

Till Kingdom Come

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Author's Note

This book contains nonconsensual sex and allusions to incest. While I have tried to handle these elements—which are essential to the plot—sensitively, some readers, particularly those with a history of sexual abuse or incest, may find this story disturbing.—EA

Chapter One

The night was fine and dry, with just enough of a chill in the air to keep a man on his toes. Overhead, a gibbous moon rode high in the sky, casting a ghostly light upon the gathered knights. Their armor didn't gleam in the moonlight, however. It was scuffed and dented, with nary a crest or coat of arms to be seen. They were sellswords from the Febrile Marshes and clansmen from the White Mountains none of them true knights, and none of them cared for finery, honor, or glory. They cared plenty for gold, however, and King Ungor Blackwater of Castle Black was known to pay generously when he was pleased.

Fine weather for a raid, Thrain Blackwater thought sourly, as his horse snorted softly and shifted beneath him. Though not so fine for the unsuspecting sheep asleep in the castle before them. He had known this night would come—the dragon had foretold it. But that didn't mean he had to like it.

Castle Rowan lay silent beneath them, its drawbridge down and the portcullis raised invitingly. Thrain frowned. *Like an eager wench with her legs spread*. The guards at the gate had been bought and paid for during the peace talks King Ungor had initiated with good Queen Alaina Trueheart. Peace talks indeed—they were nothing more than a scouting party for the hungry king. The Truehearts had been fools to let them in—the chickens inviting the fox into their coop. But as their name bespoke, they were trusting and eager to hear talk of peace from the larger, more imposing kingdom that crowded their northern border. It was too bad their show of openness and good faith should result in their deaths, but so it would.

Thrain had his orders from his father, the king—take no prisoners. The nobles of Castle Rowan were known sorcerers and witches, and King Ungor would not suffer a witch to live. Not that he was a pious man—he wasn't. Wenching, drinking, and gambling were more to his liking than studying the holy word. But at the start of his reign, a wisewoman had come to Castle Black and foretold his doom at the hands of those who wielded magic. Ungor had declared war upon any unnatural thing forthwith, and so began a purge of his kingdom that had lasted until this very day. Just to be on the safe side, the wise woman had been the first to the fire. Take no prisoners indeed.

Though he was reluctant to slaughter innocents, Thrain knew this would be a bloody night. His older brother, Baynor, was leading the charge, and unlike their father, who was merely cold and calculating, the crown prince had a genuine lust for blood. Men did not call him Baynor the Beast for nothing—his favorite sport was to cut an enemy's throat while he fucked the man into submission. Thrain had seen him do it on numerous occasions, to his mingled revulsion and disgust. Baynor claimed that the death throes of a fallen foe were more erotic than the tightest cunt wrapped round his shaft, and the gurglings of a dying man more delightful than the sweetest murmurs from a woman's lips.

Thrain did not share his brother's lust for death. He only hoped he could save the one he needed from Baynor's ravages this night. He stiffened his resolve at the thought. I must save him. He must live, no matter what the cost, no matter what I have to do to keep him safe.

He frowned again as he adjusted his gorget, which tended to squeak if not oiled properly. Along with the chain-mail shirt he wore, the metal plate that encircled his neck was all the protection he needed—aside from the black iron circlet of magic null that sat firmly on his brow. Let other knights cling to their helmets—great bulky things that were impossible to see out of, let alone fight in. Thrain had never met a man faster than he with a sword, so he felt no need for such confinement.

His speed with a sword was not his only gift. He was well built and muscular, but not in the bulky way of Baynor and their father. It was said that with his blond good looks and dark blue eyes, Thrain more resembled his mother's family than the hulking Blackwaters. As to any resemblance between himself and his mother, Thrain could not say. She had died birthing him—a fault his father could not or would not forgive. Not that it would matter much if he had the royal favor. He was only a second son, and with Baynor in such rude health, it was a certainty that Thrain would never wear the crown.

Unless something extraordinary happened.

Sometimes you have to make your own luck. Or as the Truehearts would have it, your own magic. Up ahead, Baynor gave the signal to attack, and Thrain kicked his horse to life and surged forward with the rest of the rabble his father had hired.

Tonight he would make his own magic, or die trying.

* * *

Elias Trueheart was having a restless night.

It was the dreams again; they wouldn't leave him alone. Swords in the night. The flash and clash of steel—the stench of fire and blood and death. A great dragon with eyes like flame. He speaks my name and says I know his as well. He tells me of days to come and deeds I must do and a riddle I must solve, but I cannot hear him over the roaring fire. A castle in flames! And then different eyes. Blue as the midnight sky, they stare into mine. A deep voice in my ear. Arms like steel bands wrap around me. I am trapped! I cannot get loose!

He woke suddenly, shaking in the dark. Gods, but they were getting stronger. What was he to do when the sleeping drafts the court physician gave him no longer worked? At that point he supposed he would be driven mad, and the kingdom would be free to find another, