still, keeping her eyes on the claws. Rage and despair filled Fynn's voice. His head tipped back, short, neatly trimmed dark hair shimmering. His throat worked with long lines of muscle, his jaw stark. One hand slashed through the air, and Sunny stopped breathing, shrinking back tightly to the stone wall. But his hand only landed against the bed post, shearing four perfect fresh grooves in the wood.

Fynn stood and stalked to the wall, leaning one forearm against it, his head hanging.

Odan stood and moved to the door. With a ripple of muscle that belied the way he seemed to just ease it open, he said, "Go. Report. Run. And bring more food."

It was a few heartbeats before Fynn pushed from the wall, but he turned toward her, not the door. "You flinched from me," he accused. "I would never attack you without cause." Then he nodded to Odan and strode away, utterly silent. The slink to his spine caused his leather skirt to sway. Odan rolled the door shut again.

She was alone with the large man. Now he would rape her. She gathered her feet beneath her on the bed, steadying herself against the wall. Her heart pounded, and she

could feel her cheeks were hot. It surprised her she wasn't more afraid, since it had been at least two months since she'd last been raped. The darkmages had moved on to fresher bodies. The old, familiar rage of her slave self wrapped her up, protected her. Her body flooded with energy. There was no slave compulsion anymore. She would fight.

He sat against the door. "Rest."

Odan's gray eyes went distant, like he wasn't even thinking about her. His hands were held in fists. Several times now, the men could have lashed out at her, and hadn't. Somehow, these men containing beasts were more controlled than human men, more disciplined. Somehow, they were missing her guilt. But she was a woman alone, a suspect.

She couldn't help but pick at him. It would be better just to get this over. "It's kind of strange warriors have chosen to go around topless, wearing only a skirt." She didn't say that even though they should have looked absurd, they didn't.

He focused on her. Unlike Fynn, his face was square, solid, with a jaw a bit too big for his head. It was balanced, however, by his thick neck. When he didn't respond she picked at him again.

"Why does your hair look like that? It looks almost like some sort of creature's fur."

"This is my human form, but yes, groundbears' hair tends to have the same wiry texture as our fur."

"You're a burrowing beast." She dared to add a sneer to her voice. She felt sick, and at the same time, ready to hit, bite, kick.

"I am." The pride in his voice was matched only by his calm. "I know that many human women find the thought of living under the earth unappealing."

He was entirely too unflappable. Time to be direct. "Are you going to fuck me now? Now that he's not here to stop you? It would be my word against yours." And that suddenly, she knew he wouldn't. Somehow, she knew.

"No matter what you say or do, you are safe with me."

He saw right through her.

Unable to take his staring, gray-blue gaze, she dropped her chin, focusing on how her hands had gone white where they bunched in the blanket.

Odan stood. "So far, what I've seen is a survivor, battered and damaged. A woman coping with change very well, with an iron strong will. She is still very afraid, and underneath the fear, she is drowning in anger. However, she has some sort of connection to the hawk, Ty."

He moved silently, nearly floating over to the bed with carefully placed steps. "That is the sum of my opinion of you at the moment. Now you know exactly where you stand with me, so please stop upsetting yourself by trying to pick a fight. I am no darkmage to lash out and delight in fear and pain. You are safe here."

He sat on the edge of the bed.

She stopped breathing. Leaning into the corner, she held herself ready.

He laid his hands palm-up on his thighs. They were huge, calloused. "While it is personally irritating to me that you obviously do not believe this, I understand how hard it would be for you. I will repeat it as often as you need to hear it."

Darting a glance up at his face, she saw he waited for her, and he caught her with his steady strength. He held her gaze, and her breath burst between them, frantic and harsh. His eyes were like the moon, like a mirror. She shook, unable to look away from the

binding stare that waited, wanting something from her. He was so close, too close. She panted, her heart thundering in her throat. His eyes were like manacles, polished silver chaining her in place.

The moments spun out, and he didn't blink, didn't look away. He waited, and waited. Her eyes fluttered, her lashes shook, but he expected her to stay, so she had to. Finally, she swallowed on her rasping dry throat, and her heart skipped, settling into a hard, driving, steadier thrum. His eyes were so solid, so calm, and yet, he stared at her. He looked at her, saw her, and didn't hate. Didn't sneer. Didn't pity.

Her spine twitched, but slowly she recognized her ability to return his gaze. She wasn't forced by him, she was encouraged. She breathed, deep, and saw herself, a small dot of cream blanket, reflected. He watched her, the woman who had survived, who had escaped. She returned his gaze, and marveled.

Finally, he nodded, once. He stood and moved back to the wall. He squatted there, and she saw he had tight fitting leather shorts beneath his skirt. He set his back to the stone and his gray eyes went distant. This time, she didn't pluck at him. She relaxed, slumping, a final tremor passing through her. How had he chastised and reassured her all without a word?

She closed her eyes, and without planning to, slept. The darkness was deep, and slow. One thought rolled into the black with a gleam of sharp, hot golden eyes. *Ty*. And then it sank, and she slept under the glow of a still, silver gaze. The nightmares were indistinct, full of anxiety and anger.

She woke when Fynn returned, the faint rasp of the door the only sound. They fed her again, and this time she only shook a little as she ate the stew with a spoon, this one carved with sharp-faced, plump groundbear. Looking at Odan, he didn't meet her gaze, but the fact he'd given her a spoon with his beast on it seemed either an offering or a rebuke. Her stomach pinched, but the pain of the first meal didn't come.

Then they took her to the baths. She used the waste chair, never doubting they would look away, and they did. Standing at the edge of the plunge pool, she knew in this, they would not look away. She flicked a glance at Odan, who watched. Stripping off her dress, she sat and jumped in, confident of the bottom. She washed just as ferociously, for just as long. And when she stared at the shoulder high stone floor she had to get up to, this time she looked up at Fynn, standing opposite Odan.

Raising her hands up to him, she asked, "Will you help me?"

He came at once, and his grip was strong, steady. She was out in a moment and he released her, just as she had believed he would. She stood from her kneeling landing, and took Odan's offered towel. Her dress was offered by Fynn when she dried. It was like she had servants. The odd thought made her blink. Humor took her breath. *Ty* had done that to her, as well. Bringing light to such a dark place.

When she'd ducked down to put her shoes on, she said, "*Ty*..."

"He's still lost to his hawk." Fynn shifted his weight. "Sunny, you should know that when damaged, Truxet can disappear into their beastspirit for ... a long time."

She looked up at him sharply. "Forever?"

Fynn grimaced. "It is rare, but yes, possible. Several months is more common."

Standing, she swallowed. Somehow she didn't think she had months to wait for *Ty*. What was to become of her?

"What—what have the other slaves been saying? Is there anything you still need to

know?"

Fynn spoke. "The initial verbal reports confirm the existence of nine darkmages, working from a possible lost Trux clanhome similar to this one, River Mountain. Various versions of humans' brutal treatment, and the deaths of hawks, and the apparent control the leader has over a rogue bear, have also been shared."

She breathed easier when Odan shifted his attention to Fynn. "We have to be part of the attack. When are the Council mages gathering?"

"No!" The word burst from her.

Both men looked at her.

She shook her head, and water dripped about her shoulders. "No, you can't go. There is no magic there but darkcraft. Everyone's elemental magic is doused, along with Beast abilities. None of the hawks could shift. The only one that seemed to still have some his own magic was the bear, but that was on the Monster's command." Yet as soon as she said it, something niggled at her memory...

"We have more abilities than those of our elements. We are also naturally resistant to darkcraft spells. Our numbers would prevail."

"No. No." She could do nothing but shake her head.

The men glanced at each other. They didn't understand.

"You underestimate them. Wait for Ty. You'll see."

Fynn pivoted, stalked away, then turned and came back. He stopped at arm's length. "Lady, we need all the information you have. From each of you. Your experiences will provide us with much we need to plan."

She swallowed. Her stomach cramped. "I understand." Licking her lips, noticing they were no longer as sore, she offered, "If you get me some paper, I can draw maps, floorplans."

Fynn sighed. "Yes. That would be excellent. However, your statements and maps will never be as good as your complete memories as seen through another's eyes."

Sunny blinked, shifted away.

Odan frowned. "The pool is at your back, Sunny. Step away from it."

"You're crowding me!"

Both men instantly stepped back. She breathed easier, and sidestepped away from the pool.

"What do you mean?" Her voice sounded suspicious.

"We need you to share your memories. But you're too close to them. If they are documented through another, every detail can be found and used."

"I don't understand," she lied. Her heart, once again, was pumping to burst. Her throat, despite the humid room, was tight. "No."

Fynn soothed, his hands reaching out. "We will not hurt you. You are safe."

But her heart still beat too fast, and her breath came in pants. She tried to slow it, choked, coughed.

"This is something all the escapees will do. It is necessary."

"No."

"Shhh. It won't happen today. Breathe, Sunny." Fynn's soft voice worked.

She breathed. She swallowed, struggling to stay focused. "I won't."

"It is a pure thing. There is nothing to fear. Have you never known the beauty of a souldance?"

Souldance. A ritual she'd graced many within her old life, one she'd gladly accepted every year as a priestess, proud and strong in her faith in the Sacred Couple. Bile churned in her stomach. "No."

Odan said quietly, relentlessly, "Why not, Sunny?"

"Leave her alone!"

"No," Odan defied Fynn. "Sunny, the souldance is not to pry your guilt free, but to give us the most complete image of who and where we'll fight. Help us. Help yourself."

"NO!" She screamed it at him. She shook from the urge to fly at him, hit him, force him to stop. "No one will ever judge me," she shrieked at the huge warrior. "I will never let anyone in that deep again!"

The silence seemed to echo on her last word. She whirled away from their merciless eyes. The pool of water, warm and deep, had stilled from its soothing bubbles, a simple spell for a skymage of Odan's caliber. In the reflection looking back at her, she was shocked to see her face. Stars and Flowers, she was so thin! Her eyes glowed mage green in the faintly swaying image. Her hair was a pale lumpy mass, lopsided on her head. Ridiculous. Her hand flew to it, felt the matted, ragged loss. The dress hung on her like a bell.

"Come away from the water, Sunny," Fynn soothed. "No more talk of the souldance today. We will take a verbal report from you."

Her heart heaved in tune with her stomach. Not today. Her mouth thinned, a slash of disgust. Seeing her own face was shocking. The shape of the arching brows, her small chin and nose. People had always told her she was lovely, delicate despite her height. The people she'd helped, bonding with in the temple, had kissed her cheeks in gratitude. They were scarred now. *No. Don't remember.* That woman was dead. That life was gone. She was never going back. Never.

"What are you going to do with me?" Her voice was flat.

Fynn moved up enough for her to see his profile, his angular face watching her with concern. "That's up to you."

"I'm never going back."

"To your City?"

She nodded, morbidly fascinated with watching the body of the woman she used to be, knowing it sat uneasily around the shard of spirit left inside her. A new spirit. A tainted one.

"I'm guessing from the color of your skin you're from Seventh City?"

A grand stone wall, built of baked clay. The square houses, tiny windows painted with surrounding bursts of cheerful colors and patterns. "I don't belong there anymore."

"As you know, my people welcome human women. We need mates ... wives."

There was a tickle of humor at how the human word sat ill with him.

"I'm sure we could find a place for you here."

"As a *wife*?" She turned, glaring at him. "Under some man's body? Bearing babies on the eve of Dark's rise?"

Odan snorted with clear amusement. "You are being a bit dramatic, Sunny."

She pinned him with her glare.

He was unmoved. "You would only become a mate if you choose to. And that too requires a souldance. We do not force women to our will, but surely you must see how necessary and beneficial a souldance would be for all of Vladaya, as well as bringing

peace to your own future.”

Stiffly, she tottered toward the open archway. “I want to go back to the cell.”

Fynn went pole straight. “It is your room.”

She tossed him a pitying sneer. “I know a cell when I see one. Remember where I’ve been.”

His shoulders rolled up while his head tipped, and instant menace shrouded him. “Are you comparing us to them?”

She kept moving into the hall. “No,” she sighed softly. “No. You’re nothing like them. Nothing at all.”

Chapter Six

Ty held a man's hand. He held on tight, and the grip was returned just as desperately. They were crouched on a familiar ledge, overlooking a wide river snaking through a dry, rocky canyon. *Home*. He was home. He was alive. He was free.

His fingers hurt. The man holding his hand was strong. Ty flexed his thumb on the back of the man's hand, and the grip gentled. He turned his neck, and from the stiffness of it, knew they'd been perched here awhile.

Of course, the person sitting quietly at his side was Delavega. Ty breathed deep, staring at the profile of his Alpha, the leader, the source of order and peace for all the hawk warriors. Delavega was smaller than Ty, slim and wiry. His auburn hair matched his auburn eyes. When he sensed Ty looking at him, he glanced over, and seeing Ty's focus, searched his face.

The Alpha's drawn brows relaxed at what he saw there. "Tydus. You're back."

Ty became aware of the horrendous taste in his mouth. He croaked, "How long was I gone?"

"To the hawk, or missing?"

He shook his head. He knew exactly how long he'd been missing. Eight nights. "How long was I lost in my hawk?"

"Just over three days." Delavega tightened his grip once, meeting Ty's eyes with a fierce pleasure. Ty's shoulders relaxed at being under his Alpha's strong gaze. Then by mutual understanding, the men dropped their grip. "Ty."

The emotion in the word carried clearly to Ty. His Alpha asked his forgiveness, expressed his sorrow, shared Ty's anger.

Hawk bit out, "There were express orders not to fly alone."

After all, hawks had been targeted for years now. Only pairs were to go on distance travel since the previously unknown beebees had taken fourteen of his Clan brothers without detection.

"Teju and I were racing. We were together ... but I got a little ahead of him."

"So far ahead he didn't see you. He didn't see you get taken. He spent every day you were gone combing the woods below your path for clues."

Ty closed his eyes, utterly relieved his half-brother had avoided an attack.

"You will souldance. I've arranged to have Quor visit you."

Something shriveled in Ty. Quor, the leader of the Council's spiritimages. And suddenly he had a perfect mental image. *Looking down at a bloody earthen floor, at a filthy woman kneeling at his feet. She looked back up at him. Her vibrant green eyes were full of rage and yet her words were calm. "No shame."*

Ty nodded at his Alpha, but his eyes drifted away to the river shining in bright afternoon sunlight far below them. It was so beautiful, his eyes burned. To see it again was a gift, paid for with blood, that he would never take for granted again. He could ask for the spiritimage he'd used in the past, but he understood his Alpha wanted the best. Despite the pit in his stomach, there was no other option but to offer up his memories for dissection. Every breath he took would be documented, every emotion, every scent, every conversation.

“There was a woman I came back with...” What was he saying? He couldn’t bring attention to her. Ty closed his eyes, his stomach rising to toss his heart around as he remembered the knife, pulsing with the echo of the spell. The darkspell she’d wrought to save him. The spell he’d accepted and used. It was impossible. Soon, the need to go to his mate would overwhelm him and he’d need help.

Delavega laughed, satisfied. “Which one? Ty, do you know how many you came back with? Eleven! You transported eleven others! I am so proud of you. You escaped, and you freed others.” Delavega’s hand on his shoulder weighed more than a bear. “Finally, Ty, the hawks persevered.” He tightened his grip before he let go and Ty gritted his teeth. His shoulder ached. But it didn’t hurt as much as his Alpha’s admiration. “I’m sorry for it, warrior, but we need your report. Immediately. You are the only one who can lead us back through to them.”

His skin swarmed at the thought of going back. He tipped his head up. High feathered clouds meant the day had been warm, and would be fair tomorrow. He wanted to shift, and fly away. He wanted to grab up Sunshine and speed into the wilderness. But it was no use. There had been witnesses, and of course, the victim herself.

“What reports have the humans shared?” He was very proud of himself for the vagueness of his question. Exhaustion ached in the center of every bone in his body.

“Up until now all we’ve had is verbal reports. Today six of them were to souldance for a complete report. Four are refusing to use our spiritmages. The Royal family has been told of the survivors, although two women will not give their identities. The Mage Guild is assigning someone to come share in the reports and to participate in the first return foray. Otherwise, the news is being kept quiet in the Cities until we can move on this Fortress they’ve told us about.”

Delavega turned to sit against a boulder on the arm-width ledge, facing Ty. His expression went blank, but Ty could smell the pulsing fury inside his Alpha. “Is it true? Are the others dead? The shitling darkmages have found an ancient Fortress of ours?”

“Yes. They’re all gone. Erich was killed by the rogue bear while I was there.” Ty turned his face into the breeze, easing down off his haunches, letting one leg swing freely over the sheer rock face. “If I had just tried to escape a few days sooner, I probably could have saved him.” They might as well have spiraled into the highest part of the sky, for all the difficulty he had bringing air into his lungs. “I thought I was gathering information. But when I heard I’d missed my chance to save him, I was ashamed.”

“No, Ty. His death does not lie on your shoulders.”

The rock was gritty under his bare ass. Sometime soon, he was actually going to enjoy putting leathers on. None of the eleven shapeshifting Clans cared much about nudity, although for the sake of their adopted human women, they tried to be circumspect. Now Ty felt exposed. It was no longer a natural state, but a weakened one.

Within the hour, Ty was to have his spirit thoroughly raked by the most powerful spiritmage the Clans had, the leader of the Council’s alpha spiritmage warriors, Quor. Before his experience was related to the whole Council, he would share the most important bits with his Alpha. Despite the shame, there was no one he trusted like this man.

“One of the women I came back with was my caretaker while I was held prisoner. It was she who freed me, she who organized the others to escape, and she who powered the darkcraft I used to sift out of the Fortress.”

His Alpha started in surprise, but Ty just kept going, as if he hadn't just announced the end of his honor.

"The Fortress was definitely Trux. I remember the beebee the sandcat brought down shortly before I was taken had signs of living near red stone. The stonework of the Fortress was red stone. I was unconscious for most of the flight. I have no idea where it's located."

Delavega made a hawk's hiss, but Ty was on a roll. "The bear is under the control of the leader. There were nine darkmages, now just five, and they have encased the Fortress in some sort of dampening spell. None of the elemental crafts work there. My body was forced into human form when I was carried in, and remained so no matter how hard I fought to free my hawk."

The man burst to his feet. "Impossible! The Elements cannot be contained!"

Ty shrugged one shoulder, rubbed his hand over his face. His eyes ached. By the Six, he was exhausted. Holding his hand out in front of him, he noted his natural Trux healing had sealed the sores at his wrists, leaving scars. If he'd bothered to focus his bodycraft on the healing for even a moment, there would have been none. Oh yes, he was a sad patchwork of silvery scars. Reminders, on the outside, for the rest of his life.

He continued. "I heard they were working on growing more darkmages into power. There is dissention in the ranks. The beebee attack on the sandcat's daughter was just the beginning. There will be more attacks in the Cities, all devised to create fear of us, to drive us out so they can step in."

Delavega folded his arms, his muscles stark. "Fuck. It is a brilliant plan. This will sow suspicion, and soon there will be dissent against our City patrols."

Like the hawk, Ty had recognized the insidious genius of it immediately. Their people acted as investigators and guards for the insular, walled Cities. All of the humans who were already suspicious and fearful of the Clans' greater physical and magical prowess would become enraged that the same people who were supposedly there to protect them, were now drawing dangerous magical predators to the Cities. "No matter what, we can't leave the Cities. That's what they're waiting for. That's what they want. They've been planning this for a long time. They'll have something in place."

Delavega, as an alpha class warrior, had the ability to partially shift. Ty admired the way his talons erupted from his feet, even as he shared his Alpha's rage. "We have to find a way to stop these things. We cannot appear weak in defense against them."

"It took them a long time to make the beebees. They complained about that."

"How many do they have?" Delavega asked sharply.

"I don't know." Ty spoke with clenched teeth. It would be an answer he repeated a lot.

"We've only killed one." The disgust in Delavega's voice was clear. "And they took fifteen of ours. Sixteen if you count the loss of the sandcat as a warrior."

"They flew high, and came in from the West, over the ocean. I was taken in a drop strike, and in the time between when it had me in its talons to when my daze cleared, he'd already climbed back up to cold air level. They're fast, sir." *Faster than us*. But Ty didn't add the obvious truth. Both men were very aware so many friends had been taken.

Delavega sprouted feathers on the backs of his hands and feet, and the cry that echoed out over the valley toward the forest beyond was wild. "We rule the skies! No darkcrafted lizard is going to out fly us!"

Ty waited for his Alpha's pride to settle. It settled much faster than usual. Delavega was excellent in a crisis, focused and concise.

"Let's go." He stepped up to the ledge, talons settling into the grooves from dozens of warriors who had rested here over the centuries.

Ty stood, stiffly. "You aren't going to ask about what I started with? The sift I used to free everyone was powered by darkcraft."

The man he admired more than any other for his skills as a leader looked Ty in the eye. His roan gaze was steady and direct, as always. "I know. You survived. You escaped. It is all that matters."

It was absolutely not what he expected to hear from his Clan leader. "Is it, Delavega?" His whisper was hoarse, his swallow audible. "I don't think I believe that. Honor still matters, even at the end. Especially then. I can say I had others to protect, but in the end, I accepted the darkcraft and used it." Saying the words made him feel filthy, obscene.

The older man stepped up to him, wrapping his hand around the back of Ty's neck. His skin was warm and tough. "Remorse is a luxury of the living, Ty."

Ty's stomach was still tangled with his heart. Both twisted as he struggled to meet his leader's eyes. "Delavega... Alpha..."

He waited, with the patient eyes of a father, of a hunter.

"She is my mate."

Delavega's nostrils flared, his lips thinning for a moment. "I'll look into her situation." His hand tightened then slid away, resting for a moment on his shoulder. "I can tell you none of the humans you brought through have been condemned as a darkmage."

"She—" *isn't*. Ty broke off. His instant denial was swallowed down. She'd done it. He'd seen it, felt it. He'd taken the power, accepted it. "It was—" *to free us*. But hadn't he just said honor mattered, even in the face of evil? That he expected better of himself, despite the stakes?

Tearing his gaze from the rich emotion of Delavega's, Ty stared at the twisting silver line of the great river his Clanhome was named for. He needed to see her. He was afraid to. How would he bear to be torn between the blood-drenched revulsion and absolute hate for darkmages that was part of his very core, and the soul-bond that drew him like a magnet to a woman who was his perfect match?

Ty called his hawk to him, throwing himself into space, arms spread, grinning into the fall, the space, the warm rushing air. The hawk took form, but this time Ty was not lost to it, hovering as a shadow as it wheeled in an arc toward the Eyrie. He remembered the single tear tracking from Sunshine's dazed, desperate eye, and he screamed his hawk's cry, beating the air hard. But he couldn't fly from the memory. Couldn't fly from the fact that even in the moment of their supposed triumph, the darkmages had been able to wound them both one last time.

* * * *

It only took a day before he broke. The sun was setting after an entire afternoon of failure. He flew down from the warm air currents, bathed, and dressed carefully. When he caught himself grinding his teeth at his inability to complete the souldance with Quor, he took a moment to stretch, swinging his arms in wide, controlled sweeps that reminded

him he was out, free. It had been four days since the escape, but to him it felt like the first.

He went all the way out to the orchard, and carefully chose the ripest, most perfect peach he could find. Quor had shared his own frustration and concern at their inability to connect, but told him the next day would feature Ty's old spiritmage he'd danced with before. Quor had been confident the link could be achieved then. Cupping the peach carefully so as not to bruise it, Ty strode through the gathering dusk. Lars was a man he respected, someone who had seen the heart of who Ty was. The thought of Lars now seeing what they'd done to him, and what he'd done that final day, brought bile to his throat. He shouldn't feel shame. He understood that. But he did.

Back up to the sixth level, he paused outside the holding rooms. Several of the humans had already been released to the Cities. But she was still in there. Sunshine. Clean. Free. She was refusing to souldance, and the Council was frustrated. The news of her had been that she was no darkmage. His knees trembled at the thought. Somehow her soul had been stronger than the taint of pure selfishness, and she'd been able to put away the hostility she'd channeled that day. Ty thought he could almost understand how this could be, when he remembered how even though she'd been stooped and scared, her eyes had shone clear, sharp emerald. Delavega had helped him destroy the knife. He needed to smell her, one more time. He had to discover for himself what her scent held without foul darkcraft. He needed to see her, before he went mad with the way his hawk fought him last night.

The guard at the door returned with a groundbear. Ty was surprised. He'd heard she had a groundbear and mountaincat as her Council guards, but he didn't expect to know the men. He'd watched this man win last Autumnal's Skymage Championship. Odan was widely respected and known through the Clans. He could control a tornado, fly faster than a hawk, and commanded rain and lightning. He was deadly, and he was always controlled.

"I'd like to see Sunshine." He held the man's gaze. If it had trickled down to him that Ty was her match, the man wouldn't let him get near her. He willed himself to breathe calmly, firming the jesses on his hawk.

The skymage's gaze assessed him. "I'll ask her." He left.

Ty looked down at the soft peach in his hand. His heart struggled to beat harder, but he used his bodycraft to maintain a steady rhythm. She would see him, he knew.

Odan returned and nodded. Following the larger man down the hall, Ty clenched his jaw on all the questions he yearned to ask. Soon, he'd know for himself. Odan turned into the washroom. The mountaincat was at the sink, washing a tea set. Odan stayed in the doorway, a watchful presence. The other men's positions passed briefly through his comprehension, and then there was nothing but her.

She was stunning. Her hair was a smooth, bright golden cap, and her skin dark honey. His mouth watered, and his hawk screamed with possession. Inhaling, he dragged the luscious, living scent of her deep. No taint of darkcraft fouled her rich scent. He was forced to close his eyes for a moment, to understand that he stood before his mate, that she'd survived that place, that she was here, now, with him.

"Ty..." Her voice was soft, throbbing with a dozen emotions. "Ty!"

He opened his eyes. She stepped toward him, her lovely, peaked lips parting.

"Hello, Sunshine."

How was it that she did not carry a darkmage's scent? He'd seen her perform the spell. He'd even seen her drill deeper into it. *Yet it hadn't tainted her.* His Sunshine was too pure of spirit for that. Hawk flapped and dove within him but he stayed where he was. He must not reveal any hint of their being a match. Not yet. Her eyes were wide and shining, and his heart flipped over.

"It's ... wonderful to see you." He paced closer and held out the peach. "I brought you a treat."

She paced closer, but they stopped, an armlength between his reach and hers. His gaze coasted over her face, seeing the shine to her clean skin, the shadows under her eyes, the faint scars on her cheeks. His cock stirred, shocking him, and he ruthlessly suppressed it. Not the time. For either of them. Her scent was of pure woman. Sadly, there was still an echo of fear, different, but familiar from the cloud she'd carried in the Fortress.

She stepped forward and put her hand on the peach. "Ty."

He couldn't take his eyes off the gap between her fingertips and his wrist.

She lifted the peach away. "It's warm," she marveled.

"I picked it. The sun's just gone down."

He stood before her, unchained. She was here, before him. They were out of that place. Her dress was long and blue, with a scoop neck and short sleeves. Her arms were too thin, the line of her jaw sharp. Bangs feathered her forehead, and her ears were precious shells.

Sunshine angling her head. The stone rising high, to sweep down in a vicious strike that rocked her on the bench.

He'd done that to her. Ty stepped back sharply, shaken. He needed to kill the woman again. His own hands needed to rip her fingers from her body, one by one. A tremor passed over him.

"Thank you, Ty." Sunshine turned the peach in her hands. Her fingers were so slender, delicate, respectful of the fruit. "It is..." She stopped. Swallowed.

He stepped back. He must never touch her again. What was he doing here? She was perfect for him, and lost to him. Not because she was a darkmage, but because of his own failure, his own sick decisions.

"You are being treated well?"

She nodded.

"You do not have to souldance if you do not want to." He wanted to tell her it was all right, that she didn't have to be afraid, that he could tell she was no darkmage, as could any Trux that scented her. But he didn't know what a spiritmage would find in her, and didn't fool himself that she wasn't damaged, wasn't dangerous. It was her right to hold herself free from that intimate search, even though his people could benefit from her recollections, more than anyone else's.

She raised her chin. Her eyes searched his, but he didn't know what she sought. He tried to pour his respect and love for her into his gaze. She looked away sharply. "I... cannot. I will not do that." She peeked at him through her lashes. "Are you well?"

Of course he wasn't. He never would be again. "I fly every day. It is a gift I treasure. My family and Clan support me." *I miss you. I yearn for you.* "I am so sorry I left you like that, when we came back." How would he ever sleep again, now that he had her true scent? "You must have been frightened. My beastspirit..." No excuses. "Forgive me,

Sunshine. I regret not being there to escort you to your healing.”

She looked at him, opened her mouth, closed it. “There is nothing to forgive. I pictured you flying, and it filled me with ... peace.” She whispered the last word, and the idea she thought of him, and that it strengthened her, was a shot of pure energy through his gut.

Hawk hissed and thrashed, demanding he hold her, lead her away, cover her. Ty backed away. “I’ll leave you to retire.” What would become of her? She couldn’t become his mate unless she souldanced, and he’d never ask that of her. When would he see her again?

“Will I be able to see you again?” she asked.

He nodded. He simply wasn’t strong enough to stay away. This was going to be a new form of torture. “I would like that. Maybe we could have a meal together.” What was he saying? He couldn’t spend that kind of time around her. He’d break. The need to close his arms around her, to feel her skin, to bury his nose in the most intimate spaces in her body, was already fused into his bones.

“She’s under confinement until she agrees to souldance, but you’re welcome to join us here,” the mountincat said. He was propped against the sink, arms crossed, considering.

Ty nodded. “I’m assigned a duty for most of tomorrow.” He’d be deep in a souldance, his failures being recorded. He looked harder at the man, assessing him. “I’m Tydus.”

“Fynn.” The man inclined his head. “Congratulations on your escape.”

Ty couldn’t stop the faint cringe at the words. He was so tired of hearing that, and for him to say it in front of Sunshine, the true warrior of the moment, sickened him.

“I’m Odan.”

Ty glanced at the man. “I know. I saw your win last fall.”

Odan shrugged.

He looked back at Sunshine. She had lifted the peach up to her nose. Her eyes were closed, golden lashes gleaming on her tanned cheeks.

“Ohh...” she moaned.

Ty’s cock surged again, hawk went insane, and he swayed with the need to reach for her. The memory of watching her back disappear out the door of that room echoed through him, a wound he wouldn’t recover from soon.

“Enjoy it,” he murmured.

Her lashes rose, and her jewel eyes shone over the rise of the orange and pink ball.

“Good night, Sunshine.”

“Good night, Ty.”

He walked backwards toward the hall, legs stiff, unable to tear his gaze from her. Breathing in a deep taste of her scent, to remember, he noted her fear was less. She smelled like warm earth, and peaches.

Just as he turned to leave she asked, “Have you done it yet? Souldanced?”

He looked at her over his shoulder, memories flowing between them like links on a thick chain. Like the broken bodies of three evil women. Like blood on a tainted knife. “Not yet. Tomorrow.” His brain ached from the battering he’d taken today during his hours of failed connection. It was a duty he must complete, so he said the words without bitterness.

She nodded once, decisive, brave.

He turned and literally dragged his feet down the hall, feeling Odan at his back. When he cleared the holding lair doorway, the entrance carved in warning with the natural weapons from each of the Clans, he simply stood. He waited to gather the strength to leave her.

“If you could convince her to souldance, when you come back, it would be good. For her and the Clans. Also, soon she should consider her future.” Odan stood quietly, tracing a snarling muzzle.

Her future. His mate. “I’ll—“ Ty clenched his fists. She was out. They were free. But they weren’t. “I’ll—“ His knuckles cracked, and the tendons in his forearms leaped, veins popping with pressure. He would do whatever it took to heal her. To make her truly free. “Yes.”

Without looking back at the man, Ty pivoted and went blindly up the stairs toward the Eyrie, his Clan’s lair at the peak of River Mountain. Need and despair were bitter partners. He struggled to reach for hope. Hope was essential. Tomorrow, he’d souldance, and tomorrow, he’d find a way to convince her to consider him. Somehow.

* * * *

The handsome blond man wore purple velvet today. Fitted with braided gold, he looked powerful and dashing. He stood in the kitchen over the body of the old man he’d killed too quickly and screamed obscenities in one long, breathless string after another, hurling pots and utensils and plates with obnoxious clangs against the rock walls.

Pretar watched Thad seethe and boil and wondered idly if he let it go on long enough, if Thad would simply disappear into his rage, like water into steam. Running his hands through his hair, he made note it was time to get a trim. If he let his hair get too long, he tended to feel like a giant flower, with the vivid shade of red on his head.

Russ cowered against the wall behind him. “Oh, dear. Dear me.”

Pretar rolled his eyes. The man was a mouse. An evil, gifted mouse, but a mouse.

Sverre yawned, resting against the kitchen doorway across from him. Pretar was aware the old one was up to something. Something he did late at night when everyone else slept. No matter. Pretar had the bear back and would set it to spy on him. As of today, Thad had agreed to stop torturing it for eating the hawk’s heart, since he’d come so close to killing it in his rage at the escape.

Pretar couldn’t believe it. The Beast had gotten free, overpowered the girls, gathered all but two of the slaves, and managed to somehow work darkcraft to escape. He really couldn’t believe it, even five days later. He hadn’t thought Beasts were capable of darkcraft. Although it pleased him they weren’t any more pure than humans when they’d portrayed themselves that way for eons, it also left him uneasy. For the fuckers were damn powerful without the added boost darkcraft gave a mage. He tended to agree with Sverre, though. It was an aberration the Beast had resorted to for escape, and the only thing that would come from it was his own kind would kill him for them.

Thad had begun to use spells now, in his escalating fury. Spittle flew from his mouth in a long strand as he spun, setting fire to a towel and a box of spoiling meat, then magically lifting an enormous table and sending it spiraling up to the domed room’s ceiling. When it crashed down, Russ whimpered behind him. Thad had threatened to kill him if Russ ever immobilized him again, so the mouse probably wouldn’t. Pretar glanced

back over his shoulder, not liking the man at his back. He was wiping his glasses on his shirt with quick jerky motions. Pretar watched Thad waste more of his hard-earned power on an immature fit over a burned meal.

Catching Sverre's bloodshot eyes, he jerked his head toward the exit. They walked out side by side, with Russ scurrying after. It took awhile before they had enough distance from Thad's tantrum for quiet speech.

Sverre rubbed his eyes. "We didn't send out any lizard-birds today."

Thad insisted he be the one to direct the creatures after Greg's death. Pretar considered the state Thad was in, and the fact that he himself was still riding a sweet swell of power from the spell where they'd used Allie's body yesterday. "I'll send them out. Hopefully they'll get better at retrieving soon. We need new slaves."

"B-b-but I like picking out our slaves. It's fun. We've always taken them ourselves."

Pretar reassured Russ. "It's a deviation that will suit the current portion of our plan. True, the lizard-birds might bring back people unsuited for work, but remember, they'll have recently had some contact with the filthy Beasts. It will serve the greater plan to terrorize the Cities, and also strike horror into Beast hearts. They will guess these people have been taken to the place the hawk escaped from. They'll go wild and attempt to rescue them."

"Oh, please yessss," Sverre moaned, curling his bony old fingers in greed. "By Skyfather's little boy tears, I want them to try to come through the stone. I cannot wait to see them die, and drink their anger and pain."

Russ giggled gleefully, shoving his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. He looked over his shoulder toward the kitchen, where Thad's shouts echoed. "The Matron has already initiated the final protection spell. I'm thinking of sleeping near their sifting stone, so I'm close enough to watch the whole thing when they land." He hunched his shoulders, wrapping his arms around himself. "How many will they throw to us before they understand the spell?"

"I can't believe they're not here yet!" Sverre spat angrily.

Pretar had a sudden thought that Sverre was losing sleep because he was personally watching the Beast's traveling stone, already implementing Russ's plan. He relaxed. If that was what the old man was up to, it was all right. "Maybe they killed the Beast we'd captured. If so, they won't be able to come back through, in all likelihood." *But by all means, you fools, lose sleep and weaken yourselves camping in the hallway waiting for them.*

"Well," Sverre sighed tiredly, "I don't think Thad will come out of this fit in time to complete the ritual destruction of Karu's body today." He darted a look at Pretar, licked his lips. "Do you think we should wait for him?"

Russ stilled his nervous rocking, also looking at Pretar. Although triumph sang through his blood, Pretar kept himself calm. Both of them were looking at him as leader behind Thad. This was going very well.

"Performing the ritual without him will just set off another tantrum, and then we'll all need to waste energy when it's directed at us." He didn't add the rest, that they were all getting tired of defending themselves against the man who was supposedly on their side.

Sverre had the balls to stab Thad in the back, but it was unfortunately Russ who truly had the power to do so. Pretar provided the link between imagination and ability.

Russ nodded. "Yeah, that's true. All right, well, I'll help with the new slaves when the lizard-birds come back. I'm just gonna go ... to my room."

All these years and he still couldn't lie very well. He was probably going to one of the Cities to rape someone. The little piss-ant was so addicted. He couldn't even wait a few days for the lizard-birds to bring fresh slaves back.

Sverre said, "I'm going to bed."

Pretar believed him.

They went their separate ways. Pretar to finish healing the bear and set him to his task of spying on Sverre, and then to loose a lizard-bird. Soon they would all dine well on pain and fear with the arrival of new slaves. The Cities would explode at the continued mysterious attacks. The plan was going nicely, and even better, Thad was falling apart spectacularly. Now if he could just keep the Matron in the Royal City, far from them, all would be well.

* * * *

After the evening meal on the sixth day after the escape, Fynn came back from his foray relaying her daily "report" with the news someone was coming to talk to her.

"I will not souldance." It had been her mantra. He had spent several useless hours each day talking to her about how necessary one was to defeat the darkmages. Ignoring him, she'd just continued to give Odan every detail she could remember, until she grew hoarse. And as hard as it was to say what she'd seen, what she'd lived, out loud, it was still better than having someone relive it through her eyes, knowing every thought that had gone through her head while she'd suffered.

"He isn't a spiritmage. Actually, he's a watermage. Delavega is the Alpha of the Hawk Clan, and as such equal in our culture to one of your Royals."

Her heart was suddenly thundering between her ears. *This man knew*. He would know what she'd done, because Ty would tell him. With her slave's strength, she said casually, "No, he isn't. Unlike the Royals, he actually earned his position, instead of being born to it."

Fynn mulled that over. "Did you know Truxet when you lived in the Cities?"

Quickly, her mind supplied the faces of the three warriors she'd spoken to in her old life, working with her temple on investigations. But with them came the feeling of finely woven fabric against her body in the warm evening air, of gold bangles on her wrist, of her confident poise and false sense of worth. She shoved the memories back. That woman was dead.

Fynn made a tscking sound of irritation. "Please do the Alpha the courtesy of answering *his* questions."

She swallowed. It hovered on her lips for the hundredth time, to ask the warrior about Ty. Who had he been before his capture? She kept her mouth closed. Odan, curse his gray eyes, simply waited, watching her. Almost, she stuck her tongue out at him. The thought surprised her, and she paused, arrested at how safe she felt with them, that she could even think of such a thing. Then the stone began to open.

Odan rose from his post holding the wall up and Fynn hurried to open it. The man who stepped into her cell did not need the assistance. For the first time since the escape, Sunny felt the thrum of her magecraft. Her ability to sense people's spirits came to stark attention, in much the same way it last had ... for Thad, the Monster. Then, she'd

mistaken his power for attraction. Now, she knew better.

This man, Delavega, was oddly petite. He was shorter than Fynn, who in turn was shorter than Odan. He was even more slender than Fynn, but with a leanness that screamed *deadly*. His eyes were a fiery brown, and his hair a dark auburn. His skin was lighter than hers, but darker than Odan and Ty's, similar to Fynn's. He did not wear the black leather skirts of her guards, but a sleeveless leather tunic and tight leather pants, all undyed in natural tans. Over his heart was an imprint of a hawk in flight.

"Leave us."

It wasn't until Fynn was in the hall and Odan was passing by the man, that she snapped out of the fascination and jerked forward on the bed. "*No!*"

Odan never paused, continuing out. Fynn turned to look at her. He merely nodded. The Alpha started to swing the stone door shut. She'd known she couldn't rely on them. No one was to be trusted. Spots flashed before Sunny's eyes. She screamed, high and short, and hurtled herself off the bed, diving for the opening. There was no slave compulsion to hinder her now. She would fight to her last breath before ever being raped again. If she could just stay with her guards, she thought they might interfere.

The man caught her around the waist and she spun and clawed at his eyes. No man would touch her, ever, ever, ever. With a bob of his head and a twist of his arm, she was immobilized. She continued to scream, wordless shrieks of rage and terror, struggling in his grip.

"Be still."

She fought, kicking and bucking, diving to bite at the hard, wide hands that held hers. Her body was her own. She was no slave any longer. She would never give up fighting.

"Sunny." A large hand cut in and took her jaw, forcing it up.

Odan's calm, controlled face filled her vision. Panting, she continued to struggle, glaring at him for his betrayal.

"Stop. You are safe."

With no trust in his words, she screamed through her clenched teeth, straining her neck to move her head out of his grip, thrashing her body. She would not stay in this room with this unknown man, to be used, bullied, beaten, fouled. A woman alone with a man like this would have no choice but to accept his domination. Free of the slave compulsion, she would never again let herself be put into such a weak position. She would fight until she was dead.

"You're going to hurt yourself. Sunny, stop!"

She recognized Fynn's voice, but didn't care. Wouldn't stop fighting. Couldn't stop. Never again.

"All right, groundbear. Move back, I'm going to release her."

Odan let go of her chin and she lunged at him, snapping at his hand. Then the smaller man who had nonetheless held her immobile with immense strength freed her, and she whirled away, finding Fynn against the door that was once again sealed. She paced along the edge of the bed, panting, mind racing.

She had to get out, or barring that, defend herself. The hawk moved and she rushed to put the table between them, snatching up the only thing there, a wooden cup. Her hand shook as she clenched her fingers tight around the poor weapon.

The men stayed still. She stayed frozen, her sawing breaths harsh. As the minutes

ticked by, her knees shook. Her breathing steadied, but didn't settle. After a long while, she became aware she was rocking, her shoulders quickly tipping forward and back. Her feet ached, but she stayed where she was.

Finally, someone dimmed the lights to a soft setting. She froze, awareness spiking again.

"Her reports indicated she was calm and rational." Delavega spoke as if he wasn't watching her with eyes of banked fire.

"She has been fine for days, but she is highly suspicious," Odan replied.

"So I see. Lady, are you listening to me?" Delavega's voice was quiet.

Sunny swallowed, and nodded once. They expected her to trust this man, seething with power. They would have just left her to him. Alone.

"I am here to discuss Ty with you. I have a very personal, very private decision to discuss with you. Either the men stay and I lose control of this secret, or they go. You can trust that I will not attack you. I will not touch you again in any way. My word on my father."

She swallowed again, uselessly, because her throat was still closed, locked. She glanced wildly at Fynn, who raised one brow. Odan nodded to her. It was on the very tip of her tongue to say, fine. But she couldn't do it. The slender trust between her and her guards had been forged when she'd had no choice. It had been forced on her when she was in shock and weak at her arrival, and no other man would get it easily. She simply could *not* voluntarily seal herself in this room, effectively giving herself over to a strange man.

"No. They stay."

She held Odan's gaze when she said it. There was no judgment, no disappointment in his eyes. Instead, he inclined his head as if honored.

When she glanced at the man who vibrated with more power than any being normally should, his surprise and displeasure were clear. "I see."

"I don't think you do, Hawk. Or you would never have asked to be alone with me."

Fynn closed his eyes, as if unable to bear her cold tone.

The man adjusted his stance by only tiny measures, but suddenly he appeared at rest, like a bird who had fluffed itself and suddenly seemed neater.

"Ty has proven unable to souldance. His initial failures with three separate spiritimages have possibly been attributed to exhaustion, but personally, I do not expect him to be able to complete the ritual when he's rested."

When her eyes burned, she finally blinked.

"I ask, in your educated opinion, do you think your joint darkspell has damaged his soul beyond the ability to connect to another's?"

Her stomach fell through the floor so fast she had to brace both hands on the table to remain standing. Her brow burst with sweat, her cheeks flaring hot at the same time her hands went ice cold. *Ty. Oh, Ty.* After noticing how quiet her guards were, how their gazes were downcast, she actually considered his question. Couldn't help but relive the moment she committed to the spell, forcing another's body to yield to the pain she commanded. The harvesting of that pain had sickened her, but she'd been so angry, so bone deep furious, and her fear of the dark trap unfolding on the little room's wall had pushed her through. She'd pushed the knife deeper and tasted triumph. Then she'd grabbed Ty's arm, and passed it to him, much the same way she'd passed peace at the

temple, before.

Nausea swelled through her. Had she poisoned Ty's soul when all of the darkmage's torture had failed? She relived his resistance, his recoiling, her desperation, her determination. *She'd forced him.*

When she pushed the words through her parched lips, it didn't sound anything like her voice. "I don't know."

The damn man didn't say a thing. He watched her, his eyes dark and flickering with power. She clenched her jaw on the urge to clear her throat. Or to fall to the floor and hide under the table.

The man finally unfolded his arms, holding his wrist in front of him in a casual stance, seemingly at ease. "Have you heard what the other freed captives have said about you?"

She shook her head.

"They say you are a hero. They say you did what you had to, and only when it was necessary. But many are also very afraid of you now."

There was only one person who mattered. "Is Ty afraid of me?"

The man cocked his head at her, and said slowly, "No." He came to a decision. "I understand you are refusing a souldance. You will never be allowed freedom of movement in our clanhomes until we can clarify your status beyond doubt. Also, we desperately need the details of their Fortress that only your souldance can reveal."

Once a spiritmage walked through every urge and flicker of her brain, he'd know everything she endured, everything she'd done. They all would know everything, including how she'd been responsible for her own capture, a blind, stupid participant. While held as sacred, confidential rituals in the City, she had no doubt her souldance would be harvested for every beat of emotion, and shared widely here.

"I don't care. I will never share myself in a souldance."

"Hmmm. What about Ty? Do you care about healing him? Tomorrow the Council considers if he should be censured."

"What is that? Punished? I'm the one who worked darkcraft and forced it into him."

Flicking his fingers dismissively, he said, "It doesn't work like that. He never should have used the power you gave him. He knew exactly what it was. But he took it. Somehow, a Trux was able to use darkcraft, something that has never been done in the history of our people. It is utterly foreign to us. The fact he's been unable to souldance will be significant."

Her legs trembled, not for the first time. She leaned more heavily on the table. She'd said too much, even as she tried to protest his innocence. Oh ... *no*. They would damn him for a choice she made.

"Do you know about the custom of Truxet adopting women? Our beastspirits can recognize a mate. A Trux who has found a mate is volatile, unsteady, focused solely on bringing the woman into the Clan."

Both Fynn and Odan's heads drew up sharply. She swallowed. Somehow she knew what the Hawk was going to say, even though it was absurd.

"The other reason I suspect Ty has not been able to complete a souldance is that you are his match. You and Ty are potential mates. When he visited you yesterday he confirmed what he'd suspected upon your escape. He hadn't known in the Fortress, but away from their dampening spells, he is certain."

The man pivoted with nearly floating grace, transferring his weight almost like a dancer. He paced to the wall Odan stood by, turned, and paced back, pulling thoughtfully at his lower lip. Her guards were clearly beneath his notice, unnecessary to him at this moment, so ignored.

He stopped and faced her again. She held her breath. Beautiful, noble Ty. And her.

“What if you controlled the souldance? What if *you* acted as spiritmage for Ty?”

Shock speared through her. She blinked, stunned. The room dipped, shifted.

“Breathe, Sunny,” Fynn said softly.

When she threw him a surprised glance, he was still standing at attention, his face directed at the floor. It took concentration to open her throat, but she choked in a breath. “I couldn’t. Couldn’t.” But now the seed was planted. To walk through Ty’s soul, to know him that deeply, for him to touch her, gifting her with his strength and honor ... she wanted it with a sudden vicious greed that frightened her.

“What if you could? Would you? To prove his innocence? To heal him?”

“I—I—” She was rocking again, and couldn’t stop. To save Ty? Sunny was overwhelmed.

“I—” Her mind went in five different directions. *The scent of incense at the temple in the early morning, birds chattering in the courtyard tree. The monster hitting her over and over, laughing, telling her to call to her gods again. The sound of a man whispering “No” followed by a wet sucking as his heart was ripped free.*

She stumbled to the bed, unable to stand, unwilling to fall before this man. “Is it true Beasts do not worship the Sacred Couple?”

He blinked. She’d surprised him. Good.

“It is true. We do not discount your faith, but we do not see a human entity overlaying the world. We see each of the Six as an independent force, neutral and necessary.”

“And yet a souldance is still a powerful ritual for you? You do not undertake it lightly or often?” Surely not, or their spiritmages would all be mad.

“Absolutely. It is never used for judgment, as I’ve seen it in the Cities. It is a tool for strengthening the mind, for revealing hidden needs. All our warriors experience it at least once, on maturity, but later souldances are by choice.”

Sweat poured down her back, gathered under her arms. “Maybe,” she paused, forcing herself to breathe through the nausea, “possibly, I could find a way to perform this rite. For Ty.” If she led the souldance, she could verify if she’d stained him, broken him. If she had to, she would lie. Lying about what she saw in a souldance was a heart stopping concept, one so forbidden and depraved it shook her. *But he would be free.* She put a shaking hand up to her temple. “I’d be trusted to perform it? They would believe my findings?”

The leader of the hawks nodded to her. “Of course.” His eyes gleamed, and she knew at once he was hiding something. She’d just stepped into some sort of trap. “You’ll attempt it, then? Tomorrow?”

She stared at him, trying to tell if she was only imagining that his eyes rippled with power. She swallowed. On a breath, she whispered, “Yes.”

His leg swept forward, knee locking. He bent, back straight, head folded, and swung both arms wide, fingers arched. After a long quiet moment, she recognized the position as a bow.

Fynn growled. The hawk turned and stared at him.

Fynn lifted his head and stared right back. "Tell her."

The smaller man pursed his lips. "It won't change her mind." He cocked his head, considering Fynn's steady challenge. "But you're right." He turned and moved so he casually rested against the table, facing her. "Your cat wishes you to know that if you are able to complete a souldance with Ty, it will create a connection that cannot be undone because you are a match. By the ways of our people, you'll be Bonded. Normally, you'd be brought into our education program, given choices of mates, given time. But I want to go to the Council tomorrow with proof that Ty is capable of a souldance. If you do this, you are tying your future to Ty's, and will remain here with him, in River Mountain."

Sunny stared from the confident, nonchalant man to Fynn, who was unhelpfully watching the floor. Of course there would be a connection. There always was. She'd have a lifelong memory of Ty's deepest self inside her. But apparently she'd also have some sort of status others would recognize, a public connection. "If I accepted this connection, you're sure it wouldn't reflect poorly on him." She gripped the cup with both hands, so tight she was shocked it didn't shatter.

Delavega nodded. "I wouldn't set up this opportunity if I did not believe with all of myself that neither of you are darkmages. With this souldance, it will be proven. While I do not approve of what you did, and do not understand how Ty was able to participate in it, in the end, neither of you hold the true evil of a darkmage in yourself. If you can prove Ty is capable of a souldance, you will go a long way toward healing him, and helping him move on."

How political of him, to gloss over it. She'd hurt someone, claimed the pain to power herself, then forced it into another. But if he was right, if there was a chance she could clear Ty, maybe, possibly, even forge a new start for herself ... *with Ty*.

He gestured with his hand toward her. "I owe you a debt. Will you accept it? It means I need to touch you, briefly, on your neck."

Her heart squeezed. He needed to go soon, before she puked with stress. For some reason, she glanced at Odan. Gaze on the floor, he nodded, once, faintly. Fynn remained silent, although he was obviously tense.

"You don't owe me anything." She rejected his odd offer. "I'll try to do this, for Ty, but I seriously don't think I'll be able to. The part of me that could work such delicate, spiritual craft is dead."

Again, he tilted his head down and to the side, gazing at her from an angle, as if she were a curious, newfound object. "The debt is not for attempting the souldance. It is for returning him. For caring for him. For—"

"I will not accept. I was compelled to care for him by their orders. It was a trick of fate that I was assigned to him."

Folding his arms, he rocked back on his heels. She understood refusing the Hawk Clan Alpha wasn't effective, but couldn't stop herself.

"Are you really in a position to refuse a powerful ally?"

The only sound was her panting breath. She forced the words out, as a social nicety, when she wanted to just scream. He wanted to thank her for being a weak, prideful idiot who'd so easily been made slave? "I don't want your gratitude, or your debt. Ty is free, and they do not get to drink my death. Nothing else matters."

She went stick straight when he chuckled. Chuckled!

“But already, more does matter to you. Life has a way of entangling and enlarging. First you only wanted to spite them, isn’t that how it was? Obviously, you have a fierce spirit. Next you wanted to free Ty. Then you decided to take others with you.”

If he only knew taking them was only because of the generosity of Ty.

“And yet, you did not step up to volunteer your guilt, to die when your objectives were met. You want to live, as you should.” He nodded, and her guts knotted at his patronizing, benevolent gaze. “Now you are going to souldance with Ty, which will add more complications to what ‘matters’ to you. You’ve developed bonds with these warriors, so soon.”

He gestured to her silent guards. The ones she suddenly realized she was no longer terrified of. They might bring death to her someday, but it wouldn’t be through rape and torture. When she’d thought they would leave her alone with this man, she’d been unable to control her panic. Yet during the past days, she’d let herself fall asleep under their guard.

“Oh yes, Lady, there is much that matters to you. And I think, already, *many* as well.” He bowed, again, brief, curt. She saw it as mocking. “I will hold my debt for awhile, instead of accepting your refusal.” With his dancer’s grace, he turned and nodded to each of her guards. “Warriors.” He shouldered open the stone, and slipped out, followed by Odan.

Sunny tiredly hauled herself into the corner of the bed, slumping with relief against the stone wall.

Fynn shut the door, leaned against it. He stared at her, but she didn’t meet his gaze.

“Sunny...”

“What.” She sounded exhausted because she was.

“I wish I could hold you, give you comfort.”

She looked at him sharply. “You can’t.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

She knew he wasn’t sorry for telling her, but for her refusal. She shook her head.

“Comfort is a lie. Everyone would hurt someone else if they had the incentive. Trusting people, feeling like you could be safe with someone, it’s not true. It’s just a lie to make yourself feel better.”

“If it works, what’s wrong with that?” Fynn asked wryly. “Future possibilities don’t make a given moment any less true.”

She shook her head.

“You trust me now. Why can’t you transfer your acceptance of my presence to acceptance of my touch? You would grow calmer. Touch is an extremely powerful need in all people. You weaken yourself by holding yourself apart.”

She just kept shaking her head.

He sighed. Sitting to the side of the door, he rested his forearms on his lifted knees.

“When are you going to get chairs?” Irritation thrummed her kicking heart.

“In volatile situations, anything can be a weapon. This room is designed to keep such opportunities to a minimum.”

Sunny looked at the cup she still clutched in her hand. “I’m thirsty,” she said, surprised.

“When Odan gets back, he’ll bring tea.”

Relieved, she leaned her head back against the stone. “Fynn.”

"Yes?"

"You really want to comfort me?"

"Yes. I have compassion for what you've survived, Sunny, and admiration."

"But you know what I did."

"All the more, Sunny. You need touch, to bring you back to reality, all the more.

There are no darkmages here."

Reality? If anything, it was Fynn, and men who still retained the myth of honor, who were working outside reality. Reality was exactly what you *would* do for food. How you fought through the pain. Where you went when you chose to stand up in the morning in a place without hope.

She couldn't keep from picking at it, after bottling it up for days. "But I could be a darkmage."

Fynn snorted. "I think not."

He said it so lightly!

"I did it before."

He shrugged. "It is an utterly unique situation, true. The Council will consider it as a whole. Our people have clearly defined consequences."

She turned the wooden cup around and around in her hands. There was a tiny chip on the lip, and it was rough. "Your Council judges lawbreakers? And what is the penalty for darkmages?"

"The Council is a group who rules the Clans along with the eleven Alphas. They are chosen by trial, based on prowess. In matters such as this, I'm sure the Council will not let a subcouncil decide. And the penalty for evil is death."

Sunny closed her eyes. Her thumb rubbed over and over the catch in the wood, until finally she pressed hard enough that her skin snagged. Lifting her hand, she saw the tiny bead of blood, perfect and red. People were so easily broken. That she was alive was incredible.

"You deserve a choice, you know," Fynn said. "You should be brought through a souldance that would find other men who match you, and you should be able to choose among them. Delavega has implied that you must do this to save Tydus but I don't believe that is the case. What you've agreed to is forever."

She stared and stared at the tiny drop of blood. "I choose to do this, Fynn." Ty was there for her, and she would do what she could to be there for him.

They were quiet until Odan rolled the door open, speaking in his quiet, low voice.

"I brought tea."

Rubbing the blood into a smear, she looked at him. Like Fynn, he met her eyes, held her gaze with apparent ease and no recrimination. Tightness eased from her chest. She breathed deep, and for the first time, shame left her easily. She nodded at him. He nodded back. She scooted out from the corner and held her cup up for tea.

Chapter Seven

Ty paced in circles around the Eyrie's open flight room. The two story room was cavernous, but still confining to a hawk. It was where the younglings practiced and the men could train in poor weather without risking their lives.

When he felt his Alpha approach, he went motionless. His mate was not with him, so he turned and resumed pacing. If he wasn't trying to crack his mind open to a spiritmage, sleeping, or flying, he was pacing. The movement fooled his hawk into thinking Ty was doing something about getting to Sunshine. Sometimes.

"You should be asleep." Delavega threw himself down on a pile of pillows and drew the dish of nuts closer.

Sleep. Ty was so tired he could almost cry, but every time he closed his eyes he remembered her kneeling on that bench with her hands behind her back. He remembered the pain, the beatings, the way he'd screamed, feeding them. He remembered the scent of Erich and the stunning strike of the beebee from above. He remembered the faces of the darkmages who still lived, and her shabby little form fading on the words, "All of them."

He hissed. His hawk pecked and ripped at him from the inside, caring about none of it. Their mate was here, in River Mountain.

"How was she?" He tossed the words over his shoulder.

"Well. She's a strong one."

Ty froze. He turned on his heel in a slow pivot. "I can tell you're keeping something from me."

"No need to get that look on your face. She's fine."

Ty strode forward and stood over his Alpha. "What happened?"

Delavega sighed. He tossed the last nut into his mouth and wiped his hands on his thighs. "She became distraught at the notion of being alone with me. Her guards remained in the room and now know about your match, and that I am bonding you tomorrow without giving her a choice. However, one of them assured me on the way out that they would not be running to their Alphas and demanding a brightmoon ceremony for her. They are both very protective of her, very considerate."

Ty was moving for the exit before he became aware of it. Only when Delavega blocked his way did he focus. "I have to see her."

Delavega put his hand on Ty's shoulder, squeezing and shaking him. "You'll see her tomorrow, if all goes well."

Ty focused again. The scent of Sunshine, both the purity of her clean skin, a new scent, and the remembered scent of her fear, coated Delavega. "You touched her."

"I said, she will be yours tomorrow."

Hawk beat with the full strength of his wings inside him. "She will?"

"I'm meeting the Council in a special session in a bit. I intend to pay the fee for taking an adopted woman without choice. Tomorrow, you will take Sunny to mate."

Ty stared at his Alpha. Hawk strained incessantly. He licked his lips, his heart thundering, his cock aching. "Why?"

Delavega drew him by the arm over to the lounge seating again. They were alone in the room. Ty knelt near where his Alpha settled.

“Ty, I am so glad to have you back. So relieved. I want to reward you, to ease you.”

“Sunny is not a trinket to be gifted.”

“That’s not what I meant. Your parents and family and friends are all very concerned. They see the difference. Your reports are excellent, and now that we’ve begun the third retelling, I’m finding that the accuracy and consistency is tremendous. You did a good job of remembering.”

“But?” Ty couldn’t stop inhaling deeply. Her scent, clean, tinged with fear, echoing of stone.

“It isn’t the same as having a recorded, guided retracing. I need to get inside your head.”

Ty just nodded, resigned. He understood the importance. “So you think, if I mate, I’ll be able to souldance?” He was so tired of lying still, head throbbing with concentration, while spiritimages did their best to pry him open. His magescape, the mental construct that was the seat of his power, was feeling damned crowded from their hovering.

“I don’t know. But I do know for sure that you’ll be able to souldance with your mate.”

Ty hissed, muscles jumping at the implication. His Alpha was breaking several serious protocols protecting human women, all to get information.

“And there’s the even larger issue of getting her information from her in return. With your help, I think she’ll be able to give us a guided report as well.”

“Two reports for the price of one mating. What a deal.” Ty leaped to his feet, hands fisted.

“She’s what you want. Don’t be insulted on her behalf. You’ll be able to care for her every step of the way.”

Ty shuddered. To relive what she’d survived, over and over, to issue it on paper for the Council’s perusal... And to force her to relive what he’d endured. It wasn’t fair. She’d suffered enough. “She won’t do it. She won’t bond with me.”

“She’s already agreed.” The gloating satisfaction in his Alpha’s voice made Ty’s fingers itch, the ghost of his talons hovering underneath.

“You. Are telling me. That Sunshine...”

“Is yours. Yes.”

Ty spun and strode toward the exit. “I have to see her.”

Once again, Delavega just appeared in front of him. “No. You’re strung out, Ty. You’re running on nerves. You need to sleep and focus.”

“Focus on what?” Ty spat at him. “How I couldn’t save Erich? What they did to me? What I did to get away?”

“How about the mate that needs you? Sunny is deeply conflicted about her ability to do this with you. You need to get it together so you can support her. Go to your hawk. Tomorrow you will have a mate, Tydus. Seek out your father if you have questions.”

“No.” The rejection was instant. After a wonderful ten minute reunion, he’d found he couldn’t bear to be around his family or any of his close friends. He’d hardly seen them since he’d been back. “And no witnesses.”

“Agreed. I’ll serve as part of the triad.”

“Is that wise?” Ty had witnessed two matings in his life. He knew the Alpha rarely served in the triad. He had other things to concentrate on, like keeping the hawk sane.

“It will be fine.”

Delavega was too glib. He was morbidly focused on bringing the darkmages down, on destroying them and their beebees and reaping revenge. Ty understood, but it was uncomfortable for Sunny to now be in the Alpha's sights as a means to do so. "Did she name the other elements?" Usually it was the woman who chose the elements who would balance her spiritmage in the triad. "Wait. She doesn't have a spiritmage."

"No." Delavega shook his head. "And I didn't introduce her to the finer points of the ritual. Her two guards have befriended her and will do fine as the balance of the triad."

Ty felt every one of his inner hawk's feathers lift. He hissed.

"Stop that. Ty, you need to sleep. You're about one hour from me pouring a sleeping herb down your throat."

As a bodymage, Ty could send himself into sleep with a thought. It had always been a very handy skill to have in the field. But he had no control over what his brain did while asleep. Sleep. It was a laughable term for where his mind went when he closed his eyes.

"Later." He ran his hand through his hair. His stomach growled. It seemed all he'd done since he returned was talk himself hoarse, eat, and get his brain picked at by spiritmages. "I should go tell Dad." He hadn't even told his family about Sunshine.

"Do you want me to do it?" Delavega's voice was quiet.

Ty's shame curdled in his gut. *Yes.* "No."

His Alpha nodded. "Tell them, then get some sleep. That's an order."

Ty went a few paces down the hall before Delavega's voice followed him. "She's lovely, Ty. Strength like I've never seen."

He never paused. He just said, "I know."

The praise did not bring him pride. He wanted to rip, to hit, to shred. To kill. They needed to die. For her. His anger carried him past the suddenly stilling whispers in the dining lounge. His Clan didn't know what to make of him. They were so proud, and also worried. He strode through the winding halls of his home that he knew so well and felt like a stranger.

Pausing outside his parent's room, he stared at the intricate woven tapestry hanging over the door. His cell in the old Fortress had had no privacy hanging. Sunshine had peeked at him from the base, there on the right side of the door, on the last day. How would she greet him when he saw her next? He was mating a woman he'd never held, a woman who had been tortured far beyond what he'd endured. Had Delavega even told her what it would mean?

It didn't matter. Despite the shocking way Delavega had manipulated her into becoming his, it didn't change the essential fact that he would accept it. She was his. He would hold her. He would heal her. He was hers. Ty cleared his throat. "Dad. Mom."

Silence had fallen when they sensed him out here, but they'd waited. After all, Ty had come to this door several times over the last days and not called for entrance.

The privacy cover tossed back, and his father stood there. Again, Ty was surprised by the sight of him. He looked just the same, which didn't seem right. His father searched Ty's face, his gaze hard and desperate. "Ty. Come in."

Ty breathed deep. His mother hovered, her hands half lifted toward him, her eyes red. He held his forearm out for his father to grab in greeting, and the touch seared him. Alive. He was alive. The Council would approve the mating, despite her semi-coercion. Ty's smile spread over his face.

"I've got good news. Mom, Dad, I have a mate."

* * * *

The next visitor she had arrived in the late hours of the evening. She'd been dozing but Fynn gave her a moment to wake up. The man who stepped in the door was so huge he had to duck. Bigger than Ty. Bigger than Odan. His dark hair was threaded with gray, and unlike Odan's it was earned through age. However, he was in no way frail.

Fynn stood by the door. "This is Quor. He is a Groundbear, and leads the Council spiritmages." He looked at her, and Sunny sat stiffly, and very still. "He's here to talk to you about your souldance, and your bonding. Do you want us to stay?"

She nodded once and gave the man her attention, rising from the bed to stand stiffly before him. Thankfully, she'd had time to learn he was coming, to prepare, to rest and eat. Now she looked him over, aware he was their version of a High Priest. He simply stood and watched her. There was none of the seething energy of the last man, although she almost would have preferred to have the hawk back. For Quor was a spiritmage. Like her. And his energy sang to her, wrapping around her, seeking, curious. If she could, she'd slap it away. But it wasn't anything he could control. It's just the way the element reacted to others of its like.

Except her energy did not reach out and respond. It flickered inside her, deep between her lungs, but it did not stretch, quest, twine, in return. Quor's eyes grew sad, and her shoulders grew tighter.

He went right for the jugular in his calm baritone. "Ty remains unable to undergo a souldance. He suffers. But while I see guilt as a small piece of his motivation, mostly he is furious. I've seen this kind of impotent anger before, when a man has failed to protect his mate. I do not know if you realize what you mean to him."

She clasped her hands. No, she had no idea what she meant to him. It would make sense if he was angry over what she'd done, but there had been no anger when they'd met in the bathing room yesterday. "Beasts—"

"Truxet, please."

She nodded. "Truxet use a souldance to find a man who would be a spiritual complement to a woman." The temple priests had found it an attempt to play god, that the Beasts thought themselves Skyfather to see so clearly. They also derided it as a waste of energy, since marriage was so much more than a natural attraction.

"Yes. All the women our people adopt are offered a choice of matches."

No matter how the Guilds and Royals dressed it up, Beasts, Truxet, were paid for their security efforts in the Cities with the most precious of resources, one they couldn't produce themselves: women. There were many dark stories of what happened to the women who were "adopted" by the Truxet. Having their choice of men was not one of them.

"But I have not had this souldance to seek matches."

"Our men can recognize a potential mate when they meet one. When you landed here at River Mountain, free of the dampening spell, Ty knew instantly. If he met you in the Cities, our people would approach your people about your interest in relocating."

Relocating. Disappearing. Same thing, since women who were taken by the Clans as wives, or as they so animalistically referred to them, mates, were never allowed to return to the City they were from again. No contact, and any daughters went, too. Sons were not welcome. Sunny shifted her feet, gripped her hands tightly. Ty had touched her, a gentle brush of a deadly talon. How horrible for him, to look at the woman who should have

been his partner, and know that she had betrayed him, forced him to use the darkcraft he'd fought against so hard.

The large man's deep, soothing voice continued mildly. "In this case, with you refusing your old identity, it is my pleasure to assure you that you are welcome among the Clans, Sunny. Your addition to our family would be joyful." He paused, his eyes glinting. "Provided, of course, we can confirm the lack of darkcraft on your soul."

Her head jerked back as if he'd struck her across the cheek with the full force of his massive arms.

"The only way to prove that you remain whole after you were held by the darkmages, after you touched their craft to escape, is to undergo a ritual you know well."

"My refusal makes me look guilty."

"Of course. And clearly, your statements to your assigned warriors show that you feel guilty."

Sunny glared at Odan, standing back straight, his bristly silvered head at odds with the warm golden light of the steady craft-powered balls set into niches in the room.

"I want to ask you something, Sunny."

She looked at him, her stomach regretting her noodle dinner. And she'd been so glad to graduate to heavier food.

"Do you want to stay near Ty?"

"What do you mean?" This was a trap. Anxiety spiraled up her spine. He was leading her somewhere.

"You went to great lengths to free him. But not Erich."

Rage lit her up so fiercely she actually took a step toward him. "I wasn't assigned to Erich. I never even saw him alive."

"Ah. So you are not sure if it was merely human pity or something of the spirit that drew you to Ty?"

She ground her teeth and glared. "Ty has a lovely spirit. He's brave and fierce, caring and intelligent. He was willing to sacrifice himself to the Merry Three just to increase our chance of taking more people with us."

"But I'm asking you, Sunny, if you merely appreciate him from your shared experience, or if you truly desire to stay with him. Would you return to a City, or would you prefer to remain here, with Ty?"

Ty. The memory of peeking around the door, of his smile flooding her with confusion. His easy disregard of his situation, his teasing warmth, his iron focus on learning and resisting, his unshakable pride. He'd been like a beacon of meaning in the shell of her life.

"That's what I thought." His words were gentle, but she found them patronizing.

She glared at him, fists clenching, furious he dared to read her with such blatant ease. He didn't know her. She tore her challenging gaze from his and looked to the side, clamping her jaw shut. *I'm so tired of this rage.* They'd done this to her, made her a vessel of fear and hate and anger. She breathed, and stayed silent.

"In my experience, Sunny, when a person has undergone severe trauma, there are two paths. One is a spiral of focus and rage, and one is a spiral of hope and persistence. Both are painful, and neither of them may lead to full emotional recovery. You are at a crossroads right now. You've been walking in both spirals." He grinned, with sudden ease and charm that surprised her. "You must be getting a bit dizzy."

He hadn't earned the right to tease her, to make light of what she'd lived through at the Fortress. Her lip actually lifted in a sneer. "You want me to lead Ty on a souldance. But you've been nattering on more about a match between me and Ty than about declaring him innocent. Then there's the logic issue. Why would the Hawk Alpha want someone under suspicion to be the one to clear Ty of the same suspicion?"

The large man raised one bushy eyebrow, his eyes gleaming with appreciation.

She folded her arms tightly. "You are such a patronizing ass. Spit it out already. What's this push to get me in Ty's brain?"

He beamed at her as if she'd performed a difficult trick. Tucking his head in a strange, folded bow, he said, "You need Ty, and he needs you. Together, you will heal and wipe away the taint of the darkcraft from your spirits. And together, you will be able to contribute the details we need for the attack."

Attack? "No." The word was torn from her depths. She stepped back, and again, coming up against her bed. "No." Just the suggestion of anyone sane and whole entering that Fortress willingly made her nauseous. They thought to attack! Their naivety took her breath. She shook her head again and again.

His hands patted the air soothingly. "Not in body. Not at all. We'd never ask you to go back."

"You can't attack them there. You will fail." She heard the thin, thready panic in her voice.

The large man sighed. Cupping his chin, he rubbed his finger along his jaw. "Sunny, you need to decide if you want to stay with Ty. If you do, the souldance will bond you as mates, at the same time moving the Council's goals forward."

"You're so sure that a ritual to combine us won't compound the darkness, forge us into something worse?"

"I'm positive. After meeting you, so is the Hawk. The Council agreed earlier this morning."

For the first time, Sunny wanted to get out of this room. She wanted to run through stone tunnels until she could hide. All of Ty's future was depending on her broken abilities. "And Ty? He gets no choice? To prove his innocence, he must take me?" A ruined ex-slave, a shell.

Fynn looked up from his position at the back corner. His gaze held hers, burning with intensity. "Sunny. Never doubt he will want you. Never. You are his match."

"I'm not—"

"Sunny." Odan spoke too, overriding her argument. "You don't want your old life. You are being offered a new one. Quit worrying about Ty. Every warrior wants nothing more than to find a match in his lifetime, to be chosen. Will living among the hawks be something *you* can live with?"

She blinked at him. Looking around the barren room, small details jumped out at her with strange clarity. The cupped hollows that held the magelights. The wooden bedposts worn smooth and polished. The way the hinged door had scraped a lighter path against the wall near the pivot.

She looked into Odan's steady, relentless silver gaze. "I can live with anything. I want to be with Ty."

Quor, the spiritmage, shrugged. "Very well. Tomorrow, I'll send you something that might help you with the souldance. Naturally, this souldance is not for reconstructing

your memories and giving a report about the Fortress. It is going to bond you as mates, sealing out any hold darkcraft has on you."

"She will not be presented with choices?" Fynn's voice was empty, but she sensed his disapproval.

The man moved to the door, dragging it open with a simple flex of his deep chest. "The situation is unique. My visit was to verify she is willing to join with Tydus. I see that she is. Neither are able to complete a souldance, and yet are both in desperate need of one. The very healing Sunny can offer them both will bind them, as she acts as her own spiritmage."

He paused, and looked at Fynn. "Oh, and Cat, I task you with telling Sunny about the matebond ritual. I assume she will choose you and the groundbear as her remaining triad members. Delavega will, of course, be the third." He winked. "Goodnight."

Fynn looked so stunned, Sunny's jaw relaxed with amusement.

Odan, however, looked furious. "He's rushing them into this, and don't tell me it's not the Council just wanting a breath-by-breath accounting."

"But..." Fynn rested back against the wall.

Odan stalked to the open door and shoved it closed. Frustration radiated from his back. "And what about the week of waiting? Even without the choice, there should be a week before the ritual!"

Fynn rustled his hand through his short dark hair. "Everyone is jumpy about the person who used darkcraft and is refusing a souldance. It's causing night whispers. The Council wants it settled, for their sake."

"But she hasn't even learned our laws! She hasn't been through the introduction in the women's caves." Odan spun so fast she bounced on the bed. "You're not married? No children?"

She shook her head. When they'd insisted, she'd told them the basics of her prior life over the past few days. "I didn't lie." Confusion filled her. "What sort of introduction is there? What happens during the week before the mating?"

Odan waved his hand as if the words were pesky gnats. "She won't even let us touch her. How is she supposed to manage a mating!" His big jaw clenched, and tendons stood out on his thick neck.

"Quit talking about me as if I'm not here!" she hissed at him.

He ignored her, continuing to address Fynn. "Do you think we should approach the Family Council for her? To ask them to intervene?"

Fynn rubbed the bridge of his nose as if pained. He crouched, his black leather skirt bellowing out around him. Taking his hand away, he looked at her, then at Odan. "No. This is the right thing for both of them. It's bizarre and I agree it feels selfish of the Council and Delavega, but remember, there remain five strong darkmages out there, with ties to who knows how many lesser ones who have evaded us. *Five* of the fuckers. We have to be as prepared as possible, and that means being just a bit ruthless. They were meant for each other anyway."

Fynn turned toward her. "Sunny, tomorrow you will be bound for life to Ty. Do you understand what you've agreed to? You will not just souldance with him, you will swap pieces of your soulair and join your life paths together until death. Things are already swinging into motion. If you have any second thoughts, we have to act on them now."

She stared at the man with light golden skin, and warm, concerned eyes. He was

young. Younger than her. He was strong, and while tested, had never really been strained. Odan, she sensed, had more emotional depth to his background, but had also never been forged in the fires of bitter hardship. He too watched her with a concerned, watchful gaze.

Chewing her lip, Sunny's heart pinched, much the same way it had the first time she'd seen Ty hanging in chains, but still wholly himself. These men, these honorable, sweet, noble-minded men, were worried about her. Despite knowing what she'd done, even knowing a dab of the disgusting things that had happened to her, they truly cared about her. She hadn't given them any reason to. There was no benefit to them. They were vicious warriors with beasts living inside them, and yet they were such sensitive, kind innocents. They touched her, and it made a heart she'd thought never to feel again swell.

She brushed her fingers over the cool, smooth sheets. "He said there would be a triad. At the ritual. The Hawk will be there, and you both could be there, too."

Fynn ground his teeth, his head tipping back in frustration.

Odan sighed, deeply.

"I'm glad."

They both looked at her, newly focused.

"I trust you a bit. I didn't want to trust you. I know if we were all back in the Fortress and you had to leave me in order to help your people, you would. But here, now, you're on my side, merely because you know I need support. You are fine men. I'm grateful for your patience and assistance. It's a relief to know you're going to be there tomorrow."

Odan abruptly looked amused. His brow lifted sardonically. "Don't speak too soon."

She shrugged, lacing her hands together. "Whatever the ritual entails, I can survive it. Ty will be there. And so will both of you."

Fynn stalked to the door and pushed it wide open. "Come on." He went straight through and disappeared.

Odan looked at her, swept his arm out. "After you."

Cautiously, Sunny stood and went out, turning to the left as Fynn had. She had a feeling he wasn't headed to the bathing chamber. She was right. He was waiting, arms crossed, energy snapping with irritation, at the arched entrance carved with fearsome warnings. When she came closer he went out without speaking. She followed him down a hall and up a staircase, and eventually they threaded their way to an opening at the end of a hallway.

Sunny came to a dead stop. The scent of fresh air was tinged with earth, and held the lush promise of summer.

Odan moved up next to her. Fynn waited at the dark opening, the sides lit with several bright magelights on posts. He shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"Fynn." Odan's voice called the man's attention.

He turned and looked back at them, and Sunny saw clearly he wasn't really with them. His gaze was distant. His face tight.

Odan looked down at her. "It's a lovely night. Nothing can harm you in this area. At our Council's seat, you are totally safe."

He thought she was worried about stepping into the Wild. After living her whole life in a walled City, she supposed she should be. But she wasn't. She was worried about stepping out from the surrounding stone. This Fortress contained her, was familiar. Unlike the old Fortress, this one vibrated with life. They'd passed several people on the way here, even one woman. It was well-lit, and so clean the stones polished by the ages

gleamed.

Fynn came up to her with his swaying, graceful stride. "You're about to be adopted into the Truxet Clans. I refuse to describe the matebond, something your patroness should do for you, in a cell. You need to understand what you're agreeing to with space around you, where your brain will focus on possibilities. Not in a cell, with no other options. Come out, and taste the air of freedom. Hear what this offer really means. Then decide."

Sunny's gaze swung from Fynn's passionate, energized one to Odan's steady one. Once again her heart ached, and she knew, suddenly, these men were her friends. And she was theirs. Maybe the friendship would only last until bad times of pain, but here and now, she'd accept it.

"All right." Her voice was soft, small. She wasn't proud of it, but that was the way it was. Fynn hustled off toward the opening, passing in a golden wash through the bright lights into the shadows beyond. Sunny slipped her hand into Odan's.

She felt him still, then his fingers closed gently around hers, so warm. He stepped in front of her and led her out.

Her knees were shaking, but she kept pace. He paused beyond the reach of the entrance lights, where the stone landing stopped and stairs disappeared down. But her gaze was not drawn to the murky path carved into the mountain's exterior, nor the bushes whispering in a night breeze. She looked up, and saw the sky for the first time in months. She saw the waxing moon, Skyfather's gaze, and the stars, his blessed children. She stood beneath the lovely, distant panorama, and knew to her bones her faith was gone. It was a moon, a celestial orb that may or may not have another world on it. But it wasn't the afterlife's reward for temple priests. Nor were the stars future priests waiting to be born. They were just a far away mystery.

Fynn trotted back up the steps out of the darkness. He glanced at her hand in Odan's, but didn't say anything. "There's a nice place to sit, just down here. Do you want a magelight?"

"No. Let's not ruin the moonlight." In the place where her faith used to live, there was a great hollow echo. In her blood, where confidence used to run strong, sang rage, and bitterness. Memories of hours on her knees, hours preaching to crowds, of offering people blessings and issuing condemnations, made her stomach roil and churn.

She held tight to Odan's hand, and followed Fynn into the darkness. They moved slower, and her eyes adjusted but she knew they could see better than she. When Fynn gestured to a bench carved to look like a bower of flowers near the edge of a cliff, she used both hands to feel her way up to it. She settled herself in the middle. The men remained standing below her, on the trail. She patted both sides of the smooth slab.

"Sit with me."

Both of them perched at the end, leaving space between their bodies. Fynn visibly relaxed, his shoulders easing, breath deepening.

Odan settled into stillness that made him part of the night.

The silence only made her consider the moon. The empty, cold moon. "What is the moon to you?" she asked.

Fynn said, "It's mostly believed to be connected to spiritimages, although the bodyimages sometimes claim it."

"Connected how?"

He shrugged. "Ask Quor. I think it has something to do with change, and

imagination."

"Do you know, Odan?"

"The watermages study it. They've actually proved it can speak to Water. Skymages, of course, are interested in it. They believe it is not part of Vladaya, but something beyond our realm."

Then Fynn asked, "Why? How do the Cities view it?"

Sunny didn't answer. Couldn't. "Tell me about tomorrow."

Fynn and Odan sighed at the exact same time. Her lip eased to the side in that strange relaxation of amusement. The feeling eased through her body, and tears jumped to her eyes as it quickly disappeared. She had almost smiled. It didn't seem right, while at the same time it was like a miracle.

Fynn leaned out, looking past her to Odan. "Have you ever been to a bonding before?"

"Yeah. You?"

"No."

The men seemed to contemplate that for a minute, and then Fynn said, "So you do the honors."

"Thanks." Odan's dry voice made it clear he didn't consider it one.

"Oh, for pity's sake, just tell me."

Odan had a lovely voice, a tenor that soothed. "All right. I'll tell you about the matebond ritual."

He eased back on the bench, supporting himself on one hand. His smooth chest was sleek in the faint light, sculpted. The position made his muscles stark. It was easier to look at him than the moon, so she angled to face him, putting her back to Fynn. He kept his gaze on a horizon she couldn't see.

"The ritual is held in a room that has been cleansed and scented with soothing incense by the Clan Alpha. The triad guides the Trux to the site, and prepares the pit."

"The pit?" The word was ominous.

"The room is round, and in the center, a shallow circle is set into the floor and lined with furs of animals killed in a Clan hunt. The triad stands at equidistant points around the edge of the pit, and the witnesses stand around the edges of the room."

"Witnesses?" Alarm rang through her.

"In your case," Fynn spoke near her shoulder, "there won't be any. I'm sure of it. Ty has the right to invite his family and friends, but no warrior would put you in such a situation. The only witnesses truly necessary are the Alpha and the woman's spiritmage. In your case, the Alpha will form part of the triad, and you are acting as your own spiritmage. Something I've never heard of."

Odan ignored Fynn's suspicious mutter. "The matched warrior waits for his mate in the room. She is escorted, after being offered a drug to relax to her."

"A drug?" She was beginning to feel ridiculous, blurting out repetitions.

Fynn spoke again. "You can take a harmless drug to relax you, to put you at ease."

"No. Absolutely not. No drugs." Her spine went pole straight.

Odan nodded. "Your choice. When the woman enters, a bodymage guards the outer door. The ritual has begun. She enters the pit of her own will—"

"Drugged?" she asked dryly.

"The drug doesn't control you," Fynn defended.

Odan continued over both of them, "—and the triad seals them inside a protective space. No one outside can get at the vulnerable pair without taking the triad down first. In a sense, this is the equivalent of a calming drug on the Trux. He knows he cannot be interrupted, that his back is guarded, and it lends a small edge of sanity to the situation."

"Sanity?" That implied there was a certain insanity, before.

"The matebond ritual involves three exchanges. Blood, body, and spirit. At the end, the pair shares a connection unlike anything in the human Cities. It is the envy of every unmated Trux, and the basis of our entire way of life. Family is everything to us. The woman becomes part of the Clan when she is claimed by a beastspirit."

He paused, and when she didn't immediately interject, he turned and looked at her. She realized his face looked softer. He smiled a bit. "Blood?" he asked quietly.

Sunny nodded.

"Best case, a nip. Worst case, a deep bite. Usually, the woman is so lost in pleasure it's not a big deal."

"Is it true, that the triad will ride the ritual, too?" Fynn's voice dripped eagerness.

Odan rolled his eyes. "Fynn..."

The other man sighed.

Odan shifted, bringing his arm forward, bracing over his knees. He considered his hands. "The matebond was developed for a very specific reason, Sunny. Our beastspirits. When a Trux finds a mate, the beastspirit's only goal is to make sure she becomes his. Giving the woman a choice is a semblance of civilization and dignity our people have strained under for centuries. But once she's chosen, and given a week to meet her mate, the ceremony that bonds a human to the Truxet is so ... necessary to the beastspirit, that there's simply no way to prevent it. Just once, in heat and frenzy, under the watchful eye of the Alpha who has complete power over our beastspirits, our animal self rises and meets the woman."

He clenched his hands. "No, I won't lie to you." He turned his head, but with his face lowered, the moonlight didn't reach his darkened eyes. "In a matebond, the Trux warrior goes to battleform, a blended form between human and animal. And then he fucks his mate. He claims her in the most ancient of ways, and she submits, and there's no such thing as equality, or even tenderness. It's raw domination, and violent."

He sat up, turning toward her, and their knees bumped. She jumped, realized she was leaning back away from him, but couldn't help it. Odan reached slowly for her fists clenched against her belly. He paused over one, and she stared at his hand, the size of it. And still let him finish the movement and take her hand in his. He drew it away, stiffly, to rest on his thigh. He smoothed his thumb over the back of her fist.

Fynn crooned, "Shhh, Sunny. Shhh."

"I—I—"

"It isn't a rape. It's nothing like that." Odan's voice saying that word shocked her.

"How dare you even say so! I think I know the difference."

He ignored her outburst. "But it's wild, for at our hearts, we are. For all that it sounds so ruthless, it is in an incredibly emotional event for us. For anyone involved in the ritual. It's beyond special, a continuation of family, a culmination of a life's search, a match. It's right up there with birth as something that's just an intrinsic joy. A man has found a woman and she has chosen to join their lives together. If she doesn't accept him in this souldance, there's no matebond, and it's done. But nearly always, at the end, a couple is

bound and strengthened for it. It's a beautiful rite. A proud moment, even though it is fraught with tension."

He turned her hand over, and began to pry her fingers from their curled fist. She stared at her hand in his, watched him force her thumb away and soothe it. Fynn's heat was against her back and she realized she rested against him, but he made no move to touch her.

Odan opened her hand, and placed his open palm against her damp fingers. "Quor wants us to be in your triad tomorrow. We'll be there, at the edge of the pit. We'll be linked with Delavega, and we'll be protecting you."

"You'll ... watch?"

Odan's gaze went past her, over her shoulder. Whatever he saw made him sigh. "We'll feel it. Everything you do. But we'll be in a trance, focusing on blending our elements. We won't be watching, but we'll know."

"Not the souldance. Not that." She was suddenly terrified. This entire thing was to pry open Ty and force her to share herself with him. Only because it was Ty was she even able to contemplate this. No one else could be on their magescapes with them.

"No, we won't be in the souldance ... although I'm sure Delavega will get echoes through Ty's hawk."

"He will?" Her voice was shrill.

His larger hand soothed her wrist with his finger tips. "Not specifics. But our Alphas are tied to our beastspirits. He'll know emotions. He'll know if you fail to bond, certainly."

His hand on hers made his words real. "So—So—Tomorrow, Ty and I will fuck in a pit and he'll bite me and I'll souldance with him, and then some sort of exchange will seal us together and the three of you right there around us will feel it all."

Fynn shifted behind her. She felt the heat of his hand hovering near her shoulder, but it moved away. "Sunny, tomorrow, you'll become one of our people. You and Ty will help each other. The hawk will be able to proclaim you both innocent."

"Oh, and the Council, too. Don't forget we'll help them as they force Ty to record his pure memories." Her voice was too loud for the night, hoarse, bitter, but she wasn't really angry about the Council. She was still caught up in a vision. *A changed Ty looking down at her, brushing her cheek with a talon before running away.* That image sent a thrill to her, lifting the hairs on her nape. But it was quickly followed by another. *Being tied down on a bed, the laughing women lounging around her, while bony Tattoo worked her body, thrusting into her over and over, biting her breasts until they were covered in red crescents. She still had a few sliver-shaped scars. Then he'd lifted up a knife, and licked it, slicing his own tongue. The blood had landed on her cheek. One of the women had smeared it across her face. Another had bit into her outstretched forearm. And a third had leaned in to lick her eye. The four of them had kept her there all night, then sent her to get them breakfast the next morning.*

The men were waiting, Odan's hand serene and solid on hers. Fynn's chest a wall of strength at her back. Enough time had passed that she noticed the stars had moved, and she could make out a horizon where dawn would come. Her breath panted in the night. "I was—I was—"

They waited, a long time.

She finally whispered it. "I was a slave."

They still waited, silent. Odan's hand was steady. Fynn's breathing was even.

"I was tortured."

They didn't move a muscle. Her gaze jumped from a tuft of grass at the rim, to the pebbles by her shoes, to the blackness beyond. She smelled the scent of earth, sharp and fresh, and a cool breeze brushed her hair.

"I died there. I did." *The feeling of Glasses' hand on her chest, squeezing past blackness, pressing on her ribs until they shattered, until her heart stilled. She'd died. And come back to the pain of him beating on her chest, and laughing when she gasped through the pain of newly moving blood.*

"I can't be the woman I was. I'm not her anymore. I won't be her." *The lash slicing against her back, again, again, again, again, again ...* and she'd babbled prayers, begged, summoned, dwelled in her faith, until they broke it.

Fynn's voice came softly from near her ear. "Then you're not."

"I'm Sunny. His Sunshine." She was clinging with both hands to Odan now. "That's what he called me. I'm his. I'm not her anymore."

"Sunny," Fynn whispered, "You're free."

She sat there for a long time, with a pounding heart, desperately gripping hands, sawing breaths, and two strong men leading her to a new path.

When her hold finally relaxed on Odan, she could see, even in the moonlight, she'd left gouges from her ragged nails in his skin. She brushed over them. Drawing herself up onto her own spine, away from Fynn's heat, she straightened, facing out into the lightening darkness, clutching the edge of the bench on either side of her thighs.

Fynn stood and asked, "Sunny, do you want to bond with the hawk Ty tomorrow?"

She chewed her lip. With all she'd survived, with how completely she changed, with the threat of the dark power she'd tasted, what was she doing standing here? Breathing, she closed her eyes. She uttered the bravest and most selfish words she'd ever spoken. "I do."

Odan's breath eased from him in a softening.

Fynn waited a moment and then punched the air with his fist. "Yes!"

"Excuse me?" She stared at him, shocked.

He looked down at her. His eyes were part of the darkness, but his grin lit up the night. "You made the decision for yourself. Not for Ty. Not to seek revenge on the darkmages or in guilt to help the Council. That's fantastic."

"Is it?" She was a little dazed.

"Yeah. Come on, we have to get you ready. Only a few hours before dawn now."

"Fynn, she doesn't need to primp."

"Sure she does. Right, Sunny?"

She stood up, determined to get started, to move on.

He grinned at her, turned and jumped down onto the trail. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to reach for him as she took the small hop down onto the uneven dirt path. He held out his hand and steadied her, then lowered his arm to drop her grasp. She stepped up to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. His body was hard, his skin cool from being out in the night, but his arms came strong around her, closing with no hesitation.

Fynn gave a great hug. An emotional hush gripped her as she relaxed and accepted his gentle warmth. He wrapped her close and she felt her breasts press against ribs, but

stayed against him anyway. He smelled of a musk that settled into her like incense. His cheek pressed against her temple. She breathed, feeling the plane of him against her, and whispered into his throat, "Thank you."

He moved his hand from her shoulder to the back of her head, and her heart swelled. Stepping away from him, she darted a glance at his face. He wasn't smiling. He wasn't leering in a teasing way. He looked every inch a warrior, his face a mask, eyes glittering. "I swear to you, Sunny. You can trust us. We are honorable men, and you are safe here."

She nodded, and turned to Odan, who had moved onto the trail. She held out her hand, and he took it, walking her back toward the Fortress where her new life waited.

Chapter Eight

Odan brought her a deep purple dress. It was a heavy fabric that flowed over her skin. The sandals were red. Freshly bathed and dried, her hair was the color of late autumn grass. 'Honey,' Fynn had called it. 'Light brown,' she'd returned. Certainly, it didn't have the sheen of Ty's. And when it dried, the fingerlengths left had thickened into deep waves. Ty's was definitely curlier. She primped a little, trimming her nails smooth and slathering in lotion.

The men took her with them after she'd had a wonderful breakfast of eggs, fruit, and sweetbread. They took her out into the halls again. Down and down the staircases Odan had carried her up just a few days ago. No one seemed to look at her with more than a passing glance. The warriors they passed were big, extremely muscular. Not many wore the black leather skirts her guards did.

She asked them about it. "Your skirts mean something, don't they?"

Fynn chuckled. "They are warskirts, thank you, and they designate us Council warriors."

"Does that mean you're better? A higher rank?"

Fynn just chuckled again.

When she looked over her shoulder at Odan, he'd shrugged. "It's complicated."

She'd frowned at him.

Fynn waved to someone who waved to him down the hall. "We're alphas, Sunny. No one envies us, but being a Council warrior is something to be proud of."

She blinked, hard. "Alphas! You are your Clan leaders?"

Fynn burst out laughing. "No. Not at all. We're exiles, merely for the abilities we were born with."

After another staircase, Sunny asked, "Being an alpha is a physical designation?"

Fynn nodded, but he seemed distracted now. His steps lengthened, as if he was eager. "Yes. But being *the Alpha* of a Clan is much more. And not for me, at all."

He led them into a corridor where no one else walked. "What about you, Odan? Would you answer the Clan's call?"

"I cannot say."

Fynn stopped in front of a stone door. He threw a curious look at Odan. "That's not a no-way."

"No, it isn't." They looked at each other, and Sunny thought Odan had just risen in Fynn's esteem.

Fynn leaned into the door, his shoulders jumping with effort, and Sunny got the feeling this door wasn't used much. She followed him into a room that was much dimmer than the hall. The smell of fragrant, herbal incense assaulted her with memories. *A pious peace, secure in her rank and well-being.* Stopping, she closed her eyes and swallowed. That was done. That woman was gone.

Fynn looked around, hands on his hips. "Wow. Someday, I'll bring my own mate here."

"May the Six blend and deliver her," Odan murmured.

"What is this place?" Sunny asked. Then she noticed the hole in the floor, about two

bodylengths across. She walked up to it, looking at the gray and brown pelts below.

“Oh.”

Fynn came up and stood beside her. “It’s time. Ty will soon take you as his mate.”

Sunny had a memory of washing red off Ty’s muscled legs. She’d felt more than she should when she bathed and fed him, but now those memories were full of even more emotion. Emotion, and a yearning ache. He was so very beautiful. But she couldn’t imagine him touching her scarred, skinny, gangly body. She’d filled out a bit even with a few days of decent food, and her scars were of course healed and smoothed. But she was no beauty, and never would be.

Fynn shifted, taking a deep breath through his nose. “He’ll fuck you here. He’ll be in his battleform. This ritual will bind you to him and to the hawks. It will create a link between you that will be a source of great strength and peace for both of you.”

“I’m to take in part of his soulair...” Sunny shook her head at the audacity. They’d never thought of such a thing in the City temples. It was astonishing, to blend male and female this way. And worse, even if she did dare to do it, she was tainted. She’d betrayed Ty, forcing the darkness on him. And now they wanted her to further infect him.

Odan stood a bit farther off, but he too looked as if fascinated into the pile of furs lining the knee-deep pit. “When you accept each other in the souldance, you’ll enter a mirror state. You’ll see inside him, become the truth of him.”

Sunny took a step back before she knew what she did. “What?” Ty couldn’t possibly be allowed to glimpse how broken she was. She planned on keeping his glimpse into her as narrow as possible.

“This is something you want, Sunny.” Odan’s voice was matter-of-fact.

Fynn explained, “You’ll belong here. You’ll start a new life. And at the same time, you’ll both be confirmed innocent. The Council will gather the details of your capture, and with as much information as possible, we’ll storm the Fortress and retake it. We have to free the people there, and stop the beebees at their source.”

He’d gotten more and more excited as he spoke, his voice passionate.

Sunny shook her head. “No.”

Odan turned to face her and folded his arms. “The report is necessary, Sunny. Neither of you will avoid it, but through this mating, both of you will support each other in the effort.”

“But—”

“Sunny,” Fynn’s voice was short with impatience. “You’re worried about reliving your ordeal when we need to record the report, and I understand that. But after it’s done, you can suppress the memories, shadow them and heal. Denying them is no way to live.”

Odan nodded but redirected the conversation. “All of that is part of the future. For now, Sunny, concentrate on how you’ll enter the souldance with Ty. Quor and Delavega have asked you to do something extraordinary—be your own guide in a matebond. Ty will help, but he’ll be deep in the hawk.”

“What does that mean?” She couldn’t control the way her tone crept higher and higher.

“Our beastspirit cannot be denied access to our mate. This ritual is the offering, the blending, of our two halves. All of a Trux comes together to greet and claim their mate.”

Their? Was the beastspirit another being? Sunny was rocked by the reality of the pit. They expected her to let Ty fuck her, in his beak and talon form, and they expected her to

souldance with him while it happened. "I don't know if I can do this," she whispered.

Odan's steadiness answered. "You will, because you have to."

She looked at him, his muscled form quiet and strong and unbattered, unrapped. This man fed her, watched over her nightmares, kept his distance while she bathed. He listened, but when he talked he was complete and thorough. Odan was intelligent and fascinating. He was trustworthy here, in this society. But he wasn't Ty. She didn't know if he'd have chosen to let himself be tortured for the chance to free more strangers. She didn't know if he'd smile at her after a night in chains coated in pieces of his body. Sunny didn't love him to the depths of her shattered soul.

She answered her warrior guard. "I will mate with Ty, because I must."

He understood her subtle shift of meaning, and nodded to her. Fynn, bless his more action-oriented heart, said, "Don't be scared, Sunny. We'll be here."

She was still watching Odan, so she saw the stripes slice briefly across his face, a sign she recognized now as strong emotion. His gray eyes narrowed. "Fynn..." he growled with irritation at the smaller man.

"I just mean she won't be alone. I mean, we stand for her." Testy, he fished in his pouch at his waist. He drew out a folded paper and handed it to her. "This is from Quor."

It was a philosophical comparison. The familiar tenets of the temple were listed on one side, followed by rebuttals on the other.

The first temple belief read *Every person is a flawed reflection of Skyfather or Earthmother*. She remembered the agony of her faith, that she'd never know the purity of Earthmother's being. The thought written next to the familiar teaching was stunningly simple. *Every person is beautiful*.

The second Temple belief read *Every dance is a chance to improve*. It had been so easy for her to find fault, to offer "corrections" upon seeing into a person's soul. *Every dance is a chance to see clearly*. Had she ever really seen anyone clearly at the Temple? She'd gone into them proud and secure in her status, knowing it was her duty to point out flaws.

The last line read *The Sacred Couple are our unknowable source*. When all was darkness, the Couple had been absent. The source that had led her to survive had been inside herself. *We are each of the Six*. The Six hadn't been at that Fortress either.

"Gee, thanks," Sunny said dryly. She handed the list back to him, hiding her unease. She didn't want to remember her old life's faith, and she didn't want to be confronted with someone else's.

Fynn unabashedly read it. "It's a message meant to help you adjust your understanding of a souldance, from the Cities' Sacred Couple to Vladaya's Six Elements."

At the temple, all instruction was based on the relationship between the Sacred Couple. The Skyfather and the Earthmother represented all the masculine and feminine energy in the world, divided in three elements each. Understanding how the masculine acted and how the feminine responded, and vice versa, was at the heart of the temple's rituals. People came to the temple for help, for cleansing. And all of the help and cleansing was based on the understanding that everyone needed to improve, to strive for connection to the divine.

What Quor had distilled her old self's faith into was familiar to her. She rejected all of it. What he listed as his rebuttals chimed through her body like a bell. Like possibilities

she hadn't considered.

Odan moved up closer to her. "You are what you are. See yourself, today, and see the Six in you."

She looked at him. His calm gray eyes, his thick neck and square jaw, none of it was exactly handsome, but he was perfect. Something crystallized inside her broken spiritcraft. She'd wondered, when trimming her nails, just how by all the pearls in the sea she was supposed to summon her spiritmage craft for this ritual. After all, Quor's presence had revealed how thin it had become. But what if her craft didn't come from the Earthmother? What if, like an alpha's skills, she was born with it? What if everyone was born beautiful? Not a struggling, flawed echo of something beyond, but a piece of the divine themselves?

Her knees gave out, and Fynn caught her, lowering her gently to the floor. "Sunny?"

"Oh ... my ... stars..." Sunny propped herself up on one hand. "Let me see it again!" She demanded the paper back from him.

She stared at Quor's words. Her old self would have scoffed at them. She would have giggled to think of the huge, powerful warrior saying these things. Her superiority would have been unchallenged by a phrase as weak as "Every person is beautiful." She'd seen into some horrible memories in her time as a priestess. And of course, now she'd lived them herself. She knew what it was to pull the clothes from a dead body for her own use. To do a despicable thing to save herself pain. But maybe, as Delavega had pointed out, maybe just as she wasn't a priestess anymore, she wasn't a slave, either. What if she hadn't sought out the worst of people in a souldance, to improve them and point out how far from the Couple they were, but instead showed them their strengths, and how to see themselves clearly, so they could choose their own path?

She handed the paper back to Fynn, who squatted next to her. "Do you need something to drink?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Do you pray, Fynn?"

"Not often. I think my time is better spent training instead. But then, I'm not a spiritmage."

She looked at him sharply. "Only your spiritmages pray?"

"Of course not. But we don't gather to worship like you do in the Cities. We don't have a political structure around praying, or a location to physically support. We pray where we want, when we want, and it's over in a moment. Connect to the element you need by meditating, by focusing, and take that power you're seeking into yourself."

Sunny shook her head. She understood his words, but it was too much, too new. "When I lead Ty into a souldance, when I dive into him, he's not some supplicant coming to me for help."

Odan, standing nearby, huffed a laugh. "I think you'll find you're not the one doing the diving."

She craned her neck, scowling at him. "He's a bodymage. I will control the souldance."

"You're his mate."

Sunny was shaking her head so much, her brain was going to come loose. She looked at Fynn, grinding her teeth at the sympathy in his warm brown eyes. "I *must* do this." She drew up her knees, wrapping her arms around the soft fabric covering her shins, and buried her face in it. It smelled of the sun and lavender. She'd forgotten this scent.

Breathing deep, she calmed her racing heart.

Fynn crouched near her, contemplating the knee-deep pit lined with furs. Odan walked the room lighting incense until a haze hung in the air. Against all sense, it soothed her. There was nothing she wouldn't do for Ty, yet in reality, it was time to admit, there was nothing she wouldn't do for the ability to be with Ty. She missed him. After only a handful of brief conversations in the most dire of circumstances, he captured her. Today Ty would walk in here and bond to her. He'd know what she'd survived, know what she'd done. They said he wanted her ... she trembled to imagine it. Ty. Wanting to be with *her*. Body. And soul.

Odan said, "He's here."

Fynn rose and faced the door. A stone rumbled a grinding noise, and then again. She continued to stare into the pit.

Delavega's voice came with a nape-prickling wash of power. "Hello, warriors. Thank you for agreeing. Fynn and Odan, right?"

Her men remained by her side. Fynn said, "That's right, Hawk. It's an honor."

And then Ty's voice, low but clear. "Hello, Sunshine."

She froze. His voice was a touch at the base of her spine. It echoed in her belly. Lifting her head, Sunny breathed in the herbal scent beginning to cloud the air. The room seemed larger and more shadowed. She let her breath out on a sigh. "Ty."

When she breathed in, she smelled him behind her. *Warm man*.

"Sunshine, you are well?"

She nodded, her eyes burning and dry. Her throat burning and dry. "And you?"

His voice came lower, closer, his heat searing her left arm, his breath smelling of honey. Of course, he was more honest than she. "I've struggled."

She nodded again.

"Sunshine." He paused, her name vibrating with a yearning intensity that softened her. "Do you choose me as yours?"

Turning quickly, she jerked her head around to see him. He was big. So big. His shoulders, now that they weren't drawn up by chains, were broad, surrounding her. Even though she'd seen him before, it still struck her how *clean* he was, his hair a soft tumble of thick, gilded dark curls. One hand hovered near her shoulder, and his fingers trembled.

She took his hand in hers. It was so easy to do, his skin fascinating to her fingertips. He stopped breathing.

She swallowed. "I do. It's just—"

She didn't get a chance to voice her self-doubt. He lunged forward, arms around her, with a thrust of his legs. Airborne, wrapped in his body, she closed her eyes and relaxed into him. He twisted so she landed sprawled on him. So much body, so hot, nude, and aroused. She scrambled to the side, slipping on the pile of loose, slick furs. His hands held her upper arms, firm but far from hard. His skin shivered, and she put one hand on his chest, feeling his strong heart thud.

Sunny jumped when sharp green light flared out above her. She looked up to see the men stood around the edge of the pit, their arms outstretched. A clear triangle of power shone, with a domed cap rising up over them all, creating a miniature room out of the pit.

Delavega announced, "The triad protects."

"You can trust me." Ty gritted out, voice so low she could barely hear him.

She looked down at him, his features clearer now in the magelight the men generated

around them. His cheeks were flushed red, and his golden eyes glittered. Something wild and raw twisted in her gut but she stomped on it. "Of course."

"You can." His voice strained. His forehead glistened with sweat.

Sunny leaned to wipe the dampness away with her thumb. "I do, Ty." She licked the salt from her thumb because she wanted to. The taste burst in her mouth, sizzling. Her mouth flooded with moisture, and suddenly all she wanted to do was lick him, all over. He was here, underneath her. Free. And through a weird twist of fate, he wanted her.

Ty's eyes were glassy, his gaze fixed on her hair. His fingers lightly feathered through her hair. "So soft. You're here. In my arms."

One of his hands drifted down to her wrist, circling it, and she shivered to realize how large his hands were. His gaze drifted to her neck. When his blunt fingers touched her there, she jumped. Energy poured from him, softening her.

"You're healed?"

The memory filled her. Of drawing his bravery into herself, of distancing herself from the Merry Three's laughing voices, and simply trusting that they'd survive it together. "They're dead. We're out. For now, that's as healed as I can get."

He focused on her, and his eyes flared mage-green for a moment. His gaze wrenched through the anger that still lived her gut, and plucked at her sleeping magecraft. She held her breath, pinned by his closeness, wanting to look away.

He didn't let her hide. His gaze held hers, digging through her secrets, calling to her. "I want to belong to you. I have no right, but Sunshine, I need you so much."

Her power unfurled inside her. She exhaled on the smallest cry, her lashes fluttering with the sensation of her skin stretching, waking. He was summoning her, and didn't even seem to know it.

"You did it, Sunshine. You freed me, you rescued them, you got us all out. By Marrow and Blood, you even collected most of the intel. You're the most amazing woman, and I'm already yours. No matter what happens here, I'll always be yours."

His eyes released her, traveling to her lips. Heat throbbed through them. They had healed, the skin smooth and soft again. Now her lips felt tight, aching as she leaned on one arm over him. His grip on her wrist tightened, and her lips parted. Even her teeth were sensitive. Her tongue swirled in her mouth, aching to taste him. When she swallowed, his gaze jumped to her throat.

"Ty..."

Somehow he heard the hesitation in her thoughts. His fingers curled along the edge of her ear and she gasped, the sensation striking between her lungs, and trickling lower. His thumb and forefinger captured her earlobe and pressed it, twisting it gently. Her body jerked.

"You have to realize, I loved you before I knew. I loved you when you were my Sunshine in that place. But somehow, I think their attempt to block the ability to know a mate failed. I knew. Somehow, under all the pain and anger, I knew you were mine."

His hand cupped the soft skin below her jaw and directed her face toward him. She met his eyes, and this time, the gold glowed. His eyes were like two miniature magelights, lit with his mesmerizing power. "Don't doubt this. Don't doubt that you belong here, with me. Trust me."

Heat poured off him, mixing with the energy of him, melding with the energy he'd triggered in her. She was dizzy to be kneeling here, so close to him. "Ty..."

“My hawk needs to meet you, Little One. Come on, now, come into me. Don’t be afraid of flying. I’ll be with you.”

His words exploded in her womb in a burst of cleansing light. His hand curled around her nape, his thumb brushing her pulse, stopping it. His hand on her wrist pushed, lifting her hand. She watched his gaze staring at her lips, and let him move her hand farther out from her body. The hand she braced herself on ached, her elbow trembling.

He set her hand on his belly. It was hard, tight, but quivering. She’d touched it many times. But not like this. Shifting her palm, one of her fingers brushed his navel. The last time she’d looked at his navel, the darkmage had scored bloody furrows down to it. They were gone now. She stroked it with her middle finger, softly, and the velvet of his skin made her head spin. The corners of his eyes wrinkled as he narrowed his gaze on her pulse.

“My Alpha has my hawk, Sunshine. He has it tight, giving us time. But it’s so hard. Come to me, my Lady. I won’t do this for you. I can’t. Forever between us, it has to be you leading.” His hold left her wrist, his fingers drawing designs on the back of her hand.

She licked her lips, and they throbbed. His mouth was wide, the skin plump and dark. Moisture gathered between her legs. “I want you...” She pressed her hand firmly to his belly, but there was no give. Her skin flattened, and they both sighed at the same time.

“I am so amazingly glad to hear that.”

The laughter in his voice made her mouth twitch.

“Sunshine, look at me.”

Her gaze ripped from his mouth, but his eyes weren’t waiting for hers. They stared down his body to where her hand was welded to him.

“Look.” His voice was low and hard.

She turned her head. Down his deeply working chest, past his small, tight brown nipples. There, right there, her hand, dark against his paler skin. She was old gold, he was new, and her freshly trimmed nails were neat and clean. Not a breath from the edge of her palm, the fat head of him throbbed. Literally, she could see his cock pulse, lifting with a strong heartbeat. The skin was stretched tight, the hole open and shining with moisture.

“Oh...” Even his pubic hairs gathering around his base glinted with a golden sheen. He was rampant, fully hard, lifting at a steep angle from his groin, pointing right at her.

“Please, Sunshine. Breathe. That’s it. This is me, Ty. I’m right here, waiting for you.” His hand continued to pet the back of hers, stirring the small hairs. His other hand remained on her neck, his thumb sweeping slightly, slowly on her throat.

His voice was calm, and she listened. Breathed. Her fingers twitched, gripping into the muscles of his lower abdomen. Now that she was aware of how close he was, she could feel the heat pouring over that small space between the rim of his cockhead and her hand. His skin was darker there, textured and veined. She’d seen veins like that standing starkly from his arms, but on his cock, it seemed to fill her with urgency.

“This has to be you, Sunshine. Come to me.” It was something between a prayer and a plea.

She remembered how to answer such a call. Haltingly, her sweaty hand traveled in small increments lower on his belly, lower, her wrist brushing his softness, and lower, her palm full of his thick hairs, and lower, until the edge of her hand was nestled in the vee between his cock and pelvis. He was so warm down here, and the skin above was silky soft.

His hand eased away from hers, but his touch feathered over the tip of her thumb, the rasp of his fingertips against hers tangling with all the other sensations. She looked at her hand resting beneath his throbbing cock. She watched a bead of liquid seep from his tip, stretch, and fall onto the back of her index finger. Ty was lying beneath her, hard, and he wanted to fuck her. And looking at her tan hand against his tan hairs, she wanted to claim him in whatever form necessary.

But that meant a souldance, an opening of herself and a voyage into him that had always been sacred before. She'd seen so much darkness since she'd boldly voyaged into someone else's mind, assured of her sanctity and righteousness. Ty's body was here beneath her, and she was so close to becoming his.

"I'm yours. Reach out and take me. I know you can." His words, his belief, spoken so softly. His thumb on her neck shifted and pressed—into her pulse. He pressed against it, his thumb firm, and she wished he really was the brand he felt like.

She stared at his cock, understood the life and possibility of this moment. It was like her body had turned to stone, one of the paused statues found in the halls. There were laws here, and some kindness. To live, with Ty, to stay by his side, and help him in all that he worked at, was the only future she could imagine for herself. A future she was afraid of. Afraid to want, even as it hovered so close.

"Come to me, Sunshine." His fingers played down the edge of her hand, teased the fragile skin at the base of her thumb, and poised there. When he lifted his hand, she held her breath to feel the flow of energy between them stretch. He moved his hand to his cock, and dragged his fingertips up the length of himself. He paused.

She followed. Her eyes burned but she didn't blink. She lifted her hand like it weighed an entire stone and placed her fingertips in the exact spot on the base he'd touched. The energy snapped back into a tight flow between them. She knew that he'd stopped breathing beneath her.

He was warm. She dragged her fingers over the tight skin of him. Soft, but not smooth, his cock was covered with rises and tiny hollows. She paused, her heart taking a hard strike when she saw the scars on the side of his girth, white and slightly raised. They looked years old, but she'd seen the woman slash into him just days ago. Her fingers moved up to touch them, warm, slick. He trembled, his body rigid.

"Breathe, Ty."

He breathed with her, and they left the memory. She was sure his gaze followed her fingers as they moved along his length, passing over his, stopping at the flaring lip that circled his tip. His body froze beneath her, utterly taut. "Sunshine," he rumbled.

She picked up her hand, and this time the energy clung to her fingertips. She could feel his energy refusing to release her, and she moved through the air with the sensation of honey dripping from her. She covered the back of his hand, picking it up, turning it, so that their fingers flowed, so naturally, into a tightly woven grip. Ty held her hand, lying beneath her, his cock reaching for an intimacy she'd forgotten. *Pleasure*. It was so beautiful. So unexpected. A physical need, a bone-deep yearning, held her for an endless moment.

Here, now, with the new hope of Ty waiting, she would take him.

Palm to palm, his fingers covering her hand but her grip no less strong, she lifted on her knees, shifting her balance. One leg eased over his wide torso, her heavy skirt sweeping across his thighs and ribs. When she settled on his belly, they both gasped, both

shook. She wore no underwear. Her labia were spread wide, and she oozed cream all over his skin. He felt cool against her for just a moment, but the heat came roaring back. Sunshine sat on Ty, spread wide, so close to him, her miracle. The sensation of him beneath her curled her toes. This was new. It was all so new. She'd never done anything like this before, not as Sunshine.

His touch at her neck skimmed her shoulder, her arm, trailing down to capture her other hand from its anchor in the furs. Then only Ty's strength pressed back against her hold, both of her hands tightly bound to his, balancing her. She straddled Ty, his huge, dark cream body shimmering beneath her against the dark backdrop of the furs. Her purple skirt covered him, the color vivid after gazing at his skin. Green light from the triad flickered above with the faint gold of the low magelights. She breathed deep, and smelled incense, herself, and the spice of Ty's skin. *Oh, he was watching her.* Shifting her knees, she sealed her open woman's core against his stomach, and bent forward to take what she wanted. He groaned, his arms trembling, and lifted his chin, giving her access to his throat.

Sunny opened her mouth wide and set her lips against the cords of muscle. The bent position drove her clit into his hard muscles, and she rocked, groaning. The pleasure was like nothing she'd ever known, ever remembered, ever guessed at. It was deep and sharp at the same time, and she rocked again, as eager as a child discovering sweets. Then her tongue came out and finally, she tasted his skin. With a soft cry, she lashed his neck with her tongue, her teeth scraping, lips working to get closer. She fed on Ty's strength, his kindness, his generosity. He shook beneath her, and she ground her hips in tighter, her knees gripping his ribs, his hands pulling hers forward, drawing her into him.

His voice was not quite human when it spilled the garbled words, "Please. To me."

She bit, tongue flickering against his jumping pulse, and moaned. Then, for the first time in this life, she opened her magescape. The mental image was the heart of a person, a construct of their elemental craft, a subconsciously chosen visual of meditation when they first learned control. Before, when she was the priestess, her magescape had been a garden. The red roses had thorns, the purple puffs had thistles, the bursting yellow stars had burrs. Now, she stood in a round stone room with an arched ceiling, a dome. Stone, warm and slick was beneath her feet. And the stone walls beat. They breathed, and shivered ... keeping pace with Ty's heart. Her shattered soul had a new magescape, just like her shattered body had a new pleasure.

Crying out in amazement, in relief that she didn't have to face the garden, she rolled her face across Ty's throat, nipping and lapping and dragging her lips against him. He was strength. He surrounded her. He was the very walls that now defined her. But the bedrock beneath her feet was hers, and it was solid. Her power, her self, thrummed, sensation spiraling through her body. She cried out, shimmying her hips from side to side, seeking a way to get closer to Ty.

He grunted, calling out hoarsely at her attack on his throat. "Come to me!" It was an order, angry and desperate.

In her magescape, she whirled in place, her mind trapped between her domed, mental cage of living stone and the body she physically rode on the furs. "Ty!" she cried out against his throat, her voice shouting into his pounding blood. "Help me!" She was so very close, but she didn't see a way to break out of herself and join him. His energy drenched her, enfolded her, but somehow, she had to find a way into him, or there would

be no souldance, no new future.

His voice was a bass rumbling against her gaping cunt, speaking right to her womb. "It has to be your choice. Choose me!"

She did. She wanted him, darkness be damned. Suddenly there was a hole in her magescape floor, perfectly round and smooth, just half a bodylength wide. Wind whistled up from it, blowing her hair wildly. In real life, she opened her eyes and lifted her head from Ty's throat. She stared at Ty's contorted face, his head thrown back, his hands pressed back on the furs, held down by hers. She lifted her hips away from his belly, feeling the energy pull and stretch between them. She angled her pelvis, shifted minutely, and captured the tip of him in the soft, soaked opening between her legs. His head thrashed, and she heard his grinding teeth inside his clenched jaw.

In her inner world, she stepped up to the hole in her bedrock, and jumped down into it. She fell, and Ty keened out a harsh shout in real life. His body bucked and she moaned, feeling him plug her opening, bridge the gap in her flesh. He stretched her, sealed her, healed her.

Back in her mental magescape, she was falling, falling, and then she saw him. His wings were wide, the tips sweeping forward. She threw her arms out, and then she wasn't falling anymore. He banked into an angle, his feathered body immense, the size of hers. He was brown and tan and cream against the blue sky. She tipped herself after him, flying in his wake, and he tossed up his hook-beaked head and screamed her success.

Gasping, nearly sobbing, she tightened her grip on Ty's real hands until it was brutal. She held on to him with every ounce of her anger-fed strength, and shoved her body down on his. Her head jerked back, just like the hawk's, and she keened in triumph. She, Sunny, took Ty. She pressed down, down, packing him into her cunt, straining with her legs and shoulders to push him deeper, even though he was so wide, so long. He met the end of her and her head snapped forward, hanging limp. It had taken everything she had. Her body was impaled on Ty's. She'd done it herself, because she'd wanted him. Her soul flew threw his, spiraling in open space, because he'd asked.

Ty shifted under her and she opened her eyes, blinking to focus, struggling to breathe beyond the thick heat of him lodged inside her. He lifted his head, his chest flexing as he drew himself up and softly brushed her cheek with his lips. He breathed into her ear, "I'm so proud to know you."

She sobbed, bit into her lip. The feel of him inside ripped her up, undoing her. He was pleasure and pain, a missing piece she'd never known.

He swung his body, and his torso brushed across hers, the heavy fabric she still wore dragging across rock-hard nipples. His lips brushed her other cheek and he whispered, "I'm yours. Can I make you mine?"

He eased back, lying beneath her. His eyes were golden orange, his pupils wide. His lips parted, glistening, and his sharp cheeks matched the angle of his tight jaw. It was the face of the man whose body she'd taken. She wanted his spirit so bad her toes curled, where they tucked against his powerful thighs. "Yes, Ty. Make me yours."

He closed his eyes. As easily as if she were a toy, he pushed up on her gripping hands and set them on his chest. The position sat her up on him a little straighter, driving her hot clit into his hard groin. She moaned, fingers clutching at his pecs. Ty's body flared with heat, searing her spread thighs and palms. He laid his hands back on the furs, his arms bent above his head. Then he began sparkle, literally giving off a burst of golden

light. It seemed as if his entire body took a breath, expanding, growing. She cried out at the beauty of it, and from the pain when he pinched her inside, swelling *everywhere*.

Then the discomfort was lost in the wonder of the change. Ty wasn't human. He was a Beast, a Trux, and he was taking her as his wife, his mate. That meant she had to accept his hawk. And she did. She rode his shuddering body, feeling his chest muscles thicken and bulk, feeling her legs stretch painfully wide, her entire body lifting higher as he grew deeper. His face changed, his jaw and nose disappearing, a massive, razor beak forming, his neck thickening, his hands altering, growing enormous black talons.

When he opened his eyes, they were the same fiery amber she loved. But wild, untamable, and fierce. His beak opened on a hiss at her steady gaze, and then his massive arms rose. His talons closed over her upper arms, the curving bone of them seemingly made to circle her without puncturing her skin. She watched them come with fascination, looking at how the needle tips of the talons lay so near her arms, but never touched her.

His body bucked, and she sank her nails into his chest, closing her eyes. The thickness inside her would never have fit if he wasn't already there. It filled her completely, and beyond, stretching her. He punched his hips up again, tossing her body above him, and there was no slide, no give. They were welded together, despite her moisture and his, from the sheer size of his girth.

The sensation that her hips were going to be riven apart left her on the third thrust, because the weight of her body pushed his tip completely and utterly against the mouth of her womb, lighting her body up with heat. His next thrust sent spiraling awareness down her legs and up through her torso, seizing her lungs. Again, the arch of his pelvis bucked beneath her, and left no doubt: her body was wrapped in pleasure. Her breath left her as the landing crushed her clit. She rolled her hips, struggling to catch that lightning sensation again. Her clit brushed across his wiry hairs, pressing tight to his pelvis, and on the shock of it, he thrust, launching her body.

The pattern continued. Her body was riding a wave, tossed on his power, pinned to his strength, and aching, reaching, striving, clutching at the piece of himself he'd lent to her. She coiled her inner muscles tighter, and tighter, rocking, grinding, swaying with him. Her breath whistled in her dry throat, his roars were garbled but no less yearning. Without any break in the timing, the thrusts came just a heartbeat faster, jabbing her body up because there was no room to take him inside.

Finally, sweat dripping down the center of her sternum, her nipples chafed from rubbing against her dress, her ass aching from straining to hold him tighter inside, his thrusts hit without resting. As soon as his hips touched down against the furs, they punched up again, thrusting, rocking her up, falling, her hands gouging at his chest, thrusting, tossing her that much higher, falling, driving her that much tighter.

His thrusts matched the beat of her heart. They matched the beat of his wings as he flew hard and furious in their open sky. His pulse beat in the walls of the stone room that seated her power. The thrum of the beat was all she knew, all she wanted, but she couldn't capture it, couldn't reach it. He thrust, and thrust, and thrust, and then he wheeled just in front of her, tumbling in the sky to face her. He was a man again, no feathers, no beak. He hung in the air and held out his hand, his face twisted in a snarl, his eyes slits. She hung in front of him, arms outstretched, legs bent, weightless. *Thrust, fall, thrust, fall, thrust*. She put her hand in his, and fell.

Light shimmered across her body, a scream ripping free, and all her strength

imploded. She collapsed on him, writhing, the pleasure of clamping on the thick heat inside her taking her breath, picking up the sharp pleasure of her clit, swollen in its hood, which spiked the pleasure in her cunt again, seizing her body in gasping spasms. Arms banded across her shoulders, holding her bucking body to his. He breathed deep beneath her, and then his back arched, the angle changing the pressure in her cunt, and she shrieked, writhing, but he held her close, bellowing, the sound rumbling through his chest to hers, striking at her clit. She gasped, choked, curling her legs tight around his to press herself closer. There was nothing but his body lodged in hers, hot and hard. She scrambled with her thighs as his body eased back flat beneath her, moaning through the deep, cramping pleasure. She was shaking now, her fingers curled into helplessly squeezing fists, her cunt knotted viciously around his cock.

His body jerked under hers, and she swallowed, cinching her inner core tighter, desperate for everything he had. He thrust, weakly, barely lifting her, moaning long and low. Her heart squeezed. Her overworked lungs struggled against his banding strength, but she didn't fight. Her body was washed by sensation, heated blood, thick cock wedged deep, and the booming thrum of his heartbeat under her ear. She strained, squeezed, and one last soft shimmer of light shone through her blood. His body jerked under hers, but she knew he hadn't come with her.

On the magescape, one she wasn't even sure belonged to him or her, human Ty drew her into a warm embrace. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his shoulders, burying her face in his neck. His hands settled, one on her ass, one cradling her head. "Look," he breathed inside her head. "Look."

The pleasure was so complete, all she could do was obey. Sunny looked into Ty's soul. Then screamed, her head exploding with pain.

Images streamed through her brain, glimpses of happiness from her old life, and from Ty's. But it was gone in a moment, the distant past overshadowed by the nearer trauma. Both of them were a tumbling cauldron of shame, guilt, broken pride, and lethal rage. Violence as fierce as any she'd witnessed in the Fortress lived in Ty's depths. It shook her even as she approved of it. Both of them stirred the memories, sharing shards of bitter survival in the span of a heartbeat. She knew he was seeing her self-loathing, that she'd failed to see the Monster's true self and gone with him, so blind. She clung to him, mourning the humiliation that still haunted him at how he hadn't been able to withstand them. Ty's thoughts were consumed with his helplessness, the pain he'd fed them. But where she'd gone flat inside, discarding her past, he'd clung to all that he was.

Through it all, his body moved beneath hers, the muscular flesh pressed so tightly against, along, inside her she thought she'd die of heat. It was Ty, and as deep as he was in her, as shockingly close to her skin, she was deeper in him. Deep in him, flitting about his soul with her own demons chasing after her. They'd never taken any of the hawks over, and Ty's anger at giving up his pain and fear were mild compared to what she'd done to help them. Cooking, cleaning, fetching for them as she stood watching them torture others. And her gods hadn't done a thing, as powerless as she in the face of evil. All her faith wiped away, even as Ty's became more resolute, feeding on the need for vengeance.

She writhed on him, shimmering with sweat, struggling to hold to the pleasure of his heavy arms tight around her, to ignore the chaos in her head. His hips slammed against hers and the tide turned. She was no longer drawn in, lost in the pleasure. It was like

she'd walked into him, and found a room where she already existed. And in that room, the heart of herself hidden in Ty, he threaded into her mind, her memories, her soul.

Everywhere he went she cringed. She didn't want him to see. She didn't want to look at it herself. Crying, fighting, she struggled, working herself harder on the thick cock binding them together, reaching for the end. But he was ruthless. He went through all of her, burrowing through her stone mountain as if he was an earthmage. Her weakness, her horror, her small disobedience not even so much from defiance, but from the desire for death. He held her tight, in the fur-lined pit, and in their psychic sky, in the recesses of her mind, and she fought him. If she could just climb to the top of this pleasure, it would all break.

Until he showed her his memories of her. Her face, pinched and filthy, peering around the base of a doorway. Her vivid eyes, sad but clear. She calmed her struggles, astonished at the need pulsing through him whenever he saw her. For seven nights, he'd been tortured. And each of those days he'd seen her twice. And she had kept him sane.

His body rolled and thrust beneath her shocked weight. Her insight that he was dedicated to her, that this formality to tie her to his hawk was pure satisfaction for him, echoed out into the room on a long moan. Oh yes, he saw her darkness, the hate, guilt, and fury, and yet he fixed on her ... with joy. His sorrow at her pain, his admiration at her survival, his worry when she left him, they all helped balance the rage in him at his capture and treatment. Thinking of her kept him from being eaten alive by his own fear. She brushed past a memory of his, lightning fast, of his pleasure at seeing her kneeling before him, bare, marked at his command. It curled in on itself, diving away and she couldn't follow it because Ty's talons were sinking into her brain. Holding his last thrust high, he ground her hips down onto his. It was such a strong streak of light, it blinded her.

He pulled, ruthless, despite her awkward flailing, and it was just like before, when they touched, and the energy pulled and seeped between them. It was like her soul was thick liquid, and he was pulling a piece away. *I want you, Sunshine. You're mine.* He pulled, and she moaned, unable to let him take it, the despair, the shame, the anger. *I love you, beautiful soul. Come to me.* She screamed, fighting, and another memory drifted across her consciousness. *Every person is beautiful.* And she could not fight the truth of Ty's memory, of how he saw her this way, even when she was bruised and harnessed to darkcraft. Even when he saw her thrill to control the scarred woman's pain, even when he took the stone knife that reeked of darkcraft and secretly destroyed it. He saw her clearly, more clearly than she ever wanted to be seen, and he loved her. Wanted her. Lusted after her, and gloated in the finding of her.

Sunny stopped fighting Ty's tenacious grip on her soul, and instead closed her metaphysical fist tight around a piece of his. While she couldn't quite bring herself to gift him with a piece of herself, she watched, trembling, as he took it for himself, and pulled a piece of this powerful being into her in return. He stretched her, winding her into him.

"Yes!"

Ty's cry echoed in her real ears, in her real heart. The feeling of having a piece of herself stretched faded until it no longer felt about to snap back. She sank into the heart of a proud, fierce predator, soaring with him over green forests, coasting to a bare tree and perching there, wings angling through the wind with ease. He sank into the heart of her secure stone room, and hope exploded through her body, leaving her limp and sated. The world twisted, and suddenly her thoughts soared in a direction she'd never imagined.

For a pure, surreal moment, she lay aching on damp furs. Pleasure trembled through her bones and the slender heat of her beloved's body wrapped around her cock, weighted her chest. Her Alpha's power thrummed, ruthlessly chaining hawk's fascination back, deep, safe. Sky, water, and fire were a powerful triad supporting her, and she knew she was Bonded.

Delavega rasped, "The Alpha sees."

She opened her eyes. The world righted itself, and she realized she'd actually been in Ty's perception for the space of a breath. The dark furs stretched away and the stone wall was within reach. She was draped over Ty, her thighs awash in hot cream, her cunt stinging from overuse. Ty's grip gentled, large human hands sweeping over her back. Heat filled her, and she knew he was healing her, sending his craft to seek across her small aches. The green tint to the air faded, and with it, the incense seemed stronger.

There was a scuffle, and she heard Fynn and Odan, distantly. They appeared to be helping Delavega. She'd forgotten the men were there from the moment Ty took her into the pit. Before she had time to do more than realize they were there, Ty rolled, his hips between her thighs a perfect fit, even though he softly slid from her wet grip. She lay beneath his weight, lax, sweaty.

His hand cupped her cheek, fingertips tracing the sweep of one brow. "I'm yours, now." He smiled, his eyes dancing, so happy.

Tears pricked her eyes and she blinked, hugging him hard. He was free, and she was with him.

He lowered his head, and kissed her. The intimate touch of his mouth sealing to hers was the perfect finish to their bonding. His lips covered hers, his tongue soft and hot, gently exploring her mouth. His tender touch after the rough, tumbling exchange of souls made her shiver and moan. Tearing his mouth free, he held his face to the side, breathing hard. Eyes squeezed shut, jaw clenched, he shuddered. Then he rolled again, and folded his hands behind his head. She clutched at his shoulders, staring down at him.

His grin was so brazen. "Kiss me."

It was a delicious thought, but she heard voices again. She cast her gaze over one shoulder to where Odan had one of Delavega's arms slung over his shoulder. Fynn was opening the door. "Shouldn't you help him?"

"No, I shouldn't. Despite all I owe my Alpha, he wouldn't let me. And I know he's really all right."

Looking into his eyes as the door shut on her guards, she realized she was alone with Ty. Her mate. The connection to him was a chain made of light. She clung to it.

He jiggled his shoulders, breaking her searching look. "Kiss me." He'd just had her, just waded through her soul, just swapped his soulair with hers, but eagerness for more drenched his command.

Draped over his chest, she propped herself on her arms. She touched his lips with one finger, gently. It was hard to imagine. Despite everything they'd done. "I've never felt a souldance like that. I wasn't in control. It was like—"

His tongue flashed out and dampened the end of her finger. The feel of his breath on that patch of skin made her shiver.

"Flying."

"What?"

"Our souldance was like flying."

Her breath caught, and she pressed her finger more firmly into the fleshy softness of his lower lip. "Yes."

"Did you like it?"

Lifting her gaze to his, she saw his tawny eyes, his tousled curls, his chiseled face, and saw the little piece of her soul he held looking back at her. Her darkness was in there, her hate, her fear. The wreckage of her faith and confidence.

"Like it?" The words were too pale. They didn't make sense with this emotion expanding through her body.

"Flying. Did you like floating in the sky?"

She hadn't thought about it. At the time, jumping off into the sky was what she'd done to be with Ty. Falling, following him, it had just been part of the moment, part of learning him. She remembered the tummy-turning push of wind, the heat of her thumping heart and the cool stillness of suspension. "I did."

He grinned, and her breath caught. "Anytime you want to fly with me, just ask. I'm lucky to have a spiritmage as a mate. We can experience flight together. For many of my Clan, their mates never understand the call of the sky."

Lucky? "But ... to fly together... You're suggesting I initiate another souldance. While you fly as a hawk over the world."

He shrugged, the muscles in his arms leaping into stark relief. "It's what you do." Lifting one hand from behind his head, he cupped her nape again, in much the same way he had earlier. "I'm body, you're soul. Together we are a perfect whole."

She leaned into his touch. First he thought them lucky, now he thought them perfect. Her wild, maddening Ty. The thought of flying through Ty's eyes, merged with his soul, made her thighs clench. He'd just caught a glimpse of her, and was already offering to blend with her like that again. Insane.

His thumb settled into the hollow of her ear. "Don't doubt us, Sunshine. We're good. You shone so bright for me, you burned me alive. We're good."

She huffed, tracing his lips with her fingertips. "You're the one who burned."

He brushed over her pulse, and the catch of his rougher skin on hers was good. Then his hands trailed down, and brushed a scar at her collarbone.

"I wish you really could burn. Just burn those marks away." Her words were bitter and angry.

"Do you?" He was serious, interested.

"Yesss." She pattered her fingers along his smooth jaw. "I wish you could burn them all away. All their marks. It's not shame, but I'm not that woman anymore."

"I can, you know."

She looked at him with a snap of her neck. His eyes were at half-mast. They still drilled into her like a spike of power. "I'm a bodymage, Sunshine. I can't erase old scars that have fully healed, but I can toy with scar tissue, alter it."

Her head spun. "You ... you could?"

He nodded. "Do you know how spiritmages can take the pain from a person's soul and dull it?"

She nodded. Burying traumatic memories hadn't been her specialty, but she knew it could be done.

"We're going to do that." He captured her earlobe again and played with it. She tilted her ear, angling into his touch. "At the end of this, when they don't need our memories

anymore. I promise. I'll take every scar on your body, and make it mine."

He wasn't looking at her eyes. He watched his fingers play with the ends of her hair, which set her scalp to rippling. So he didn't see the tears filling her eyes before she blinked them away. "Thank you, Ty."

The words were heavy, thick. They came from a need inside, one that reached beyond his sensitive offer. He was the man who had helped her rediscover life. His head darted, his mouth capturing one of her fingers. His lips held the knuckle, while his tongue brushed across one of her nails. Shuddering, it was all she could do to leave it in his mouth when he suckled the tip, his teeth brushing the pad.

"Sunshine, I love you."

With a cry, she buried her face in his neck. She clung to his shoulders, throat thick, heart thundering. It was surreal lying on him, here in this odd room.

Against the side of her thigh was hard, silky flesh, scalding hot. She breathed in his scent, spice and salt and clean air. Holding herself motionless, the width of his body lifted hers where their ribs pressed together. Her flattened breasts ached with a surprisingly delicious thrum.

"You weren't frightened of me. I could tell. Delavega kept me human until you'd accepted me, and then I went to battleform, but you still didn't fear me. He kept my bloodlust controlled, and I didn't hurt you, not even in the final blending." His free hand rested on her hair, ever so slightly rustling across her skull, sending goose flesh down her arms. "Don't fear me now, Sunshine. Hawk will not come back to meet you ever again. I swear, my control is my own again, and you are safe with me."

Idiot. She knew that. Didn't mean she wasn't shy. She continued to breathe the scent in the crook of his neck, but she loosened her hands on his shoulders, uncurling her fingers.

"There, Little One, touch me."

They'd just come together, but it felt like ages ago. It had been rushed, necessary for political reasons that had no real bearing on *them*. And yet, they'd both needed the ritual desperately. The entire process had been a whirlwind, carrying a frantic yearning that had dizzied her. She was quiet now. So very, very here. Her fingers reached, and found the hollow of his collarbones. Then one went to his neck, mimicking his hold on her before, and the other traveled up his raised and bent arm, playing with the delicious secret muscle exposed by his position.

"I never want to move," Ty murmured. "This is so sweet."

The edges of her lips rose up and she knew it was just a matter of time before Ty healed her enough to make her smile again. The skin on the back of his arm was so soft, and the dips in his muscle were fascinating. She turned her face and opened her mouth against his throat.

Ty moaned.

She shivered with her whole body to feel his rumble beneath her. Lifting up onto her knees, she drifted her lips over his throat, and touched her tongue to his pulse. Her hands came down, down to the flat sweep of muscle on his chest. They stopped at his nipples, and brushed the tiny nubs. With every stroke, his breath caught.

Her yearning for this man had carried her out of the dark web of hate she'd existed in. Her curiosity and admiration, mind-boggling as it was, were returned. To save him once again, and to save herself, she'd come here today and promised herself to him with

bonds that could never be broken.

It was all so new, so different, so amazingly, thrillingly impossible, her head spun. Literally. The pit and the rounded dome above them added to the effect, and she felt as if she were at the bottom of one of the tornadoes her old City had lived in fear of. Her lips against his jugular, she sucked at his flesh, drinking his steadiness, his strength. Unlike her, they hadn't broken him. They hadn't ruined him.

And yet, he wanted *her*, the broken shadow. He fanned the spark inside her and her hands dug into the thick muscle of his chest. Her teeth set in his neck. The soft hitch in his heavy breaths wasn't enough. He had demanded she resurrect the spark of life inside. She was a fragile flame, and he was the tinder she consumed. No, that wasn't right. He was the bonfire she strove to become.

"Ty..."

"Yes." His response was distant, more a reaction than a reply.

"I want you. I want to touch you, burn with you." Her voice shook. This was no required ritual of his people, no ordeal of proof. This was her, Sunny. Alone with Ty, and free.

"Oh, by the Six, yes." His hand cradling her head moved away, fisting in the furs.

"Yes, Sunny."

On the cusp of igniting, she looked down. "Oh, Ty—your throat!" Her heart stopped. She'd marked him. The bruised spot was oval, with the indentation of her upper teeth clear and the skin glistening with moisture that at least wasn't blood.

His breath exploded in his body, his legs shifting restlessly, his chest working deeply. "Yes. Again." His voice held a hiss to it she was beginning to understand was his hawk riding close.

Canting her head, she closed her eyes, put her mouth on the other side of his throat, crawled onto Ty's body. His hips bucked, but his arms remained frozen, one behind his head, one out flung. Sunny lay over Ty with her whole weight, her body engulfed in heat, her legs struggling with too much fabric, and her mouth failing to find a good seal against the strong hollows and sinews.

She struggled to her feet, straddling his hips. The purple hem of her dress danced along his ribs. He was amazing. His face was flushed and tense, eyes glittering gold. His muscles were strong and stark and spread before her in utter trust. She tore the dress over her head, fighting with the short sleeves, the heavy thickness. She threw it to one side. Instead of cooling her body, the air on her bare skin seared it. Her nipples stabbed out, aching, and her stomach sucked tight at the shock.

Ty's eyes scorched down her body, his lip lifting from his teeth, the ferocious need on his face leaping from her breasts to belly to spread cunt. In her preparation bath, she'd shaved. Everywhere. Ty's cock jumped against his belly, thick and dark. The reality of this moment turned her knees to water. Her knees shook, then gave out. She fell, straddling him. If her thighs banged his ribs, he gave no reaction. He drove upward, his body curling in a stark painting of muscle as he lunged toward her, but he fell back before connecting, one bicep jumping in his raised, bent arms.

Swallowing audibly, he murmured, "So beautiful."

Sunny believed him, and heat rolled through her body, seeping down her channel and painting her labia. "Ty... I don't know where to start."

She'd never done this before. Between the vague meaningless lovers she'd had before

and the rapes she'd endured when she'd first been taken, she was utterly overwhelmed at the aching need, and her uncertainty. And the room was still spinning around them.

He met her eyes, capturing her, grounding her. "Touch me. However you want. It will follow."

She didn't know what he meant, but holding his gaze, she obeyed his directions. She reached one shaking hand out and brushed his collarbone. A tingle ran from her fingertips to her palm, past her elbow to her heart.

"Touch me. Use your hands and your mouth. I want all your strength."

"I don't want to hurt you." Her eyes went to the bruise on his neck. Was violence all they'd left her with?

"You can't hurt me. There is no pain here." He was very certain. His eyes steady and merciless. "Teeth, nails, need, tears, it's all us. It's just us."

Her fingers drifted in, to the hollow beneath his voice box, the indentation at the center of his throat. As she traced it, his eyes fluttered and closed. Freed, her gaze took in his tight jaw, his soft lips, and the red mark still riding his throat. She touched it again, heart thundering. *She liked it.*

"I like it."

She jumped hearing Ty's words, her eyes darting to his, shocked. But he wasn't looking at her, he was watching her throat, hungrily. Had he read her mind?

"I liked it when you gave it to me, and I like feeling the sensitivity left behind. It's nothing like before. Nothing. I want more of it." His eyes settled on her breasts, and again wet heat escaped her core.

"I'm afraid."

Now his eyes jumped to hers. Tension thrummed through his frozen body. "You can trust me."

She shook her head. Blood spun so fast through her body, she grew dizzy. She steadied herself by putting her hand down on his shoulder. "No. It's not that. I fear the pleasure. I fear getting lost. I can't explain it."

His eyes were so serious, intent and urgent. "Sunshine, first, I'm a Trux. There is no getting lost. I will find you. No matter where you go, never doubt I will come for you. Do you believe me?"

Now it was her turn to swallow. More liquid gathered inside. She could feel it roll down her sensitive passage, making her squeeze her inner muscles. How had she ended up here, belonging above this man? She could only nod, accepting his devotion. Her heart thumped.

Then Ty grinned, a wide saucy look that took her breath. His eyes changed from one blink to the next: Warrior, then playmate. "Second, I'm a bodymage. Your spirit willing, your body's pleasure is my domain."

"Oh. My. Stars." He was a bodymage. She'd heard the stories. No one, simply no one was a better lover. And besides, he could heal any damage at all, now that they were free. She put her eyes on the red patch of skin on his neck. Before her eyes it shrank, faded.

Ty crooned, low and soft. "Mark me again, mate. Please."

Still high on her knees, Sunny shifted back, over his hips, until his massive thighs forced her legs wide. She knelt back, her bottom cupped in the hard cradle of his furred legs. His arms jerked out, but he stopped them, clenching the furs. Her attention was not on his aborted reach, but the magnificent torso spread out before her. She put one hand

carefully on his hip, setting her palm and each finger precisely, feeling the heat and softness, the bones and sinew of him. His cock jerked.

She leaned over him, and inhaled his scent, his warmth. He smelled *so good*. She couldn't resist a second deep inhale. Her hand closed around him, and he jerked, a strangled sound caught in his throat. The thighs she sat on twitched, shifting her.

He was longer than her hand, his girth seemingly made for the curl of her fingers. The beauty of his veins and smooth cap stretched before her eyes. Under the lip of his crown on one side, there was some dried cream from the last time he'd mined her body. She dusted it away with one finger. It was impossible to resist stroking him, smoothing him, cleaning away the sticking hairs and the moisture. Pulling his crown tight, twisting around the width of his base, traveling roughly over the texture and veins of his center until he was so tight there was no skin to push, she worked her hand up and down. Ty's legs trembled beneath her, but she continued to stroke her hand around him, her other hand welded to his hip, her face hovering close over the wonder of him, blowing on him, breathing him.

His abs rippled beneath her stroking hand, distracting her. Her mouth set to devouring the muscle of his belly. He was salty, and thick beneath her teeth. Thicker and less vital than when she'd set her focus on his throat. Tightening her jaw, she sucked, laving him with her tongue in slow lashes. Swallowing on the mounds of muscle, she moaned. Her beautiful man merely lay beneath her, his body tightening with every breath. He was hers.

Her thighs were spread painfully wide by his twitching legs. His cock was well trapped in the cradle of her own grip, and her mouth drank deep from beside his navel, pulling at his core. Ty moaned, long and hoarse, and she rolled her mouth against him, rewarding him with a deeper bite. His hips bucked, making mockery of her hold. She adjusted her touch, below his flared crown, and squeezed harder. His hips bucked again, and this time his strength was sufficient that her whole torso shifted with him.

Her tongue traced around the inner path of her teeth, knowing she hurt him, knowing he let her, knowing it was good. The strength of the column in her hand made her clench her own empty channel. She swallowed against his muscled belly, and her insides rippled in reaction. He bucked into her hand yet again, and this time the wetness seeping from his tip coated her hand, stole the strength of her grip. With a gasp, her lips released him. Rising back to sit on his thighs again, she looked down at her man.

His arms twisted in the furs, mounding and sliding them as if he wrestled them back. His cock was immense, and the head a gorgeous dark brown shade above her tan hand. Low on his belly, a matching deep bruise seared his skin. A soft, satisfied moan drifted from Sunny, and breath sobbing, she loosened first her hold on his hip, and then her grip on his cock.

His head tossed back, jaw gritted tight. She crawled up his body. Kneeling on all fours above him, she pressed a kiss over his heart. The simple press of her lips against that muscle, and feeling the kick of his heart beneath her, made her eyes drift shut. She lingered, dragging her lips across to his nipple, which she nibbled. Her tongue traced the lower edge of his pectoral muscle, and her teeth scored the first rib bared at the edge of his chest. Her lower folds throbbed.

With a subtle lean of her body, she could reach one bulging bicep. His arm jerked up, but fell back. She opened her mouth and kissed his skin there deeply, loving over a vein

with her tongue. Then it was back to his chest, feeling the dip where his sternum ended, licking up to his other nipple, which she mouthed with the most gentleness yet. That soft, slight touch made her lips throb and swell. She swayed above him now, aware of the faint, steady thrusting of his hips into the air.

But she didn't heed his call this time. His chest was no longer covered in blood, hers to wash for them to ruin again. His chest would only be covered in her touch, now. Washed by her, marked by her. What she feared came to pass, and it was beautiful. She was lost in him. Each drag of her tongue, each inhale of his scent, each kiss and nip, took her farther from the past, clarified her new self more. She was Sunny, Ty's Sunshine. She was free, and she knew pleasure in being alive, with him. She kissed him until her lips puffed. Kissed him until her tongue ran dry and rasped his skin with a harsh touch.

By the time she left his belly button and came back to her mark on his skin, she couldn't see, could barely breathe. She kissed the bruise she'd made, so gently, so delicately. Her lips burned. The steady moans Ty gave her changed to a sharp hiss. It was time. She shifted her stance until her hands were braced above his shoulders, and she let her knees drift wide. Her hips lowered, seating over Ty's, trapping his cock between them. His head thrashed beneath her, curls sticking to his ruddy face.

She was soaking wet, and so was he, their bodies weeping for the other. With a curl of her hips, a clenching of her ass, and a punch of his hips, his cock notched in the deepest hollow at the center of her sex. She pressed her shaking arms into supporting her weight as she lowered herself down, laying her torso over the inferno that was Ty. She let her arms fold around the top of his head, burying her face in the soft hair near his ear. Her entire weight draped over his body, his cock just kissing the mouth of her vagina, legs aching from their spread position, she held the moment. She held the moment like she covered Ty's shaking body—completely.

She'd discovered her man, gotten lost in him, and found herself again. No darkmage. No slave. No priestess. A woman. A broken woman learning to be free again.

With a flex of her abdomen and a push of her arms, she drove her body onto Ty's and took his cock's thick, wide head into the stretched mouth of her channel. He choked, his head whipping to bury against her throat. The lightning of his breath rode straight through her body to her cunt. She sighed, and shoved again, pushing his cock's head into the center of her channel.

Ty was so rigid beneath her it was like lying on a warm sculpture. He held himself still, offering no resistance to her ownership. She went lax again, but now Ty's trembling had passed to her, and she didn't feel the weighty peace she'd felt before. The time had passed from *before* to *now*. It wasn't something she could step back from. Her body was invaded, this time solely and completely through her choice. Ty's body was inside her, and this time there was no souldance to hold open, no responsibility. She could feel him lodged inside her, and she mewed as she lost the fight to hold the moment.

Sunny writhed, slithering across Ty's body, grinding her breasts into his hard chest, working his cock into the part of her body that wasn't naturally opened by her position. Her hands buried in his hair, clenching in it. She rocked her hips, pushing with her knees, and forced Ty into her body. It pinched. It was so good. He moaned, the rumble of it fluttering against her nipples. Placing a kiss against his throat, she panted into the shell of Ty's ear. "Ty, I have to make a decision." The thought of asking him, of being this honest with him, made liquid gather inside. She felt it pool against the tip of Ty, trapped inside

her body. "I'm going to come. But you're very much with me. I can force the mouth of my cunt to take the thick root of your cock, driving the fat head of you against my womb. That would end both of us together. Or I can play with your length along my clit, making you wait."

Ty shook, and a line of sweat trickled out of his hair and down his neck. Her tongue darted out to catch it. She moaned at the burst of his pure taste. On a breath, she said into his ear, "Do we end this for now, or do I toy with us both?"

He never hesitated. "Toy with me." The words burst from him. "Never end."

Something opened up inside Sunny. It had stirred with the first bruise she'd left on his neck, and it had grown stronger with his words ceding control to her. A new model of the confidence she'd worn as a priestess of the Earthmother stretched. She sighed, pleased. "Call to your craft. You cannot come until I tell you. Hold yourself back."

He nodded once, his neck shifting against her lips. "I'll reach a point where the spirit will overwhelm the body," he warned.

Sunny clamped hard around his heat inside her. "Yes. That sounds perfect."

He tilted his head away from her, offering the strips of muscle in his throat to her mouth. "Do I keep you from coming, too?"

"No. I come. As much as I want." She licked along his throat from collarbone to ear. Her heart kicked once, then settled into a steady rhythm.

"All right," Ty grated out. "But in return, my craft will make sure you come with me when I go over, no matter what."

"Oh, yeah. That sounds perfect, too." Who was this woman? There was no fear here. She rubbed her hips in a tight circle, licking her raw lips while she ground her clit into his belly.

She panted against his warm, fragrant neck as she toyed with his cock's tip. She drew herself off, squeezed him in, backed away, squeezed. It took ages and her skin shivered and heated with every thrilling length she cleared. Finally, he was caught at her entrance. She could feel his crown hovering there, and with exquisite control, rocked just so that he smoothly rounded her entrance, and slid along her folds to flatten her clit.

Gasping, her fists seized in Ty's hair, pinning his head. He moaned.

She shook, holding the perfect pleasure, then her hips quivered and she drove down, flattening herself on his slippery-soft hardness. She came within moments, rocking hard on the fat length of him, her clit red hot and imploding with such sharp joy. Her mouth sealed onto Ty's neck. His fingers brushed down her spine from her nape, a tender caress, and then he arched.

Propping herself up on shaking arms, legs spread wide over Ty's hips, Sunny looked down at the muscular warrior spread below her. Power swelled in her body. This man was hers. She rode his form, for no other reason than choice and pleasure. The heat glittering in his slitted eyes, the need revealed in his grimacing mouth, made her flush with power even as her thighs shook with weakness. Just looking at him made her crazed. She needed to wring every bit of sexual freedom she could from this moment. She needed to use Ty. She *needed*.

Closing her eyes, she ground herself steadily on his trapped length, long, smooth glides pulling her clit down, then pushing it up. Working both sides of herself, giving an extra flourish when she trapped his head in her clitoral hood, she rained all over him until the air smelled sticky sweet. Every once in awhile, Ty would jerk, or groan, or hiss. But

she was lost to his needs. He'd agreed to subjugate himself to her, and she trusted him to mean it. She stroked harder, shorter, harder, until she found that one piercing sweet spot on her clit. Holding the pressure, she arched her back and reared above him, grabbing her breasts and thumbing her nipples. Balancing upright on that one perfect point was like flying. No. It was flying. Sunny flew, her head whipping her cry through the air.

Ty shouted, too, his body bucking once beneath her. Sunny slapped her hands down onto his ribs, framing the bruise she'd kissed onto him.

"No!" she cried out. "Just me!"

Ty's head strained to the side, his jaw clenched, eyes closed.

Scrambling off him, unable to understand her need to take her own pleasure on his body, this greed she felt for his skin overwhelmed her. Straddling his thigh, she fisted his cock, and squeezed him. He was immense, and he was hers. Hers. Nearly sobbing, she rubbed her open, fiery folds on Ty's thigh, the width and hardness of his leg breathtaking. Watching her hand shaft up and down, she came again from the friction of the hairs on her soft, bare skin. Shaking, she squeezed around his head, her thumb digging into the seeping hole at his tip. Ty cried out, both of them breathless.

She scrambled up again, and this time she sat on his abs. They stretched her wide. Taking his massive arms, she pushed at them until he lifted them above his head. Putting her hands on his extended triceps, she looked at how small her hands were against his arms. The position made her lean much farther forward than she had been, due to the lean length of Ty's body. She writhed on his stomach until she pushed open her own folds, pushing her clit into the stone ridges of his belly.

Leaning over Ty, she stared at his straining face. Her cheeks were pulled wide by the position and as she bounced and rubbed and dripped all over him, his erection jabbed her in the ass. Each strike wound her tighter, tighter, the hint of his bluntness so near her anus caught her breath. He was close, but wouldn't take her there. Because she was in control. Her fingers bit into his arms when she came. This time the sound that left her throat was guttural, low and hoarse.

Sunny turned, reversing her straddling stance on his belly. Grabbing up his cock again, she rubbed the head of him over her clit, shaking him, grinding and fluttering him over her throbbing, swollen button. Spreading her lips wide with her other hand, she knew only she could see this beautiful picture. The high, thin wail ripped from her throat. It stretched, the pleasure burning as she set her weight to leaning against his thick pillar. She watched his balls roll before her eyes.

Shuffling forward, she stuffed him awkwardly into her vagina. The position pulled him away from his body and he shouted as she ruthlessly sat on him, forcing him to stand at a steep angle. Her heart pounding with exertion, running with sweat, a kind of glowing joy spread down her limbs. It was like the peace of the temple ran in her bones, while her muscles were on fire. Holding onto his calves, she pounded herself down onto his thickness, until the need to come ate at her gut. Thrusting her fingers onto herself, she plucked and twisted and gave herself pleasure for the first time. For the first time, as Sunny, she made herself sing, with Ty's help. She folded over, collapsing in the sheltering vee of Ty's legs, her hips shivering and spasming in aftershock.

It took some time to turn herself around on his rigid erection. By the time she was facing him once more, she was nearly without energy, her core burning with sensitivity, but couldn't stop working herself on his body. She lifted herself, thighs trembling, and

sent her hands roaming over his skin. She was lost in the swells and rises of his torso, her fingers stroking and prodding at every point. Inside, he was like warm stone, and she clenched, dragging herself without rhythm.

His nipples were small and sharp, his navel shallow and soft. His ribs were an echo of his abs, still wet from her work. His pecs rose sharply above his lower chest, and his waist had fascinating hollows above his hipbones. Her mark was a bright blotch on his skin. She touched all of him, holding him captive inside her body, winding herself tighter as she cinched around him inside. Her clit ached and burned, the heat at her thighs so high she could combust.

Finally, she gave in and set a rhythm. Deep, glide to mid-length. Deep, glide to mid-length. Her body stretched around the root of him, when their hips met. This was the depth she'd delayed before, and the tip of his thick crown shoving deep inside her made her grind her teeth. Gliding and pushing with her wet strength was amazing. When she pushed her hips forward to force her clit into his hard pelvis, the scratch of his pubic hair on her raw clit sent her over on her next thrust.

Sunny collapsed on Ty, sprawling, spent. Her body was heat and shuddering blood. She'd taken all she could. But Ty stretched beneath her, his body going even tighter, arching, shaking, and then he roared, a deep, agonized, conqueror's shout. She clung to him, clasping him inside, tears pricking her eyelashes at the emotion of forcing her man to orgasm. That she could bring him to this point. Then his power crackled across her skin, and she swore she saw a glow surround them.

She had time to take a breath, and then his power seized her. Every inch of her body burst and clamped at the same time. It was like lightning, falling, flying, flaying and she screamed, fingers scrabbling at his shoulders, thighs clutching his. The pressure of his expanding cock inside her took her breath, breath she desperately needed. The wetness exploding inside wasn't her own. Ty coated her womb, and she shook. There was nothing to describe the sharp pleasure of being forced to come, and knowing he'd been overwhelmed. It was freedom.

Chapter Nine

When he could think again, he ached. It was like he'd gone on a three-day run and been beaten by a pack of sandcats. Satiation held him like chains to the sweaty furs beneath him. She slept draped over him, and was heavy enough to make breathing a conscious effort. He didn't mind. Gently, he stretched his arm forward and hovered his palm over her tangled cap of old-gold hair. He could feel the heat of her. He laid his hand back at his side.

He had discussed this with Quor. She'd been raped, and worse, lived as a slave to pain-addicted madmen. His goal was to let her control all touch. Sex especially was hers to initiate, and hers to dictate. The Six give him strength. He'd been prepared to wait for her for years after the necessary ritual sex to seal their matebond. Her quick and fervent response to his submissive role in bed was beyond all his expectations. His balls twitched and immediately he sent a command to his body to prevent an erection.

She snuffled and shifted, her breath scalding one rib, and was glad of his pre-emptive command. The smell of them made him horny. Her trusting sleep made him horny. The cream dripping from her sprawled thighs onto his hip made him horny. He'd thought this desperate need to touch her was just part of meeting his mate. He'd thought it would fade after the matebond. It hadn't. He wanted to roll his face across her body, lick every inch, massage her until she slept and then fuck her until she fell unconscious. Kind of like what she'd done to him.

His brave, ferocious, resourceful Sunshine had defiled herself for him. She'd chosen to face torture just to stay by his side. When he realized she was really going to agree to go into the mating pit with him, he'd been a tangle of adrenaline. He'd feared the bonding, feared it even when Quor assured him she was not a darkmage. What if Delavega had seen the thrill of satisfaction at the darkcraft's power he'd seen in her during their souldance? But he hadn't. He'd battled his hawk as hard as he ever had, and his Alpha had helped. The ache of keeping his beak from her flesh was an echo in his teeth.

Now she was his. First, he would hold her safe. Next, he would do everything he could to aid the destruction of those evil fuckers. But first, he would hold her safe. She sighed, moaned, stretched one leg down along his. He grinned, charmed by every tiny mannerism of hers. He had much to discover about his mate. How incredible he'd found her there. First, he would hold her safe. The trick would be to do so without ever touching her. Every single motion that brought her in contact with him needed to be her choice, her initiation. It had been torment to lie there, bound by this decision, knowing it was right for her, part of healing her, part of loving her, while she resurrected passion in herself beyond his wildest dreams. Torture. Good thing he had practice in surviving it.

The day was not going to be easy. There was a souldance to wrench the memories of their captivity from them, which he would delay at every opportunity. There was an audience with the Council, who wanted to smell her for themselves, and hear her report. The punishment would come, eventually, for her use of darkcraft, and he would do everything he could to mitigate it. There were her guards, who the Council had refused to dismiss. Now they were an honor guard to truly help organize her security, as snippets

from the other prisoners had spread across the Clans and there were whispers that one of the slaves he'd returned with was a new darkmage. The woman with the scarred face wanted to talk to Sunny, as did the odd black-eyed Water girl. He didn't like it, but he'd let her decide. For now, he'd claimed her as his, bonded their souls, and witnessed a true passion that gave him hope.

She lifted her head and blinked at him. Watching clarity sharpen her green gaze made his heart kick. The last time he'd seen her eyes blind and distant like that had been when she came under the force of his command. He'd sent it as his last coherent thought as the orgasm ripped through his body. He'd never felt anything like it. If torture was sensation forced on the body against its will, then she had tortured him. With her demands and her feminine power, she'd broken his bodycraft's control. It had been beautiful, to feel her come with him, as helpless to the pleasure as he.

"Hello, mate." He smiled at her, so proud to claim her.

Her eyes shuttered, the looseness of sleep fading from her face.

He frowned. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. Licked her lips. "Yes." She swallowed. "Are you?"

His heart sighed. She was wonderful. "I'm very, very all right. I'm content, down to my soul. You are beautiful in your passion."

His hands ached to touch her, but he held his arms away.

Her own fingers curled in small, unconscious pets on his chest. "I was rough."

"It was stunning."

"I won't always be like that."

"We'll discover passion together, when you're ready."

Her brow wrinkled, two little furrows between her brows. "I... Ty..."

"Don't ever be embarrassed with me, Sunshine." The knowledge of her old name spiked into his mind, a relic of their souldance in the matebond. She was right. That wasn't her anymore. He'd never use that name. The ownership of having named this new woman, the one he was so proud of, purred in his belly.

She plucked at his nipple fretfully. He swore she didn't know it sent echoing stings behind his balls. "I know. I know I can be free with you. I still feel I was somehow..." She made a frustrated sound. "Not selfish, not mean, but something..."

He shook his head. "No. You were beautiful."

She blinked at him, obviously displeased. "We were beautiful."

His heart sighed again. "Yes."

"Don't think I don't know what you did."

He grinned at her chastisement. "Oh?"

Then she sat up, sitting off to the side of him. His grin died as cold stung him from the shadow of where she'd been.

"You gave me control. You didn't want to frighten me. Ty, you're not them."

He knew intellectually, this was true for her. Sexually, he wanted to give it some time. He held out his hand, palm up. "You aren't either, you know. It's official. You're not a darkmage."

"I performed evil, for selfish purposes. Somehow, it seems wrong that I'm here with you, like this. Free. Bonded."

When she put her hand in his, he almost lost control of his cock. It thickened with a hot pulse, but he quickly drove the blood back. "You want a punishment?"

She looked up from their hands. He wanted his heart to kick like this every time she met his eyes, for all of his life. He was so crazy in love with this woman, and so happy in this affliction.

She whispered, "Yes. I deserve it."

He tightened his torso and sat up. Considered this need of hers. "I'll look into the Council's thinking on the darkspell you worked. There likely will be some sort of penalty, but my people don't torture." His heart curdled at the typical punishments of his people. Restraint. Scarification. Isolation. All of them would be traumatic to Sunshine, due to her past. He wouldn't allow any of them, even as he understood her need for redress. "I'm sorry to say that we don't have the ability to spend the day quietly together. Are you ready to hear about the waiting obligations lined up, or do you need some time to clean up and eat?"

Sighing, she tightened her hold on him, then took her hand back. "Tell me."

"We have to meet with the Council later today, and with Quor. We have to submit a detailed report, and also, the woman you cut to work the spell wants to talk to you. As does the Water girl."

She looked away. Nodded.

"You don't have to see her."

She nodded and said, "I want to. But I have nothing to give her. I can't even make reparations."

"That's not true. You are a hawk now, Sunshine. You have our entire wealth behind you, and if necessary, that of all the Clans."

She shook her head. "That's not fair. I wasn't a hawk when I committed this act."

"We adopted you knowing what you did. What you seem to forget is we also know why you did it. Let yourself remember why, Sunshine. You got us all out."

She made a disgusted noise, turning her head away. He wasn't going to erase this shame of hers easily. Various punishments his people used flitted through his mind. None of them were suited to her. The thought of her wearing scars of shame made his stomach churn. He'd seen her back when she rode him facing his feet. She had enough scars. Power pulsed in his bloodstream. He couldn't wait to burn them away. She'd never feel a thing, and she'd be covered in *his* marks.

"Is there anything else on the agenda today?" she asked.

"My Clan will want to meet you. They're very excited, of course. I can't wait to show you around my clanhome." He didn't want to think of how he'd lived the past days in agony there, worrying about her status, missing her until it was a physical pain. His hawk had been ferocious, focused on nothing but acquiring her balls deep. He'd had her balls deep, and now hawk rested, sleeping silent inside. "My family would like a private meal with us." His stomach curdled even more.

"Your father, mother, and brother."

He looked at her sharply, then remembered as much as he'd learned about her past, she'd learned about him. "Yes, and probably my grandparents."

She nodded. He knew she had grandparents in Seventh City, and a stepfather, but she wasn't close to any of them.

"Can we delay any of this?" She sounded so forlorn.

"Not the Council, not Quor. Everything else, yes."

She took a deep breath. "Let's start with those then, and see how we feel afterwards."

And a bath is needed. Food wouldn't be refused."

Abruptly, the cramp in his stomach at the thought of his family changed into gouging hunger pains. His mouth watered. "We have a plan, then."

"You'll be with me? Face the Council?"

"Oh, yes. I won't leave your side."

Her eyes smiled. Soon, he'd see her mouth smile. He knew it was a matter of healing time.

"I've exchanged two guards for one."

"Actually, you've gained a third." He stood, stretched, preened at how her rosy, soft lips parted.

"What do you mean?"

"It's just a precaution. Until all the dust has settled, and all the reports finalized, and all the Clan Alphas have shared the official news with their Clans, the Council wants the people we brought through to maintain their guards."

He held his hand out to her, and she took it. He preened at her lack of hesitation. He lifted her up, steadying her. His scent rolled from her body. His mouth watered.

"I thought I was being guarded because I was suspicious."

He shook his head. "That's done. Your guards are for your safety. You need to learn our laws and ways. We don't want any of the women wandering around unescorted and ignorant of the dangers and expectations of the Clans."

"How long will we have to keep them? And will it still be Fynn and Odan?"

The concern in her voice might have made an unBonded man jealous. But Ty knew she was simply always his. He shrugged. "I'm not sure how long, and I'm sure it will be them. They're probably waiting at the door." He took up her dress and gathered it, smoothing the cloth back down over her head. It had helped, to claim her with her skin covered. The person who had dressed her this way instead of in the traditional robe was smart.

She put her arms in the elbow-length sleeves. "They saw us. Fucking."

He frowned to hear her. Tried not to take offense. "They were part of our ritual, Sunshine. They served as our Triad with little preparation. I'll send them gifts. You can help me pick them out."

"So I'm not supposed to blink when I see them again? Do I mention it? Do I thank them? Say, 'Gee, guys, thanks for watching over me while I boned Ty in half-bird form?'"

Ty folded his arms and studied her, determining whether she was actually trying to pick a fight, or be a bitch, or was simply scared. He turned and sat on the edge of the stone pit. "That state is called battleform. It was something you will only ever face once. If I did not have a Triad watching over us, I would have been crazed, and possibly dangerously aggressive. The Triad serves a purpose, and no one who has ever served on one, nor any of the usual witnesses to the ceremony would ever be so crude as to directly refer to the sacred sex they saw."

She folded her arms. "You're upset. I'm sorry, it's just this is a new situation for me."

"I am upset. Because you don't seem to respect the ritual that joined us."

"I do!" She unfolded her arms, then folded them again. "I'm sorry, Ty."

Her soft voice undid him. He climbed to his feet, standing above her on the stone.

“Don’t be ashamed of us, Sunshine. Please.” He poured emotion into his plea. He was asking for her acceptance of more than just the ritual. He needed her to be as proud of him as he was of her. *Her kneeling on a bench, chin lifted.* His toes curled. He had his own ghosts to face.

She nodded.

He offered his hand to her, and she took it. He helped her out of the pit. “As for etiquette, they may congratulate you. You may accept, and thank them for serving. Otherwise, it won’t be discussed.”

She surprised him when she brought her other hand up to hold his with both of hers. “I’m scared.”

“Of facing the guards?”

She shrugged. “All of it.” She shuffled closer to him.

He’d promised himself he wouldn’t pressure her. How quickly he failed. “Sunshine, may I hold you?” He held his breath.

She flashed shocked green eyes at him. “Yes.”

He stepped into her, bending his hand with both of hers up between them. He gently, slowly closed his other arm around her, letting his hand rest lightly on her shoulder. He bent his head down over the crown of her, loving again how she fit so perfectly to his throat with her slender height. *The long, tight line of her poised and straining above him in a column of golden skin.*

She cuddled into him, sighing deeply. He rested his cheek on her hair, feeling hawk’s wings flared wide, as if he would gather her close also. “Today is going to be hard, and long. We will have to revisit the Fortress in our minds, but we will know it is only in our minds, and we’ll have each other at every step. Tomorrow may be hard as well, as final questions are answered, and you begin to meet my family and Clan. But always believe, Sunshine, I’ll be at your side. Always. I will keep you safe. All my people have pledged to keep any of our adopted women safe, and you have two of the Council’s alpha warriors dedicated to your safety as well.

“We’re going to finish this. Then we’re going to put it behind us, and create a new life together. You’ll find a duty you love, and I’ll return to my bodymage duties, and we will go forward.”

She squirmed against him, sniffing into the crook of his throat.

“I love you, Sunshine.”

Her breath caught.

“Ty?”

“Yes?”

“You don’t have any clothes.”

He chuckled. They’d been painful on his skin when he’d tried to dress to come to the ritual, so he’d gone without. “All the better to bone you without them.”

She twitched in his arms. Sighed. “Oh, you.”

“Not that yours prevented a thorough boning.”

“Ty!”

“Sunshine!”

She struggled back against his arm, and he reluctantly let it fall away. “Quit it. I’m sorry I called it that.”

“Called what, what?” He was prodding her. He shouldn’t need to hear the words, but

he did.

“You know.”

“Tell me.” He tapped her on the nose.

She loosened her hands and stepped away. “I shouldn’t have called our sex boning. It was crude, and I’m sorry I did it.”

Now it was his turn to step away. He stretched out his arm in a sweeping directive to guide her toward the door. In this room, his hawk had joined him in claiming a mate, and their mate had thrillingly claimed his body again. He wouldn’t rush a declaration of love when she’d just melded her soul to his. He was being weak. “Apology accepted. I won’t tease you about it anymore.”

She nodded and went to stand by the door.

He cast one last look over the thickly scented pit. Emotion closed his throat. He was home, she was his, and they’d heal. By Bones and Sinew, they would both heal.

* * * *

Three hours later, she sat with three silent warriors in the depths of the earth. Her gaze couldn’t stay away from Ty. Tydus. The hawk-man whose thoughts and memories were tangled with hers. Before, when she was that other woman, the priestess, the secret, private things she saw were packed away, prayed away, then faded away. With Ty, she rolled them on her tongue. Her hands were in fists, holding his memories tight. She swallowed them, and imagined them becoming part of her blood.

Glancing at Odan, she noted he was breathing deeply, seeming to find relief in the sweltering heat of this room. They’d walked down, and down until they’d even gone past the massive plaza and into the earth. Fynn shifted, not impatiently, but the adjustment was unlike him. Catching her eyes, he smiled at her, his face relaxing. He was ... content. Both of her guards, her new friends who were at least mostly honorable, had greeted their exit from the round ritual room with congratulations.

Her gaze dragged back across the round wooden table in this small meeting room, and caught Ty’s flickering golden eyes. He returned her look. Her heart kicked hard. She was sitting next to Ty, waiting for the spiritmage Quor to attend them. But in her head, she was cradled in a fur-lined pit, consumed body and soul by the man who’d reawakened her to life beyond pain.

He began to reach for her, a shift of his shoulder, a slight glide of his hand lying on the table. The motion checked. He looked away, too casually, as if checking the open doorway. Frowning, Sunny reached out her fisted hand and laid it over his. He instantly twisted his wrist and caught her up. She sighed, the touch of him stroking her deeply. He’d stepped away from her to roll open the doorway, and aside from the hug she’d sought after they’d bathed, he hadn’t touched her since.

When she’d reached for him in the bath, he’d sidestepped, telling her tersely, “You never need to wash me again.” A shadow shifted in her mind, tethered in his memories twining through her. Because she’d felt the ragged rawness of him, she hadn’t argued, even though both could understand that this would be nothing like then. To him, that particular service she’d provided was too shadowed for there to be any pleasure in it. Yet.

Before she could grasp it, the men all sat straighter, heads turning. A few moments later, she heard Quor’s steps, too. He filled the doorway, and this time she noticed the scars on his arms, the shadows under his eyes, and that he was younger than his gray hair

belied. Her fingers uncurled to grip Ty's hand. He was huge, and muscled with it. Almost bigger than the bear, from the Fortress. A man that size could kill her with a few blows. Maybe even one.

Ty's other hand came over hers, petting across her knuckles. Her guards were looking at her, now. Somehow they all knew she was afraid. Fynn frowned. Odan shook his head slightly, but she didn't understand his cue.

"Congratulations on your Bonding, Tydus, Sunny." Quor sat in one of the extra chairs. It held.

"Thank you, Quor. It is through your generosity this plan was accepted by the Council. I would offer you my debt." Ty spoke smoothly, polished.

She now knew offering a debt was a deep sign of thanks, to be repaid through personal actions, not material goods.

Quor opened his mouth, closed it, and considered Ty. He nodded slowly. "I was going to say I have no desire to accept it, but perhaps an earth dweller like me might wish for a hawk's eyes someday."

Sunny's hand jerked in Ty's. The words Quor spoke rippled across the fine hairs on her arms, bare in the short-sleeved brown dress she wore. He spoke with the Father's breath, a push of magic behind his words.

"What's wrong, Sunny?" Odan's words were calm.

"He just spoke Truth. In the Cities, only the highest level of priests can see the path of actions to announce the future as Quor just did. But there is no Skyfather here. How did you do it?" She directed her curiosity at the larger man.

Quor glanced at her and smiled. "The Skyfather goes where he is needed. Just because I do not construct him doesn't mean I deny him."

Sunny frowned. Her thumb rubbed against Ty's again and again. "Word games."

Quor shook his head. "The Six are ever a mystery. I can very easily appreciate the Sacred Couple as a face of their power." He held up a hand to stop her denial. "As for the Truth-seeing you sensed, it is no simple spell to be taught. The choices before us may not come to pass, but sometimes, through keeping my inner gates open, I can see the outcome of a particular series that is building."

Ty drew her attention by loosening his grip on her hand. He squeezed it and she took it back as he stood. The smell of him, even the fresh, clean scent that had nothing to do with the deep joining of their bodies, made her melt. Ty took his nail, just his human nail, and gouged the soft skin of his wrist, just below the pink scars from his manacles. Sunny gritted her teeth to see the blood there.

He caught it up, smearing it on his fingers and just that simple, the tear he'd made was gone, with a faint blush of blood left behind. He reached out and Quor angled his chin up. Ty smeared the blood on Quor's throat. "I am in your debt, groundbear."

"We're both in your debt," Sunny quickly corrected. Ty's blood had the power to bind her word now, too.

"I accept," Quor said, and they nodded to each other.

Quor smiled, and the genuine happiness on his face when he looked at Ty made her blink. "It is so good to see you home, and Bonded. Tydus, we thought you lost, and you were not."

Ty grinned back at Quor. "Thank you, spiritmage."

They nodded to each other and Ty went behind her to take his seat again. He did not

touch her as he went past, and she shivered at the lack.

“Sunny,” Quor said, “you completed a souldance, observed by a Clan Alpha. No one can doubt you are no darkmage. Least of all yourself.”

Quor’s eyes were dark blue. They were deep, and seething with the echoes of all the souls he’d touched in his life.

“I understand. But even though bitter darkness hasn’t taken root, there are shadows.” She admitted, “I fear the shadows could spawn again, in the right circumstances.” Cutting a woman with a knife was nothing. She’d do it again if she must. To save Ty’s life, she’d kill. She knew it for a fact. “I think it is very important...” She searched for the right words of warning to use without damning herself. “It’s critical I not be tempted again. We need to stay safe. I need to stay here, with Ty.”

She looked at Ty, couldn’t stop herself from reaching for him. “I am staying here, now, right?”

His fingertips were rough against the underside of her wrist. His thumb looked large and pale against the back of her hand, scarred from the time when Glasses stomped on it. “You are hawk. You belong here, with us.”

She searched his eyes. “And you, Ty? You’re not going back.”

His lids lowered, although his eyes never wavered. “I gave my word I would go back. There are yet two to save. And five to kill. Certainly I won’t go out with the group leaving today for the first exploration.”

Sunny rocked back from the blow of his words. The room tipped. “No.”

Ty’s grip tightened around her suddenly numb hand. “We’ll talk about it.”

She shook her head. “No.” Looking wildly back at Quor, she begged with her eyes. “No. This is what I was trying to say. No.”

Quor set both of his large hands on the table, palm down. The small line of Ty’s blood on his neck had dried to earthy-ochre. “You fear you will become a darkmage if Ty is in danger?”

He understood. Her shoulders slumped. She nodded, throat tight.

“That’s not fair, Sunny. I know the layout. I know them.”

Very slowly, she turned her head, chin lowering, until she was looking at her beloved from beneath lowered brows. “I know the layout better than you. I know *them* better than you. And I know, better than you, any of the warriors who go through your stone to land at the Fortress are going to be dead, dead, dead.”

“Those mages will find the difference—”

She kept talking right over him. “And their corpses will be eaten, just like all the other hawks and slaves were.”

Ty didn’t back down. “—in Truxet who are not bespelled and crushed by a surprise Beebee attack—”

“And their death energy will go to make them stronger.”

“—are a far cry from the opponent I was when I landed half-dead.”

“They’ve sealed the exits with darkcraft. To be free, you have to use it, and you *can’t* do that.”

Ty spoke passionately. “We are a might to be reckoned with, even without the Six to call on.”

She was furious he wasn’t listening to her. Worse, none of them were. “I saw how it hurt you, what I did, when I forced it into you. But I don’t think you’re even capable of

calling darkcraft to you. In effect, you'd be entering a realm where it is the only magic that can be used, and you'd be trapped."

"Sunny." Fynn's voice was firm and loud. All faces swung to him. "You cannot expect us to ignore them. This first time out, a small force has been named. Our goal will merely be to gather information. But we *will* go. That we haven't gone in these recent days has been an outrage. We *need* to go."

He took a deep breath that swelled his chiseled, bare chest and said, "We've called this meeting to go over our attack plan, and see if you have any last minute notes for us. And to impress upon you how important it is for you and Ty to complete a souldance to gather your exact memories. You've both proven you can do it in your Bonding. We need your help."

She looked at his lean face, the short dark hair, the wide mouth. She tried not to care, knowing that when Fynn was chained to the wall, when the choices were that small, there was no telling what he'd do to save himself. Ty was the only one she trusted. She'd seen him laugh in the face of despair, hauling hope's gutted and dying carcass around like a fellow soldier he wouldn't abandon. Fynn had been fair to her, and kept his hands to himself. So she tried.

Speaking slowly and with weight, she said, "If you go, you will die." She put every ounce of her conviction into the words, into her stare as she held his eyes.

He never flinched. "Then I will die, for I must go."

Sunny's head rocked back. "You think this will be some thrilling battle. You think you're going to some noble end. Stupid idiot."

"Sunshine—"

She wrenched her hand from Ty's, cutting him off. She jabbed at Fynn with an accusing finger. "Their spells immobilize you. They blind you, they suck the air from your lungs, and they make you hurt until you are nothing but hurt, incapable of anything but screaming."

Fynn nodded. "You told us. I've listened to your reports, to all of the reports. We have to try."

"You did *not* listen. Or you would know 'trying' is just a waste of life. The second you land, you will be lost to your Six. You need a darkmage you control, or you need someone willing to take the shadows I took. You need something utterly different, because that is *their* Fortress."

Ty hissed.

Odan said mildly, "Actually, it's ours."

She glared at him. "It's theirs now." She pinned Fynn the Idiot with her attention again. "Your Six don't work there, and physical strength is meaningless before their skills."

"Tell that to the tall one whose neck I broke." Ty's voice smirked.

She slammed her hands on the table. "By surprise! Through inhuman effort!"

He nodded, unmoved by her growing rage. "Yes. It's good to remember that we are not human."

"You were human when you were there." She turned from him, feeling the heat in her face. She jutted her chin at Fynn. "You need to come up with a different plan, one where you'll be sure you have the upper hand." It was like she was strangling on her heart. She needed to stop this. "*Please, Fynn.* Tell them to wait."

Ty shuddered, nodded. He looked at Fynn. "That's a good idea. I think we should go in battleform. Maybe even with a marten in beast form. They're the hardest to catch, with the smallest mass outside of a hawk. Their speed could be key."

Hearing Ty include himself in this madness caused her mind to go blank. Between one breath and the next, the world disappeared. *She had to get to the kitchen. She'd delayed obeying her slave command too long, and the pain pierced her lungs. Rushing to get to the room, the stone blurred beneath her cracked leather slippers. Too late. She fell, writhing, screaming, the pain twisting her gut. She crawled, desperate to get there before she vomited blood. Over the sensation of her nails ripping on the cold, dirty floor, a male voice came, strong and certain. "It's gone, Sunshine. I've got you."*

"Bonded, my mate. I'm here. Sunshine, I've got you. You're free, you're out, you're safe, you're mine..."

The words blended with the high, grating whine of a trapped and tortured creature. Her. The terrible sound stopped. His words hesitated, then continued.

"Sunshine, you're in River Mountain. Shhhh. Don't cry. I have you. We're safe, together, alive."

His arms were around her, smooth and warm. There was no blood to wash, and he was out of chains. She sat cradled against his front, between his legs, wrapped tight in his creamy muscles. His chin rested on her shoulder. Surrounded, safe. Time had passed. The air held the vibrancy of outdoors. He'd taken her from that meeting room, into the wild.

She blinked, and realized the reason she couldn't see well was because of the light. The sun was brilliant, bouncing off the water, which chattered and shushed in a wide, gleaming swath. She was outside, in the daytime. Alive, with Ty. Clothed, clean, by a river.

"Ty."

He kept rocking her. "I'm here."

She closed her eyes, remembering. "Always be here."

He rocked her, silent.

"Ty, always be here."

"I cannot promise that, Sunshine. Life is complex. I have no control over death."

She was shaking, despite the warmth of the sun, of him at her back. "Don't go back."

He whispered, and the brush of his breath across her ear made her go still. "I promised."

"You made that promise to me. You said you'd return for any we had to leave. But Ty, they could have come, and didn't. You took all the ones who wanted to go. We didn't have to leave them. They failed to join us."

Ty made a tutting sound. "Sunshine, poorly done. They are there, and no matter what, I will not leave them there."

His attempt to shame her for trying every argument was lost on her. Once, she had built a life around assisting others, of sacrificing her wishes to achieve a greater good. Now, she was a selfish survivor fixated on only one man. She looked at the river, the beautiful rushing wide wildness of it. She'd never seen one before. It came from around a bend on their right, and on their left, a wide curve arched away. The river had a rocky shoreline on the other side, while they appeared to be sitting on smooth paving stones. A short walk beyond the river, a rocky cliff rose high, high above them. The curve of the shushing river combined with the facing cliff made her feel protected.

She added more logic. "They're probably dead. The slaves. The Monster's rage when he found us gone would need death to soothe it."

"Perhaps."

Finally, she said, "I want to have sex in the sunlight."

"Sunshine on my Sunshine," Ty chuckled. "I love it like I love you."

She looked around. The paved area filled the inner curve of the river's crescent, going very near an earthen bank. The water was a mere bodylength below them. "Here?"

He laughed out loud, a booming burst of pleasure. It rumbled against her back, tickling memories of what it was to feel that joy. "I will not share your beauty like that. This is the main River access, off the central plaza. People gave us privacy because of your distress, but they will soon come out again."

Rolling his shoulders, he stood, leaving her feeling exposed and cold. When he held out his hand, she quickly took it. "How long was I..." What? What had happened? Was it a waking dream? Had Monster found a way to send nightmares to her over the distance? Ty pulled her to her feet. She ached.

"Quor said it was probably a memory that took you over from the stress of our conversation. He said it was normal, that it could happen to either one of us. Fynn and Odan both shared it has happened to you before. You were ... remembering, for about an hour."

"So long!"

He stood, holding her hand. His other curled in a fist against his thigh. "Not that long, although it hurt to hear your fear and pain. I'm sorry I couldn't break you from it. I thought the sun might help."

"I think it might have." She turned her face up to it, marveling at something she once considered a nuisance in her old life. "Why didn't Quor stop it?" He could have. She'd done it for others, for children caught in a spinning mind, for adults lost in their troubles. "And why do you keep hesitating when you want to touch me?"

Ty shifted. She noticed people sitting on a wide flight of steps leading up to three huge, open arches in the face of a rock wall. A few stood up and walked down to the river.

"I didn't want him to. I know it's wrong not to trust him, an insult to a man who is one of my people's leaders. But the thought of him reaching so deeply into you makes me..."

"Scared?" Sunny looked at Ty's lashes, tipped gold in the sunlight. His eyes looked molten. She hadn't thought his own inability to connect with a spiritmage would transfer to letting her connect to one as well. Her heart softened. He had protected her, even from his own people.

Ty waved to someone. They waved back, looking at her curiously. "Not scared. Enraged."

The word fell hard and vicious from his smiling, relaxed face. She looked at his eyes, and he looked back. For a moment, common rage mixing in a soup of other unhealthy emotions swirled between them, recognizing the match in the other.

Fascinated, she watched him blink, and the rage was swallowed. Hers ebbed back into her spine. "Ty."

He nodded. "We are together. We are alive."

She reached up, and he froze, his breath still. She touched the scar on his cheek, the

bump on the bridge of his nose, the scar at the rise of his lip. Brushed the line of his jaw with her thumb. "Exactly. Exactly. Don't go, Ty." The needy, desperate words burst from her. "I beg of you. I beg—"

His hand fell away from hers. He stepped back from her touch, his head turning and eyes closing. "Do not. Sunshine, never. I am no master of yours, no parent or judge."

"What? Do not beg? Do you think the word, the feeling of prostrating my pride, is the slightest difficulty for me?" She snorted and put her hands on her hips. "I respect you. I honor you. You are the spirit that dwells within me, and the better part of it besides. I have no shame in begging before you. It is a pale echo of what I did to survive. And in this, to stop you from this rash decision of honor, I will beg, and beg, and plead, until you listen. I cannot watch you go to your death, for it will kill me, too."

She waited and he breathed deep, once, twice. When he seemed to calm, she explained clearly what she'd hinted at in the meeting with Quor. "I fear if you go, the last decent part of me will die with you, leaving only the shadows. They'll grow, and feed on each other. I'm not a darkmage now. I have no craving for others' pain." She stepped into him, feeling her words bounce off his stubborn, stiff jaw. "But to lose you, I would become one. Not only would my rage have no boundaries without you to mark them, but the disgust and disdain I feel for everyone else," she nodded to a giggling woman and her looming man a short ways away, "even them, for not knowing the touch of evil, for not understanding that they aren't real, won't ever be real until they're stripped like we were... Oh yes, Ty, I fear. I would want them to taste it. I would want to show them the truth of it, to make them suffer and see—"

His head turned, gracefully. His lips met the edge of her ear, softly. His words fell into her building fury, darkly. "I want to kill them for you."

She stood with a whisper between her and her man, in the bright sunlight, with the river behind them, surrounded by a cliff and a mountain and allies. But with his words, she was alone in the dark. She didn't misunderstand. He wasn't talking, as she had been, of the stupidly innocent, untouched society around them. He was talking about Monster, and his minions.

She whispered back. "I want to kill them, too."

"I need to, Sunshine." His breath blew in a hot rush against her, sizzling her throat. "I ache with it. It's bitter in my blood."

Her hand captured the tight blade of his cheek, held it. "We can help. There is a secret to be worked out, of how to reach past their block on the Six. You can aid the fight against them here, without ever returning."

"I want to feel his spine in my beak. I want my fingers wrapped in his intestines. I want to rip off his cock and shove it down his throat." His chest worked furiously, brushing against hers, yet he stood like a statue, feet braced.

"I know." She pet his cheek, the warm skin of him sizzling her fingertips. "I know, Ty. But who will hold me when I'm lost in memory? Who will take down my rage, by merely meeting it with his own? Who else can I trust enough to love, body and soul?"

He tipped his head so his lips were against her palm. "Do you love me?"

She lifted her chin, putting her lips on the underside of his jaw. "I think so. I think trust and desire blooming where it had died, and the wish to learn to laugh again, might just be love."

Nuzzling her hand, his lips drifted a caress away from her fingertips. "Desire?"

“Stop pulling back from me.” She pressed a kiss to the hollow of his throat. “I trust you. I desire you.” Her hand pushed at the side of his face, slid into his hair and pulled on the back of his neck.

Following her lead, his lips turned and bowed down to hers.

“Ty, I need you to remind me how to live. Without you, I am dark.” She pressed her lips to his, and the bottoms of her feet sizzled. For the first time, she realized she’d lost her sandals somewhere. The thought came and went, because his lips were soft and warm.

His breath seared her mouth, and his tongue brushed at her lower lip. Her other hand was on his hip and she used her grip at nape and hip to pull him close while she stepped against him. So warm. She pushed her mouth against his. Her heart thundered inside, but it bounced off the counter-rhythm of his. Dragged her lips across his, igniting them, and nipped at the soft fleshy pad of him. Her mouth opened, molding to his. He met her, turning his head so their lips blended, first lined together, then across. The softness of his kiss, the hard strength of his body, the tight line of his neck, his breath caught in the cave of her mouth.

He leaned into her, and she curled her arm entirely over his neck, bracing on his wide, bulky shoulder. Her lower hand slid to his back, splayed wide in the center. She crushed her breasts against him, and kissed him, urgently, yet lingering. After a nibble on his lower lip, when her breath had gone from fast to deep, shrieking laughter and the patter of quick feet brought her back to herself. Against her thighs, she could feel his hands gripping his legs. She pressed one more kiss to his lips, and pulled her head back. He followed her and kissed her deeply again, head turned to fit his mouth over hers.

When she softened her grip on him, loosening her arms, he blew out a laugh and rested his forehead to hers. “Before this day is out, I want to love you in the sun. But we cannot. We have duty calling us.”

Duty... The word was foreign to her. She owed no one anything. Just Ty. There were no bonds of obligation for her to honor. Just Ty. “I follow where you lead, and gladly. I help your people, I rip open my memories and yours for them to sift through. But I will not go back. And I will not let you go back, either. I will fight, Ty.”

He looked at her, and his eyes were the color of an evening sun. Bright and rich orange, she stubbornly stared at them, refusing to be blinded. He stared back, silent. She grabbed his head with both her hands and kissed him, and this time, she pushed her tongue into his mouth, conquered his, first flaying it, then stroking softly. She chased it and caught it, and sucked it hard, and nipped it. His lips turned hard, and she softened, lazy with his demand. By the time she could breathe again, his hands were *finally* anchored firmly on her hips, his fingers splayed across the rise of her ass. The feel of his claim branded her, sending her mound grinding into him.

With a lingering touch, their lips clung, then parted. She couldn’t stop, and kissed along his face, burying her nose in his neck. “So good.”

His hands tightened a moment, then he stepped away. “You must be hungry.” His voice was so low, deeper, hoarse. “I’m starving. Let’s head to the Eyrie.”

“What’s that?” She cleared her throat when her own voice rasped worse than his.

“My Clanhome, at the peak of the mountain. Whenever I’m not assigned a duty, I live there. It’s where I was raised. My parents and brother are there. It’s home.” He took another step away, his hands falling from her hips.

She captured one, and their fingers laced together, fitting perfectly. “Will your Alpha be there?” She had a sense of the maddening man now, through Ty’s eyes. He was vital in her fight to keep Ty from returning to the darkmage Fortress.

Ty slid her a suspicious look. “He may be. A lot of meetings have been happening, as they collect the reports and consider plans.” He led her toward the lovely, slender arches carved into the natural rock. They’d been polished, and there were silver glints to the gray stone.

Sunny’s lips lifted ever so slightly at one corner. “What are your parents like?” If she could get the hawk on her side, to see that a sortie to the Fortress was a disaster, then maybe she could stop Ty from his rage-driven quest. And maybe pressure from his parents, who now knew the worry of losing him once, would also help.

As they moved up the wide, shallow steps, a man stepped away from the rock wall to the far side. Odan, his gray-shot hair bristling, blue eyes bright as the sky. Sunny stopped, the stone cool against her feet. Odan was still watching over her, even now. She turned her head, searching, her stomach tight. In a quick sweep, her gaze snapped back to Odan, standing tall, hands clasped in front of him. “Fynn.” Her lips were thick and hot, puffy from their kiss. “He’s gone.” For the first time, she thought crying might not be a waste, but no tears came. “Oh.” *This hurts different than a lashing. How strange.*

Odan nodded once. Sunny wanted to slap him across the face. Rake her nails down his cheek. Hit him in the gut. Knee him in the balls. Spit in his eye. She shook off Ty’s hand and walked up to him. Shivered as she passed out of the sun and into the shadow of the rock face.

“I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

“Don’t discount them. They’ve only just left.”

A wild hope spiked through her, taking her breath. “They haven’t really gone yet? He’s still here?” She actually turned her shoulders, poised to run and stop him.

Odan shook his head. “I’m sure they’ve left by now. The team was chosen this morning. I was refused.” His voice was even, holding no inflection, a mere comment. She was learning to read behind the gloss of him.

“I’m glad.” She crossed her arms. “I’m glad you weren’t picked.”

He looked up at the sky, and his eyes flashed an even brighter blue. “They would have gone just a short while ago. They’re due to return, if they can scout unnoticed, at dawn.”

She shook her head. Then couldn’t stop. Ty was standing at her back, close enough to feel his heat, but not touching her. She leaned back, knowing he would catch her. His chest was solid behind her. She just kept shaking her head. “They’ll be waiting. They won’t even take them for torture. They’ll just kill them.”

“You were sure about that, in your report. But they have only two slaves to guard the stone, and their pitiful traps can be avoided, possibly even stopped.”

She kept shaking her head. She saw him in her mind’s eye. Fynn’s lean body, pacing with his restless energy when she was awake, then poised and watchful while she fought sleep. Fynn taking her outside in the night, to feel the wind and the wilderness.

Whirling, she threw her arms around Ty’s neck. “Ty! You’re here! You weren’t chosen! You didn’t go!”

She pressed into him, torn between horror that she had stood kissing Ty while Fynn died, and joy that he’d been kept from the mission. “Ty!” She squeezed him with all her

might. “Ty!”

“Shhhh. I’m here, Sunshine.”

His hand lightly soothed over her hair, ruffling the short softness of it. Again, she felt like crying, but didn’t. Turning her face, she opened her mouth and sank her teeth, hard, into the curve of muscle that sloped from his strong neck to his shoulders. It was thick and she bit harder, worrying it.

His hand stroked her head again. Far from fighting her strange urge, he pressed her to him, as if to encourage her. His hips swirled against hers for a moment, before he controlled them. “Let’s hope they succeed in exploring the Fortress. Maybe, they’ll even get a few, and bring back their heads.”

Gasping, she lifted her teeth from his shoulder, watched the deep indentations turn dark red. The rage that Fynn was gone mixed up inside with the knowledge she could hold Ty, touch him, bite him. She just had to keep him. “Heal this. Now, Ty.”

He did as she ordered. The bite faded before her eyes. She kissed the spot softly. “I don’t know why I did that.”

Odan moved past them, up into the vast arch of the opening. “You were claiming him, marking him. Any Trux is proud to wear his woman’s token.”

Sunny lay her head in the hollow of Ty’s shoulder. His big hand covered her hair, stroking the finger-length strands again and again.

“I’m so glad, Ty. So glad. And so sad.”

He said, “We’ll see.”

Squeezing her eyes tight, she refused the hope in his voice. Hope for Fynn. And hope he’d be on the next mission.

Chapter Ten

They walked across the massive natural cave paved with flagstones. It was full of tents and carts acting as taverns and shops. Moving toward the stairs, a black-skinned man in a leather skirt like Odan's intercepted them. Sunny tensed, but when Odan stepped forward to grip his arm, she relaxed.

"Greetings, groundbear."

"Greetings, black wolf."

"Anyi has requested her presence." The man had nearly the same lean musculature and size as Fynn. He nodded in her direction.

Odan turned to Sunny. "Anyi would like to see you now. I know Tydus wants to take you up to the Eyrie, and you've recently had a difficult time. Do you wish to delay?"

She wanted to say yes. She wanted to pretend she didn't know who Anyi was. But she knew, in her heart. And in her gut, she wanted to get this over. Raising her chin, she said, "I'll see her now."

She glanced at Ty to see how he took her decision.

He grinned, and the sight of him, the height of him next to her, suddenly made her bones melt.

"What are you grinning about?"

"Your bravery. You're my little warrior."

Odan fell into step next to the other man, and Sunny held out her hand to Ty. He took it, beaming as if she'd given him an enormous present. She just shook her head at him.

They were led back to the cells. Hard to believe the last time she'd been here she was a tormented woman refusing to give her old name, refusing to souldance her secrets to a stranger. She'd walked out of this alley of rooms with Fynn by her side just that morning, freshly bathed and Bonded. The black-skinned wolf opened a stone door to reveal another man, burly, brown-haired. He said, "She wants to talk to her alone."

Sunny looked at Ty. He shrugged, squeezing her hand. Forcefully, she lowered her shoulders and breathed deep. "All right."

She stepped in. The men huddled in the hall, and the door was closed, but only mostly. The sight of the handlength crack eased Sunny's spine. The room was just like hers, only the blanket was black. Finally, she looked at the woman who had been her fellow slave. She was standing at the side of the bed. Her hair was long, shining, and brown. The thick silkiness of it surprised her. She'd never seen it like that, of course. Her face was still scarred, though they did not run so deep or red. Sunny kept her eyes from straying to the woman's arm through force of will.

The woman, Anyi, cleared her throat. When she spoke, her voice was husky. Maybe from emotion. Maybe it would never heal from the screams they'd taken from her. "They say you're not a darkmage."

Sunny's pride unfurled. A sharp memory of Ty's body moving in hers made heat explode in her belly. It took her breath for a moment. Then it was her turn to clear her throat. "That's what they say."

The woman looked her up and down. She was older than Sunny by at least a decade.

“They say you took a Beast to husband.”

“I did.” Something more than pride lit up her heart and set it thumping. Hearing from someone else Ty was hers was powerful.

“The one that took us out of there?”

“Yes.” It was the best day of her life. Even better than today, when she’d believed she was free and connected her life to Ty’s.

They looked at each other a little longer. The woman folded her arms. “You’re not sorry.”

“No.”

The woman backed up a step. “I can see it in you. I don’t know why they can’t. None of us who were there are to be trusted. We know honor is a weak thing. You’d do it again if you needed to, and I’m frightened of that. Because I don’t know what your definition of ‘need’ would be.”

Sunny nodded. There was nothing to say. The only proof would be her actions, and those hadn’t been tested. The Trux felt sharing a souldance with Ty was somehow a guard against the fact she could become a darkmage at any point, in a situation that called for it. They’d been fighting darkmages a long time. But something told her they’d never fought a band the likes of which the Monster had assembled.

Anyi’s words came out as a whisper. “I just wanted to see you.”

Sunny spread her hands, shrugged. Here she was.

When Anyi looked down and away, Sunny turned to go. She stopped. Turning, she said, “Did you hear they sent a team back today?”

Anyi nodded. “They sent six good men and a woman to their deaths.”

“A woman!”

“They had a representative from the Mage High Guild. A powerful firemage, trained in battle.”

Sunny ground her jaw. Abruptly, exhaustion pulled at her. “That one, they might not kill. Her, they might keep as a slave.”

“I hope she dies quickly,” Anyi said bitterly.

Sunny nodded. Fynn’s warm brown eyes came to her. She’d just seen him what, an hour ago? Argued with him. Touched him. “That’s all we can hope for.”

The rock scraped and both women came to attention. The burly brown man frowned, including both of them in his scowl. “You can hope they return safely.”

Odan was protesting in the hall, but the man waved him off, irritated. He continued, “You can hope they succeed in their mission, or exceed it by killing or capturing a darkmage. There’s much you can hope for besides their death.”

Sunny looked at Anyi, who met her eyes. She shared with Anyi’s dark brown gaze the knowledge her guard had no idea what he was dealing with.

Ty muscled the larger man out of the way, and stood between him and Sunny. “Let’s get some food into you, mate.” His words were steady, and only the tautness of his neck revealed his anger at the other man.

Sunny’s mouth abruptly flooded with saliva. She wasn’t so used to being free that food wasn’t still exciting to her. “That sounds wonderful.” Without looking back, she left Anyi behind with her guard’s foolish hope.

* * * *

It was all he could do to keep his hands off her. Literally. The urge to touch her, pull her in tight, and bury his face in her hair was an ache. His palms hurt, his fingertips throbbed, his arms kept twitching. When he'd held her during her screaming, keening, groaning flashback, he'd been torn between summoning his Alpha for help and going to the sifting stone to kill the darkmages himself. But of course, he'd stayed by her side.

At last she'd woken, and seemed to be her strong self once again. Too strong. Too much herself. Despite the newness of their mating, she barely looked at him as they moved through the clanhome, her neck twisting with curiosity. She seemed utterly comfortable with him, which was amazing given her recent past, yet maddening given their recent ritual.

He knew of men who didn't emerge from their new mate's body for a week. His walked next to him boldly, despite having no initiation to understand his people whatsoever. Adopted women were usually sequestered and instructed to his people's ways. Over the years, the eleven Clans had developed the adoption of human women into an efficient series of courses, carefully tiered for integrating them into the Clans.

By the time he'd taken her, via River Mountain's internal sifting stone network, up to the Eyrie, she was trembling with fatigue. A morning meeting, a mating, another meeting, a flashback, and two emotional revelations later, he finally brought his woman home to care for her.

Sunshine stopped at the entranceway to the Eyrie, her slender, strong fingers dancing over the spread wings of a hawk carved there. Inside, his hawk echoed the position, proud and ecstatic she was finally here. She stepped inside.

Alpha was waiting there. He'd bathed recently, his hair dark with moisture, and slicked back on his head. As with her guards, she turned ruddy, her heart thumping hard.

"Alpha." Overwhelmed at how Delavega had manipulated the situation to clear her, while settling and mating them, Ty knelt, declaring his allegiance to the man who was more than a leader to him. He leaned his throat back, but met his Alpha's eyes. "Thank you."

He knew his Alpha had to have seen it during the ritual. The Alpha was the source of Ty's hawk, and as such, was a shadow in all his hawk felt. In a bonding ceremony, he would be even more aware than usual. Delavega knew Sunny wasn't frightened of the darkspell, nor ashamed of it. Oh, no. She was proud. The potential for deeply selfish, evil actions was awake in her. Ty didn't care. So that made him just as bad. Delavega knew it of both of them, and by vouching for the mating without a Truxet spiritmage presiding, made it his responsibility.

Delavega brushed his fingers over Ty's jugular. When Sunny moved to kneel next to Ty, Delavega took her hand and kept her from finishing the movement. She rolled her shoulder, pulling away from his grip with just barely polite haste.

"No, Lady, you need not kneel for me yet. When your training in the ways of our people is finished, and your adoption into the hawks is formalized, you will do that before the Clan. But everyone here," he nodded to Odan, standing in the shadows at the entrance, "knows you are bound as tightly to Ty as it is possible to be."

Alpha flicked Ty's ear, and he rose. His Alpha embraced him, his smaller frame against Ty a comfort like heat in his bones.

"Welcome home, Ty and Sunny. Congratulations. I'm so very pleased you found each other. May you be a peace and strength for each other until the end of your days."

His Alpha stood before Sunny. Normally, he'd hug the woman, or if she was distant or timid, at least take her hands. But he held back, and Sunshine just stood. He gave her a deep, formal bow of respect instead. Charmingly, she copied him. Ty grinned. His Sunshine was reawakening to manners.

"A dinner is waiting for you in the small dining room, along with your family." Alpha motioned to Odan. "You are dismissed."

Odan stepped forward. "I am not, Sir. The Council has not released the guests to their own paths yet."

Ty turned to the groundbear. He was getting tired of the damned silent shadow of him. "My mate is safe within our clanhome. I'll summon you when we leave." As if he couldn't protect his own mate.

"Hawk, her safety is my command. Be grateful Dom did not reassign another to take Fynn's place, trusting the two of us could work together."

Ty kept his hiss in his throat. The leader of the Council had no rights over Sunshine now that she was of the hawks.

"Well enough then. I will take this up with Dom myself." Hawk's quiet voice ended the discussion. "Ty, Fen is also in the clanhome tonight. There's news I'm not to release to the Clan yet. Before you go to your family, I'd like to meet with you," his eyes swept Sunshine and Odan, "all of you, first."

Alpha turned and Ty gestured for Sunshine to follow him. He almost moaned as she brushed past him in the hallway. His hands spasmed to keep from caressing her. It was his mantra: *Only by her will*. He would never touch her on his own selfish whims. The only time he could ever feel her was when she desired it. No matter how rare such an occasion might be. This was how he would win her trust, and assure her confidence.

Watching her walk down the curving halls before him, he felt a terrible ache in his chest. She was so slender, like a reed. She was a woman meant to dance, a thoughtful soul meant to explore the inner recesses of people's minds. There was a scar on the nape of her neck, and one peeked out below the arm of her dress. It would be years before she might feel the desire to touch him casually, to lean on him, to flirt with him. If ever. They'd taken that from them. He wanted to rip out their eyes with his beak.

Alpha took them into a small meeting room. Fen stood, raising his brows when Odan trailed in. He shook his hand, and Ty's.

"Your hair is getting shaggy, Shield." Ty twitched a hunk of it. The Shield, or the Alpha's second in command, had been one of Ty's instructors as a child. He was a second father to him.

"I overcompensate for my gray by having a lot of it." Fen reached over and yanked a hank on Ty's forehead. "You're one to talk."

Fen surprised Ty by taking his hand. "There's bad news, Ty. And in the circumstances, we wanted to tell you." Fen held out his other hand to Sunshine.

She just stared at it. Ty swallowed, willing her to reach for him. She looked at him, which was a start.

He smiled, keeping his joy of her in his eyes, hiding the dread of what he thought might be coming. "Sunshine prefers not to touch strangers, Fen." He would not allow her to feel pressured.

Fen nodded. "All right." He squeezed Ty's hand and nodded to Odan. "Hello, Odan. You're Sunny's Council guard?"

“Yes.”

Fen sighed, and looked to Alpha, who simply nodded, grim.

“I’m sorry, Sunny. Your guard Fynn is dead.”

She looked so slender, so fragile. But her hands curled into tight balls and her shapely lips flattened into a white line. “I know.” Her cold words accused him.

Fen looked askance at the Hawk, but Delavega motioned for him to continue. “The woman returned, via a dying owl in her arms. We couldn’t save him. He was dead within moments. The word is some sort of spell hit them through their feet the moment they landed and killed them within breaths. It didn’t matter what form they were in: human, battleform, or beastspirit. The owl managed to take his beastspirit’s form and trigger the sifting stone, but he was already caught in the darkspell. The woman wasn’t affected by it. Then there was the beebee they’ve chained to the doorway. It was already eating the fallen warriors as the owl pulled her out.”

Fen stopped, jaw clenched, staring at the ground. Ty closed his eyes and concentrated on not smashing his fist into the stone wall. No one had suffered more from the darkmages’ new pet creatures than his Clan. The beebees needed to be destroyed, to the very last one. Currently, Ty believed from what he’d overheard that they could not procreate. The Six help them if they did, for they were powerful creatures indeed.

Ty moved to touch Sunshine, stopping himself just a breath from her hand. He forced his arm, stiffly, to return to his side.

She folded her arms and stared at the ground. “Fynn was a cat, right?”

Odan spoke quietly. “He was a mountaincat and a Council firemage.”

She nodded, her head folding down as if her neck lost strength. Ty shuffled closer to her, his hands fisted.

Fen spoke. “The Council is already planning another recon. Their goal now isn’t to scout the Fortress, but to place it. They’re calling for a team of hawks and owls. We want them to go in already in beastspirit form, escape the traps and the beebee, and get out of the Fortress. We want them to return to River Mountain via the air, giving us a physical location.”

If they knew where they were, it would all be over. Ty’s mind froze at the perfection of being able to march on the Fortress. All of the Clans, even the best of the humans, surrounding it, destroying them.

“But ... if the Fortress is across the sea, or so far over the Eastern Mountains they can never journey back, we’ll never even know if they made it out.” Sunshine’s voice was bitter. She turned her head, and those eyes, oh, Tempest, those sharp eyes of hers, cut right into him. “Ty, don’t go.”

“I’d have an advantage when it came to speed in navigating the halls, from my knowledge.”

“That’s shit. You never saw more than three halls in the whole place. I knew it all, better than them, even. I’ll give them the map from my memory. I’ll pace it out. We can build a practice field and reconstruct the paths from the sifting room to the entrance I know of.” Her arms were tight around her, her shoulders so high they almost touched her ears. “You said it was like this place, and the men can plan other exits based on guesses. You want to go for revenge. This mission isn’t that. It’s not even to see if the other two slaves still live.” Her eyes seemed lit with pure magecraft, they burned so green. “Ty ... stay.” The pleading in her voice, the sharp, sudden stench of her fear, twisted his gut.

Delavega spoke. "Ty stays."

Ty whipped his head toward his Alpha, his blood freezing.

Delavega frowned at him. "We lost you once, and only through this miracle," he nodded at Sunshine, "did we get you back. You are yet a warrior who will hold duties in the Clan. But not this one Ty."

Sunshine crumpled to the ground, and Odan's arms tangled with his when they caught her. Ty fell to his knees and gathered her in, pulling her from Odan. Damn right he should step back. Ty spared one glare at the man, then cupped Sunshine's face. She wasn't gone to a flashback. He breathed deep, willing her to look at him. She was shaking, her eyes on Delavega like he was the humans' Skyfather.

Ty looked up at his Alpha. For a moment, he let the man see his disappointment, the rage that would need to be dealt with at leaving this to others. But then he focused on who was most important.

Delavega crouched, laying his fingers on her pulse. "Is she all right?"

Sunshine lifted her head away from Delavega's touch.

Ty had already sent his craft skimming through her body. The connection to her made his cock fat, and in this position, it hurt. "She's exhausted. This was just an adrenaline kick. She'll be fine, especially after getting some food and drink in her. Malnourishment isn't something I can heal."

She turned her head and looked at him. "*She* is going to eat, and then sleep. *She* is going to look at what's happened today in peace and quiet. *She* is overwhelmed, but not deaf."

His heart squeezed, but he kept it from his eyes. Instead, he looked puzzled. Then he mouthed, "Are you sure?" with exaggerated care.

That spark of light lit her eyes, and her mouth kicked up in a definite lop-sided, almost-smile. His heart squeezed again. Someday, she'd smile, and laugh. Someday, she'd reach for him, and he would know he could reach for her. Someday, they'd heal. *A woman stroking a dagger-sharp nail across Sunshine's cheek.* He smiled at her to cover the fact he'd almost gagged. She was his to protect. Sunshine must never know how his initial compliance in her final torture haunted him. Sickened him. Aroused him. His thumb brushed her taut, sculpted cheekbone once, then he loosened his grip, backing away so she sat on her own. He didn't want to crowd her.

"You are so ridiculous." Her eyes were smiling again, even as her mouth scowled at him.

"I need you to come eat, then rest. At your body's needs, not my orders." Making his hands withdraw from her skin was a lesson in focus. Hawk screamed inside, the high pitch echoing in his ears. He tried not to wince.

He stood, hovering and cursing inside. He wanted to pick her up, but knew he couldn't. She rose up on her knees, lifted one foot, and braced her hands on her knee. Her head bowed, and this time he didn't care about the scars on her nape. This time, he worried about the bone of her spine showing stark through the skin. *His woman.* The need to offer her meat immediately made his feet itch.

Then she turned her head up to him, and the request for help was clear in her face. He held out his hand. She put hers into it, and he went hard as a spike. *His woman.* Lifting her weight easily, he steadied her. She took her hand back, and he stepped forward before he could stop himself. Instead of protesting, as he feared, she looked at

Odan.

"Before, I would have prayed for Fynn. Not only would that not matter to silent deities, but Fynn followed a different way. What do your people do for funerals?"

"Every Clan has different rites, but generally they gather and remember him. Then, at the next Autumnal, we'll hold a larger service where the Six are called to take back his energy, with any others who have died."

Sunshine stood tall and straight, her jaw tight, staring at Odan. "I'm a hawk now, can I add my remembrance to his Clan's?"

Odan looked at Ty. Ty nodded to the man.

"I'm sure you can, Sunshine." He looked at Fen. "Can you find out when the memorial will be?"

Ty had met the man twice. But he'd always have a piece of Fynn's fiery heat living in his matebond with Sunshine. "I'd like to attend as well."

"I'll let you know soon," Fen said quietly. He gestured for Ty to lead Sunshine out of the room.

When Fen had slipped away and Alpha had said goodnight, Ty turned to take Sunshine to the dining room where his parents waited. His awareness of her just to his side was like dawn light striking eyes gritty from an all-nighter. It was beautiful, and painful.

"Ty?"

He focused on her, intent. "Yes?"

"I want to speak with Odan."

He blinked, nodded.

"Alone."

He nodded again. "I'll wait at the end of the hall." The Groundbear stayed stock still, as usual. He didn't reveal Ty could easily hear every word from that distance. But Ty thought surely Sunshine knew this, just as she'd known he could hear everything she'd said to Anyi, the woman whose pain had powered the darkspell.

"That will be fine." She seemed to even breathe easier, her shoulders lowering. Perhaps his Sunshine just wanted the appearance of privacy.

He disappeared around the curve of the hall, and stopped. The conversation from the gathering room ahead was enough now that he had to turn back toward her and concentrate to hear her clearly.

"You will not go, either." Her voice was very haughty.

"I assume you are speaking of another mission to the Fortress you were held in?"

"Let me be clear, groundbear."

Ty bit his lip to keep from laughing. She sounded so fierce.

"I'm listening."

Ty frowned. Odan sounded so intrigued.

"Here, in this place, I trust you. I won't have your body power their evil. I won't risk you suffering a bad death."

"I am a warrior, Sunny. The admiration I feel for you does not extend to turning from my duty."

"I will give you a good death rather than let your pride help them."

Ty held his breath, his body tightening to run forward.

"You offer me threat, little one?"

“Listen to me, you striped bastard. When you picked me up, I was forced into a relationship with you I would have refused at any other moment. But at that second, it was out of my power. Your Beast leaders—“

“Truxet, please.”

She ignored Odan’s instruction and kept right on. “—will keep throwing good people away, because pride is universal. But you don’t get to die on that altar of manhood. I’m telling you, nothing the *Truxet* can do will break their hold on that Fortress.”

Ty could hear her soft pants. He took a step forward, feeling the tug of her panic on their bond. Was this going to send her into another flashback? She plowed on.

“The thought of you ending in a bad death, strengthening them, makes me want to cry. And I hate crying. You’re not going to go. I couldn’t give Ty a good death, because it would have killed me to kill him. I couldn’t use this promise on him, and thank every Element or Spirit that ever moved his Alpha forbade him or it would have broken me.”

Odan soothed her. “Ty has you, Sunny. Warriors with mates would not be sent on such a mission, even though his experience at the Fortress cannot be discounted.”

Ty frowned. His tongue ran over his dull human teeth. He craved the feel of a flesh-strike against his beak. The need to feast on darkmage bodies made his stomach grumble.

Sunny’s voice became clearer. She’d turned to face him. “I mean it, Odan. I’d say this to anyone I cared about. I’d rather see you dead by my own hand, quickly, while you’re free. Fynn stood at my ... connection ... to Ty this morning. And now he’s gone. It’s insane. I told him. And now I hope you’ll be more inclined to believe me.”

“Oh, I believe you, Sunny. I hope never to face death at your hands.”

Uh-oh. Ty heard the clear humor in Odan’s voice. He heard Sunny’s harsh inhalation.

“You don’t believe me, skymage? You don’t believe—“

“Enough.” Odan’s voice stopped her, and Ty moved forward another step, despite the lack of heat to his words. “I understand your fear for me, and thank you for it. I understand we have underestimated them, and every time we fail, they grow more powerful. But woman, we cannot stop fighting. We *cannot*. Even in the face of certain death.”

Sunshine made a sound and Odan hissed at her. Ty would not stay away. He strode forward while Odan kept speaking.

“We are creatures of hope, and the darkness is our blood enemy. We do not waste life on pride. That’s not fair of you. If I am called to go, I’ll go believing I can change some small balance of power, achieve some small measure of information. You have no right to take that from me.”

Ty stopped at Sunshine’s shoulder, his body quivering to keep from pressing against her. He stared at Odan, but the man merely acknowledged him with a glance and looked back down at his rigid mate.

Sunny rocked his world by leaning back against him, trusting him to be there. He held her through the simplest contact of her shoulder against his chest.

She whispered to Odan, “Well maybe you should sleep a little bit lighter.”

Ty blinked. Odan blinked.

And then both men threw back their heads and roared with laughter. Ty braced his arm against the stone walls of his clanhome, and howled until his stomach ached. Odan scrubbed his hand over his face, and had a hard time controlling his guffaws. Sunshine sidled away from them and leaned her back against the opposite wall, glaring at both of

them, arms crossed.

Finally, when Ty had his chuckles down to sporadic bursts, she said crossly, “Can we eat now?”

He held out his arm, and she stepped forward, chin high. Grinning at Odan, who was chewing on his lips to stop himself, he followed his mate down the hall.

* * * *

She woke up to the soft glow of a child’s lowest setting on a single magelight. She lay on a firm, comfortable bed with a soft blanket, slightly fuzzy, tucked around her. She lifted her head from the pillow and looked quickly around her. The room was a bit bigger than her cell. It was furnished with a table and chairs, and there were niches full of clutter all over the walls.

Propping herself up on her elbows, she saw the same arch-to-floor tapestry flap all the other rooms had as doors. This one was designed with a large, splayed, hand. Lying across the doorway was Ty. He had one blanket folded around him, and his neck arched to the carpeted floor in a painful-looking angle. His mouth was slack, and even in the low light, dark bruises winged under his eyes. One powerful shoulder was bare above the blanket, and rounded with muscle.

Sunny sat up, crossing her legs tailor-style. This was Ty’s room. She knew it, somehow. A scent rose from the blankets, and to her surprise, it relaxed the tension she’d instantly gained upon waking. Lifting the pillow to her face, she inhaled deeply. Ty. Gold laughter, resolute honor, and somehow, an innocence that not even nine darkmages could destroy.

She opened her eyes and stared at the man who was basically her husband. She’d live here with him, in this small room, helping his people do whatever it was they did besides uselessly throw themselves at darkmages. He’d been hers to care for, and she had, much more than she’d wanted to. The repayment was in her favor many times over.

Over the past few days, she’d painfully recounted most of what happened to her, and everything she could remember about the darkmages. In return, a friend had gone to battle, ignoring her information, and died. His body now strengthened a beebie, waiting for the next batch of stupid Truxet.

But her Ty wouldn’t be one of them. She’d begged, and he hadn’t promised. But her pleading before his Alpha had won her way. That was something to remember. Ty wouldn’t bend to her, but he’d bend to his Alpha, who was protective of him. Good.

Sunny stretched, her hands high above her head, hands folding into fists. Relaxing, she recalled the foggy details of stuffing her belly and meeting Ty’s parents, grandmother, and half-brother. They’d been cautious. Of him, actually, more than her. They’d been quiet and kind, and she remembered little else except he had his mother’s coloring and his brother Teju was young. Odan had gone before the meal.

Patting her belly, she delighted that she still felt full. A huge yawn stretched her face, and when she finished, it finally occurred to her Ty was too far away. What was he doing on the floor in his own home? A deep frown settled into her forehead first, before cascading down to her mouth. She noticed all his hesitations. The way he came near, then pulled away. He treated her like she’d rave at him. He treated himself like he was dangerous.

Flipping the cover away, she bumped her way to the edge of the bed, and slid her

legs into the cool pre-morning air. It had only been afternoon when they'd eaten, so she'd slept a long time indeed. She wasn't particularly surprised. It had been a tumultuous day. The carpets were thick but coarse under her feet. This was the first time she'd awoken not under the watchful gaze of Fynn and Odan. She'd miss her new friends, for different reasons, but their absence paled against the fascination of Ty. She paced to him and knelt, calling up the magelight until she could see him clearly.

Ty was an extremely handsome man. His nose was a bit big, but it complimented his wide mouth. His sharp cheekbones didn't quite match his delicate eyelashes. Those eyelashes swept up, and his sunset-rich gaze locked with hers.

He blinked, and she saw his pupils dilate and retract, focusing on her. He was awake as instantly as that, yet lay there, waiting for her.

Trying to keep her irritation with him from her voice, she whispered, "Am I your wife?"

"You are my Bonded."

Hmm. That wasn't the right question. "What will we do, when they've taken all the reports they can from us, and no longer kill people by sending them to the darkmages?"

Ty sat up. The blanket fell from his bare torso. Fields of warm skin spread before her, his scent strong and sweet.

She tried again. "What is our life going to be like?"

"You'll have some training to complete. Everyone here works at something of their choice. I'll be asked to take on duties, usually healing and studying my craft. The seasons have a rhythm, and every fall is the great Autumnal."

Sunny shook her head, feeling her hair shimmer on her scalp. He didn't understand what she was reaching for. "You really think we can just pretend? Just act like it never happened?"

Ty shifted one arm forward, then laid it on the blanket, as if that was what he meant to do. "I think it will get easier with time."

Sunny put her head in her hand, her elbow resting on her knee. Shoving her hand through her hair, she pinned him with her stare. "We are scarred. You and me, together. Look at you, lying on the floor, unable to touch me."

His head tossed back as if she'd swung at him. His lips a thin line, he spoke in a low voice. "We'll live, Sunshine. We're together, and we'll live."

Her heart stuttered, and heat bloomed. A direct strike to her chest. She rubbed her breastbone. Peace settled into her. "Yes." He did understand. "Yes, Ty."

"What are you trying to say?"

All right, maybe he didn't understand. "I'm sorry I'm not saying this right." She reached out and put her fingers on the back of his hand. She could feel bone, and hair, and warmth. For so long, his hands had been out of her reach.

"We're different now. We're new." They'd ruined her, but hadn't had a chance to destroy him. She'd gotten him out. No, they'd gotten out together. "I will have the shadow of that darkspell in me all my life. And while I faced them all over a longer period of time, nothing happened to me that was as bad as their attempts to break you. They never focused their full power on me, hour after day." She closed her eyes and scrubbed at them with her fingers. "I never want to see chains again."

His hand turned under her light touch, his fingers brushing her palm. She opened her eyes and wished she could smile at him, as he did. He was like some beacon defying the

night.

“Don’t forget. Chains didn’t hold me.” His eyes actually twinkled, moving from sparks of orange to amber and back again.

She took his hand in a tight grip, and dug into her knee with her other hand. “Ty, I would walk through blood and fire to be by your side. I’ll live this life, with these people and their silly rules and their silly need for the myth of justice. I’ll live it with you, for you, but I don’t think I’m ever going to be a part of it. I’m alive. I’m with you. Neither of us are in chains. That’s what’s essential. That’s what’s real to me. Do you understand? You are all that matters to me. I’m yours.” She looked at him intently, searching to see if she’d managed to connect.

His thumb swept along the outside of her hand. The hairs on her arm lifted. He spoke with emotion vibrating his quiet words. “Despite all you’d been through, you dared to reach out to me. No one else will understand my nightmares. And I understand yours. They didn’t have to break my hawk. They infected me with hate, and a rage that will never die. It’s like a shadow eating at my heart, every moment. But then there’s you, sewing up my scars, every moment.”

Her hand eased the grip on her knee. Breath sighing from her, she returned his caress with her own thumb. “Yes. So, Ty ... what the fuck are you doing on the floor?”

Ty went still. When he failed to breathe, she shook his hand a little. “You think you’re protecting me? But you’re the only person I trust. I will never fear you.”

And then her craft, the part of her that was dormant, scarred, and buried, bloomed in between her shoulder blades. It was like wings unfurling across her shoulders, cascading down the back of her ribs. A spiritmage’s connection to someone they’ve walked in never fades. Her souldance with Ty was stronger than any other she’d experienced, and fresh between them. It wasn’t the same as reading someone’s mind, which she could only do if she was in a souldance with them. But it was very close, because she could sift through her knowledge of him and pull up his memories if she actively tried.

The amazing thing about this moment was that she wasn’t trying. It was like her desire to reach past the gulf he kept between them had become its own spell, and the knowledge was there. “The Merry Three. You’re—“ She couldn’t single out one word for what seethed inside him regarding that final act they’d stumbled through together.

He tried to pull his hand away, but she held on.

“Yes, you’ve found the nightmare that haunts me most. Leave it be. I’m a mess, Sunshine. I won’t discuss this with you. Time will help.”

Sunny reached out her free hand and touched Ty in the middle of his forehead. He turned from her, pulling his face away. It hurt, physically, to see him try to hide from her. It felt like her ribs were too small for her lungs.

“I’m being respectful of the fact you still have healing to do, and that we’d spoken once in a sane setting before you joined your life to mine. I don’t ever want you to feel obligated or pressured by me in any way.”

“Oh, Ty.” He was so mixed up.

“You’ve saved me over and over. Let’s wait. You have much to discover Sunny, about my people and yourself. There’s no rush.”

And abruptly she knew that there was. Her craft tingled across her back. There was a window of time here, and it was closing. If she didn’t settle Ty’s nightmares soon, they would be locked into a careful, respectful, distant relationship where she was a victim and

he was her protector. If she didn't knock down this barrier he'd put up, she'd never be a woman who stood equally with her husband. Her mate, or whatever he was. She needed to create a new view of herself for him. Preferably now.

The problem was Sunny had never seduced a man in her life. She'd befriended them and then become a lover, or she'd been seduced herself. *Don't think of the Monster.* She'd had sex a few times with men who'd asked, but nothing where she'd had to lure. It had been so easy to disappear into Ty's body after their ceremony. Freeing and powerful.

There, that was the way to do it. *She* wanted it. Make it about her, and he'd agree, because then his nobility would give an excuse to his own desire. Like before when he'd stretched beneath her and let her use him while she reawakened to pleasure. But this time she had to make sure she was engaging him. She had to be his partner. She wished she could smile, tease him into this. But with her, there was only weight.

"I'm lonely, Ty. I don't want a healer. I want my man to stand by my side, or against my back, or to face me completely."

He looked away from their clasped hands. The warmth of his eyes flashing in the low light kicked the excitement in her chest down to her gut.

"I finally have someone I trust enough to touch. And I care for you enough that I want to touch you." She held her free hand out to him, palm up, fingers splayed. "I can put my hands on you. My choice. For pleasure. Knowing you want my touch, too."

One set of hands gripped tightly, but her other hung between them, a request she wanted him to answer. She rolled her eyes up at him, looking at him from under her lashes. Licked her lips, because they suddenly prickled. His eyes followed her tongue like it was a juicy meal. The thought made the corner of her lips rise. The amusement he was teaching her was so close. It was rising in tiny doses, as only he could make her feel. His eyes jumped to the pre-smile. His body leaned toward her.

"I want to touch you, Ty. And please hear me clearly when I say I want your touch, too."

"Touching you is all that makes sense sometimes," he whispered. His eyes on her mouth brought her tongue to peek through. She licked the swelling, soft skin, and tightened her grip on his large hand.

Her eyes left his face and traveled lower across the swells of him, investigating the ridge of his collarbone, the pricks of his nipples. Hot, smooth skin. His scent, the quiet moment full of promise. He was there before her, his breath falling warm against her upturned palm. Her hand was shaking, her shoulder tight from holding her hand up to him. "You're so perfect."

"I'm yours, Sunshine. Dark warrior, so brave. I'll be whatever you need."

Her hand was on his chest. The muscle was firm, and her fingertips flexed his skin just barely where she curled her fingertips. His heat throbbed against her palm after the cool air, and sizzled up her arm, through her shoulder to her tightening throat. Oh, no. She'd wanted him to take hold of her, but as usual, she was weaker.

She raised up on her knees, bracing herself on his chest. The heel of her palm tested his density, her nails tested his pores. Her hand was dark against him, her skin several tones more golden. Her knuckles found the softest hollows, and her thumb rubbed sinuous patterns behind her sweeping hand.

His breath eased from him, and his lids lowered. "So good." His thumb rubbed the outside of her hand again, where their fists seemed to have melted into a single unit. She

no longer had any idea how to separate their two hands. It merely felt natural for the sensation of her fingers to be surrounded by him.

He sat tailor-style before her, his lower half hidden by a light woven blanket. "I will never take this for granted. That you touch me in pleasure humbles me."

Again, her spiritcraft struck her, tightening a band around her forehead. The Merry Three's sickening laughter echoed once before their evil memory was lost under the hard beat of his heart under her fingertips. He might tell himself he was holding back to respect the violence done to her, but it was more than that. He was afraid of himself.

Her throat burned, and her breasts ached with the weight of her tight, throbbing nipples. His scent grew stronger with the heat building between them, and she couldn't keep her fingers still as they roamed his torso. She had to make this about him learning to reach for her. She had to slow down, had to lure him in.

Ty took a deep breath that spread his chest beneath her touch. He arched his back, his shoulders rolling to press himself toward her. "Please. Whatever you need."

She stopped breathing for one moment, then told herself that even though it was a baby step, it was him coming to her. Need prickled every iota of skin, and her thighs melted with urgency.

Tearing her hand from his, Sunny scrambled to her feet, pulling her dress free, and taking off her underclothes. She gestured to Ty, who sat frozen in his blanket. "Get up." Impatience boiled through her. She wanted more. Now. She could lure him out just as well when they were together.

Ty rose, a slow cascade of blanket revealing him. He was erect, his cock thick and straight. She wanted to kneel before him and explore it, but checked that thought. It would trigger memories of her washing him, for both of them. She looked around the room, desperate for an idea to get her face near his groin.

"Will you sit on the table?"

He moved past her, and she watched his butt flex and hollow with his easy steps. One scoot, and he was on the table, his legs a vee framing his flaring cock. She spared a glance for his powerful legs, his large feet, and then pulled a chair up between his legs. The scent of him hit her hard. Unlike his pillow, the only thing it made her think of was sweaty furs, and sharp, tight pleasure.

Her breath was coming in hard, small pants. The smooth wood of the chair was cool under her ass. She was so excited by the amazing reality of Ty seated nude before her, all hers to touch and enjoy, she had to close her eyes for a moment. The scent of him hit even harder, a burst of rich man making her thighs clench.

Slow down. This isn't really, entirely about you. Draw him out, show him I want a partner, not a toy. "Give me your hands." She stroked down his forearms, so tense they were roped with veins, and lifted his hands. The skin was thick, calloused and warm. She was losing the moment, losing her ability to think. Every sensation, the intensity of him, was drowning her. His erection bobbed, and her mouth burst with so much saliva she had to swallow.

Glancing up at him, she saw he was staring at her chest. "Listen to me. I want your touch. Do you hear me?" She gripped his hands with all her strength, doing her best to crush the truth of her desire into his bones. She shook her arms against the laxness of his, raging at how he still waited for her to take charge. *"Touch me."*

"Show me," he grated, his voice low.

That wasn't right. Those weren't the words she wanted to hear, but her tongue needed his skin. Something was essentially off...

"Whatever you need, Sunshine. Show me." His order was clipped, tight, and his hips lifted toward her face, the thigh muscles jumping, his abs a stark pattern.

She squirmed on the chair, moisture leaking between her thighs and cheeks. She rotated her hips, rubbing her inner lips together, and moaning at the tightness wrapping around her hips. Lifting her hands, she put his on her head, then pressed them to her scalp. Her whole body shook with excitement. His cock was right there, a part of him she had no fear of.

She put her hands on the strips of bulging muscle in his thighs, and leaned in to wrap her lips around the tip of him. He was thick and hot in her mouth. She wanted badly to bite down on him. Her tongue explored the ridge and hollows of him. She had to swallow against the saliva leaping to her mouth, and moaned at the salty taste of him.

Ty moaned as well, and that really did it for her. She swirled her hips against the flat, unsatisfying chair. Sliding her hands firmly up to his hips, she gripped him tight. His hands wrapped almost entirely around her skull, his fingers toying with the damp hollow at the top of her spine. He didn't press on her, but the extra weight of his touch made it easy to sink lower onto the rigid column nudging against her teeth. The table was rough against her breasts as she slid her mouth deeper onto his gorgeous cock. When she'd packed her throat, she laved him with her tongue. Drawing off of him to gather her breath, she admired the shine she'd left on his length.

There were scars slashing across one side of him. The skin of his tip was as dark as she was, and his hair around the base of him was darker as well, a soft brown. Sunny put the wide tip of him to her lips and pushed her mouth down around him, rolling her lips over her teeth. She could feel every dip and rise of him as she drove her mouth down, down, stretching her jaw wide. She drew back off of him with strong suction, and he choked. The sound of his need, and the thickness of his private flesh in her mouth, made her belly tug, tighten, need.

She laid her head on his thigh, the hairs coarse against her cheek. "Ty?" She wanted to come, she wanted to toy with him, but before she lost all control, she knew she had to find a way to make him participate more. His cock lunged under the soft push of her breath, and she sensed his chest working deeply above her.

"I heard something, about having a bodymage as a lover." She shifted in her chair, aching, trembling.

"Yeah."

She licked her lips, rubbing her tense thighs restlessly. "Can you make me come? I want it *now*, knowing you did it, that you made me."

One breast pressed against his leg and she rubbed her tip against him. It made her belly clench. She used to be irritated by her chest. Now, her body was simply what it was. She looked down at herself, seeing the slight mounds and the tiny, dark nipples that were barely bigger than his. The skin of the nipple was very dark, almost a cocoa brown, but the very tip lightened, the skin there thicker, forming a little ball.

Ty's huge hand came into her view, and she froze, heart thudding furiously behind her ribs. There was nothing for him to truly cup, but his hand curved under the swell of her, and his thumb circled her tip once before settling over the top of it with a heavy warmth. With one hand on the crown of her head, and the other cupping her small breast,

his craft sparked, racing through her blood, igniting her bones. The force of him rolling through her body surprised her. She hadn't thought she'd actually feel his craft, the push of him, as he tightened the heat.

And then he was at the point of her, the center of her body, the very tip of her clit, where the pleasure was so shocking, so bright. She stared at his big thumb resting on her nipple, and felt him seize her body, holding her immobile. Her body was frozen, bones locked in place, muscles unresponding. But inside, her body was alive with movement, and she was suddenly aware of all of it. Blood rushing, heart squeezing, lungs stretching, and inner folds swelling, slicking.

His fingers stroked around her, brushed her tip, and thrummed it. She could only watch the small movements, frozen, slack in the embrace of his legs, the taste of him thick in her mouth. Then his fingers leisurely came together, and clamped around the bead of her. The sight echoed perfectly the harsh press of pleasure between her legs. Rigid, shaking, silent, the orgasm wiped out everything, expanding the moment.

"Ty!" Her voice was high and thin.

With a shove, her shoulders met the cold rungs of the chair back. Movement flashed at the edge of her knowledge, and then he was kneeling between her legs, shoving them open, holding her nipple in his firm grip. Gasping, she tried to pick up her head, but the pleasure wouldn't let her go. The endless breath of her orgasm came and went, *but the pleasure didn't stop*. She shook, her whole body convulsing, muscles overwhelmed.

His hand shoved between her legs, and two fingers pushed into her heat. "Sunshine."

The press of him opening her body, delving into soft tissue, made the orgasm twist her spine. He was inside her bones, inside her lungs, inside her. The sensation in her clit turned to pain, and a shriek ripped from her before he froze her throat. She was nothing but pleasure, light, heat, imploding in an exquisite agony. She was dying, and she wanted it.

Then his hands were gone, and she slumped in her chair. Her body was coated in sweat, and tremors shook her repeatedly. Finally, she picked her head up enough to focus on him kneeling stiffly between her legs. His face was harsh, his eyes narrowed while his lips parted to accommodate his panting breath.

Her spiritmage connection with him snapped into place. He was afraid of what he'd done to her. It had confirmed something, and he felt sick. It took her three tries before she could lift her hand up to his face. Reluctantly, he raised his up to support her, kissing her inner wrist softly.

"Ty..."

He closed his eyes.

"Thank you. That was exactly what I wanted. You are amazing. We'll do that again sometime."

His head jerked, a tiny, short movement. His eyes opened in a blaze of orange flame. She read self-loathing in them. "Will you get on the bed with me?" she asked.

In two heartbeats, she was scooped into his arms, gasping at the ease with which he whirled her, laying her out on the bed. Then he stood at the side, hovering. She scooted over, and he lay down next to her. Her body was melted, struggling in the aftermath of the cataclysmic orgasm.

It was all she could do to roll onto her side, worming her way up to him until her head was perfectly cupped by his shoulder, his arm curving behind her. She tossed one

leg over the huge rise of his, and her free arm explored him again. Just like before, she was soon lost in the fascination of him, the sensation of muscle and life.

A long while later, when her fingers had explored every bit of him she could reach, she finally danced her throbbing fingertips into the crinkly hairs at the base of his tall erection. He still wasn't touching her. He hadn't taken satisfaction in fulfilling her desire. She was drowning in skin, his and hers. All she could focus on was how close he was. Ty. Here, lying next to her. Right here. Hers. But now she knew she'd failed. She'd gotten lost in the beauty of him, and somehow, the connection she'd sought had slipped through her fingers.

When she closed her hand around his base, she turned her head, and sent her lips exploring in the path her hands had taken. The urgency of her passion before had faded. Now, the need was different. Something she'd never felt before. Something so beautiful, so fragile.

Her palm throbbed as she shifted her grip on him. His hips punched once, pulling on her hand, before falling back, rigid. She propped herself on her elbow. "Don't stop yourself, Ty. Touch me. Move with me. I'm yours."

It was still several moments before the arm cradling her moved, coming tighter and harder around her, his hand spread wide across one breast. She'd moved lower by then, her lips toying with the edges of his ribs, while her fingers had made it up to the peach-soft skin of his head.

His other hand rose from his far side to settle lightly on her hair, sifting through the strands. It made her shiver, his nails stirring her scalp. She laved the upper set of muscles mounding in his abdomen. He sent his fingers down around her ear. His hand on her breast pressed tighter.

Happiness unlike anything she'd ever known unfolded in her chest. They were *together*. She hadn't quite convinced him she wanted all of his desire, to touch her as freely as she knew he let her touch him. But they'd made small progress, she was sure of it. And on top of that essential growth was the fact he felt so shockingly *good*. Touching him was beautiful.

Her hand drifted down his cock and kept going, feathering over his balls. His hips stabbed up, so she did it again. His hand left her breast with a swipe of his thumb over her nipple, and settled hard over her belly. She closed her hand around his balls while she closed her lips over his nipple. He pressed her stomach, and moisture rolled out of her in a thick wash, trickling onto his thigh. She kissed his nipple harder, grinding her hips against him, rolling his damp, soft balls until she could feel their hard centers.

"I want you inside me," she panted.

His hands moved to grip her ribs, and then she was up and on him, draped over his heat. His cock prodded her cunt, and she shuddered. Burying her face in his neck, she licked up the muscle there, sucking at the place that beat with his blood. His hands coasted down to her ass, palming each cheek. He pressed her down, nudging her against his cock. The skin there was so sensitive from her orgasm, she jerked, shivering. His hands went to her thighs, pulling them wider. His commanding touch made her close her eyes. She bit lightly at his throat, her hands kneading his shoulders. His fingers slid back up over her ass to her waist. His grip settled in there, and she moaned at the feeling of how big and strong he was beneath her, holding her. He tucked his hips and his cock head kissed the gaping mouth of her.

“Ty, yesss...” She whispered between kisses.

With a flex of the chest she lay on, he dragged her body six inches down his, sheathing himself in her cunt. The feeling of him settling his length deep made her sigh. She took him easily. He felt cool for a moment, and then she squeezed herself tight around him. Her mouth was now directly over his nipple, and she took full advantage.

After she'd thoroughly eaten both nipples, she licked up his breastbone and lifted her head. Her hips would bear the imprint of his fingers gripping her forever. She squirmed a bit, and looked up at him. His head was thrown back, the long lines of his throat beautiful. Oh, how she wanted. So she took the moment and used it like he wanted her to. “Ty, I don't have the strength, from before. Roll us. Take me.”

There was no pause between her sentence and his reaction. He rolled, burying his face in her throat, and his body slid steadily in hers. Braced on his forearms, his chest pressed against hers without crushing her. His hands burrowed under her shoulders, and his thighs spread hers wide. Trapped between him and the bed, with his strength surging over her, she lifted into him. He went deeper, and the long slide of him seating hard in her body sent her breath bursting with every stroke.

The rhythm went on, stretching, steady. Too steady. Her hands swept his back, from neck to ass. Her legs struggled around his. Finally, she ordered. “Ty! Take me!”

He stopped. Her body heaved under him, aching at the delay.

He whispered, “I love you, Sunshine.” He kissed her, opening her lips and drinking her breath. Somehow, he cocked his pelvis and pressed against her clit.

She came. A long groan ripped from her throat as her body went rigid. The pleasure was as soft as his tongue pressing into hers. Her nails bit into his spine, but he kissed her until she slackened beneath him. He pressed tiny closed mouth kisses to her jaw, her cheek, the corner of her eye. “Thank you.”

Her hands stroked over the indentations from her nails. “Yeah, right. You're welcome.” Her voice was low and throaty.

He drew one of his hands up from underneath her to cup her face, his thumb gripping her chin, insisting on her focus. “I feared we'd never be able to truly make love. But despite everything, your history, what I did before, the newness, we did.”

When her hands delved into his hair, it was thick and sweaty. She combed through the curls, remembering how good it had felt when he'd touched hers like this. “Ty, man of mine, your hard cock is inside me. Quit *worrying*, and *finish*.”

“Do you want to watch?”

She met his eyes, surprised to see they were almost bright yellow with the shining gold of them. Pressing a quick kiss to his chin, she said, “Yes.”

He adjusted her under him, his thighs shifting against the stretched cradle of hers. He pumped himself in a few leisurely, shriekingly sweet thrusts, and then ground his hips in harder against hers, shoving his tip tight to something inside her body that pushed back. Holding her breath at the intimate sensation, she watched green magecraft swirl across his gaze before being swallowed in his dilating pupils. His eyes widened, shimmered gold to orange, and his cheekbones went stark. Then his lids fell, his gaze losing focus, and his lips parted, lifting and revealing teeth gritted tight.

It was so sexy she came again, squeezing hard, scraping the tip of her clit against his hips, the heat and ease of it bubbling through her blood. She lost sight of him when it rolled up her spine, making her eyes roll back in her head.

He settled onto her, his body relaxing with a final shudder. The weight made her purr, even if the sweat between them was uncomfortable. Snuggling her face against his, she draped her arms over his back and closed her eyes. His breathing steadied, settled, and rocked her back to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

When he woke up, he was still in her body. He'd moved to the side of her in the night, but their hips remained sealed. So easy, he could harden and gently fuck her awake between kisses. He squeezed his eyes tight, wishing he could trust himself to keep it that way. Hawk flapped and fluffed inside him. With sorrow, he drew himself from the clasp of her wet heat.

He'd almost killed her last night. He'd used his craft to trigger a lover's orgasm before, but never controlled it like that. Easing fully off her, he couldn't keep from leaving his hand spread on her concave belly, tight with muscle. She had offered him passion, and he'd taken her trust and gorged on it. Never in his life had he taken such control over someone's body. At the end, he'd breathed for her, felt her heartbeat settle into him, as he'd forced her body to accept pleasure beyond the natural burst of endorphins. It had been a high unlike anything he'd known, to control Sunshine's body. He'd come. Repeatedly. In the time he extended her orgasm, he'd given up three of his own. Renewing a boner was easy for a bodymage. If it had been sweet pain for him, what kind of torture had it been for her?

What had he done? There was no way he could sink into the dominant sex he'd enjoyed before. Especially not with Sunshine, who'd suffered slavery. He knew about the shadow that bitch had left in him, and yet when Sunshine asked, he'd jumped into the chance to control her pleasure, instead of denying her, distracting her with something else. He was weak. He was dangerous. So was she. With two strokes of her mouth on his cock, he would have done anything she asked, regardless of the wisdom. Fire and Water, she'd had him with nothing more than a touch, let alone her intimate kiss.

Yet she hadn't fought him about what he'd done to her. Hadn't cried. Didn't even seem to realize what a pervert he was. She'd taken the lead while he was reeling, and he'd managed to participate in a normal, gentle lovemaking. He'd done it. Without any rough kink, without any domination from either of them, they'd exchanged pleas and passion and shared a beautiful moment.

It almost killed him. He could do it again, wanted to do it right now, but the fight to stay in the moment, to control the gentleness of his hands, make sure she was leading the cusp of the action, keeping it all to her pace, was exhausting. When she'd come again with him at the end, he'd almost cried.

Now their mingled scent marked his bedding anew. No more painful nights, holding himself from going to her. He drifted his fingers over one stark hipbone. He'd make sure she tried some of the sandcat's spicy stew today. And share some of the richer sweets of the Clans, too. He really loved the thin sticky candy of his Clan, but the bears had the edge on the chocolate dishes women seemed to love. When she'd fallen asleep at dinner last night, she'd only had a small portion. Eggs with cheese this morning, definitely.

His fingers drifted idly from scar to scar. Looking up her torso at her breasts—now there was a dessert for you—something eased in him when he saw the cut above her nipple hadn't left a scar. More probably, whoever had served as her bodymage when they'd first landed at River Mountain had healed the wound. Disgust twisted in him. He hadn't even been able to stay with his Bonded, watch over her, heal her. He'd landed, his

mind aching from the darkspell and the wrenching pain of sifting so many people, and then his hawk had erupted, its only thought to hide their guilt and fly. He'd left her alone, scared and hurt, while his beastspirit soared and hid.

He was an asshole. Days later, his Alpha had organized the matebond, and he'd selfishly, eagerly agreed. Like she could have said no, under suspicion and being told he needed her. Ty trailed his fingers down her arm, a gentle, soothing touch. She'd been amazing in the matebond. Confused and in pain, they'd found each other through the tatters of her craft. Something was going on with that connection, last night. She'd poked at his shame, and before he could follow it through, his cock had been buried in her mouth. He shivered. Watching her reach for him, hearing her tell him what she wanted, knowing she trusted him beyond all others, taking her pleasure boldly ... his cock almost got hard from remembering her before he wrestled control and sucked the blood back, painfully wilting it.

It was much easier to watch her glow above him, to follow her, than to try to strike a balance. He'd stick to giving her control if he could. It was safest, and fucking exciting. To know she'd been a slave, and yet with him she rose to master, it brought a lump to his throat. He could give her that, so easily, with such joy.

"Mmpf."

He paused his stroke on her arm, settling his hand around hers. She squeezed his grip back. Something eased in his chest, and his hawk hunkered down.

"Your thinking woke me up." Her voice was thick and adorable from sleep.

"I'm such a clumsy clod."

She stretched, and he had to control his cock again. When she burrowed into his side, he eased his arm around her and thanked the Six. "Good morning, Sunshine." His old words felt natural.

She sighed, yawned, and stretched again, a long, warm line against him. "Yeah." She squirmed until her head tipped back and the green of her eyes jumped at him. "We're amazing together, Ty."

He smiled, and tried to mean it. Briskly rubbing her upper arm, taking advantage of the last touch he could glean in the aftermath of their loving, he turned up the magelights to a daytime setting. "Hungry? I want to feed you."

She yawned again, and even her bad breath was cute. He sent a pulse into her, erasing it, and any he might have as well.

"Definitely. I'm starving."

He sat up and eased off the bed. "How does cheesy eggs sound?"

"Perfect."

He opened his trunk and shuffled through it. Found a robe and gave it to her. "Bath, then breakfast."

She sat up and frowned at the robe. "What then?"

He pulled a pair of shorts on for the walk to the baths. "I'm sure they'll have a report request waiting for us. When you fell asleep after supper, I refused to wake you up for the full recollection the Council is waiting for." They usually had lists of questions, to which too many of his answers were 'unknown.' "The Council will want to meet with us today. And the Water girl is waiting."

"That all sounds really awful. Come back to bed, and let's repeat how the morning went."

He looked at her sharply, the teasing surprising him, thrilling him. But she wasn't teasing. She was serious. Sitting with her shining hair mussed, bare-chested and comfortable in his bed, he took a step toward her before he remembered himself. "Bath. Food. We have obligations, Sunshine. I promise we'll do something fun today."

She sighed and climbed from the bed. Her ass was tight, and her long legs smooth. He smelled himself mixed with her private cream, and inhaled deeply. Hawk flapped inside, proud. She pulled the dark green robe around her. Frowned again at it.

"You can pick out your own robe if you don't care for that one."

She looked at him, and her lips still looked plump and red. "This is a woman's robe. Why did you have a woman's robe in your trunk?"

He grinned, happy with her suspicion. "For a woman."

"Any woman." She crossed her arms.

"Any woman who might need it."

She took a deceptively lazy path around the table he was now much more fond of. "Any woman who might find herself in your room needing a robe." She stopped in front of him, and leaned against his chest.

He took the lapels gently in his fists and drew her close, lowering his head. He hovered over her lips, denying himself. "You are the only woman who will ever need a robe in this room again."

She looked up at him, and that small smile curled one side of her mouth. She kissed him, quick and hard. "Good. I'm sticky, and I stink. Wash, then food."

In the baths, several deep plunge pools with stairs for little ones were already occupied.

"Morning, Tydus!" Several people called out to him, looking curiously at Sunshine. "Congratulations!"

"Many thanks," he answered, returning people's greetings. He saw Sunshine's assessing gaze, and wondered if she wouldn't prefer the private bath back at the holding cells. He hadn't warned her of how a Clan's life tangled together. But after a moment of cataloging the warriors and their families, she hung her robe on the side and moved into one of the baths that was empty.

She gave him a wry look. "Gee, stairs. There's a handy technique."

Ty grinned. "It just gives me an excuse to watch your beautiful behind walk out of the water." He jumped in, dunked his hair, and passed her the soap.

She shook her head. "Where did Odan go?"

She was soaping herself, and it was all he could do to stay an arm's length from her. "Don't you remember? Fen came into dinner with a Council order to desist his guard when you are here in the Eyrie with me."

"Odan left during dinner? I only vaguely remember that."

"You were exhausted. You slept hours last night."

"Yes." The thoughtful tone to her voice made him look more closely. She paused, staring blindly into the water, lost in thought.

"What is it?"

She looked up at him, and her eyes glowed. "I slept last night. And I didn't dream."

"That's good, huh?"

She threw herself forward with a rush of water, flinging her arms around his neck. "You take my nightmares away. You make me new." Her words were so quiet, barely

mouthed against his chest. He gathered her close, folding down around her. Her slick body against his was torture and peace. When would this pounding desire for his mate fade to the comfortable acceptance he saw in other pairs?

Then he realized he, too, had had no nightmares last night. "We're good together." He spoke quietly into her ear, and watched gooseflesh erupt over her shoulder.

She pressed in tighter to him. "We're together. And you're not going back."

He wrapped her tight, squeezing her thin frame, returning her strength. He didn't respond, because he wouldn't promise that. He wasn't going back soon, but if there came a time when they attacked in earnest, he needed to be there.

She pulled back, taking his face firmly between her hands. She studied him intently, wiping a trail of water from his cheek. "Now all I have to do is get you out of that room."

Ice slid down his spine, and it was all he could do not to jump away from her. Her words didn't make any clear sense. He would pretend to be confused, thinking she meant his room they'd slept in. But he knew she was talking about the Fortress. Talking about his nightmare. He took her wrists and lowered her hands from him. Kissing the fingers of one hand, he playfully waggled his eyebrows. "Oh, I'll get out of that room all right. I think there was a certain request for a certain Sunshine to be in sunshine."

She grabbed his hand and drew it up to her mouth. His heart seized when her mouth opened and her little white teeth grazed the tough calluses on his middle finger. She closed her lips around the tip of him and sucked. Her flicking tongue may as well have been a knife puncturing his lungs. He stared, frozen and mesmerized, as she took one fingertip and made it the most erogenous place on his body. Her long, delicate fingers held him firmly while she breathed over it, then mouthed him gently with her soft lips.

A throat cleared softly nearby.

By Ash, sometimes having a little brother was such a pain. "Go away, Teju." She held the suction on his finger while she drew him out of her mouth, and he felt it down to his toes.

"I need to talk to you, Ty."

Sunshine rolled her eyes. A smile was impossible to stop.

"Good morning, Teju." She turned to his brother, lowering herself into the gently churning warm water so her breasts were covered.

"Good morning, Sunny." His brother always got awkward around women.

Ty sighed. "What is it?"

Teju shook his head. "Not here." By the way he kept his gaze pinned on Ty, Ty guessed he didn't want Sunny to hear whatever it was.

"Give me a minute. I'll come to your room."

His brother nodded and left with a mumble at Sunshine.

Sunny didn't pick at it, and they washed in an easy silence. Back at his room, he dressed quickly and watched Sunshine do her hair by combing her fingers through it. "Will you let me talk to him, Sunshine?"

She glared at him. "Let you?"

He tried again. "Will you wait here for me?"

"Yes." She kept the irritated stare so he merely gave her a brief bow, when he wanted to grab her up and devour her mouth, and ducked out.

His brother's room was only a few doors down. The flap was up, inviting visitors, and he ducked under, dropping the heavy leather down flat behind him. "What is it, Te?"

“Hawk has announced the next exploratory team. He refused me. I want you to go to him and speak for me. I think Mother has gotten to him.”

Ty stared at his little brother. Four years separated them, and Ty considered Teju’s mother his own, since his had given him to his father and left to return to the City when he was six. She’d come as a paid woman, and gotten pregnant. She’d done her duty by him, tending him until he was six, and he’d never seen her since. Gretty was the only mother he remembered, and the only one that mattered, although he had no unhappy memories of his real mother.

“I stood chained to a wall for a week thanking the Six it was me that was taken, and not you.”

Teju plopped into a chair. “If you’d stayed with me instead of proving how much faster you are, maybe you would never have been chained at all.”

Ty nodded, but shrugged. “And then I’d never have found Sunshine.”

“I want to go, Ty. I want to be part of this.”

Ty moved forward, keeping his sigh inside, and sat across from Teju. “You don’t have to avenge me, Te.”

“Oh, yeah? Look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t want to go, too, to kill all of them.”

Ty leaned forward. “I’ve been forbidden by Hawk.”

“You’re mated now. Of course you can’t go.”

Ty rubbed his neck.

“But you still want to. Let me go.”

“It’s not my decision, Teju.” Thank the Six. Mother would kill him.

Teju erupted out of his chair and roamed the room. He was going through a black phase, Ty saw. His brother rearranged his room constantly.

“Hawk held races for all single, childless volunteers. I never stood a chance. I’m a good fighter! Just because I’m not as flight-fast as others doesn’t mean I’m not tough.”

Ty appreciated the irony of hearing his twenty-two year old brother whine about losing, and feeling pleased. “This mission calls for speed. It is a fair test. When did this happen?”

“Dawn.”

Ah. About the time he was making love to his mate. “Who was chosen?”

“Will, Klendoz, Sheffy, and Anto.” Te smirked at a set of jesses hanging from a niche. “Of course, Anto! He’s won every race ever since he was ten!”

Te wasn’t exaggerating. “Te, speed might save their lives. Might. Likely, this is a death-duty.”

Te whirled and stared at him, aghast. “We’re stronger than the darkmages!”

Ty stood up, and felt again the ache in his limbs he’d lived with at the Fortress. “No. We’re not.” He went up to his brother. Putting his hand on his shoulder, he looked him straight in those rich brown eyes. “And I won’t ask Hawk to place you on a team. Maybe you’ll earn your way there. Maybe so many will die you’ll get your chance. But I don’t want the ones I love anywhere near them.” With sudden clarity, Ty knew he’d never go back to the Fortress. He wouldn’t hurt Sunshine that way. If he had the opportunity to hunt them in the Cities or the wilderness, he would. But he knew from this moment, the Fortress was a specter he’d have to live with. He’d never face it again, even though that meant breaking his oath to try to free the last of the slaves.

Teju stepped away, irritated. “At this rate, they’ll live to a ripe old age and die in their sleep.”

Ty burst out laughing, a deep guffaw at the thought of pretty-boy Thad old and feeble, storming around having a fit. “We may not be stronger than them in that Fortress, but we’ll find a way to stop them somehow.” He sighed, worried for his friend Will. He refused to be like Sunshine and wish a quick death for him. Instead, he prayed for the Breeze to aid his friend. “We’ll lose good warriors doing it, but we’ll beat them.”

He thought of the woman returned by the dying owl. “What of the woman the Mage Guild sent with the last group?”

Te sat at the table again, drumming his fingers. “She lives.” Te looked up at Ty, arrested. “Maybe the secret lies in teaming with women. You and Sunny got out. And this woman escaped with an owl.”

Ty shuddered, revulsion rolling through his gut at the thought of sending a woman into the Fortress. When the Cities sent a woman as their representative, it must have killed Dom to hold to his promise. It was not in a Trux’s nature to endanger women. “The humans, for all the susceptibility to darkcraft, can be powerful allies. I think you’ve hit on a good idea. We’ve maintained a good relationship with the Royals for years. Maybe it’s time they stepped up in the fight. We thought we had the darkness cowed, but they’ve merely been hiding better than we ever dreamed.” His fists curled tightly. He stretched his neck, clenching his hands until his knuckles popped.

“I’m sorry, Ty.” Teju’s low voice pulled Ty back to the table. “I’m so sorry. If I’d been closer—”

Ty held up a hand. He’d been avoiding his family, not wanting to deal with this. “Let me be clear. It wasn’t fun. But I got out, with a *mate*, no less. The Six are aligning in our favor. Their end is coming. I played a part in that, and I’m proud.” He pictured again that mousy little round rat Russ, with his glasses. Remembered how the man had ripped off Ty’s fingernails one by one, then grew them back, gloating all the while, only to do it over again until Ty screamed his voice away. Then he’d started on his toes. “This wasn’t your fault. And it’s done. If I need your help someday, I’ll come to you. But there is no debt, here.”

His brother met his eyes, a fine warrior, a strong man. Seeing his brother whole and unaware of what pain could do to a man made Ty relax. Te nodded, and the tension between them disappeared. He’d face his father more clearly, hiding less of the shame haunting him. But not today. Hopefully not any time soon.

He shook his brother’s arm, hugged him, and went back to his mate, knowing he could fly faster than Will.

Chapter Twelve

By the time they'd finished their morning report, talking the points over with Odan scribing, she sensed his rage was at a breaking point. He'd been distant when he came back from ten minutes with Teju. He told her a new team of hawks was chosen to try to explore the Fortress, and one of them was a friend. But that wasn't the whole story of why he was so angry.

Spending breakfast being quiet with his parents and politely waving off well-wishers in his Clan's gathering room, then meeting up with Odan and reliving small details of the Fortress hadn't helped. They were in a room with walls of books, and it was very distracting to her. It kept making her remember her old self, in the Temple. Ty picked up on her agitation, yet didn't ask her about it. Of course. Elements forbid he actually reach out to her in any way. His anger triggered hers, and the impotence she felt at being trapped in this room, answering questions she'd already answered, ignited.

That's when a man in a black leather skirt walked in. His skirt was pleated, and longer than others. His black eyes and hair made it seem like a fashion statement, but she recognized that the different style probably had meaning when both men rose to their feet abruptly.

Sunny got to her feet much slower.

"Dom, welcome." Odan gave a little head bow.

Ty did as well. "Hello, Sir. I'm Tydus of the hawk. This is my Bonded, Sunshine."

The tall, broad man nodded to Odan and shook forearms with Ty. He looked at her and said, "Hello, Lady Sunshine."

She folded her arms. "You can call me Sunny." Sunshine had become her private name with Ty. She didn't want him saying it.

"Please, be seated." The man gestured and they all sat back at the heavy table. "I'm Dom, Sunny. The head of the Council who advises the Clans. I wanted to meet you."

Well, here she was. She wanted Ty to reach for her, but he wouldn't, so she reached for him. His hand engulfed hers, and she squeezed it.

"Congratulations on your recent Bonding." He nodded to Ty, who nodded back. "I've read all your reports with interest." He studied her. "It is an extraordinary story. I am impressed by you, and thank you for your help."

Anger was her friend. She'd used it to spit at scarier men than he. She pulled it to her and spoke coldly. "Help? You mean, the information you ignored, sending good people to their deaths?"

Ty coughed.

Dom waved his hand, as if Ty had apologized. "The first skirmish, their creation and use of the beebees, goes to them. The second, the escape of a captured hawk and numerous slaves, goes to us, in large part due to you. The third battle, our test of their defenses, goes to them. I am sorry one of the guards who befriended you was lost. Do not think we do not value his effort, or shrug aside our pain at his loss."

He folded his hands on the table. "However, the Truxet will not hesitate in this war. We'll carefully explore and assess, but we're not going to ignore this darkmage Fortress. Unfortunately, there is much we still need to know. They currently have the upper hand,

but their time for working freely in the dark is over.”

“Fynn is dead.” She leaned in, vibrating with rage. “If you’d listened to me, this second attempt, with hawks who are going to fly through, would have been better. I’ve offered to brief them, practice and give detailed explanations to them. Yet no one has come to me. For all I know, they’ve already left, in their hurry to rush in unprepared.”

“Your map of the Fortress is already very detailed. I’m sure they’ve consulted it.”

“I could put that map in their heads, as I have lived it. Yet I spend my time,” she shoved disdainfully at the Council papers near Odan, “talking about eye color and hand size.”

All three men focused in on her. Dom asked quietly, “That is what I’ve come to speak to you about. Are you ready to souldance? You are now willing to share your memories?”

“I don’t see why we need to go that deep. I can transfer my memories. It should be enough.” She sat back, crossing her arms. “I’m sure my report was clear that I was a priestess.”

“Sunny, you refused all requests to share your memories.” Odan spoke precisely. “Fynn was quite thorough in his arguments.”

“I did not. I refused a souldance. A transfer of insight is an entirely different thing.”

Dom looked at Odan briefly. “Get Quor.” The order was brusque, and Odan didn’t respond beyond leaving in a blur of skin that made Sunny jump. She stared at the empty door across the large room. She’d never seen a person move so fast.

“Why did you not offer this ability before?”

“I’m only slowly reawakening my craft, and it’s definitely damaged. But you never asked me what I could do. You required a souldance and I will never expose myself like that to anyone again.” She glanced at Ty, whose orange eyes smoldered. For him, she’d done it. She’d survived, and wasn’t sorry.

“So you’re saying you have the ability to put your memories directly into another?”

“Not entirely. I can share images, pieces, like someone whisking pictures before your face.”

Dom laid his hand in the middle of the table. “Can you give *me* their faces? Here and now?”

Sunny’s breakfast heaved in her stomach at the thought of using her craft. Looking at Ty, she took warmth from his eyes. It was time to repay the Beasts for giving her a new life. “I can.”

She laid her hand over his. The skill came to her after just a moment’s concentration. *Pressure, containment.* She took her touch away. “You’ve boxed yourself up. I won’t fight my way through. You have to find a way to let me in.”

Ty leaned in. “Sunny, this is huge. If you can pass their faces in a clearer way than the pictures we’ve been trying to construct by our descriptions, we’ll have a much better chance at finding them when they go to the Cities.”

“Tat—Sverre doesn’t leave the Fortress, to my knowledge. If he does, he’s not gone long. Thad, Russ, and Pretar all left for varying amounts of time, but they probably wouldn’t use those names.”

Dom shook his head. “We’ve already canvassed the powerful personalities for those names. They’re not there.” He rolled his head once on his neck. “Let’s try again. Ty, please go to your mate, ground her.”

Ty stood, but hesitated. “She could pass the faces to someone else.”

Dom stared at Ty, his dark eyes hard. “*I* want their faces. Through my role, I can share them widely.” He gently grasped her outlying hand in his. His skin was hard, that of an active warrior.

Ty nodded, and Sunny’s simmering anger went incandescent at his submission to this man. Her Ty had spat, literally, in the faces of the most terrifying darkmages, while he was in their mercy. He didn’t need to be ordered like a child by some politician, even if he did have calloused hands.

“You know what?” She opened her mouth to continue her scathing retort, but just then Dom opened whatever box he’d jammed himself into, and stole her breath. She slammed back in her chair so hard it teetered on its back legs. Ty caught her and set her back down. His hands on her shoulders let her breathe. Dom’s grip on her hand stretched her arm.

“What the fuck—“ she gasped out a breath “—are you?”

The man in front of her looked human. But he wasn’t. Nor was he Trux. He was mage, and many beasts, and churning power thick enough to make her numb. Her reaction to Thad had been attraction. Her reaction to Delavega had been caution. Her reaction to this man was terror. She trembled, and Ty’s hands rubbed at her shoulders through her dress. Her free hand flashed up to grab one of his, desperate to connect.

“I’m the Dom.” His eyes were merciless. They were predator, and they were hungry.

She swallowed with difficulty, feeling her fingers scrabble at Ty’s. He bent down to her. “He is an honorable leader, the best of us. Please, Sunshine. Give him their faces, and he will set in motion a manhunt the likes of which they cannot escape from.”

She shook her head, furious that he wasn’t more afraid with her. Didn’t he see beneath the man’s polite, safe mask? She was furious at her fear, furious at the surprise she’d felt. She should have been more ready. She knew everyone was a killer at the core. She’d learned that.

Ty stroked her hand against his face. “Focus, Sunshine. Do this for the hunt, and be done.”

“Don’t let go.” She didn’t know where the childish plea came from, but he didn’t laugh.

“Never.”

She reached out with her power to the pulsing tangle of spirits that was Dom. Ty gripped her other hand tightly on her shoulder, his free hand on her nape, warm and steady. Dom’s power crawled and snapped at her skin.

“I will not harm you. I am in control. Try to give details to me. Their height, their weight, their smell. Think of them as if they stood in the room.”

“I’ve done this before,” she snapped. “I think I know it better than you.” Oh, she did not want to remember them. She’d had one night free of their horror, in Ty’s room last night.

Ty whispered, and his voice grated low and hoarse. “I want them dead, Sunshine. I want them ripped to pieces, their blood burned before it can ever become part of Earth or Air. I want them to scream.”

The dark hate in his voice broke her heart. She knew it well, but didn’t want that for Ty. Not her Ty.

When she’d fallen, literally, into the souldance with Ty, she’d had no control, and no

finesse. Now, she closed her eyes, and focused on her pounding heart. Dom's fingers sizzled against hers, his energy barely restrained, as if it would rip the information it wanted from her regardless of the tiny fact her mind was her own.

She breathed, ignored the spreading numbness in her torso, and breathed again. He held himself apart, so she understood that even though she was against a massive well of power, she had room. A tiny bit of room. She breathed.

First, she brought up Tattoo. Ripping him from his context in her memories, she placed him on a blank flagstone floor similar to the main plaza of River Mountain. Then she poked into the swirling mass of power that was the Dom, and found he had pulled a path of calm open for her, a thin path of safety. She stepped into his spirit and handed him the recreated package of memories that was Sverre, the oldest darkmage. Then she hurriedly backed out.

A low growl rumbled through the room. Dom's fingers against hers twitched.

Ty's hand moved from her nape to her eyes, covering her face. "Don't look at him, Sunshine. I'm here. I'm watching over you. He has the memory. Do it again."

She hesitated, but quite frankly was relieved not to have to face what she'd glimpsed in the smallest brush with Dom's mind. She called up Russ next. It sickened her, to erase the knowledge of what it felt like to be under him, to know the force of his blows. But she didn't want Dom to know those bits. So she built him, gathering the information that would make him the most complete, coherent memory she could, even though she had to stare into the shadows. Then she wiggled her fingers in Dom's.

It was easier this time, the beasts falling back at once, already expecting she'd throw them the juicy mental carcass that was a darkmage. Glasses' image passed to Dom, and this time, she caught the triumph, the eagerness of the hunt. And then she stilled, aware of the trap that had closed around her. She tried to step back into her own mental construct, but found the way blocked by a wash of fur. Coarse, shaggy, silky, it was ever-changing.

Just as panic threatened to swamp her, feathers brushed her face, and Ty's scent carried strongly to her. She breathed. His voice came from far away. "You're safe. I'm right here. Again, Sunshine. Please, try."

But it took longer this time to build the persona that was red-headed Pretar. Every time she added some detail to her composite, she was distracted from her effort to strip off her personal memories by movement around her in the mental plane. She was surrounded. But then she'd feel Ty's hawk, and calm, and continue. When she finally was ready to give the total memory to Dom, the crack she opened in her protective cloak fractured from the force outside.

In a spiritmage's construct, she had walked from her mind to Dom's. And now Dom's mind had her cornered, and his soul was much, much stronger than hers. She was drowning in otherness. But then the fur pulled back, giving her breathing room. She turned, and her mind froze as she realized she had no idea where she was in Dom's mind. She should have been at the very edge, barely tasting his personality.

"Ty!" She called out, and warmth came to her.

"One more, Sunshine."

Did she hear that with her inner ear or her outer one? She couldn't tell. She was shaking, and exhausted. For Ty, she'd remember. Reluctantly, she opened up her first memory of the Monster, his handsome, polished face smiling up at her while she looked down at him from the Temple steps. It was the last coherent thought she had.

The memories of Thad rolled before her, unstoppable, cascading. She screamed, trying to blank her mind, to stop the onslaught. Growling filled her ear, low and vicious, then the pure strike of a hawk's high cry froze her struggles. All that she'd ever seen, felt, tasted, smelled and heard of the Monster was ripped from her, assessed, and stolen. A stiff wing brushed her arm, and she stood frozen, so filled with hate, trapped until her memories ran out. The black silence holding her dissolved, and she was once again on the edges of Dom's consciousness. She could sense the border of him, an armlength away.

She didn't step out. She looked into the swarming compilation of souls and hissed, "How *dare* you?"

A black wolf trotted toward her, coalescing from the black mist. Its face elongated into a snout she didn't recognize, and its legs morphed into a cat's, although they were massive. Within another step, it had grown a spiny ridge and a thicker, longer tail, then it was fluffier, and shorter. She closed her eyes, shook her head. When she opened them again, a man stood before her. He was nude, and his face was a constantly melting amalgamation of features. At one point, she swore she saw Delavega's delicate jaw and strong nose, but then it was gone.

Even while he flowed from one man to the next, Dom spoke out of an ever changing throat. "I did not mean to do that. I was too eager. I apologize."

She could so easily flee now, but instead she spat at him. "You can't undo the knowledge you took. Don't worry, you now know how familiar I am with coping with rape."

A growl flashed from him, ending in a yowl. The two sounds were never meant to come from the same throat. "Bitch. *Don't* name me rapist. But I admit the loss of control. I place us in your debt."

"I don't want your apology."

"You don't get a choice." He lunged. She screamed, twisting away, but a massive bear paw swiped at her throat, claws brushing across her skin.

She clasped a hand to her throat, but realized she was unharmed. Her skin tingled from contact, but the mental blood she touched was not hers. "What is this crap about debt?" She muttered, disgusted despite the fact that spirit-blood was not real.

"We wronged you. And unlike the Monster who thrived on your anger and pain, it shames us. The debt is a blood obligation. No matter the wrong it would do to us, if you need me, we are yours to command."

He kept referring to himself in the plural, and now animal features were showing up in his dizzying face. Sunny shook her head, turning and stumbling to get away.

"Sunny." Her name was a growl and she looked over her shoulder. His figure was nothing but a black shadow about to be swallowed in a sea of writhing fur.

"Know that he is the walking dead."

She stepped out of Dom's mind, snatching her hand from his. Burying her face in her arms, she lay her head down, hiding her face against the table. Her breath came in shuddering gasps.

Ty crouched next to her, his hand sweeping down her spine. "Sunshine?" He spoke to Dom. "Did you get them?"

"Yes."

Sunny slammed her hands into the table. She stood sharply, glaring at the man that once again appeared a mere human. But it was a lie. Like everyone, he wore a polite

mask. She'd seen his heart, and he was a killer who would only use the rules when they favored *his* people. "Get out." Her voice shook but she didn't care.

Quor and Odan stood a short ways from the table.

"Shit," Odan said softly.

Quor looked quickly to Dom. "What happened?"

"Yes, why don't you tell them what happened?" She hissed.

Dom's black eyebrows shimmered to brown. His left eye flared garnet and his right went vivid blue. She blinked, and he was again a strong faced, dark-eyed man. She stepped back, fighting with the chair.

"Look at your memories instead of hiding from them, Sunny. Then you tell me what happened here."

She slammed her hands into the table again and screamed at him. "Get out!"

Ty pushed her back from the table, moving in front of her. She wasn't sure if it was to protect her from Dom's reaction to her defiance, or to protect his Dom. "Maybe that's best, Sir."

Dom nodded to Ty, his face closed and blank. He turned and left. Quor turned as if to follow, then pivoted to face her and Ty. "Did you just complete a souldance with the Dom?"

She couldn't answer. Her stomach was the size and density of a nut. Her heart was a drum filling her chest. She dropped her forehead onto Ty's strong, wide back. Ty had said he was with her. But she'd gone into a magescape, and she should have known he couldn't follow her there. It wasn't his fault.

Ty spoke, confused. "She said she could transfer her memories to him. It was working fine until the last one."

Quor's deep voice was also confused. "I thought she didn't want to souldance? And then she just agrees to share with our Dom? And you let her? There should have been safeguards put in place."

"She didn't consider this a souldance." Ty spun, wrapping her up tight. "Sunshine? Something went wrong." His voice was thick, shaky. But then it settled, deepening, hardening. "Tell me. Did he hurt you?"

"I want to go outside. Take me back to the river. Someplace private. Someplace bright."

Ty rocked her, and she was able to breathe through her fury.

"All right. I know just the place." He held her a few more moments, then stepped away.

She kept her arms tight around herself, still feeling battered. Ty led the way and Odan fell in behind her. Ty gestured sharply with his hand. "No, Groundbear. I think we've had all we can stomach of the Council's presence today."

Sunny shot him a glance. Odan simply watched them leave, standing motionless, his blue eyes bright in his controlled, rough face. His brow lifted once, and he nodded at her. She looked down, and hurried out.

Half an hour later, after scurrying through the mountain tunnels for a blanket and a water skin, Ty sifted her via a stone to somewhere outside. She stood clinging to Ty's hand in a silent forest. Sunny had never been in a forest, as humans were exclusively creatures of City Walls. And nothing but grassland had surrounded her City, when she'd had a rare glimpse over the Walls.

“Oh, Ty! That smell!”

He nodded, and led her down a faint path. The ground was spongy under her feet, padded with long, dry needles. She breathed deep, again and again. It reminded her suddenly of Fynn. He’d smelled like this wild, clean freshness when she’d first met him. Yesterday she’d argued with him. Now he was gone. And as abrupt as his death was, she had no problem believing it. She was used to such loss.

Ty walked through the woods, and as she followed him, she noticed his stride shortened, gentled, along with his shoulders. By the time she saw an opening ahead of them, glowing with light, she was walking easier as well. There was a gap in the woods and they walked through.

Stopping, she stood next to Ty and watched him close his eyes, roll his head on his neck. They were at the edge of a meadow full of tall, soft green grasses, bright purple flowers sprinkled through them like jewels. Beyond the meadow, a vast view opened up, of craggy mountains with sheer, sharp cliffs. With the pines surrounding the lush, open space on three sides, and the open vista rolling away beyond, it was an idyllic spot for a high summer tryst.

Ty pointed to one. “Do you see the sharpest point, about three ranges back?”

“The peak behind the rounder, lower one?”

“Yes. That’s River Mountain.” Ty’s hair glowed bright gold in the sunlight. His voice dripped with pride when he spoke, staring at the mountain.

She’d known, intellectually, that the Truxet sifting stones moved people through space with a push of magecraft. But seeing she was a week’s travel from the place she’d just been was incredible. “What is the farthest distance you can travel between stones?”

“As far as I know, there’s no limit. If you know of a stone, you can get there. I’ve never gone from the northern most clanhome, the Snowcats’ White Mountain, to the most southern, the Lizeed’s Sandhome, but I’m sure it’s possible. The stones were put in place in our ancient history, and we no longer have the skill to make new ones. Just recently we found one, hidden by darkcraft. And of course, the new Fortress as well. Who knows how far away that is? The sea bounds the lands to the West of the Seven Cities, and we’ve explored far to the north, east, and south.”

She looked across the vista. The wilderness was vast indeed. “So ... how did the others use the stone at the Fortress, if they’d never been, and you hadn’t shared your memories?”

“They knew of it through me. That was enough. They imagined the place, and it took them. Imagine if all our warriors had to first physically go somewhere before they could work the stones. That would be a huge limitation.” He took the bag from his shoulder, and opened it.

“Ty, if your people have explored so thoroughly, then how are the darkmages moving between the Cities and the Fortress? They must be able to use the stones to sift as well.”

Ty pivoted, his hand gripping hers painfully tight. “No more talk of them. They’re walking dead, no more than foul rodents in the shadows. Tell me what happened with Dom.”

Standing the sunlight, looking at Ty’s vibrant orange eyes, Sunny was no longer sure. “When I built the last image of the Monster, Dom was there, in my head.” Her heart started thumping, and she tried to twist her hand free. Some insect buzzed in the grass

nearby. “I should have been able to build it, strip my memories away, and give him the image alone, but instead, it was like he commanded the memories from me. It was a bit like he was the spiritmage in control of my souldance. He saw—“

Ty stood before her, watching her pant.

“Let me go!”

He did, immediately, and she stumbled out into the meadow. The grass came up to her waist. It was scratchier than it looked, and the smell was nothing she’d known. Earth, and sharp life.

“You’re worried about what Dom saw? You think he’ll judge you?” Ty stayed at the edge of the forest, the large trees like a wall of shadow at his back. “Can I tell you why I wasn’t able to souldance with any of the spiritmages they sent me in those first days out?”

She knew her shoulders were hunched defensively but couldn’t relax. She brushed the purple flower. It pricked her finger and she drew her hand back quickly.

He spoke. “I was locked in shame. As much as I wanted to share the information with my people, to aid the downfall of the darkmages, I literally couldn’t let someone into my mind. They’d see what I’d done, how I’d aided my own capture, how I’d given in to the pain.”

Ty’s rasping voice held so much loathing, as they stood there in the lush, warm meadow, Sunny couldn’t stop herself from turning to him.

He continued. “But most of all, they’d see what I’d done to you, in the last hour we were there. How they trapped me, and how I broke, joining them, to my eternal horror.”

“Ty, no. I don’t blame you for any of that. They would have blinded me. And in the end, you defied them to save me, when *you* were bound and vulnerable. You are—“

“Don’t.” He stepped toward her in the meadow, the grass hissing against his leather pants. “Stop hiding from it, because it’s drowning me. You saw me at my worst, and you still came to that ritual and Bonded yourself to me. You saw the truth in the souldance, I know you did. *You saw that I liked your pain.* Yet last night you made love to me.” His voice had lowered to a rumble. “Sunshine, you know why I won’t touch you. Tell me.”

She snorted. “You’re trying to protect me. You shower me in honor, worried about the rapes. I’ll have a problem being touched by others for the rest of my life, Ty. The rapes were just part of the violence. I won’t really trust anyone but you again.”

“That’s not why, and you know it. Look at me.”

She was so surprised by his denial she blinked. In the time it took to focus, he blurred across the grass to stand a breath from her. Squinting in the sun, he searched her eyes, his whole face tight with emotion.

His voice was softer than the slight breeze that stirred up over the cliff. “You can stop pretending I’m a hero. Say it.”

She looked right in his eyes and poured her faith into him. The faith he’d forged out of the broken shards she had left. “I’ll never believe you’re anything but a hero, Ty. But if you’re talking about the shadows that haunt you from when those three bitches played with us, then yes, I know they made you like it. And I know it fascinates you as much as it sickens you.”

He lifted his chin, his lips thinning back from his gritted teeth. “Yesssss.” He lifted his hand up and hovered his touch above her cheek. Without touching her, he drifted his fingers along her jaw, then clenched his fist and took his hand away. “I have to make sure

every touch we share is *your* choice, because I won't ever have you powerless again. And part of that is because I'm so fucking scared you'd do it for me."

"Do what, Ty?"

"You know."

"Tell me." Her voice coaxed.

He held her with his eyes, and she watched them bleed mage-green and back to hawk-orange. "Let me hurt you. Let me like it."

Sunny looked up into the tormented face of a man who had killed for her, bled for her, walked in darkness with her. "Of course I would. But you're denying I'd like it, too."

Ty froze. "Would you? I think you could, but first I'd have to break through your fear, and I don't want anything broken in you."

He was so close, so beautiful in the high sunlight. It was easy to let his words go. No more arguing. The sky was a great blue bowl with puffy white clouds scattered across it. Crazy to her, to think the world could be this beautiful, when every single person in it was so deadly. She noticed how well the blue complimented his light tan, and his streaked, light brown hair. Lying her hand on his chest, she looked up into his too-serious face, and smiled.

The pull of her tightening lips felt odd. As odd as the peace radiating from her very bones. Her craft snapped open, and the swirling, heaving emotion in him burst through their souldance connection. The outward draw in her plumped cheeks rearranged her face, and shimmering happiness followed the physical manifestation of the smile.

"Sunshine..." Ty breathed, staring at her smile.

"They made you feel that pleasure, Ty. Your despair and anger at feeling it was just part of their torture. Am I disappointed in you that their spell worked? Of course not." She couldn't stop the smile. It was etched on her face. It was easy to glide her hand across the strength of him, enjoying his hardness under the weave of his shirt, a rich roan color today. "You really feel like you're close to hurting me, all the time? So much that you can't even share a casual touch?"

He closed his eyes, turned his head. He breathed, and opened his eyes to stare at the view before them. "I don't know. I want you. I want you *so much*, I ache. My cock is constantly in the grip of bodycraft, or I'd be wild for you, always."

Sunny glanced down his flat belly to the slight bulge in his pants. "Really?" The intrigue in her voice was clear.

He choked on a groan. "You obviously don't want me in the same way. I'm insane for you." Looking back at her, his smile slowly answered hers. "You ... are gorgeous."

She bit her lip, feeling a laugh hovering just under the surface of her jaw. "Gorgeous enough to make love to? Out here, in the light? With you touching me, and me just lying here, trusting you?" Lifting her hand, she drew her nail along the soft swell of his lower lip. "Ty, I may not think about sex all the time, but never doubt I want you, too. You just have to remind me of that now and again."

Cupping his jaw, she looked up at him, her smile continuing to stretch her face. His had faded, and he *still* made no move to touch her. This was going to be the day she put him in control. "Kiss me, Ty."

Ty moved back one step, and her hand fell from him. The pack he'd brought fell with a thump. His shirt came off over his head, and he undid the lacing at his waist. Bending, he unbuttoned his boots, and toed them off, then pulled them free and tossed

them aside. He opened the pack, and took out the thick, brown blanket, snapping it wide. Tramping over it, he flattened the grass, so the surrounding stalks formed a little room for them. Standing in the middle, he peeled off his pants, his cock hard and thick, standing tall.

He took her hand and pulled her forward, ridding her of her dress and underwear, removing her leather shoes last, kneeling below her. But after that flurry of activity, he just sat there, head bowed, chest working, staring at her toes.

She stared down at his thick, glossy curls. "Ty?"

There was a long moment, and then he gritted out. "I'm so scared, Sunshine. What I want, and what you went through..."

"Ty, we'll find a way together. I'm never going to be a slave again. With you, I'll never have to fear your lack of respect. I trust you. Tell me what you want, and I'll do it. Not out of fear, but of desire. Hold me tightly, kiss me hard, fuck me deep, and I'll enjoy it. Your touch, Ty. However you want it. Because it will always be you."

He shuddered, shaking his head hard. "No. Not however I want it. I have to know you can stop me. I have to." Walking on his knees over to the pack again, he drew out the water skin. "This is too new. We're too fresh. I won't take you into the fear." The stopper in the mouth had a toggle clasp, a sharp spear of bone, polished smooth and tapered to a point on one end. He slid it from its hole, and ripped it from its tether. He turned, face harsh and fierce. Holding it up to her, he demanded, "Take it."

She took it. The length of her finger, it was cool and creamy. That it would stop someone like Ty was a joke, but apparently he wanted to arm her. Turning it in her hands, she reconsidered. It was sharper than the stone knife she'd tried to make to end Erich's life. If she had to, she could kill with this. Something eased into place inside her, and clicked, solid.

Ty met her gaze when she looked up, fist closing around the tool. Holding her gaze, he reached out a shaking hand and put it on her hip. Breath burst from him when he touched her, and his hands closed hard, fingers biting into her leanness spasmodically.

"You'll tell me to stop, if I frighten you."

She nodded. "All right."

"You'll hurt me if you have to, to stop me if I'm not in control."

She nodded again. "No one will ever hurt me against my will again."

He jerked on her hip, bringing her a step closer. The grass crackled under her feet, under the blanket. She'd never stood nude in the sunlight before, and the sun was amazing on her breasts and ass.

"If you don't stop me, if I go too far, it will kill something in me. Sunshine, we're riding an edge right here. I won't be able to deal with it if I take you, and you don't find pleasure in it."

She bent down over him, her nipples throbbing. "I love you." She put her fist on his shoulder, and let the point of the tool jutting from her clasped fingers dig into the mound of muscle that joined his neck. "I don't fear you. And I won't."

He shuddered again, his jaw clenched tight, neck straining. For a moment she thought he pressed into her bone dagger, and then he knelt back. "I'll touch you the way I want. Rough. Like you're mine. Like you've always been mine. I won't ask."

She stood straight again, feeling heat glow in her belly. Her throat was tight. She could feel sweat gather at her nape. "Ty, you are so fucking sexy. Touch me before I

come just standing here thinking about you.”

In one breath, his hand reached up and slid between her thighs. One finger shoved deep into her moist clasp, and she gasped, arching up onto her toes at the shock of him.

“Thank you, Sunshine. By the Six, thank you.” His hand pushed harder against her, his finger curling and straining inside her body. “You’re the most beautiful, bravest, generous woman I’ve known. I don’t know how long it will take us to heal, but we’ll get there. This isn’t going to be like them.”

She shivered from the throb in his words, clutched her muscles around his finger. “Don’t talk about them ever again when you’re touching me like this. Ever.”

“No. Never again.” His other hand slid down to curl around the back of one knee.

Her leg bounced, shivering in reaction from his warm touch on the sensitive skin.

“Your breasts will get bigger as I feed you. Your ribs won’t be so stark.” He swirled his finger inside her, pushing on soft tissue, stirring her breath with the small movement. “Your nipples are going to be a problem. I’m going to bite them, because they’re too delicious. I’m probably going to bite hard enough to scar you at some point, and heal it that way. I need to make sure my mark is the newest one on your body, the final mark.”

His hand coasted up the back of her thigh, massaging her. She braced her knee, watching his shoulders flex.

“You know the other side of having a bodymage as a mate?” His hand was on her ass now, kneading the muscle there with a tight grip, making her gasp. He stopped, curling his nails across her skin roughly. She focused on him.

“Answer me.”

“Uhhh... Other side? What’s that?” She recalled the orgasm he’d torn from her frozen body and moisture cascaded over his finger inside her, loosening her channel.

“I can come as much as I want. I don’t have to wait for my cock. I can force it to get hard instantly.” He looked up from staring at where his hand lay buried between her thighs. His orange eyes shocked against the background of the brown blanket and the green grass. “And I want, Sunshine. I want a lot.”

Finally. She absolutely thrilled to the look of the hunter in his eyes. She loved her gentle, respectful friend, loved his protectiveness and understanding. But she wanted them both to be free. She wanted all Ty had to give as a lover, no matter what kind of lover he’d become. If she’d become a seductress, he’d become something new, too.

In answer to his low warning, she opened her legs, spreading her stance. With a drag and a twist, he withdrew his finger only to shove his folded hand up into her, a wedge wrenching her open. She groaned. The push of his hand shoving into her, widening her vagina, surprised her. It stung. It ached. It sent a fresh roll of cream from her, and trembled in her thighs. He rammed his hand up into her, practically lifting her up onto her toes.

“So good, Ty.”

“Yes.” He’d been staring again, at his hand working her core. But now he looked up at her, and his smile blinded her. His teeth were white in the sun, his hair tumbled across his brow, and his eyes laughed up at her, sharing the amazing reality of them, here, now. His chest flexed as he did it again, moving his fingers as deep as he could reach.

“Uh!” The feeling was so intense.

His smile stretched, becoming more of a rogue’s grin. His sopping hand left her channel and grabbed onto her clit. The firm touch ripped a cry from her, and then he was

massaging it, pulling and twisting and rolling it in his fingers. Her legs shook and she reached to brace her arm on his shoulder, but he angled it away. The unsteady sensation somehow made her focus on his touch all the more. He held the grin, his eyes glinting even more dangerous, as he roughly forced pleasure to spike, again and again. He dragged her to this point so fast it took her breath. Her heart pumped wildly.

“Ty!” Her hands were against her belly, trying to contain the shocking pleasure he’d pulled her into so quickly. “I want to come!”

He stopped. She moaned, her clit throbbing, wanting.

“I know, Lady. But you’re not ready.” He took his hand out of her folds and knocked hers away. He laid it, fingers spread, on her belly.

There was something there, some throb of resignation in his words, but the sticky cream covering his hand was fragrant. She liked the scent.

“I am! I am ready! I want you so badly.” The throaty pout in her voice didn’t move him.

“You’re not close enough to come, but that wasn’t what I was talking about. You’re not really ready for me, but I won’t be able to stop.”

She looked at his huge hand spread across her stomach, the line of muscle a column down the middle, her hipbones a bit too stark. He closed his eyes, and she saw after a minute his frantically heaving chest steadied. His thrusting, hard cock, however, stayed thick. She licked her lips. Nothing he said made sense. She burned for him, beyond ready for his powerful penetration.

When he opened his eyes, he took his hand away, and lay back on the large blanket. Lacing his hands across his stark abs, he said, “Come. Kneel over me.”

Uncertain, Sunny knelt at his side, her body awkward as she unlocked her aching thighs. His cock was huge, standing nearly straight up, making straddling him at his narrowest point problematic. She reached out and touched the head of him, rubbing her fingers across the clear moisture. He hissed, and his cock flexed.

“Put your leg over my hips and put me inside you.”

His words alone tightened her cunt. Remembering the pleasure she’d had from their joining in the past, she licked her lips. The sun on her skin was just part of the heat churning inside her. She maneuvered herself over his thick chest, straddling his waist, then backed down on his cock. Catching it in her hand, she squeezed him as she set his tip to her entrance. Rocking back, the stretched, wet mouth of her capped him gently.

“Not like that.” His hands grabbed her hips. Tightening his grip, his whole torso came alive with muscle as he folded himself up while at the same time shoving her down. “Like this.” He seated her on his cock, and she collapsed against his chest, shuddering. He wrapped his arms around her, and she’d never felt so safe.

“So good...” she whispered, grabbing at him inside.

His hands tightened and he lifted her off his erection. Her breath catching at the sensation of him dragging himself out, she flailed as he picked her up. She accidentally kicked him in the shoulder as he turned her so she straddled his ribs, facing his feet. He chuckled, lying back. She braced her hands on his thighs, one still in a fist, clutching the bone dagger.

“Suck my cock, Sunshine. I know that I’m coated in your own cream, and it’s going to make me go really fast, quick and sharp.”

She stared down at his glistening flesh, and he jerked on her hips, threading his arms

beneath her thighs.

"Oh, yes." She couldn't even think when he forced her thighs wide and drew her down onto his face. His mouth opened, lips capping her folds, and his tongue ripped down the center of her. "Ah!"

He groaned, and the rumble of him, the air of his breath, made her writhe.

"Suck me." He ordered, his hands covering the back of her hips, sealing her to him.

Her belly pressed to his chest, her breasts flattened to his stomach, and her thighs sprawled awkward above his shoulders. It all faded through her as he sucked on her clit. She buried her face in his groin, the hairs crisp against her nose.

Pushing her away from him, he snapped, "Suck me!"

Her mouth scrabbled up the column of him, nibbling and kissing, and then she caught him in her mouth, and drew him inside. He shoved her back down over his face, and now his tongue rimmed her opening, the achingly sensitive flesh causing her to stiffen. She rimmed the head of him, mimicking him almost without thought, caught in his motions.

He stabbed hard and quick into her vagina, and she clamped her lips around his width in shock.

"Suck!" he spoke into her body, and she heard him.

She sucked, desperate at the pleasure he laced her with. His hips punched against her face, surprising her, and his tip slid into her throat. She drew back sharply, and then he did it again, lifting into the grip of her lips. The feeling of his hard muscle sliding into her mouth, the taste of herself, her precarious perch on his body, his mouth rolling in her soft folds, sucking and licking at her... She thrust her head forward until her nose buried in his balls and his cock was in her throat. And this time, she swallowed.

His body arched under her, and he shuddered. The salty taste of him exploded in her mouth. She had to draw back to swallow, and still the thick musk of him filled her. She swallowed the smooth cream of him, grinding her hips down on his face. His hands held her lower spine desperately, his tongue lashing her clit. The sensations in her mouth warred with those in her cunt, and she sobbed, lapping the last of the cream from his shaft.

"Fuck, yes!" He pushed her away, and she keened, agonized that he stopped. Somehow, she was propped on her hands and knees, her head hanging limp, and he was behind her, kneeling between her legs.

"You drank me down. So pretty, Sunshine." His words mattered less when the length of him pushed into her. He swung his hips, rocked back, and then drove in again. She'd never had him so deep. Her ass was crushed into his hips so tight, she could feel his hairs against her bottom. He thrust, a quick flurry of deep jabs, and her arms collapsed, her head resting between her forearms on the blanket.

Ty was inside her, directing the sex, and it was so good, so amazingly, never-in-her-life good.

He drew back and shoved her shoulders down even farther, canting her hips high. Grabbing her ass, he pushed her knees wider with his thighs, and thrust in deep, long lunges. After the first wave of amazing pleasure, she could think enough to grab him in return, and soon she was so sensitive she could feel his head shuttling back and forth, evading her clutching hold.

"Mine! Only mine!" Ty's words roared above her as he buried himself deep.

Frustration and fury swam through her as the tightening, seeking ache in her was denied. She shoved her hand down under her body, reaching for her clit between her bare folds.

Ty was rigid behind her, his hips pushing hard against her, his body trembling. He was coming, *again*, and she hadn't.

"Ty!" she called to him, demanding.

He folded over her back, sweaty and hot, with a groan. She grabbed her clit and pulled on it, pressed it with her fingers, but it was too late, the moment had gone. He was so heavy, holding her so completely to the blanket, her knees aching from their weight. She couldn't even wiggle under his lax body. Her neck hurt. She reached farther back from her clit and managed to brush his balls, hanging soft and loose. When he finally sighed, and lifted himself away, she was glad to take a breath.

He moved off her and sat back on his knees. "Stay there."

She was folded over on her splayed, bent thighs, her ass spread wide, her one hand still lying under her hips. "Ty!"

He sighed, and again, unease slid through her at the suggestion of disappointment. "You've got to trust me."

His words were philosophical when she ached for flesh to fill her, for his touch to send her, for pressure. She shook her ass demandingly, feeling the warm sun on her crack.

"Touch yourself."

He sounded subdued. His voice sounded different, calmer, looser. Relieved, she lifted her hand and toyed with her clit, circled it, then stroked her inner folds, circling her opening like he had. She was so sensitive now her folds felt huge, the pleasure curling her toes.

"Put your finger in your cunt."

Hearing his command excited her. Her eyes squeezed shut, she eased her finger into the wet softness of her vagina.

His hand closed around her wrist gently. Then his other hand joined hers and his finger pushed into her alongside hers. His could reach deeper, and she arched her back, trying to lure him even farther. He took it away, and she'd no sooner sighed at his loss, than he shoved the damp length into her ass. Her eyes burst open, staring at the nearby stalks of grass in shock. It felt so good. His other hand held her hand in place, keeping her finger buried in herself. She squeezed, inside, and he rubbed her finger with his, curling along the thin skin separating their touch. She cried out, shocked with the stabbing pleasure.

Controlling her hand with his grip on her wrist, he made her stroke herself. Then he stroked her ass. Alternating her hand, then his, he built the rhythm until her heartbeat was part of it. Cunt. Ass. Cunt. Ass.

Finally, he pulled her finger free, and he bent down behind her. Then his lips sucked her wet digit into his mouth. His mouth was much like her cunt, soft and wet and warm, only it sucked, sending a streak of excitement up her arm and down to her clit.

He shoved his thighs between hers, draping her limp legs over him. He knelt and arranged her so she straddled him, oozing off his lap like she was melted. His finger still stroked her ass.

"Just what we both want, Sunshine." He shoved his cock into her soaking, tight

vagina, and in her folded over position, he had to work at it. Short one hand, he couldn't maneuver her as well. She got her arms in front of her and helped, pushing back on him until they managed to get most of him inside her. No sooner had she moaned at the delicious pressure of him against her belly, than he backed away, and his finger left her ass.

He held her hips, and shifted. His dick pressed to her exposed anus, spread by her position. He put one hand on her tailbone, and his tip to her tiny hole. She was shaking, scared of this, but wanting it because he did. Because he'd already made everything else so good.

He made this good too. He let his weight force her ass to give in, and her hole bloomed around his thick cock. A streak of biting sharp pain zipped up her spine, but his hand pressing her down onto her knees denied her escape. And then the pleasure hit. It ran through her hips, sizzled her thighs, brought her cunt clamping desperately on its emptiness. She moaned, long and harsh, the guttural animal-sound bringing a matching hiss from him.

And then he stroked, and it burned. He stroked again and it sang, sizzled, and flamed. She cried out, shoving back to get more of it, and he laid himself over her back, enfolding her, capturing her. "You're my woman." He growled into her ear. "Someday, you will trust me." And then he jerked, his body heaving, pleasure sounds ripping from his throat.

Furious, she struggled under him, disbelieving she still hadn't come. And that he continued to natter on about trust when he was deep in her ass and she hadn't made a peep. But he was massive, and she was well trapped. Subsiding, panting, sweet tugs stretched her ass while he finished thrusting.

Her whole body was tight, about to split with frustration. He left her and she rolled onto her side, watching as he went to the sack and got the water bottle, washing his half-erect cock with sand and soap and a small cloth. He washed his hands, and then took the cloth over to her, draping her thighs wide as he pet a cool corner of it across her ass and thighs.

"Tell me you're not done." She grumped at him.

He tossed the cloth away. Stared at his cock. It rose, thickening, stretching, lifting. He met her disgruntled gaze and smiled. "I'm not done."

"Hmmpf."

"Does golden Sunshine want to come?"

She looked away, unwilling to be teased from her frustration.

He took up the water bottle and took a deep drink, then offered it to her. She drank as well, the water refreshing. He capped the bottle minus the bone latch and set it aside, then took his cock in his hand and stroked himself.

"Mmmmmmm." His eyes closed dreamily.

She was outraged. "What are you doing?"

"Enjoying the moment." He opened his eyes and pinned her with his flaming gaze. He lowered his head and ordered, "Lie back. Spread your legs. Put your arms over your head."

Slowly, Sunny arranged herself to his pleasure. She did it because she was desperate, aching and tight inside, to find an end at his touch. As soon as she'd relaxed, she felt the sun beating down on her spread core. Heat flared across her tingling breasts, and softened

her belly. She moved her hips restlessly. “Ty...” She suddenly knew she didn’t have to be submissive. He was trying to be all masterful, but she was powerful, like a beacon drawing him in, even in her sprawl.

“What are your shadows, Sunny? Why were you so upset when Dom got a glimpse of them? I can sense them in you, but I don’t have a spiritmage’s skill at sifting through a souldance. I told you mine. Will you share yours?”

Brows snapping together in disbelief, she gaped at him. “Now?” She closed her thighs, drawing her knees together.

“Open your legs like I told you to.” He pumped his fist harder down the length of his cock.

Chest working hard, she slowly opened her thighs, the knees lifted to spread her lips wide.

“I know what this means, you know.” He gestured at her with a jerk of his chin. “Opening yourself like this to me, it’s a gift. Other women might do it with a sexual thrill, but for you, it’s more. We’re building trust in baby steps, and part of that is you sharing your nightmares. You know all of mine, Sunshine. You’re healing them right here. Tell me.”

She licked her lips. Even that simple touch caused a cascade of sensation down her chest. “I...”

She wanted to tell him. She wanted it out. But it was so hard.

His fist closed around his tip, and he rotated his palm over the head. “I’m listening.”

“I...” She felt the bone dagger in her sweaty grip. She rolled it through her fingers, and closed them tight around it again. It steadied her. “I’m afraid of people now.”

Ty watched her, his gaze flicking from her cunt to her breasts to her face. His hand slid down his cock. He cupped his balls, and waited.

“I’m afraid of everyone. Every single person. They’re all breakable. When it comes down to the final pain, the worst evil pressing on their spirit, they’ll give in. Everyone will. I saw it again and again.”

He wrapped his hand around his base, and squeezed hard enough his knuckles turned white. The head of him flushed dark.

“I...” She was panting now, so exposed, body and spirit. “I broke. When they hurt me enough, I’d do whatever they wanted. To avoid their pain, to stay away from them, I manipulated others, hurt them. None of the people who move through River Mountain know how weak they are. They’re so determined to bring them down, the darkmages. But we’re all darkmages. We just haven’t been brought to that point.”

She watched him stroke himself, sometimes a few fast, rough pumps, sometimes lazy, gentle drags.

“This is the nightmare haunting you? That you won’t ever feel secure among people again? Can’t trust them?”

She nodded. “I reached out to help your people, to give them the darkmages’ faces like they wanted. Dom says he lost control. He says he owes me a debt, that it was a mistake. But nothing will take away the fact he forced his way into my mind. When he wanted it badly enough, he didn’t act with honor. He took it, not trusting me to give it to him. You say the Truxet can’t work darkcraft. That you’re untouchable by it. But you’re not any more pure than us. Dom was just one more example. I don’t feel the need to be punished anymore. Not by him. None of these people are better than me. I have no

recompense to make for saving you, beyond controlling my choices so the stain won't grow."

Tipping his head back, Ty inhaled a huge breath. He lay his hands on his thighs, crossed tailor style. He stared up into the clouds, breathing. "So. I asked you for an extraordinary favor, and the Dom betrayed us." His voice was cold, dangerously empty. "No, we're not perfect. We have warriors who fail their duty. We have men who commit crimes. Because we resist darkspells, and our magecraft reaches deeper into the elements than most humans, we think we're better." His words fell faster, hotter, the familiar fury bubbling close. "We close out the human men when we desperately seek the women. I asked you to trust my people, to open yourself to them, and you did, and we failed you. I will never ask you to do that again."

"Ty—"

He brushed his hand at her, stopping her words. Dropping his head forward again, he trailed his gaze over her body. Her belly tightened to see the desire in it. Despite all the times he'd just had her, he still hungered. "Most of the time, people want to live in harmony. They want to be safe, so they work to keep the whole safe. But I'll never tell you to be less vigilant. I'll never tell you you're completely safe from their failures. We'll just have to find a way to watch each other's backs, to be able to function with some sort of light trust. Can you do that with me, Sunshine?"

She arched her back into his hot stare, rubbing her ass on the coarse blanket. "Yes, Ty. As long as I have you. As long as you don't tell me I'm wrong to fear them. I'm broken inside. When it comes to trust, there's just you."

He shook his head. "You're almost ready to trust me, Sunshine. That's my point from before. You're afraid of everyone, and you've accepted you're breakable yourself. I think my nightmare is just another face of the same fear. Mine came out as a fear of myself. I know exactly what I could do to you, simply because I want it." Swallowing, he closed his eyes for a moment. His hands fisted on his thighs. "I could hurt you. And I would like it. I broke, too, in the end. It wasn't the spell, Sunshine. *It was me*. Knowing that I don't have the honor I thought I did is..."

He looked at her, and Sunshine felt such a connection between them, a throbbing that went from her heart to her clit to his spirit.

"I liked what I did to you today. Controlling you, taking you. But I think the thing keeping me sane was knowing you liked it, too. I took you the way I wanted to, I was selfish. It was beautiful. But you were with me, participating at every step."

"I'm not afraid of you, Ty. Everyone else, even me, but not you."

He looked at her, and something darkened his eyes that caught her breath.

"You *are* afraid of me, and you should be. We're still forging trust."

She struggled to breathe. Her heart skipped and thudded. "No." She shook her head hard from side to side, denying his words. "You won't ever be able to betray me, because I love you that much."

He stared at her, and a warm summer breeze swept over her bared body. A cleansing breeze that swept her spirit, too. Ty rose up on his knees, and his body was so strong, so perfect, scars and all. He moved to her side, and his cock stood out from his body. He stared down at her.

"I don't know what kind of bravery you draw from, to love me, when you know I'm drawn to your pain."

“It doesn’t matter if it doesn’t make sense.”

“*You smiled for me.*” His eyes were rich with fire, warmth matching her aching clit.

It was so easy, now, even if it still felt strange. She smiled up at him, his hair glowing in the sun.

“Oh, fuck! Sunshine!” Ty’s hips arched out, and his cock jerked. A thick stream of cream jetted from his tip. “Hunh!” He folded over, his hand grabbing his cock, his other landing on her thigh, biting in deep.

Surprised at the scalding strip of liquid landing across her ribs, Sunshine laughed. It was a new sound she’d never heard. Throaty and soft, two beats of breath.

“Ah!” Ty’s hips jerked again, and another white line lashed her body. Sunshine put her hand on his hip, and marveled at his beautiful cock, stark with veins, thick and tight. Another stream fountained from him, this one landing on her belly. She laughed again, more of an odd chuckle. The sight of him coming made her own hips lift, aching. The last pulse dribbled from him, coating the length of him. He moaned.

She touched the come lying on her skin. Rubbed it between her fingers. It was silky. She lifted it up to her mouth and lapped at it.

“Fuck, yes.” Ty had his warrior face on again, and it was so sexy it made her nipples ache. His eyes slitted, his nose in a snarl, his jaw tight, he swept his hand through the wetness on her stomach and pushed his finger into her mouth.

She sucked, swirling her tongue around him, loving the dry, musky taste. When he pulled his finger against her suction, she closed her teeth around him, scoring the length of him. He hissed at her, his other hand also smearing the cream across her body.

She smiled at him. “I like it when you say that.”

His wet hands settled over her breasts, his palms pressing into her. “Say what?” he asked, staring raptly at the wet handprints he left on her chest. The moisture made her skin amazingly sensitive in the bright sunlight.

She lowered her voice to imitate his. “Fuck, yessss.” Then she laughed. Because she could.

His face swooped down and his mouth was on her nipple. His lips were rough and he sucked hard, and the thought of him sucking his own come off her made her cry out. His teeth bit into her nipple, then clamped around the tiny nub, so his tongue could lash the tip. His hand closed on her other nipple, the fingers working her in a hard massage, pulling at her breast, squeezing it.

She moaned, arching, and her hand clutched his head closer. His hair in her grip was a new texture in a body already frenzied in sensation. He was soft, and hot. She clutched at his hair, fisting it, pushing his head harder against her. His mouth opened wide over the whole swell of her breast and his teeth sank deep, worrying the skin, stinging the muscle beneath. And then he swung her so she was stretched out in the middle of the blanket, and he plunged between her thighs. His cock stabbed her hard, pulling at the skin of her opening with the force of his thrust.

“Fuck! Yes!” He screamed, and his body lunged, one hand still anchored on her breast, the other braced by her arm. He was so much bigger than her. His hips hammered into her with slapping force, shoving her body up, only to be stopped by his pinning hand on her chest.

She moaned, widening her thighs until they burned, tipping her hips up to meet the angle of his strikes. Maybe it was just from the accumulated use he’d forced upon her

body, but he seemed wider, thicker, longer. He crushed himself against her, his tightening grip sending an ache deep into her breast. Fast and steady, he slammed against her body, lost in need. Between one strike of his pelvis and the next, her clit spilled pleasure through her body.

Breath lost, she strained, grabbing at his arm, arching. He didn't hold the moment to let her savor it, withdrawing and shoving in again. When his weight crushed her already orgasming clit, she shrieked, arching. He stroked in again, and this time when his hips met hers, the world went black. Rapture sang in her blood. It was like the orgasm he'd forced on her before, but this time, it was just her body, not his craft. He plunged in, his head buried deep in her belly, and the pleasure reached a plateau. She floated, sobbing, and felt him come. The heat and moisture rolling from his tip was there to greet his next thrust, smoothing his path into her channel.

She sighed, her body spasming, but he didn't soften, didn't slow. If anything, Ty's hips moved faster, harder, bruising her. His hand left her breast and then his mouth was there, his teeth surrounding the base of her nipple. He bit, and she gasped at the pain of it, but his hips thrust again, and her clit sang.

The light came out of the darkness, burning white. She screamed and screamed, clutching him closer. Her heels sank in the earth, her fist throbbed around the bone dagger. The blanket was scratchy against her back, and his chest slid in the slick, fragrant sweat between their bodies. His mouth left her and she met his eyes, so fiery, with a bit of blood on his lower lip.

She saw his orgasm flare across his face. Again. And it held her in that breathless falling moment even longer. Again. Watched him lick his lips as he shook, cock pulsing in her hold. And still he didn't soften or stop stroking. Her nipple throbbed, her thighs trembled. He braced his hands on either side of her body, and moved, jerking hard against her. The flow of his hips poured over her, slap-slap-slap-slap, echoed by the deeper touch of his cock inside her, throb-throb-throb. She choked on the pleasure shaking her body, literally. She twisted and flailed beneath him, unable to understand it, but he didn't let her escape.

Time stopped. Her heartbeat was painful, and her lungs burned. Her cunt felt enormous, and then he came again. Falling on her, his weight kept her from breathing, but she pulled him in tighter.

When he managed to lift his shaking, heaving chest above her, she wiped the sweat from the side of his face. There were no words. She had an inhuman lover, a beast of a man, a bodymage who had already healed the bruises and bite on her chest. Their lovemaking had been brutal. She was the luckiest person in the world.

Turning his head, he pressed a kiss to her wrist. His hips rocked lightly against hers. He opened dazed eyes, a swirl of yellow through the orange. "Sunshine..." his voice was hoarse, quiet.

"I'm here."

He licked his lips. "Again?"

She nodded. "Yes."

His cock hardened inside her, and he moaned, a distinctly pained sound. Then his lips feathered over hers. He kissed her, lying motionless and long and deep in her body. He kissed her with soft lips, strong tongue. His mouth moved across hers, telling her of love and peace and a yearning that would never be satisfied.

When the sweat on his shoulders had dried beneath her sweeping hand and closed fist, he kissed her deeply, teeth burning across her lower lip. He slowly, slowly drew his length from her, all the way down so his tip rested at her opening. He kissed her, angling his mouth to seal to hers, tongue licking across hers. He pushed into her in one steady glide, and when his hips met hers, she wrapped her legs around his hips and locked her feet on his ass. He ground against her clit, and she mewled into his mouth, sucking hard on his tongue as the orgasm hurt, straining her abs. He sighed in return, lapping lightly at her lips, his flanks trembling with one last orgasm. Her legs fell to the side. There was no strength left in her.

He rolled them, so that she draped across him. She sighed, utterly lax. And slept, without nightmares.

Chapter Thirteen

When he woke up, he sent a prayer to Blood and Bone, Heart and Muscle. He was itchy with sweat and come, and she was hot. He sent his craft into her body and healed her strained muscles, soothed the slight sunburn she had on her delicious round ass. Rolling her gently into the shade of the tall grass, he stood and stretched.

He'd never taken a lover so roughly. Never used his full strength in such a deep fuck like that. He'd come again and again at first, and delighted in knowing she hadn't. Instead of being ashamed of himself, instead of loathing and trembling in disgust, he smiled. He looked down at her, her short hair spiked in a delightful fluff around her deeply golden face. They were going to heal each other someday. They'd passed the turn.

Looking at her carefully, he determined she was deeply asleep. He looked out at the vista. Running full out, he stretched his legs in a push of strength and launched himself off the cliff. Hanging in the air for a breathless moment, he laughed, and fell. He called hawk to him and their wings snapped wide. Sharp and graceful, one moment they were falling, the next they soared.

Hawk screamed their pride to the world. In the far distance, another hawk answered. Wings stretched to elegant points, he spiraled over their mate, knowing the land she slept in was regularly patrolled and the more nasty of the wild creatures had been swept from the area. A thought passed through him, that he'd have to check on her self-defense skills, both physical and craft, but he felt too good, too free, too sated to worry. His mate was here, and she was Bonded. He coasted in the swells of rising hot air along the cliff, watching over her.

A few hours later, when the grass shadows had lengthened across the blanket, he saw her rouse, stretching in a long, lean arc of taut flesh. Arrowing down, he narrowed his eyes on a dead branch and landed with a fanning of his tail and wings. He cocked his head, and decided she was indeed waking. Her eyes opened, deeper green than the grass around her, as vivid as jewels. She sat up and looked around. He called to her softly. Her gaze found him. The serious furrow on her brow smoothed. The corner of her lip cocked. It reminded him of how the entire lovemaking session had started. *Sunshine had smiled for him.* He thrust off the branch and floated to her, angling himself back and changing to land in human form on the blanket. He knelt, grinning at her appreciative gasp of delight.

"You are magnificent," she breathed, staring at him with huge eyes.

He wanted to touch her so badly. To reach out and cup her breast, to gather her hand in his and lace their fingers. But she'd fallen back on her elbows, and was studying his chest.

"Now that I think about it... You'd never seen my hawk before?"

Sitting, she ran a hand through her hair. The crown of her head glinted gold in the lowering sun. She yawned, her throat arching in a way that made his teeth ache. "I never have. Does it hurt you to switch?"

"Not at all." *Pain exploding through his arms, his body straining to shift, fighting to free the heart of him.* "Although switching too often can drain a warrior, just like sifting too often." *Hands touching him, grabbing and gouging and clawing at him, while he strained to find the moment and move them all to freedom.*

"I want to see you again." She reached for him, and he caught her hand, the knot in his chest easing.

"I'll get you a gauntlet. We'll go out together, and I'll fly for you."

"Like a glove? You mean, I can hold you?" Her eyes gleamed.

He snorted. "You don't hold birds. We don't like it. But we'll sit on you. There's a knack to easing our landing, a way to scoop under us."

"Can I pet you?"

Hawk shivered inside him. "Yes, Sunshine." His voice was husky. He cleared his throat. "I'll show you the best places to scratch."

Her hand twisted in his, pulling free. She knelt to face him, the delicate points of her breasts brown and hard. There was a faint fading mark on the slope of one. His dick heated, but he clamped down on it.

"You're all right?" He had to ask.

She tilted her head to glare at him, a bird-like movement that made him smile.

"I need to ask, Sunshine. I need to."

Sighing, she nodded. "I feel ... like a beautiful woman." Her fingers came up and brushed her throat, trailed between her breasts, splayed across her belly. She frowned, looking down at her hand. He saw them then, the scars marring the velvet of her skin. Gouges, lash marks, knife cuts, burns. He carried them, too.

"Ty..."

"*I don't care.*" His voice vibrated with his anger. "You survived. We killed who we could, and the rest *will* die. Don't ever let those make you feel less. You are beautiful, mate. You are my gorgeous green-eyed blonde—"

"Ty?"

She looked at him so quizzically, he stopped. Apparently she hadn't been thinking about her scars. He cleared his throat again. "Yeah?"

"I wasn't thinking about them. I was thinking about the future, actually." Her eyes trailed down over him, and his skin shivered at the admiration in them. Leaning forward, her fingers trailed over his soft dick nestled in the folds of his thighs. It was impossible to keep himself from getting hard with her direct touch.

"It's true, isn't it, that there are no Truxet women?"

"None. We only bear sons."

She nodded. "We've made love three times now."

Humor eased through him. They'd made love considerably more than that, technically. He noted she called it making love. Her fingers danced over his now achingly hard cock. They brushed the scars on the side of him, delved into the hairs at his base.

"Ty... I don't want children now. I never even thought of it before. It was just about us, about discovering us." She scraped her nails up to the lip of his cockhead.

His shoulders tightened, straining back as he fought not to shove his hips into her hand, demanding more. He couldn't use her like that every time. He'd been rough, and it was so beautiful that he hadn't triggered her fear. "You're not pregnant. I promise, you will not be until you wish it."

Ty remembered many nights he'd leave a paid woman's bed, hoping against the odds that their casual union would bring him a son. He'd wanted children, so badly. Wanted a little life to hold and nurture, to play and laugh with, to teach and marvel at in discovery. He wasn't ready for that little life anymore. He needed to see the darkmages dead first.

He needed to see his mate healed. And possibly himself as well.

“You can do that? With your bodycraft?”

“I’ve been trained, actually, by a human woman, a snowcat. She’s done much for our people, to help us with children.”

Her breath eased from her. Her hand closed around him, fingers long and slim and strong. Then it was his breath easing out. They inhaled together as she dragged her hand up and fisted his crown.

“Why aren’t you touching me back?” She squeezed him.

He hissed, staring at his cock in her hand. It was so beautiful. Twice now he’d gotten a taste of how brutal he could be, at her urging. Her nap wasn’t enough distance. He needed to stop, or he’d throw her body down and glut himself in her warmth. “It’s time we headed back.” She’d only taken the edge off him. His hunger for her was bottomless.

“Who says?” She stroked him again.

The grip of her hand squeezing his shaft hurt. His balls tightened, pleasure aching in the soles of his feet. He was sorry to stop her, but knew it was wise. “What do you want me to do to Dom?” Disappointment in his leader made him sigh.

She took her hand back between one heartbeat and the next. His cock flexed, waving, seeking. She shook her head.

“I’m not going to just let this go.” He frowned at her.

“I stood up for myself.”

Defensiveness and the need to protect her howled up inside Ty. “He asked for help, and then took advantage of you.”

“He ... took?” Sunshine’s green eyes looked off into the grass, her gaze gone unseeing.

“You say he’s given you his debt in honor, which is no small thing. But it would do you well to have him confront his lack of control openly, to admit it before the Council. Just because he is—”

“What did he say?” Her voice was distant, distracted.

Ty finished yanking the blood out of his cock. It twitched on his nest of hair. He reached to her, hovering his hand over her knee. “What is it, Sunshine?”

She tilted her face in his direction, but her eyes still looked inward. “He said something to me, before I yelled at him. It’s important.”

Ty searched his memory of the tense, confusing scene. “He said, ‘Look at your memories instead of hiding from them, Sunny.’”

“Yes!” Sunny leaped to her feet, so he did, too.

She turned and stared in the direction of River Mountain.

“Ask me about him, Ty!”

“Dom?” She’d barely met him. He didn’t understand where her thoughts had traveled.

She spun again to face him. “No! Thad!”

Ty hissed. “Ask you about—”

“Yes!”

He took a breath and closed his anger into his fists. He didn’t want to know details, so he chose an innocuous question. “Is he taller than me?”

She shook her head, irritated. “No.”

He realized her response wasn’t in answer. She didn’t like his question. “Tell me

what's going on."

She stepped up to him and grabbed his shoulders, looking up into his face with shining eyes. "I can't remember! Just bits, but it seems so long ago."

Keeping panic from his voice, he stated firmly, "Sunshine, please explain with whole thoughts what you are thinking."

"Dom! He took the Monster from me. At the Temple, they called it giving grace. He's shadowed the memories, dimmed them."

Her little, thin face burrowed into his neck. He closed his arms carefully around her, relief weakening his thighs. "One of the reasons people seek a souldance is to heal from terrible memories."

Her breath was hot against his throat. "I know, Ty. Fynn tried that argument on me. But I wouldn't consider it, because to bury them was to first reveal them." She shoved tighter against him, her breasts rubbing his ribs.

He wrapped her tightly, cradling her head. "You still didn't wish for this."

She pulled back and looked at him with clear eyes. "No. I didn't and I don't want to bury the rest of the memories." She laid her hand against his face, and her thumb tracing the line of his cheek calmed him, let him take a deeper breath. "But I'm not mad anymore. Well, not furious. More confused and irked. Oh, Ty, I know Dom rode my memories without permission, but the Monster is not ... not right *there*."

He rested his head in her grip, glad that some good had come out of Dom's failure. "So, shall I bring this before the Hawk, to lay before the Council?"

She shook her head. "He owes us a favor. He did me a wrong, but also gave in return." Her head nestled beneath his chin.

Just standing with her pressed against the line of his body stirred the muscles in his shoulders, as if he could fly in this form. "I would challenge Dom eye to eye for you. There's no reason his shame should be a secret."

"We're going to let this go, Ty. He's not what you think he is, and it's true his goals match ours. I do believe he'll see the darkmages dead. Let it go." Her arms tightened around his waist. "Agreed?"

His hawk shifted and bobbed, agitated. "I'll try." The man who should have had the most honor of all was one of the first to prove her distrust accurate. He gathered her, utterly relieved she hadn't pushed him into confronting her lack of trust in him. She still didn't understand what it would take for him to break her fear, and he promised himself that despite the ache in his soul at this taste of her, he would give her time.

They stood there until he noticed the angle of the sun. They'd been out here for hours. "I need to feed you."

She nodded. "You do. And I need to help the hawks who are going to fly to the Fortress."

Ty bent to gather the blanket, and noticed the small bone wedge lying on it. She must have dropped it in her sleep. She hadn't used it. In all he'd demanded, she'd not only allowed him his behavior, but found pleasure there. Despite everything. She was as perfect as the Six. He offered Sunshine the water skin, and after she'd drunk her fill, he finished it. They dressed, and he put the bone in his waistband. It would be his promise to her, that she'd always be able to protect herself and control him in the end.

He led her out of the meadow and through the pine forest, and when they landed at River Mountain, the guard was different. He nodded to the man, smiling with satisfaction

when the watercoaster's eyes averted at the way they both reeked of sex. He took his mate to the Eyrie, where Odan was waiting, leaning against the outer wall next to the door. No warrior would enter another Clan's clanhome without escort.

The groundbear's stripes streaked his face with a warrior's mask, his gray-blue eyes sweeping Sunshine's rumpled dress. Ty kept his hiss to himself. The man had taken good care of Sunshine when he'd been useless. His momentary flash of emotion didn't mean anything now that Sunshine was Bonded to him.

"Hello, Odan!" She called to the powerful man.

"Hello, Sunny. You are well?"

"I am very well! We're going to eat."

"Any news?" Ty asked, wondering why he was here.

Odan kept his gaze on Sunny. "Fynn's ceremony is tonight, in the Mountaincat Lair."

Ty clenched his fist. Sunshine didn't need the added stress of a new friend being taken from her so quickly. He looked at her, seeing the set of her jaw. "Is it after dinner?"

"Yes."

She stood so still, staring at Odan.

Ty asked, "Do you still want to go, Sunshine?"

She reached for him for the first time since they landed in the Mountain, and he breathed in thankfulness, beating back his cock. "Yes."

He folded his hand around hers, nodded to the Groundbear. He took a step toward the entrance, but the man spoke again.

"Most of the humans you brought from the Fortress with you were sent back to the Cities today."

Sunshine gripped his hand hard. "The Water girl?"

Odan nodded. "She remains, as she still cannot souldance."

"I never got to speak to her." She looked up at Ty. "She helped us, in a way."

Ty nodded. "She did. We'll remember that."

Between them they shared the memory of a bloodied, bruised, collared girl staring down a raging darkmage, standing unafraid in the face of a fearful blast, and somehow returning it. Sunshine looked away at Odan.

"I need to talk to you."

He just looked at her.

"Alone."

Hawk muttered inside Ty.

She looked up at Ty, swinging his hand almost playfully. Her eyes softened, reassuring. "Really alone, Ty."

He frowned. Touching her beseeching face, he nodded. "Bath. Then I wish to take you to the dining tents." He glanced at the quiet man. "I was thinking the lizeed tent would be interesting food for her. After dinner, you can talk."

Odan nodded to him. "I can escort her to the Lair for the gathering in honor of Fynn."

"I'll wait at the entrance."

"I'm not a package." Sunshine's grumpy ire made him smile.

He tapped her golden nose. "Where is the Lair?"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine." She tugged him forward toward the Eyrie. "I'm starving,

let's go. And while Odan and I are talking after dinner, you could go visit the Water girl, to thank her."

"I could?" Ty asked.

Sunshine hunched her shoulders. "I know I should, but Truth-tellers are ... creepy."

"Then that's what I will do." It occurred to him she didn't entirely trust him not to spy on her conversation. And maybe she was right to suspect him. "We struggled to find our way to a souldance. If I can help her in any way, I will."

Sunshine looked at him. Her mouth softened, and her eyes glowed.

He shifted, swallowing on the urge to crush her to him.

She looked over her shoulder at the Groundbear. "See you later, Odan."

"Good evening, Sunny. Ty." The man nodded to him as Ty went past.

Ty only had eyes for the quickly pattering feet of his mate.

* * * *

When she recognized Odan's bushy dome among the dozens of others in the loud tent, Sunny breathed a sigh of relief. She knew Ty had taken her here partly because of the delicious food, which she enjoyed. The clay-baked meat and long grains were flavored in ways she'd never tasted before.

However, the other reason she suspected they were here and not in the more cozy rooms of the Eyrie was that he was avoiding his family. She'd seen the way he walked quieter past their rooms, and how his guarded gaze swept the bathing chamber, his shoulders easing when his family wasn't present.

The tent was very large, and the tables close. There was music and it stirred her, reminding her of the best nights at the Temple. It was beautiful and haunting, with a stringed instrument that seemed to wind through her belly and drums that echoed in her feet. The people around her, however, kept her tense. She and Ty had both reached for the chair closest to the wall of the tent, and they'd settled for sitting side by side. But there was still one table behind them, and she was not the only one who continually looked over her shoulder.

When she tapped Ty's arm, easier than shouting over the din of voices, music, and laughter, and nodded toward Odan, who was bent over another table and talking to a few men, he seemed to sigh in relief.

He leaned into her space, his lips brushing her ear, "I'm sorry. We'll give this some more time before we try the tents of the other Clans." His voice rumbled down her spine and she shivered.

She pushed his hair back so her lips, feeling tingly and sensitive from the spices, could reach his ear in return. "Maybe we could just try them at a quieter time."

He smiled at her, a wide, easy grin that lit up her heart. "We could try that."

Compromise leading to something resembling a normal life pleased her.

Then Odan was there, the low magelights in the tent making his eyes look silver.

"How was your meal?" he asked, his voice rising to carry the arm's length across the table.

She just nodded, her lungs suddenly feeling fluttery at her plan. Ty went before her, winding through the tables. He spoke to someone by the door, and although no coin changed hands, she got the feeling that this was not a free activity. Then they were in the alley made by the row of vividly decorated tents, the sounds of gathering people and

scents of food thick in the air. Odan led them farther into the darkness, toward the black gaping arches that made up the door to the river. When they'd put enough distance across the flagstone floor that they could hear each other easily, he stopped.

She turned to Ty, suddenly unsure. She trusted Odan not to hurt her, to even attempt to protect her, but leaving Ty felt wrong. Ty stepped closer to her, his clean curls glinting in the faint starlight from the gaping hole high in the cave's ceiling. He lifted a circle up to her face and she held still in surprise as he draped a long cord around her neck.

Hiding the decoration that hung from it in his fist, he tapped her chin up so that she met his gaze. "I'll feel it if you need me. See you soon."

He hesitated, and she waited, heart frozen, but he didn't kiss her like he wanted to. His knuckles brushed her sternum gently as he set the necklace down and strode quickly away.

When he'd disappeared up a set of stone steps leading away from the vast cave's courtyard, she looked down. Watching him leave had brought a lump to her throat, but what she saw now swelled her throat closed. The small bone dagger gleamed in the dark. She cupped it and brought it closer. He'd hung it on a delicately braided loop, the cord made up of many knots. And the bone had been sharpened, not in a deadly point, but one much sharper than before. She closed her fist around it. *Fresh crushed grass seared her nose and sunlight was heavy on her bare shoulders.*

"What did you wish to speak of, Sunny?"

She looked over at Odan, standing motionless a short distance away. They stood in the shadows, the lit tents a good distance away. "I'm trusting you to keep me safe. To be decent."

He just looked at her. She almost smiled. After just a few days, she knew he disregarded anything he considered insulting or rude. His silence spoke loud.

Letting the pendant rest against her dress, she stepped closer to him. Her heart, frozen before, now thundered. She stepped closer again, so that she could smell the dry musk that was Odan. She remembered the clean scent of him when he'd carried her.

"I need your help."

"Then you shall have it."

She raised her brows. "So easy?"

"Through whatever difficulty."

She lowered her brows. "Why?"

"I like you." Odan smiled at her. "You are brave, and bold, and even though you are wounded, you are more open than you think." Lines swept his face, the black streaks in the shadows causing his face to fade. His eyes took on the eerie sensation of floating, unattached, before the stripes faded, and his tanned face emerged as a shape. He considered her. "Like the way you accept."

"Like what?"

"Like the fact that you never feared the Groundbear. You feared the man, but not the beastspirit. That is very rare, a gift I honor, Sunny."

"Hunh." She took a deep breath. "I don't fear you as a man anymore."

"Not as much," he countered.

She ignored his qualification, because she didn't know Odan's heart. Glancing around, she didn't see anyone walking nearby. "Do Truxet play sexual games?"

"Excuse me?"

She heard the humor in his voice with relief. His immediate reaction meant she'd avoided the reaction she'd feared, insult. "You heard me."

"Of course we do. We are very sexual people."

She was silent, studying his blank face, considering her idea one final time.

"Did Ty ask you to do something that makes you uncomfortable?"

Snorting, she shook her head. "No."

Her wry tone made him guess doubly wrong. "Are you afraid to request a sexual favor of Ty?"

She snorted again, still shaking her head.

"I can assure you, he will refuse nothing you ask for."

Realllllly. How interesting. "That's what I'm counting on." She looked at the man, waiting. His face was solid, his shoulders and torso more square than Ty's wedge-shape, with a thick neck. He was steady, good in a way that wouldn't easily be shifted with some dangerous sex. She stepped even closer to him. "I want you to have sex with us."

Odan stepped back. "Oh?" He seemed calm, but her eyes had adjusted to the star light, and she saw the pulse jump in his throat. "Have you talked to Ty about this?"

She sighed. "No. Of course not. The idea is to surprise him."

Odan reached up one hand and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Sharing a woman is a rare practice among most Truxet. It is especially rare among most Bonded. Almost unheard of..."

She pounced on the way his voice trailed off. "Almost?"

His arms crossed over his chest. It was a defensive posture, or a defiant one. "Yes. Sharing you is not something that your hawk would likely find pleasing."

"So *you* aren't particularly opposed to the idea."

"You are another man's Bonded, Sunny. Why are you asking about having me join you? I know you do not desire me that way. I would smell it if you did."

She pursed her lips, wondering if the insult of him assuming, with his colossal ego, that she was inviting him to bed because she was horny for him, was enough of an irritation to just forget the whole thing and walk away.

Then she remembered Ty's warrior face, stark and intent. Remembered the way he stared down at her, the way he'd pinned her, bit her, fucked her for hours, and then healed her. And still wouldn't reach for her as they walked side by side.

"I'm losing Ty."

Odan's folded arms fell away. His bare chest rippled. "You cannot be, Sunny. He is your—"

"Yes, yes," she snapped. "I know he's my Bonded. But I'm losing the fight against the memories. What they did to us." She gestured into the air. "Back there, at the Fortress."

Odan's hand went back to caressing his jaw again. "Let's find somewhere to sit." He held his arm out in a gesture to direct her and they walked to the edge of the vast, paved cave. There were rough cut rock seats in the edge of the wall, and some old stumps as well. Odan sat. "I've always known you've left things out of your reports. In particular, the details of the last morning. The description of the deaths of the three darkmages was a bit off."

The stump wobbled under her and she toyed with balancing on it, tipping it on edge. "Ty was chained, with one tormenting him, as I said. I was captive by another, in the

center of the floor. Another stood to the side. But what I left out—“she glared at him, “What will *stay* left out of the official reports, is that they put a darkspell on him, and gave him an ultimatum.”

Odan stayed calm and quiet, but despite the shadows, it was so hard to talk about. She didn’t feel like she was betraying Ty, knowing he’d already told most of his guilt in his own report. Surely Odan had even read that one.

“They told him to direct my torture, or they’d hurt me worse. And the spell on him made him *like* it. Made him like seeing others in pain so much that he actually came at one point, when I stabbed the darkmage near me.”

The hate, the instant need to protect Ty. The pressure of the blow, the way the handle of the mop stick slid in her hands before she set her shoulders, the give as it shoved through the woman’s gut. And then the pain, the blinding, bone-grinding pain of daring to harm one of them while under the slave spell.

“Those fucking pustules. I’m so glad they’re dead.” Odan’s voice rumbled in a low base through her ribs. “I can see why Ty is haunted. To be forced to hurt a woman, and be forced to feel that as pleasurable, and then to find out later she is your mate. I would go insane.”

She nodded. “I need your promise, as a warrior and a friend, that you will not talk about this or the sex games, if you agree, to anyone.”

“Sunny...”

She waited.

“I will not. I will hold this secret. But I haven’t agreed to join you. These memories that you say are pulling Ty from you, they come from a time he was powerless. Springing me as a surprise isn’t—”

“That’s not it, Odan.” She interrupted him. “It’s not his lack of power. It’s his enjoyment.”

Odan stared at her, unblinking, his eyes seeming to catch all the starlight. “It was a darkspell. Surely he will be able to forgive himself someday.”

Sunny took a deep breath, and chose to take the final step in trusting Odan. She’d closed her eyes and slept under this man’s gaze. That had been harder than this. She liked him, too. “Ty likes rough sex.”

Odan remained quiet, breathing deeply for many moments. “He likes to hurt you?” he asked hesitantly.

“When things get really hot, yes. But mostly, he’s just dominant. Forceful.”

“Well, the latter is very common among all the Clans. But the former ... Sunny, it is very rare. Truxet hold women as precious. When we’re instructed in sex, and when we first try it, we’re held to very high standards of control, knowing that our beastspirits require a greater burden of responsibility.”

She shrugged. “I don’t care how kinky Ty is. I don’t care if it’s the Fortress that made him this way. I love him. But he’s so scared of himself. I’ve tried twice now to get him to set himself free with me. He’s taken small steps toward that, but wasn’t truly honest. He didn’t *really* let himself go. I regret the control his Alpha had of him during the bonding ceremony. That would have been perfect. He could have lost control, and seen that I accept it. We can’t reproduce that.” She shivered, remembering looking at Ty’s battleform below her. “Although maybe I wasn’t quite ready. But I am now. He needs to be goaded into losing his inhibitions. And then he’ll see that I can take it, and

enjoy it.”

“Would you? Enjoy dominant, rough sex? With your recent history?”

“It’s Ty. I tried to say that it was sex at first, but it’s never been. It’s love. I’ve enjoyed every moment with him, sweet and harsh.”

Odan’s voice was soft, husky. “Jealousy won’t work, Sunny. As your Bonded, he knows you’re his on a level so deep ... literally, you bound your souls together.”

“I’m not trying to make him jealous!” Her voice got a little high. She set her stump down flush with the ground and leaned toward him. “I want you to be his safeguard.” She brushed her necklace. “A better one than this. He needs to know that if he loses control, it will still be all right. Only then will he trust himself with me. If he believes I have a protector, he’ll be able to be as dominant and wild as he needs to be. Then later, I can point out how you never stepped in. Otherwise, I’m going to be some worshipped, carefully tended mate, not one that’s ever known the truth of her husband’s desire. I can meet his needs, I *know* it.”

She stood up, stalking among the stumps. “He knows it, too, he’s just afraid, and guilty. But I think if you’re there, if you’re both goad and brake, he’ll be able to do it.” She paused, staring out over the plaza, hearing the distant laughter and music. “It’s now or never. I can feel it. *Help* me, Odan. He’s confirming to himself that he has the control to be my lover, but I don’t want his control. I want all of him.”

Odan rose, too. “I’ve never hurt a woman in my life, not even in bed. I might not be the right choice for this. The thought of seeing a bruise on you for Ty’s pleasure makes me sick. You want me to just stand by, then, and let anything happen.”

Sighing for her friend, she walked up to him, looking up into his face. “It isn’t like that. He doesn’t beat me.” Her hips burned with the remembered feel of his tight grip today. When his control finally slipped, would Ty hit her? She’d heard of lovers spanking each other and had truly never desired such a thing. Was there darkness in him, like in her, after all? He thought there was. But she didn’t believe it. He didn’t want to hurt her. He wanted to control her. He didn’t want her as a slave to his pleasure. He wanted them both to be lost in it. “Besides, Odan, who else would I ask?”

“Ty has a brother.”

“No.” She shivered thinking about the brooding boy. “Please. I’ll make sure it’s good for you.”

Odan shook his head, chuckling his low, pleasing laugh. “Right.”

“What?”

“I’m still waking up with a boner, dreaming of your Bonding. I’ve fucked three paid women, and it’s barely been two days since. Don’t worry that I won’t find watching you and Ty pleasing. Enough tiptoeing. What is it that you want me to do, exactly?”

Sunny licked her lips. Heat burned in her cheeks and down her throat, and she was glad of the darkness. She stood her ground, but couldn’t keep her voice from lowering to a whisper. “I want you to tell Ty you’re there as my guard, that you won’t let him go too far. I want to stir him up, dragging out memories of when those bitches ordered him, so I can erase them. And then I want you to leave.”

“Leave.” Odan’s voice was that empty flat she’d come to know, so controlled that no inflection of emotion came through. “After you goad him into losing control.”

“Leave.”

“And this is supposed to be good for me sexually?”

“Ty’s a bodymage.”

“Yes?”

“You’ll get the best orgasm of your life.” She wrapped her arms around her waist. “Trust me. With just a touch.” So maybe she was leaving out small details like how the orgasm might stop your heart, but still, she thought it might be a good lure.

“And when shall I receive this best orgasm?” Odan’s voice was full of doubt.

Oops. Shit. She hadn’t thought this through. “Ummm. I don’t know.” And suddenly she saw herself, plotting sexual games in the dark with a man not her mate. She grinned, feeling the wide, surprising pull of it as it changed her face, then changed her emotions.

Odan sucked in a hard breath. His hand came up and touched her cheek. She felt no reflex to pull from him. His light touch fell away. “Your smile makes you look different. Beautiful.”

“Gee, thanks,” she said wryly, playfully crossing her arms in mock pique.

Odan shook his head. “Ty did that for you. Barely two days as his mate, and you are able to smile.”

Sunny nodded. “Help us, Odan. I’ll be in your debt.”

His touch on her arm was there and gone in the darkness. “No. Friends don’t owe debts. I’ll try to help you. I can’t promise it will be like you imagine, and I won’t continue if Ty absolutely balks. We tell him from the start what and why we’re doing this, and see what he says. If he wants to be free of his demons the same way you do, he’ll reach for something that will help him heal. But if he’s not ready to face this, I won’t make him.”

It was enough. Sunny stepped toward the light, as Odan directed her. Her smile still pulled at her cheeks as they walked back toward the people. Tonight, Ty was finally going to be hers.

* * * *

Devron’s voice pushed into the comfortable dark. “Rowan, you have a visitor who wants to meet with you.”

Rowan woke up and cautiously moved her shoulders. After one week, there was only a little pain. Mostly her wounds were very stiff and achy. Soon the stitches would come out. “Who?” she asked her wolf friend and current jailer, groggily.

“Tydus the hawk.”

“Who is that?”

“The hawk that sifted you here, the captive who escaped with you.”

“Oh. Him.”

During this evening’s nap, it had been Laing who joined her in bed. She’d found on her second day that she liked to lie with one of the men. They were honorable, so she wasn’t worried a jot. They were also warm and comforting in a way she’d only experienced once in the City. A warrior’s strong presence beside her kept the nightmares away.

When she’d asked if one of them could lie with her, it had been a whim, something that just popped into her brain, like a vision, but more of a want. To her surprise, they’d agreed. Laing had deferred to Devron. She’d offered to share the bed with both of them, but they insisted one stay on guard. So she slept at Devron’s side that first time, and slept well. Despite the depression haunting her through her pain-filled days, they’d continued

to share her bed whenever she requested it, cuddling or supporting her.

On this evening, Laing hummed upon waking, his leg slung over hers, one hand wrapped in a hunk of her hair. Neither man had ever jostled her wounds.

“Hey,” she said to him, throat husky.

His body rippled, stretching, clad only in his leather skirt as usual. She’d discovered that unfortunately, there were shorts built in below it. He opened his light brown eyes, his shaggy blond hair mussed. He frowned. “You’re on your back.”

Rowan assessed. Yes, she’d turned onto her back for the first time, and it was wonderful to change positions. There was only mild discomfort. “I’m much better. Maybe the stitches will come out tomorrow.”

Laing grunted. “Don’t rush your body. Give it time.”

Devron stood by the door. “The hawk Tydus wants to meet with you, Rowan. What shall I tell him?”

Laing sat up, the cascading furs shedding heat. “What does he want?”

“He didn’t say. He’s waiting.”

“Yes. I’d like to see him.” Rowan grumped at Laing. “Come back. It’s cold.”

Devron slipped out the door, closing it behind him.

Laing grinned at her. “It is not, lazybones. I’ve never met such a sleeper.”

“Kiss me.”

Both of them froze. He looked down at her, confused. “Where did that come from?”

“I don’t know.” She licked her lips. “I don’t care. Kiss me.”

He shook his head. “I think not.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t want me. You’re just bored. And you’re a wounded guest, not a paid woman.”

“So give me money, and kiss me.”

He chuckled, which made her gut boil, and rolled out of bed, already being on the outside. “Rowan, you are the most plain-spoken woman I’ve ever met. You never parse your words, just blurting whatever thought you have.”

“So? That’s unattractive?”

He stretched all the way up onto his toes, arms straining for the ceiling. Saliva exploded into her mouth. She wanted to touch and be touched. She wanted heat, and mindless escape. She wanted to celebrate finding men who didn’t want to control her. Well, they did, but mostly to protect her.

He just shook his head, pouring tea from the pitcher into two cups. Sitting up caused her only a twinge, and she sat with her legs hanging over the edge of the bed. Her thin red dress was bunched high on her thighs. The door opened, and in walked the hawk. A pang pinched her chest to see him free and whole.

“You’re doing well, hawk.” She sat before him, and tipped her chin up. That she’d survive, she never really doubted. Her vision of a future confrontation had buoyed her, made her brave. But this man had not only managed to escape, he’d taken her with him when he hadn’t needed to. When in fact, she would have seemed a handicap. “There are few souls that radiate like yours.”

Holding up her hands, she framed him, marveling at the glow she saw. Devron was at the door, and Laing was hovering on her side of the table, not entirely in front of her, but between the hawk and her.

He didn't seem to mind her focused study, standing at ease. "I understand you're doing well, also. I'm sorry to hear your healing has been going so slowly. I am a bodymage, and please know I am always at your service. I've come to offer my debt to you."

"Debt?" She swung her feet in the air, rocking them with opposing momentum.

He hesitated so long she had time to peruse his muscled form. "For what you did, with the last darkmage."

"I didn't do anything." Her voice held all the scorn she felt for her situation. "I never do. I can't."

The hawk shook his head. "You could have run. You came to help us, and stood strong."

"I came to accept your offer of escape," Rowan said wryly. "I heard you've bonded to the tall woman. Congratulations." It was so romantic that they'd found each other.

"You deserve to have my debt—"

"No. No debts." She stopped her kicking feet. The band of pressure that came with one of her spells struck hard and tight. The compulsion rose, and she said, "You're wrong about her."

They both blinked at each other. As far as her messages went, that one was downright coherent. But then another urge rose up, and she looked at Laing.

"I'm feeling much better. In a day or two, I bet I'll even be able to fuck."

Laing had been facing the hawk, Ty. He turned his head and pinned her with his whiskey eyes. He looked at her, his face closed, eyes slitted with anger. "Indeed."

He turned his face back to the other man.

"Why did that make you angry?" She was curious, and still aware that this conversation was part of the compulsion. She'd never been driven to just have one of her always-honest conversations before.

Laing didn't answer.

Rowan had the market cornered on passive-aggression. The silent technique didn't bother her in the least. She'd once gone seven months giving the Guild the silent treatment, until she'd won her way. She spoke to his back. "I'd like to fuck you. Or Devron, of course. Preferably both. I think it would help me a lot, so you'd be doing a poor, mistreated woman a favor."

Laing shot her a disbelieving look. "Can we have this conversation later?"

"No." She said it simply, without heat. Because it was true. She *needed* to have it now.

"What do you mean 'preferably both'?" Devron asked.

"I mean I'd like to fuck you both." She lifted her toes and began to swing her feet again.

"Most Truxet don't share." Devron, at least, sounded amused.

"Hmmm. I hadn't thought of having you at the same time. I've never done that before. Do you think Laing would do it?"

"Rowan." Laing spoke through gritted teeth.

"What?"

"Stop it."

"Why? Neither of you are mated." She was honestly curious, and surprisingly hurt he resisted her so strongly.

“I already told you, you’re just bored. Besides, you have only been free of darkmages a week. You endured horrible torture at their hands, including rape. You are fragile. Give yourself time.”

“I said I wanted to fuck, not be raped.”

“Rowan!” He turned toward her, glaring at her.

She laughed at him. “You have bed creases on your tummy.”

He growled, and Devron said, “Stand down, Laing. It’s just talk.”

She raised one brow, holding Laing’s irritated stare. “Let me ask you something. When I said that I wanted to be held at night, and share the comfort of your presence when I slept, did you say, “You endured horrible torture just a day ago. Give yourself time?” No, you did not. Just because I’d been beaten in the face eleven times a few days before didn’t mean you couldn’t give me the comfort of shared sleep. And just because I was raped weeks ago doesn’t mean you can’t give me the comfort of shared pleasure.”

He glowered at her. “Sex is more intimate than a simple touch. It will play with your emotions, stir up raw memories, and change how you interact with me.”

Rowan mentally rolled her eyes. “So?”

He stalked to her. She held her breath, suddenly absolutely certain she wanted his heat on her body, to feel his skin moving smoothly in hers. Her breasts ached, swollen and hard.

Laing crouched before her, his body fragrant with man-scent. “Rowan, we are on duty with you. I know you are smart enough to understand why Devron and I never eat, sleep, or train at the same time. Until they find a way to assess you without a souldance, since your craft prevents you from taking that ritual and it is the only way to absolutely confirm your intentions and memories, I am guarding you. Friendship is fine for my duty, but sex with you is not.”

Her ribs clenched tight. They didn’t trust her. Because she couldn’t be spiritually peeled open and laid bare, they were so suspicious.

Laing continued. “So first and foremost, right there, you’re off limits to me. Secondly, I enjoy your company, appreciate your beauty, and admire your life story. But I don’t want to take you for a casual fuck. I’m not looking for that. I don’t believe it would help you, and I don’t believe in sex between friends. Absolutely any man would do for you right now. I don’t want to scratch your itch and then have to watch you incorporate our experience into your recent trauma. That’s not something I’m trained to deal with.”

He reached out and tapped her on the nose. She wrinkled it at him. Damned earthmages. They were so calm and patient. “Maybe you should masturbate in the baths today. Give yourself a break.” He winked at her.

Then he stood and returned to facing the hawk. She sat and considered his words. Did she really just want any man? Aside from the bodymages, her guards were the only people she’d seen, locked up here in this room, the bathing room her only variation.

She glanced at the hawk. His gaze was cast down, his shoulders rigid. “Hawk, heed my words. Pleasure taken now need have no connection with the past.” The compulsion faded from her throat.

He raised his head slowly, and his eyes were such an eerie, burning amber. Raptor eyes. “I came here to offer you the thanks of my mate and myself. I hear you are wanted by the Mage Guild, and I hear they were also the ones to have that collar put on you.”

She stood, and her dress slithered to her knees. “But luckily I can’t souldance, so it seems that the third group of people I’ve met has continued the tradition of caging me. I’m not sure what I’d even do with freedom at this point.”

She smiled at the hurting man. “Maybe I’d become Bonded and fuck my mate senseless. Until then, I’ll have to find some other man to seduce.”

His jaw jumped. “You ... truly want that?”

She walked forward and picked up a wooden cup of tea. “Yes.” She took a drink. “Say hello to your woman for me.”

He nodded. “Her name is Sunshine now. I’ll tell her.”

Chapter Fourteen

Thad watched the lizard-bird with satisfaction, soaking up all its lovely fury and pain. Chained in the hall before the sifting room door, it was cramped and furious at being enclosed. Its long brown tail thrashed, and its leathery wings bled from beating them against the stone walls. It was hungry, despite its recent gorging on the trespassers but he had no doubt it would soon eat again. The arrogant beasts wouldn't be able to help themselves.

Tapping his new sword idly against the stone floor, Thad smiled. He'd made sure the Fortress' impenetrable ancient defense was triggered, using their last slave to power the spell. It was done, the final protection, and there would be no stopping him now. The beasts would throw themselves away on their one point of contact, and he'd just sit back and gloat. Instant win. The only regret was they'd never know it was their own damn spell protecting him, killing them.

That little toad Russ was eagerly strolling Third City now, on the hunt for fresh slaves. Fresh bodies. He licked his lips. Fresh souls. It was only fun to rape the fresh ones. After the first few times, the fear just wasn't the same. Leaning against the wall, he jerked on the front of his black velvet jerkin, embroidered with red gems. Soon, he'd emerge in Fourth City as a Jewel Guild merchant. He'd already picked out a name. He grinned happily. Erich. Yes, a lovely name, full of fond memories, even if his pet bear had gotten oddly inflamed and stolen both the kill and the heart. He'd been punished, so Thad trusted it wouldn't happen again.

He inhaled one last time, drinking in the creature's rage and pain. So sweet. Tossing the sword left behind by one of the dead, stupid, braggart beasts, he flipped it, catching its excellent weighted hilt. Grinning, he darted close, and jabbed the lizard-bird's tail, drinking one more wave of power from the thing. The metal chains scraped as it strained and hissed. Thad turned away, expertly flicking the blood from the blade. It had thick, sturdy lines. He was sure a craftsman of Second City had made it. No beast paws could make such a shining, subtle curve. The beasts had told his mother she couldn't have the wolf-man of her dreams because of the taint of Thad's inferiority. The fact that he existed was a blight that barred her from their precious wild Clans. Torn between her lost future and a son she now saw as disgraceful, she'd committed suicide. They'd discarded her delicate beauty because they'd judged him weaker, unworthy. Oh, yes, they would pay, and bow, and mourn. Thad nodded happily, secure not only in his new weapon, but with the entire scenario.

The others were uneasy, but after his initial disappointment, he'd made his peace that the next chapter had opened. The plan was unaffected, the Fortress even more secure with this new and final spell than before. Under attacks inspired by the beasts' presence, the Cities would reject their prior "guards," and chaos would reign. He, with his excellent sword won from a *failed* attempt on his secret Fortress, would step in.

* * * *

Ty was on edge from the constant interruptions. Fynn's memorial had been fucking

depressing. He'd barely known the man. Yet the Cat's energy was woven into his matebond, and thinking that the man who'd been part of tending Sunshine just days ago was now dead and in the belly of a rancid beebee made his blood beat fast. The memorial had been stirring and long, and now the hour was late. Not that he felt like sleep with his emotions in a churning mess.

The Groundbear had brought her up to the Mountaincat's Lair shortly after he'd arrived from the disconcerting Water girl, Rowan. Sunshine was right. She was creepy. However, he'd seen the bounce in his Sunshine's step and distrusted it. Just what she was planning with the Groundbear had him puzzled.

Quor had found them in the crowd, and tried to talk to Sunshine about what had happened with Dom. She'd waved him away, saying that was settled, much to Quor's amazement. Quor had set an appointment for the next morning, for her to work with him on how she'd done it. Apparently, there were still tricks the leader of the Council's spiritimages could learn. He wanted to be able to watch her when she helped the hawks who would leave tomorrow afternoon. She was planning on giving them the layout of the Fortress the same way she'd given it to Dom. Ty was unsure of the wisdom of such a plan, but Quor seemed to believe Dom was more likely to 'slip' than anyone else. Yet another reference to the power and unique spirit of Dom that Ty did not understand. He was very interested in perhaps bartering silence on Dom's "slip" into an adjustment on a potential punishment for Sunshine's darkspell. And of course, tomorrow's project would delay a little bit longer the need for Quor to make them sink into a souldance and pour out their memories for a record.

Then they'd stood in the crowd of the Mountaincat's largest room, and listened to Fynn's mother and father cry through their memories of him. Fynn's friends and fellow fireimages had all spoken of him, funny and touching and sweet stories of a man who'd only been a few years older than Ty. The Mountaincat had spoken, of course, his anger visibly seething, even with the Clan Domina, the Alpha's mate, at his side. She was a tiny woman with odd coloring. She had the same green eyes as his Sunshine, although her skin was as black as a wolf's, and her hair as orange as his own eyes. But for all her size and unique shading, she was obviously a force to be reckoned with as she pulled the leader's rage down again and again.

Listening to the memorials sent a familiar churning in his gut. Soon, with the information Ty had brought, Delavega would have to do the same thing, fourteen times. It would be the Eyrie's main room hosting memorial services and pouring out bittersweet memories of friends. Until now, the Clan had held out hope the men were alive. Ty wanted to tip his head back and scream, but it wouldn't sate the pain. And then there were the hawks who would soon fly out on their reconnaissance mission. How many memorials would they hold for that team?

When Sunshine tugged on his arm, he'd guided her into the line of people waiting to step up onto the woven grass stage platform to speak about Fynn. Others had offered prayers and well-wishes to Fynn's parents or Clan, but she just stepped up onto the stage, and stared blindly out at the sea of faces. He thought for a moment her mind had gone blank, but then she sucked in a harsh breath and spoke in a clear alto.

"Fynn showed me my first dawn after my escape. He was there at my Bonding, and his fire will always be with us. But I'm struggling to learn how to trust again, and his death has taken a piece of that back again." She touched the center of her chest. "It

hurts.”

It was as if her words summoned Fynn's fire into being. His heart strained and his muscles clenched. That they'd taken this good man from her. That they were still out there. She stepped down, and as with all the speakers, the crowd gave applause. But this time, the applause wasn't the brave, false patter of hearty denial. It was fainter, and more scattered, as murmurs swept the crowd regarding her honesty. Ty's heart was still in his throat from her perfect words. His priestess awoke in small starts. He curled her into his arm when she reached for him, pain stark in her eyes.

They'd stayed for the hours of speakers, and left when the Mountaincat led a Clan song. To his surprise, when he made to say goodbye to Odan, who'd also spoken of Fynn, Sunshine interrupted him, saying, “He's coming with us.”

The man avoided his gaze.

“He is? It's late, and you've had a very long day.”

She avoided his gaze, as well. “He is. Please.”

Back at the Eyrie, she'd asked to seek out the Hawk, but he was out, flying with those who were chosen to sift to the Fortress tomorrow. So she'd met with Fen, instead. She'd asked for a room where she could have real privacy, where no one walking past in the hall could hear them. Irritated she hadn't just asked him, as if he wouldn't have told her the Clan had stone-hinged doors for privacy, she'd thanked the Shield and stressed again how she didn't want to be disturbed. He'd promised the room would be marked with a sign of use, and privacy.

Then Ty had followed her request to gather blankets and food and drink. He'd come back to the private room, only to be greeted by Odan, waiting in the hall outside the closed door.

Sighing, he hissed at the man, as quietly as he could, “What's going on?”

Odan nodded. “We need to talk.”

“Where's Sunshine?” The bowl full of biscuits and cheese bit into his fingers at his tightening grip.

“Your mate is fine, inside. She knows I'm talking to you because I told her I wouldn't do this without your agreement.”

“What. Exactly. Is *this*?” Ty's anger was boiling up, tangled with the night's fury at Fynn's death and the continuing freedom of the darkmages.

“Easy. Keep your control.”

Ty gritted his teeth at the reprimand, as if he were a youngling. Council-trained beyond the standard Clan warrior training, this man's alpha abilities supposedly gave him an edge on Ty. Ty suddenly wanted to test that, but aggression was strictly forbidden off the training mats. He put his collection down by the door to Sunshine, wanting his hands free. He stalked forward in the hall, to stand close before the other man. He didn't care at all if he was the Clan's Sky Champion.

“What is she planning?” Ty kept himself balanced on the balls of his feet, knees bent, arms loose, ready.

“To seduce you.” Odan spoke in a hush that wouldn't carry.

Ty blinked, startled into settling onto his heels. “She's already proven adept at that. What are you here for?”

The warrior ruffled his hair. “To help.”

Ty crossed his arms. “Keep going.”

“She told me about your last morning in the Fortress. About the darkspell, and how you liked it.”

Only through his will did Ty remain in place. He was rocked by the pain in his chest. This was what betrayal felt like. Like being stabbed.

“She’s concerned you don’t trust yourself to share true passion, that you believe you’ve lost the right to be yourself, and put too much weight on her history.”

Ty kept his teeth together. He couldn’t believe she’d gone to another man with this kind of intimate knowledge. “We got past that today in the meadow. Thanks for your concern, but you can go.”

“Of course you realize I’m here at her request. She doesn’t think you got past it. She wants my help.” The man was unflappable, his metallic gaze steady. It made Ty feel even more out of control.

It was several quick, hard breaths before Ty could speak. “And how exactly does she imagine you will help?”

The groundbear finally lowered that direct stare and studied his short, even nails. “She wants me to be her guard.”

“Her guard.”

“Yes.”

Ty lowered his crossed arms and stepped toward the man. “Against me.” It didn’t come out as disbelieving. It came out with despair. Because he could well believe it. After all, he’d armed her himself against just such a possibility. He knew the groundbear would hear his wildly flapping heart, but couldn’t stop it. If he stopped, it would shatter. Sunshine wanted protection against him? Yet wanted to push him even farther into his vicious desires?

Odan looked up at Ty. “I will protect her from you in your passion. So you can ‘let go’ is how she kept saying it. Something about freeing your control and discovering each other.”

Ty spun and began to pace. “I don’t believe this. Today ... it was beautiful. It was wild, and I know she was pleased.”

“I don’t think this is about her pleasure.”

Ty paced to the wall and pivoted. “I won’t do this. I can’t. I’ll hurt her. Scar her. I *warned* her.”

“And apparently you didn’t deliver, much to her disappointment.”

Ty threw the man’s words back at him. “This isn’t about her pleasure.” He paced to the far wall. “This is about my sanity.” Facing the stone, it was easier to admit to a man who already knew of his shame. “She’s been through enough power play shit. She doesn’t need it from me.”

“You want to dominate her. That’s not unusual at all. But how rough do your fantasies get?”

Ty threw his head back, eyes burning into the rock ceiling. “I want to ... you can’t imagine it. I heard this kind of terrible, consuming obsession was common when you first found a mate, but that it faded after you were Bonded. This ... isn’t normal. Every moment I’m with her, I want to fling her over my shoulder and take her away.” He snorted, shook his head. “No. I want to put her on her knees and fuck her there. Immediately. In front of every male that looks at her.”

Ty turned again so he could see the warrior’s reaction to this charming revelation. “I

would be hard for her every minute of every day if I didn't force myself back. She wants to strip me of my control? I think not."

The man rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Why do you say it's not normal?"

"Because I should respect my mate more than that!" Ty waved his arm around, disturbed by Odan's lack of disturbance.

"I have seen you are incredibly respectful toward her. That's what she wants to challenge. She wants more passion. If you both want more passion, then why are you fighting this? Nothing in your heart's desire should cause you to doubt her reaction to you. You are mates."

"I don't turn off my own head just because of my 'heart's desire'. She's been traumatized. I don't want to ever imitate her memories. Including some very nasty memories of *me*."

"Hmmm. That's what she said was the problem. Your memories of being nasty to her. So she wants to re-enact them. Replace them."

Ty grabbed onto his hair with both hands, pulling it straight out above his ears. "What! Replace!"

Odan grinned at him and he wanted to slap the amusement off his face. "I've heard many times that mates are both peace and bane."

"With you!" Ty was still stuck on the re-enactment.

Odan's head inclined sedately. "With me."

Ty stormed forward, intent on getting to Sunshine. Odan stepped in front of the seam to open the door. "If you go in that room, you are in her scenario. If you want to stop this, then you are closing the door on this offering. I'll be gone in a breath."

Ty stood an armlength away, finding it hard to breath and impossible to think. He closed his eyes again. Reaching down the new, glowing bond to his mate, he tried to find her. She was like a counter beat, and all he found was an erection. *If you go in that room, you are in her scenario*. What scenario was that? The one where she wanted him to forget her past and treat her like an object? The one where he forced himself on her, knowing he was the only one to ever do it again? The one where he vomited tomorrow morning after seeing scars he inflicted on her body, making him no better than their captors? And what would she do when truly forced to admit how scared she was of him?

Ty shook his head. The stone grated as the man slowly pressed his shoulders to it. Odan was pressing him for a decision, no doubt because Sunshine was waiting. Ty shook his head, feeling sweat run down his spine. "No," he said. He wouldn't risk his mate like that.

"Yes, Ty." Her voice made his eyes burst open.

She stood just in front of him. Odan closed the door again.

"Sunshine." His voice sounded as desperate as he felt. For fuck's sake, they were standing in the hall.

She searched his gaze, looking worried.

"Today in the meadow, it was good. It was enough, Sunshine." His voice was hoarse, the same gravelly rumble it had sunk to after hours of torture.

"It wasn't enough, Ty, because you still don't reach for me. It wasn't enough. We haven't become what we could be, together."

He snapped at her. "I was extremely satisfied. *Never* imply that our love has been anything less than a stunning gift." He stared at her, not knowing how he was going to

deny her with this erection pulsing like a second brain. "I will never be like them."

"Oh, my Ty. I am your woman. In every way." She glided forward, wearing a black robe he'd never seen before that made her hair seem even more fair and her skin like hammered gold. "We're perfect for each other. Matched by destiny and experience. You are nothing like them. This will be a cleansing, and you can see that." She knelt at his feet, and his heart rocketed into his throat. Shadowed memories swirled with sharp, sudden lust.

No. "Get up, Sunshine. You never kneel before me again." He bent, getting under her armpit, ready to haul her up when she made no move to do so.

"But Ty, I love being before you. I love trusting you, relaxing here, because I'm safe with you." She reached for the waistband of his leathers.

He grabbed her wrist roughly. When she met his gaze, his breath caught. Her eyes were blind with desire, dazed. Her lashes swept down, and she licked her lips. "Let me be safe. Let me rework the memories you hold so closely, so guiltily. You have already let me do the wanting. Now I want to be wanted."

Shaking, he crouched before her, his crotch screaming in agony from the pressure. He ignored it. "You cannot doubt I want you. Always. Every moment, I ache for your skin."

"You can't even touch me." Her soft voice paused, picked up speed. "You think this afternoon was so successful? You *still* don't reach for me, like you think you're tainted." The bitterness in her voice surprised him. "You say you don't trust yourself. But I've told you time and again I trust you. The truth is you don't trust *me* to know my own mind. If you trusted me, you'd believe me."

"I'm the one who knows my own mind. There's reason to be afraid, and you know it."

Her hand flew up and latched around the back of his neck. She jerked him forward, and leaned her face in. Baring her teeth at him, she growled. "You're doing it again! I'm telling you, *nothing* you do to me will frighten me. I want. All. Of. You."

She lunged forward and kissed him, a kiss of fury and passion. He responded, cradling her face in his hands. His tongue battled her teeth and won the entrance of her mouth. He angled his face, kissing her harder, deeper. The taste of her was like fire in his blood.

She ripped her mouth from his. "This ends tonight. Tonight, you learn to trust me like I trust you." She blinked those light lashes over her survivor's eyes. His lips sizzled to kiss her again. *Bone, steady him.* He was so close to giving in to her. So close to accepting her invitation to become a new monster for her collection.

He swallowed and admitted the most vile shadow he still owned, hoping to clarify the kind of darkness he carried. "Sunshine, I came when Dionne killed Karu. Was it the spell? Or was it the fact I truly got off on that bitch's death?"

She shook her head. "That doesn't matter. Ty. They don't matter. That day in the Fortress doesn't matter, none of it. It was torture we got through together. What matters is that you've made love to me three times, but you've never shown me your true self. I'm not going to spend my life letting the past keep you chained. You don't trust yourself, and so you don't trust me. They're tied. Each to the other. If you'd trust me, you'll see you can trust yourself."

Out of the air, he flashed back on the words of Rowan, the Water girl he'd visited

earlier in a futile attempt to thank her. *I said I wanted to fuck, not be raped.* “I don’t understand why you want me to be like them. I could hurt you, and like it.”

“I want you to be yourself, Ty!”

Her exasperation stabbed at him. He was fighting for his very soul. He doubted very much she understood the kind of force she was fighting to release. She sat back on her heels, and even that small amount of distance she put between them was painful to him. Stirred dominant urges in him.

“Do you blame me for surviving?”

“Sunshine!”

“You know what I’ve done. Are you disgusted by the rapes?”

“Of course not. Stop this.”

“Then quit blaming *yourself* for surviving. Ty, I *became* them to get away from them. And I’ll have that inside the rest of my life. They did their work well and I’ll never be easy with people again.”

“I’m proud I survived. I don’t know what you’re getting at.” His hands fisted to keep from reaching for her.

“Whatever man *you* became to survive, I love. So what if they’ve twisted your sexuality. Made you afraid of it. Braided it into fear and doubt and reality. That was them, Ty. *Them.*” She laid her hand on his arm. “You saw my trust then, among those three evil women, and you rejected it. You didn’t believe I could do it. I’d have done absolutely anything, and because I was with *you*, it wouldn’t have been *them*. They couldn’t touch us. I knelt on that bench, and they were nothing but ghosts working the touch of you for me.

“But you let them into the moment. You let them touch you, and twist that moment of sharing. You have to forgive yourself. You have to trust me when I say absolutely nothing you do to me will disgust me, hurt me, or break me. Part of being sunshine is casting shadows.”

He looked at her, startled by the scolding echo in her wise words. “My priestess.”

She inclined her head. “I love you, Ty. I love your spirit, and I love your desire. They’re not here. It’s just us. And either you believe me as of tonight, or we’ll have to limp through this for years, sharing only some careful portion of ourselves, because you’re afraid that I’m afraid.” She stroked his arm softly, and it didn’t soothe. It fired.

“I’m terrified. I would die to hurt you for pain’s sake, with the anger of ownership I can feel inside.”

Her hand moved to his cheek. “Because you don’t trust me.”

“Of course I do. You’re my mate.” He couldn’t bear her touch, yet he couldn’t bring himself to ever deny it. He was pinned by the feel of her delicate fingers.

“My hawk, I trust you. And for you to say you don’t trust yourself is to throw that back in my face. This is the death of your anger at surviving. This is the truth of your passion for me. You want to control me, you want to use force on me. And it’s beautiful, Ty. It’s trust. It’s all tangled up together.”

Her words were making him crazy. They were making too much sense. They were too close to his nightmares, to his brightest fantasies. “If I let go—”

Her fingers landed on his lips, warm and firm, silencing him. “You’ll see our love. You’ll see my trust, and you’ll see you can trust yourself.” She leaned forward, bracing herself on her knees to breathe into his ear. “And you’ll give us more pleasure than we’ve

ever known.”

He shivered under the press of power shimmering with her warm breath across his neck. Tilting his head, he breathed into her ear in return. One breath, and he struggled to say the words. Another breath, and she remained poised, a bridge of flesh between him and his dreams. A third, and then he put his lips to her ear and whispered, “I will follow you.”

Her body jerked on a caught breath, and then her forehead fell to his shoulder, her body trembling. “Thank you. Thank you. Please, Ty. Trust me.”

He kissed her exposed nape, loving the little spike of glittering hair trailing onto her spine. His lips softly skittered over her scars there. “I will.” *The Six help them all.*

When she lifted her face before his, he was so close to her he could see her pores. In his eyes, she glowed with life, with an unbreakable spirit he ached to witness. “Mate.”

She nodded, and scrambled to her feet. He rocked his body and stood with a push of his thighs. Watching him, she licked her lips, and his erection, never diminished despite the agonizing conversation, pinched. She threw a glance at Odan, and Ty’s gut clenched. He hadn’t forgotten the man was there, but he still didn’t like it.

“So are you in?” She demanded haughtily.

“Do I need to be?” He calmly returned.

She looked at Ty, her gaze skimming his clenched fists, tight jaw, stiff shoulders. “Ty? I want to crush the old memories. Tonight we remake them.” Again, it was less a request than a demand.

He gave her a polite bow with his head and shoulders. His hands were like ice, while his blood blazed. “I will follow my Lady.”

Her chin kicked up, her eyes flashing. That small almost-smile curled one corner of her wide mouth and she nodded to him once, every inch a priestess. Turning, she gathered his supplies of blankets, a fur, nourishment. Ty stepped forward to help, but she turned her shoulders. “No, I just need a moment.”

Odan pressed the door open and she slipped in. He closed it. Without Sunshine as his beacon, Ty’s palms suddenly slicked, and his heartbeat drummed in his ears. Odan held out his hand, and Ty gripped his forearm in a tight grip, something easing inside him when the warrior returned the clasp.

“I served at your Bonding. This is merely play between mates. Healing play. She is yours. Hold to that.”

“Holding to such a thought is not just a comfort. It is a responsibility.” Ty refuted the man’s platitudes. “If I become ugly, stop me.” He held the man’s eyes, letting him see his determination. “But you must understand that she will fear me before this reaches the healing peak.”

Odan inclined his head. “Understood.” He squeezed Ty’s arm harder, and they let go.

Ty’s heart still thundered in his head, but now, glancing at the closed rock door, it was with anticipation. He didn’t know how he’d transition, from the control he’d bound himself in, to the free reign of desire she demanded. Didn’t know if he truly could do it. Didn’t know if he’d break his promise to her, and just ride the edge, like this afternoon in the meadow. He didn’t know if he’d be sick, from wanting her on her knees again.

Then he felt her call. A touch on his spine, a pull, a slow heating in his belly. “She’s ready.”

He pushed the stone open and stepped into the round, domed cave. What he saw

made him dizzy. “No.”

He only distantly heard the door close behind him, sensed Odan move farther along the wall away to his right. “Fuck. No, Sunshine.”

She knelt on a low bench. Padded, the wooden legs were carved with feathers. She was nude, and her hands were behind her back. Her head was bowed, yet her shoulders were back, and her nipples were dark and hard, clearly visible in the room’s bright light.

Her head slowly lifted, and she lightly answered, “The correct term I’m looking for is ‘Fuck, yes.’” She jerked her head toward a chair opposite her, against the wall on his left. “That’s your seat. Take it.”

“Don’t do this Sunshine.” When she’d said she wanted to erase the old memory, he’d thought she was speaking metaphorically.

“You agreed to follow. I know I told you I wanted you to take control, but I think I need to be the leader just to warm you up.”

He took a step forward, his fingers itching to choke her. “Don’t toy with me.”

She chuckled, a rusty, low dry sound that abraded his nerves like sandpaper. Beautiful, erotic sandpaper. His whole body stiffened.

“Toys. Games. Play. Yes, Ty. Yes to all those things. And truth. Trust. Love. They’re going to be part of every bite, every pinch.” She licked her lips. “Sit down before you fall down, hawk.”

The tremors shaking his body threatened to buckle his knees. Turning his head in a quick sweep, he assessed the rest of the room. There was a nest of blankets on the floor along the far wall opposite him. A table, where Odan stood with his back to them, undressing. The bench, and the chair, a simple straight back chair. The only chair.

Ty looked at her, her eyes glittering, ruthless, and excited. His toes curled. He could be out the door in two steps. But no. He’d either destroy them both tonight, or learn she could both fear and trust him.

The moment turned, and he committed to staying. His heart skipped, adjusted, and slowed, settling into the controlled beat of battle. Odan turned from the table. He had black leather gloves on his hands, and nothing else. In one hand he held a long cylinder. This time Ty wasn’t naïve enough to mistake it for a wand. A white dildo. It looked small in the man’s large hands, but Ty judged it to be a fair girth. The man moved up to stand just behind and to the right of Sunshine.

Moving with steady, slow steps, Ty turned and went to his chair. He heard the long breath of relief ease from Sunshine. When he finally finished pushing his stiff body to the chair, he sat, spreading his legs, and immediately opened his pants to adjust his aching cock. He gripped himself, squeezing brutally and feeling the heat streak down his legs.

“I have obeyed my Lady. I’m ready to follow you.” He knew she heard the threat in his words, the warning, when he heard her heartbeat kick faster. Even faster than when she’d seen him pull out his cock.

Chewing on her lower lip, she considered his words. From the amount of time she took, he understood she had heard his message. Perhaps she initially imagined this game was another of his gifts. But in this, the tables would turn. In her boldness, she’d dared him to reach for so much more than he’d ever thought she’d be able to give so soon. His words were subservient, but in her scenario, he would be anything but.

He freed her of his own opinion by lowering his gaze to his hand where he tightened and released around the base of himself. Half of him wanted her to run out of the room.

Half of him ached for her to come to him, to ask for gentle kisses. Half of him wanted her to taunt him, challenge him to finish what she'd goaded him into.

In the end she swallowed, and whispered, "I want to fly with you. Free."

So it begins. He raised his head, and stared at the charming tableau she'd set up. The powerful man waiting, motionless, just behind and to the side of her. Her false submission, kneeling, hands behind her. "Issue your last decree, my priestess, before I step into my role here."

Her breath caught, and her lips parted. He saw the way her face melted with desire. Adrenaline lit through his body, erasing his last thought of stopping this.

"I've been very mean, treating you like a puppet. Vain, thinking I know you better than you know yourself. Cruel, sharing our darkest pain with another man, and inviting him into our light. I deserve to be punished."

He blinked at her. If he hadn't been squeezing his cock, it would have shrunk to the size of a pea. He stood in a rush and strode with Truxet speed to stand before her. Fury ripped through him, complete and violent. Tipping his head back, he roared his agony to the room. The sound rumbled in his ribs as his lungs stretched to voice it. She trembled before him.

He leaned into her face and growled, "You disgrace me for thinking I would *ever want* your punishment."

He grabbed her hair and tilted her head back. How had she read him so wrong? It was another betrayal in his heart, on top of her invitation to Odan. "I want your body. I want your spirit and your blood and your pleasure and your breath. Yes, *fuck, yes*, I get off on the power you give me. The power no one else ever had, that you *want* me to take."

Her breath was coming in small pants, her eyes wide and surprised at his clipped words. "If anyone dared to punish you, I'd rip his head off. Don't think I'm done with Dom, for what he did to you. I'm going to control you here, now, but it's not from anger at your actions. It's from pleasure." His other hand came up, his thumb sweeping along her soft lower lip. "Don't you understand?" he pleaded. "I adore you."

Pulling against his hold on her hair, she dipped her head and took his thumb into her mouth. His eyes almost rolled back into his brain. So warm, wet, mobile and firm. Drawing off of him, she whispered, "I'm sorry. No punishment, Ty. Just us."

He leaned down and gently touched his lips to the corner of hers, the corner that had led the way to a full smile. He held his lips there, breathing her scent, feeling the fragile moment shift when he suddenly and completely trusted himself. It was akin to the moment he'd landed in River Mountain, and his battleform had exploded, shedding previously unbreakable manacles like paper. His brain clicked, and he knew, deeply, that he could control his Sunshine's pleasure, steer the edge of pain, ride her into darkness, and not break.

He tightened his grip in her hair, pulling her again to the up-tipped position he wanted. Opening his lips wide, he hovered over her mouth, and exhaled into her, as if he could find his way inside her delicious, vicious, iron-strong being with just a push of power. She stilled, frozen beneath him, and abruptly the sting of fear rode the air.

Ty was not particularly shocked. After all, this was why he'd resisted so hard. But it saddened him. He opened his eyes and stared into the stunned, horrified green of hers. Oh, she was surprised by her fear. His sadness clenched for a moment in his gut. A third

betrayal. She'd honestly thought she trusted him. She'd denied her damage that deeply to herself. She'd thought unlocking this piece of herself, and building this bridge with him, would be easy, nearly automatic.

"You told me your fear didn't exist. And by the end of this night, it won't. But it's not going to be as easy as kneeling on a bench."

She swallowed with some difficulty, her head angled steeply back. "Ty, I do trust you. I'm not afraid!"

"Shhh." He caressed the delicate underside of her jaw. So soft, unscarred. "You're in my hands now. Just be. Witness. Manage each moment, and you'll survive."

With a push of his craft, he immobilized her. His fingertips drifted from her chin.

Her fear scent kicked up to bitter levels and Odan stirred for the first time. Ty stood before his mate, and felt the rightness, the calm stillness. He met the other man's silver-blue eyes, and held them. Odan was a good warrior, honorable and controlled. Ty would use him if he stayed, as a friend, as a tool. Odan searched Ty's gaze, and even though his shoulders ratcheted up with tension, he nodded.

But Ty had faced betrayal too many times tonight not to spell things out. "There's no stopping me. If you stay, she'll think you're here for her, and I'll take that from her, as well."

"So why would I stay?" Odan questioned mildly. "If I'm not being her friend?"

"As mine."

Odan tipped his head. His tongue swept his lower lip. Apparently, he sensed the truth of Ty, because he nodded. "I'm honored."

Ty looked down at Sunshine, his slave, his priestess, his mate. "You are so beautiful. If I break tonight, it's going to be from the pleasure I take from you, not the past's shadows."

Her eyes, shimmering at the border of panic, pleaded with him to release her.

"Isn't she beautiful, Odan?" He asked, riffling his fingers through her silky, dampening hair. He toyed with the strands, pushing them to one side, then the other, then spiking them, then slicking them.

"She is extraordinary." Odan moved up to Ty's side and faced her.

"What do you admire most about her body?"

He was quiet a moment. "Her belly, I think. It's so tightly muscled, so lean. Sculpted like a female warrior's. She's filled in over the days she's been in my care."

Ty turned his head and bared his teeth at the man. "Don't push me."

Odan smiled blandly. "Understood."

Drifting his fingers along the curl of her ear, he put two fingers against her frantic pulse. "Even when I have your trust, I hope some small part of you will see me as this unpredictable. I like your fear in bed. It makes me feel creative. It makes me feel alive."

His finger edged under the cord of the necklace he'd given her. He drew it up until he closed his fist over the sharpened bone, a symbol he'd given her to dull her fear and free her passion in the meadow. It had worked. Too well. It had led her down a deluded path, until she'd convinced them both to this point.

"You don't get any protection tonight." He drew it up over her head gently, and her lashes fluttered.

Ty turned and strode back to his chair, sprawling his legs wide, slouching in it, one arm slung over one corner. The necklace dangled from his fingers, and her chest looked

utterly bare without it. “So here I am, Sunshine. In the throne of control you wanted me to take. And there’s your tool before you, the one you thought to incite me with. Let’s begin.”

He felt a wild tug on their bond’s path, an emotional upswell of need and fear.

“Shhhh. I’m right here. Nothing will happen that isn’t what I desire. And that is what you sought, isn’t it?” His lingering ache at her betrayal and doubt made him poke at her. “For me to *want* you. For me to act on passion’s most honest desire.”

He brooded at Odan’s bare ass, at her tight nipples, and heaving chest. The long line of her throat and the exposed angle of her jaw made his mouth water. “Take the white cock you have, Odan, and hold it to her lips.”

Odan moved only his arm, and set the rounded tip against her panting mouth.

“You have a choice, mate. You can do as I command, or you can ask me to make you do it. You’re terrified of giving up control, but it is the ultimate trust, and the ultimate freedom. You’re going to love it. I’ve already seen the start of it. I fought making us go here, but you insisted. And you were right. It’s glorious.” He inhaled and for the first time, captured the tang of her arousal under her still rancid fear.

“So do you lick that cock, or do I make you do it?”

She didn’t give herself over to him so easily of course. Quickly, her tongue darted out and lapped, flickering over the tip. From this angle, he could only get a glimpse of movement.

Then Odan said, “That’s so pretty.”

Ty understood the man’s message. Something eased in him, knowing the warrior was going to help push her, until her fear broke, and she gave herself over to Ty’s total control. Yes, they’d work well together. “Keep licking your lips, Sunshine. Odan, use the wet tip to touch her throat, gently. Stroke her with it. As it dries, go to her lips for fresh moisture.”

Staying in the chair, and letting Odan be the first at her body, was his concession to her fear. But he made sure he remained part of her mind. He made sure his comments fell steadily. “Push the tip into her mouth... Roll it in place at that hollow... Press harder under her ear.”

His cock leaped against his belly with every command, watching Odan turn her throat into a glistening column. Finally, he spoke a new, quiet demand. “Suck it, Sunshine.”

He thought she’d balk already, but she had more fight in her. She opened her jaw and Odan let the tip drift into her mouth. Her throat worked to swallow and suck at the cock.

"Gorgeous."

She sucked harder. He smiled. She was learning. It wasn’t about his control or her acceptance. If she could just let go of her own fear and *be*, the shadows of the past could never have power over her again.

“Now her breasts.” He said to Odan.

There was an audible slurp as he took it from Sunshine’s mouth. Odan began by drawing a circle around each breast. Then he lifted the tip up to her lapping tongue, and drew another, slightly smaller circle inside the one he’d just marked.

“That’s so good, Odan,” Ty praised.

By the time the man painted her aureoles, Ty had had to take his cock in hand again. “Now suck it again, Sunshine. Suck it deeper.”

He watched how her shining breasts heaved as she sucked at the cock. "Are you hard yet, Odan?"

"Six help me, yes."

"Do you want to fuck her?"

Odan's head turned abruptly, as if he'd face Ty, but paused in profile. "No." He spoke curtly. "She's yours."

"She is. She's mine body and soul, freely given. Free for me to give."

He felt a flash of rage then, for the first time. The burning anger singed him along his mental path to his bonded. He rubbed his breastbone. "At least tonight, at the whim of my true pleasure, she is," he qualified.

Confusion, and then the sense of connection with her faded.

"She's stunning, and she's compelling. I'm very attracted to her tonight." Odan looked down at Sunshine sucking on the cock.

"Then get up next to her, turn her head to face you, and put your cock in her mouth." Her fear stank up the room. "She loves sucking cock. She knows the power of it, the control over the man. It's a beautiful moment, when the woman who appears to be serving the man is in reality completely controlling him."

Odan stepped up next to the bench, then turned so he was perpendicular to Ty. He gently drew the dildo from her mouth. His hands on each side of her face, he turned her, angled his long, hard cock down to her lips. In this new view, Ty saw her profile. Her wide eyes, her swelling lips, Odan's long, hard erection gently bumping her lips.

"Do you want my help, Sunshine?" Ty asked, his heart pounding, aching for her to give over to him, to give him everything. She surprised him by opening her lips and lapping across the tight, fat head of the other man's cock. He was momentarily disappointed, and then swallowed his chuckle of pride back. Damn, his woman was strong.

"Take him, Sunshine." He left it open to her, relaxing his hold on her neck. With her hands behind her, she was still mostly in his control from the shoulders down, but now her head and throat had the freedom to work Odan.

"By Cloud and Mist, Sunny. I never imagined your mouth on me like this. I never wanted it before, but now it's the hottest thing I've ever known."

Sunshine's eyes practically spit green fire at Odan, the man she'd asked here for her supposed protection. He fed another inch of his cock into her mouth, and her jaw stretched. By the Six, the way her cheeks hollowed was so lovely.

Odan hunched his shoulders, one hand on his cock's base so as not to hurt her with his length, the other still gentle on the far side of her face.

Ty growled. "Get your hand off of her. Let her do it."

Odan took his hand away and cupped his balls. He was still holding the white dildo, and it bumped the underside of her jaw. His black gloved hands on his pale golden flesh made a striking picture, Sunshine's red lips bobbing down to meet his covered fingers in a steady motion. Ty watched, feeling his stomach ache with the need to push his own cock down her throat.

"Do I come in her mouth, Ty?"

"That's up to Sunshine."

Odan's head rocked back, his teeth audibly grinding. "Ohhh, sweet Rain." He panted, "Sunny!" His arms leaped with muscle as his body went rigid. Sunny ripped her

mouth away, turning her head and facing Ty while Odan's cock jerked long, creamy strands into the air. They fell behind her, spattering on the smooth stone floor.

She glared at him, gaze defiant. "Only you."

He smiled, and strolled up to her. Swinging her necklace from one hand, he worked his cock hard with his other. She narrowed her eyes. He angled his cock down and let his come boil up, searing his cock, searing the soles of his feet. The come spattered onto the ground in front of her. Her mouth sagged as she watched the cream pour from him onto the stone floor.

"This afternoon, I marked you with my come, rubbing it into your skin. Tonight, you haven't earned it."

Her stricken gaze met his, and his heart pinched.

"I've done everything you asked."

"But you haven't given me a thing."

Her brows drew together. She didn't understand yet. She was still playing at submission, still in control. She had yet to give herself completely over to the pleasure.

Odan stepped to stand beside him. "She sucked me like she actually wanted to. That should count for something."

Ty considered her daring. "Yes, it does. As does the scent of her sex in the air." He took the dildo from Odan.

Her eyes widened, and she licked her lips.

"I'm going to make you come. Do you want this inside you when you do? It will be sharper without it."

Her eyes jumped to his, dazed. He touched the tip to her mouth, and she eagerly lapped at it. Her eyes closed in delight when he shoved it into her mouth. He worked it, thrusting against her suction, nudging her throat. When her lashes lifted, he saw the call in her eyes. She wanted it to be him in her mouth.

He wrenched it away, and she moaned. The sound went right to his balls. "You're so amazingly gorgeous like this. Sensual, ready. Do you want me to put this inside you, Sunshine?"

"Yes!" She spat the word at him. As if she were giving in. When she was in reality defying him.

Disappointed, eager, he drew her up onto her knees, instead of sitting back on her heels as she had been. He rocked her body as he moved one leg farther out. He crouched, hissing at the pain in his groin. Without ceremony, he slid the dildo between her woman's lips, notched the tip in her hole, and drove it up into her, following the line of her vagina back toward her ass. She screamed, and he abruptly took control of her throat, silencing her. He rotated the dildo, shoving it deeper, and her body seized. Holding it in place, he forced her legs tightly together, knees side by side, and then sat her back on her heels. He pulled his hand from between her thighs, leaving the dildo lodged deep.

He turned and strolled back to his chair, but couldn't feign nonchalance. He ripped his brown shirt off and threw it to the side, feeling the heat pour from his shoulders.

"Stand behind her, Odan." Ty ordered, throwing himself down in his chair again. He hung the necklace around his own throat.

Odan did, straddling her legs. Her eyes were enormous, startled, overwhelmed.

"Take her hands, and put them on her breasts."

Odan bent and gently rearranged her.

Ty ignited the need in her, his power wrapping around her with a sudden wrenching control. She gasped, her hands spasming hard. Her eyes rolled down at finding her hands free, but nothing else. The only part of herself she could touch was her breasts. Her hands curled in, then her fingers swept back and forth across her nipples. He wound her tighter, holding the muscles in her core tense. Her gaze glazed, her fingers fighting for a grip on her nipples. He made her muscles reach for the pleasure, but he understood that part of it was knowing he controlled her. He held the burning need inside her, her vagina clutching hard on the stone column.

Her mouth tightened, but couldn't open, couldn't cry out as she wanted. Her fingers worked faster, but the tight pleasure on her breasts wasn't enough when he held her lower muscles so rigid. The minutes spun out, and he watched her, aching, refusing to take his pleasure when she was demanding hers. She shook with the muscle tremors of a body pushed beyond its limits, but still her fingers dug and kneaded and clawed fruitlessly, trying to drive herself to orgasm. Even at this pinnacle, she fought giving herself fully to him, struggled to participate in the moment, instead of surrendering.

Her eyes closed, and he smelled the fear. His legs folded in, feet on the floor, all his willpower needed to stay in his chair and not go to her, fall to his knees and beg her to trust him. The minutes spun, and spun, until his panting, rasping breaths overrode hers.

When he saw she wouldn't break, wouldn't turn to him, he crushed his fists so tightly his nails cut at his palms. He relaxed his bodycraft's control, lessened the grip of her cunt around the dildo, loosening the need. Enough. He wouldn't do this. Wouldn't punish her for her lack of trust when it wasn't her fault they'd broken that part of her.

Her eyes flashed open, a brilliant splash of color in the barren stone room. At first he thought her eyes were blank, but then he saw emotions were just spinning through her so fast he couldn't follow them. She focused on him. He loosened her vaginal muscles even more, releasing her from the need he'd forced. The dildo shifted inside her, trying to ease out. Her gaze sharpened, then softened. She took her hands from her puffy nipples and laid them on her thighs. His heart burst in his chest. *Finally*. When he'd feared he had lost, she reached out to him. She gave him everything with her eyes, submitting. Trusting.

Triumph roared through his blood. He loosened her throat, and she took in a ragged gasp. "I'm yours, Ty. Make me, please."

Disappointment and hope flooded him. She was so close, but her words revealed she still grasped at control. Even as she offered herself to him, she asked. He seized her, tightened her, and poured blood into her nipples, then her clit. Motionless, her eyes locked with his, she gave him the orgasm, hiding nothing. His jaw ached, and his eyes flooded with quick, stinging tears. He didn't have the patience for what he'd envisioned before. He ached. He needed. She was so close to giving herself completely to the moment, to the pleasure. He would break her now.

When her gaze returned and her shoulders softened, he spoke, his voice gone harsh and low. "Again. I'm going to make you come again." Because he wanted to. He held out the test, his heart thundering. "Do you want the dildo this time?"

She stared at him, and he saw her processing. Saw her understand that she wasn't supposed to want it, but she couldn't quite help herself from holding on.

"I've already taken your power without anything to hold, even without any foreplay. Remember when you took my breath away in your room? I can take that pleasure, Ty."

"Do you want the dildo?" He gritted out. The reminder of the way he'd overwhelmed

her made him shiver.

“No.” And then she smiled at him, a trembling, blinding, wide smile. “It was so good, Ty. I was stupid. I’m not afraid of you.” Her hands softly drifted over her thighs.

His throat tightened at regret with the way she yet deluded herself, but this was going to happen. “Odan, get that cock out of her.”

The other man was so big, he could reach down around her, leaning over her. His fingers trailed up and down the seam of her thighs, and Ty sent his power to move her legs further apart. Odan’s hand slipped between her legs, and slowly, slowly, slowly eased the dildo from her body. Sunshine cried out, her eyes closing, lashes fluttering. It was then he locked her hands to her thighs. Her breasts were swollen to the size of small apples, high and hard.

When Odan straightened, Ty said, “Put it in her ass.”

Sunshine let out a soft cry.

Odan growled, low and soft. “I want to taste it first.”

Ty nodded. He watched, brooding, cock aching, as the man licked it with relish. A shudder passed over him. “So sweet, Sunny.”

She moaned. “Ty, please.”

“Please, what?” he asked. Inside, he held back his sigh of disappointment. She was still fighting him, her spirit so defiant. *By the Six, trust me, Sunshine. Give yourself over, and you won’t have to beg. Just be.* If she’d quit asking, quit anticipating, quit reaching, he’d know her trust was real. His breath whistled over his parched lips. This next stage was going to be it, simply because he’d have a heart attack if this continued much longer. Either she’d resist, and he’d wait for years, or she’d break, and truly be his, free of them.

“I don’t know. Please. I need...”

Odan squatted down behind her. She was so slender, he could easily see the man’s shoulders shift. Her gasp when he must have touched her cheeks made Ty’s thighs jump. Her moan when he must have fingered her made his heart skip. Her low growl when he must have separated her cheeks and set the dildo to her small rosebud made his lip curl.

Ty spoke, forcing the moment to be his, and not Odan’s. “This afternoon, I watched your ass open around my cock. It spread, tight, and gripped me so hard, so hot. Thrusting into your body was something that made my hawk scream. And even though it’s Odan who’s feeding that stone into you now, hawk’s still crying out inside me, just remembering how sweet it was, to take you.”

She moaned again, her voice breaking once, before continuing.

Odan murmured, “Shall I stroke her?” His words were low, almost slurred, and Ty knew the warrior was also riding the edge.

“No. Seat it deep and leave it.”

“Ty... Please.” She begged him, sweat shimmering on her throat.

He tipped his head. “You’re still trying to take control, Sunshine. You say you’re not afraid, but you don’t trust me.”

Her tongue lashed her lips, plumped from the usage he’d given them. “Ty, damn you. I need...”

“That’s beside the point. Do you think I don’t?”

She blinked at him, struggling. She wanted to understand him now, was closer to following him where he needed to go.

“Odan, stand up.”

The man rose.

“Take off your gloves.”

He did so with an eagerness that made hawk fluff, irritated.

“Take hold of her nipples. Pinch them, twist them.”

Odan reached both arms over her shoulders, and his fingers settled over the small, already abused nubs. Ty watched his Sunshine, stared at her as she stared blindly back at him, taking in how another man pleased her.

“Tighter. Roll them.” He spoke calmly, his fingers twitching where they lay on his thighs.

The pleasure bled across her face, tightening her cheek bones, flaring her nostrils. She met his gaze, and showed him her pleasure, and he got an inkling of how even back at the Fortress, if he’d been able to achieve this state there, it really would have been just the two of them. Untouchable. But he hadn’t. He hadn’t understood who she was to him, hadn’t bonded with her spirit, hadn’t trusted himself as the final option from her careful unraveling of him.

“Pull them. Milk them.”

He was aware that her ass was burning, stretched taut, and aching full. She moaned, louder, harsher. His breathing kicked up.

“Fuck, Ty. I’m going to come just from listening to her,” Odan growled.

Ty surged out of the chair and stalked around them, coming up behind Odan. The man’s cock was nestled against her spine, the tip toying with the base of her hair. Ty had no connection of the spirit with the man, so he needed one of the flesh, and it would drain him to a far greater degree. He laid his fingertips between the man’s shoulder blades, and pulled the building pressure of his orgasm back.

Odan groaned. “Shit.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” Ty said wryly.

He strolled around to stand in front of Sunshine, revealing none of the pressure that this desperate moment held for him. Her lips hung slack, and her eyes were glossy, only moss green in her daze. Looking at her lovely, enthralled face, another warrior might be of the mind that she’d made it, that she was riding the moment. But Ty’s bodycraft told him her inner muscles clenched in a rhythm, seeking release. Still fucking seeking control.

He looked at Odan, who was watching his hands master Sunshine’s nipples. “Odan.”

When the bright blue met his gaze, Ty said, “I want you to call a claw. Cut her above each nipple. Small straight cuts.” He reached out and gestured, his fingers close enough to feel the heat of her, but not brushing her skin. If he touched her, it would be over.

“Here and here.”

“You’re serious.” The man disapproved.

“I am.”

Sunshine moaned, her chest heaving up and down.

“You do it,” Odan snapped, “if you want it.”

“No. You’ll do it. Quick and hard, the feeling on her raw breasts exquisitely sharp. Then you’ll wrap both hands around her throat, and tighten your grip.”

Odan had taken his fingers from her breasts, obviously repulsed by Ty’s last command. His hands hovered in the air. “No.”

Ty looked at him. “Yes.”

“Sunny?” Odan asked. “Do you want this?”

Ty looked into her eyes. She was shocked, uncertain, but fear was faint in the air.

“Answer him,” Ty prodded gently.

“I—“ She blinked. Panted. “I—“

He was suddenly angry. Angry that Odan asked her a question, drawing her spirit to the fore, and angry that in the end, she still fought with all her strength against trusting him. “But this is what you wanted. What you wanted me to step into the instant I came through that door, is it not? Both of you? To relive the nightmare. To make it mine.”

“I—“ She swallowed. Licked her lips.

Ty looked at Odan. His voice a snarl of furious command, he ordered, “Do it.”

Odan snarled back, but his alpha’s ability to transform just in part blurred his hands. Two long, triangular black claws slashed down, and Sunshine cried out, loud and low. In a blink the claws were gone, and his large hands settled gently around her throat. Groundbear’s black mask-stripes rippled into being on his face, making him look primitive and wild. Even though Ty could tell his hands merely rested there, not gripping her tightly at all, she cried out again, higher, and Ty smelled a rush of cream from her legs. Thankfully, the cream overrode the last hint of fear that had sprung up at his command for Odan to hold her throat.

Ty looked at Sunshine’s breasts, topped by two angled, short slashes. They were merely deep scratches, but blood trickled down the outside of her breasts, disappeared under the swell of her, and seeped over her ribs. He licked his lips, thirsty for the sacred taste of her. She moaned.

“Tighten your hands.” He hardly recognized the gravel of his wrecked, tortured voice.

“No.” Odan’s large fingers caressed the hollows of Sunshine’s fragile neck.

Ty took control of her body, tightening her throat, narrowing her breathing passage, as if pressure really was exerted by the circumferencing hands. He held it for one second. Two. She could still breathe, it wasn’t painful, but it wasn’t anything she could control. On the cusp of the third second, *finally*, her belly relaxed. She gave up trying to clench herself to orgasm, and simply rode the moment.

Hope burned in his spike hard cock, so fragile. “Tell me, Sunshine,” he whispered, just an armlength away.

Her eyes were unfocused, but sought his direction blindly. “He could kill me with a breath, but he’s a friend, following your desire. My throat is fragile in his grip, and I can feel the blood rush through me.”

Her words kicked him, so soft, so clear. But it was the peace in them that dropped him to his knees before her.

“It’s like light, like I’m glowing. The heat of my aching breasts, the sting, the hot roll of my blood. You wanted it. So I do, too. I’m empty. I ache. I wait for you.”

Her words brought his tears back up, tears because it had happened. She’d been right. It was all tangled up together. His belief in himself, her desire, her trust, his control.

“My ass burns, so stretched I can’t squeeze on the white cock, and the pleasure is a constant blaze. One touch and I’ll burn down. But I’m not in a hurry. I’m yours.”

His hands were shaking when he reached out and laid one fingertip on each of the cuts Odan had made. He seared them, burning her, scarring her, branding her into his soul. She came, breath stopping, mouth twisted, eyes rolling up as her lashes swept down.

Odan growled, and Ty summoned the breath to say, "Come here, look." The man deserved to witness this perfect moment of utter trust, given by a woman who'd had it stolen it from her, but had the strength to offer it again.

Odan was around and standing at Ty's shoulder in a heartbeat. They stared at Sunshine's kneeling form, hands on thighs, back straight, shoulders squared, face slack. Tremors raced over her skin, and the trails of blood framed her belly. Her eyes danced behind closed lids. She was perfection. Ty hadn't started her orgasm, but he held it, maintained it, fired it in wave after wave with his light touch on the two small, new scars by her nipples. Ruthlessly, he held her body past all sanity, drawing her pleasure out while forcing his own come to hold. She didn't fight it, riding it with grace.

He was aware he was snarling, giving out ripping, vicious hissing growls. Odan's hand landed on his shoulder, and the shudders threatening to shake him apart stilled. Ty grabbed the man's wrist with one hand, grateful for his restraint, but unwilling to let the pure moment end. He splayed his other over the middle of Sunshine's chest. He could span her from nipple to nipple. Her heart kicked, dancing under his grip. She was his, and joy surged through him, so humbling.

He took his hand away, his control away, and she fell forward, limp. Both his hands flashed forward to catch her, and she moaned, body writhing. The sinuous twisting of her nude, warm body in his arms almost brought his orgasm free, but he wrenched it back. She'd kicked up into orgasm again just from being so sensitive, without any push from him. Arching, one leg still trailing over the bench, her eyes snapped open as she wrapped her hands around his shoulders and wailed. His chest was suddenly alive with her heat. Drenched in the scent of her sex, she was like holding the sun.

He curled down over her and pressed his lips to her temple, holding her until the tremors faded into twitches. "Sunshine," he sighed, his lips sizzling, his hands aching with the shock of holding her.

"Ass." She whispered.

He grimaced. "I know, my Lady. I needed your trust. And you gave it to me, finally, but you're a very stubborn woman."

"No. My ass." She whispered.

Ah. The dildo. He sent one hand around her hip to brush the curve of her muscled rump. He found the knob that was all that remained of the long dildo. Twisting it, he withdrew it in a slow glide. When the flared head of it caught on her tight ring of muscle, he paused. She panted, moaned.

"Sunshine." She looked at him, and he took her mouth. Met her lips and crushed them, stormed her mouth with the force of his teeth, abraded her tongue with his. He licked and sucked and kissed her, breathed with her, nipped and chased her. Beneath the storm of his kiss, beneath his need, she lay limp, her hands clutching at him, hips twisting on the point of pleasure-pain her body rode.

"Ty! Ty!" She cried into his mouth, and her lips met his, her tongue dancing and soothing just as desperately. She wasn't afraid of him. She wasn't passive beneath him, crushed and timid. Sunshine wasn't broken by his needs. She was ablaze with trust.

Tightening his grip, he sank the cock back into her with a quick drive. Her nails bit at him. He grabbed her tongue and pulled it into him. Suckled her when he wrenched the toy free. She jerked in his arms, holding his head tightly. He gently laved her tongue, and she twined it around his with a small mew. He threw the dildo across the room.

“Ty...” she sighed dreamily.

“Odan,” he gritted out, “take her.”

He waited until the man knelt next to Ty, and passed Sunshine to him. He gathered up her long limbs and cradled her much more expertly than Ty had. Ty sat on the bench, working at his boots. Damn laces went all the way up. He ripped them open in a fury, tore the leather from his feet. His pants were off him just as quickly, and he stepped away from the bench.

“Lay her down on her stomach.”

He reached for her shoulders, and both men maneuvered her dead weight easily, but carefully. When she was on her stomach, her head resting to the side facing him, legs and arms splayed onto the floor in relaxation, he sighed. He stroked the line of her cheek, feeling his heart melt. “I love you.”

“I know,” she murmured happily.

Moving Sunshine’s body to his will, holding her immobile, and suppressing Odan’s release had drained Ty enormously, but achieving the submission of his abused mate, her joyous and trusting submission, something he’d feared and resisted, had equally energized him. “I’m going to claim your body now,” he told her. “Every inch.”

Her lips curled in her almost-smile, her lashes sweeping heavy and slow. “Sounds good,” she purred.

“Just a moment,” he promised, tucking her drying hair behind her shell-like, perfect ear.

He rocked to his feet, and offered Odan a hand.

The man’s head hung down, his chest working deeply. He shook his head. “Can’t.”

Ty swallowed, thankful he was a Trux to enjoy such brotherhood. The man had given every bit of his tremendous energy to helping Ty and Sunshine overcome their scars. Ty brushed the man’s shoulder, firing his heart with energy. Odan’s head snapped up, eyes narrowed to suspicious slits.

Ty grinned. “Just a little focus. Time to go, my friend.”

Odan’s eyes went flat, blank. Ty’s gut tightened, irked that the man would think he was throwing him out unsatisfied, after all he’d done for him. Odan rose on his own, ignoring Ty’s hand. He went to the table and gathered his black Council leathers and boots. He reeked of Sunshine and sex, and Ty felt nothing but gratitude.

When Odan turned to stalk toward the door, Ty moved to intercept. “A moment, Odan. If you would just take a seat.” Ty gestured to the chair he’d suffered in earlier.

Odan drew himself up, rigid. Ty dropped his eyes, and with his hands, spoke with their warrior’s silent gestures. *Listen. Sit. Good.* Odan sniffed, irritated, and Ty was ultimately surprised when he actually went to the chair.

“Put your things down,” Ty said softly.

Odan looked at him suspiciously, but did so. He sat, back braced, hands on his thighs, his erection hard and stiff and straight.

Ty reached out and clasped Odan’s shoulder. It was a simple touch, hearty and masculine and asexual. Odan stared at him, tired and distracted and, Ty suspected, a little hurt. “Do you want pleasure, now as well as later? Or just later?”

Odan stilled, tipped his head, and let his gray gaze drift down Ty’s arm to look at Ty’s grip. His lips lifted to show gritted teeth, and his view shifted so he stared at Sunshine’s body sprawled over the length of the bench. His eyes flickered from Ty and

back to her again, the long line of her spine, the rise of her ass. Angry, his gaze dared Ty to give him pleasure while he ogled Ty's mate. "Now."

Ty merely nodded. And let the twist of urging flow. It required concentration, to find the muscles, to push the heart, to swell the blood, and then the semen. Ty built the orgasm he'd trapped before, and let his hand fall away at the last heartbeat. Sunny opened her eyes, and focused on Odan.

"She's gorgeous," Ty concurred. "And she's mine."

Odan came, growling, hissing, arching, hands scrabbling to grab the seat and remain upright. His hips jerked, and his legs hopped, muscles bunching and straining. His come leaped in the air, falling in graceful arcs.

Sunny licked her lips, and Odan shouted, folding forward, body shuddering. He groaned, long and low. When he'd taken a dozen hard, fast breaths, he pushed his body up by straightening his arms, and stared at his rigid erection. "What. The fuck. Did you do to me?"

"Good isn't it? Good like a bitch. For tonight, I've given you a cockstand that won't quit for hours. No matter what. Find a paid woman. Have fun. Don't dream of us."

Odan turned his head and glared at Ty.

Ty's laughing smile died. "Or I can just make it disappear." He reached out to touch Odan again, and the man jerked his shoulder out of reach.

"Are you kidding? I'm not giving up a bodymage boner! I'm just pissed you didn't warn me, or I'd have had reservations and a woman waiting for me."

Ty shrugged. "The entire night has been kind of improvised."

Odan nodded, bent and gathered his things. "Good night, Sunny. You're in good hands."

"G'night, Odan," she murmured.

Odan paused at the door, met Ty's eyes. Aching need laid bare in the man's eyes. He wanted a mate. He wanted what Ty had. Loneliness and sorrow were part of his every moment. Ty gave him a formal bow, tucking his chin low, curling his shoulders down. When he looked up again, Odan was closing the door.

Relieved, satisfied, Ty turned toward his woman.

"These floors are getting a little messy," she commented in a slurred voice.

"Are they?" he asked, amused. "No more mopping up my messes for you. I'll take care of it."

"Yeah. Embarrassing messy."

Chuckling, he knelt in such a way as to avoid the come he'd left on the floor earlier that night. "Not embarrassing. Satisfying." He laid one hand over the crown of her head, and blocked her pain receptors, soothing any lingering aches emerging now that her last orgasm's memory was fading.

"Mmmmmmm," she sighed.

Reaching out one hand, he started at her nape. He melted the thin, raised white line, spreading the scar, pulling what pores he could into being, and smoothing the rest. She shivered, goosebumps rising. He lifted his hand and set it on the next scar, a long, puffy, winding trail across both shoulder blades, pink despite bodymage healing. He melted it, stroking his finger slowly along the path. He'd never experienced such joy and intimacy sending his craft into someone else's body. Just knowing part of him was altering her thrilled him, calmed him, made him proud.

She sighed. "Yes, Ty. Take them all. Make me be yours."

Make me. The words of trust, so easily mistaken as defiance. Defiance was woven into her soul, beaten into her nature. But with him, she softened, drifted, enjoyed. It took hours, but he covered every inch of her, eventually turning her to her back, moving from the bottoms of her feet, to her fingertips. Her body was certainly still a map of patterns, but they were smoother, lighter, and most now had more sensation.

He stood, trembling, exhausted. Straddling the one end of the bench, he considered her spread body, hands above her head, legs wide, breasts tight and high. She'd drowsed through most of it, but had stirred toward the end, and boldly ate him with her eyes.

"Are you waiting for me, Sunshine?" His voice was a mere croak, as if all her scars had settled in his throat. And they had. Every act of violence and hate that had put them there, he'd stroked away with love and acceptance. She would always be marked as a survivor, and he would always be proud to have reshaped her skin into marks of love.

"I managed to survive the wait," she winked. "Barely."

The teasing was such a shock from her. Such a gift.

"Where did you get this bench?" he asked.

"It was in a smaller room. I just took it, because it seemed perfect." She stretched her arms, arching her back. "Why? Is it some special bench?"

"Yes. It's a sex aid."

She blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah. Didn't you notice how stable it was, and how perfect the padding? It's the exact width of your hips, and the exact height for a person to straddle, although it forces him to spread wide."

"Him?" She raised one brow, and suddenly her flushed face, swollen lips, and sultry eyes made his spine ache.

"Or a tall her." He knelt. Or rather, let his knees buckle. The stone was hard, jarring. But it didn't matter. Only her body did, cleansed of their marks, remade, and open before him. "But in this case, me."

With the bench pressing into his inner thighs, his balls brushed the cool tapestry. He wrapped his hand around his cock, and forced it down until it fit to her dark, wet hole, gaping wide from her stretched legs. She cried out as he shoved the head in, and so did he. The sound ricocheted around the room, the two tones blending into an echo.

He let himself rest on the bench, his ass clenched. "I ... can't..."

"Yes, Ty."

He arched, his hands convulsing on her thighs, his body shaking apart as light tore at his joints, radiated through his blood. He shouted, long and wild. And when he panted through the shuddering eddies of her burning rays, she slowly drew herself up, propping herself on her hands behind her. She tucked her hips and wriggled in his grasp. Loosening his grip, he let her take another inch of him.

"So hot, Sunshine."

"Yes." She stared down at his cock, at the inches revealed between them. "You know I'm yours, Ty. Can I want yet? Can I?"

He wrapped one hand around the back of her nape. Swallowed. "Anything you desire. I'll follow."

She lifted her eyes up to his. Touched her tongue to her upper lip. "Fuck me, Ty. Fuck me hard, and wild. I'm angry at the way I acted earlier, at how I knew better, but

still feared you. I want to be angry. I want to be taken, and to take you in return.”

He grunted, and knew he was only moments from losing control again. With a surge, he lifted her over his thighs, shifting his ass so he wouldn't crush his balls. Astride the bench, he couldn't balance as easily. He lifted her again so that she was upright against his chest, poised above him, and said, “Take.”

He regretted the way his arms shook from holding her weight, but he was at the end of his endurance. His breath rasped harshly and wasn't aided when her long, surprisingly cool fingers wrapped around him, directed him. The tight kiss pushing against his tip made him break out in a sweat. She squirmed in his grip and he lowered her.

She writhed, crying out. “Stay out of my body with your craft. I want to do it!”

“I'm not. I won't.”

“Let me go!”

“Fuck, yes.” He dropped her, and the force of her hot cunt engulfing him lashed his spine. She wailed. He thrust up into her, surrounded by tight heat, and she cried out again. Amazingly, she growled, and then her teeth scored across his chest, and it was his turn to shout.

Sunshine went wild in his arms. Throwing herself backward to drive him deep inside her, she writhed and twisted. He held a wild spirit, and he marveled even as he fought to shove himself deeper, against the clutching strength of her body. She hissed and bucked and clamped so hard around him he thought he'd strangle. Her legs wrapped around his waist, her ankles cinching, heels grinding his ass as she pulled him tight. He lifted her a few inches and jerked her down roughly, jabbing into her, grinding into her folds. She shouted in triumph, jerking hard, and then she threw her arms out, trusting that his hands wrapped around her ribs would hold her. He did, with difficulty, as she swayed and lurched.

With fascination, as her head tipped back, he saw the line of her throat, that he'd watched from afar earlier. Her arms were outspread, the muscles stark, and when she moaned, arching away from him, hands curling into fists, he lost himself and took her. He slammed into her again and again, roaring, gasping, seeking her darkness, her peace, her light. He worked his cock into her tightening folds, fighting with her wrenching torso as she hung from his arms, all her weight slack and balanced on the point where he penetrated her. He thrust, and she growled. He thrust, and she wailed. He thrust, and she choked. Never once did she try to take control, ask to come, or smell of fear.

This time it wasn't an enemy's game, his bodycraft, or a friend's roleplay taking her breath. It was her, giving herself utterly over to pleasure in his arms, not taking from above, but lost in a perfect moment of trust. Then Ty came in hard, burning spasms. She had enough moisture to spare, dripping down over him, coating him in her pleasure, her channel fluttering around his flayed cock. He tossed her so he could wrap his arms tightly around her body, pulling her in close. He jerked against her hips, the pleasure of finally fucking her without fear or doubt overwhelming him. His hawk gave a soft chirrup of reassurance.

She went limp, and he gathered her in, draping her across his front. It took him three tries to stand, and he staggered, but managed to remain upright. Her legs slid from his hips and dangled along his. He lunged toward the bed she'd made of blankets, and grimaced when he stepped in sticky wetness. At least it was his, he thought in passing. Then he was falling, bruising his knees for the third time that night, and laying her down

as gently as a feather. His arms were visibly shaking, and his vision was spotty. He brushed the only two distinct scars on her body with his thumb. The only two he'd left intact, the short straight lines angled to each side of her nipples.

He made sure her muscles were soothed with the last pulse of energy he could muster. Collapsing beside her, he curled around her on his side, arms curving gently to enfold her. When she opened her eyes, their gazes connected, and she smiled. Wide and free, that smile would always take his breath.

Sleepily, she murmured, "You trust me to take all of you now. You trust yourself."

"I do." Gently, he fingered one still-tight nipple.

"It's not going to be like that every time, right?"

He pretended mock horror. "It's not?"

She shoved at him, her rough, almost-chuckle impossibly stirring his groin.

"I doubt he'll join us again, but I wouldn't discount my need to control you, or your ability to let me."

Then she saw the scars he'd added to her breasts. "Oh, Ty."

"I wanted these marks on you," He tapped her chin. "Thank you."

She swallowed, and when she looked up, he saw it wasn't with regret, but with desire. "It's sexy."

"Others wouldn't think so. I'll have to make sure Odan understands."

She licked her lips. "We'll never be others. Not even when the darkmages are all dead."

He snuggled her head against his throat, and gently trailed his fingers over her beaded breast. "Probably not. But we survived."

"I love you, Ty." Her voice was thick, her breath hot against him.

He kissed the top of her head, and relaxed into perfect, unshadowed sleep.

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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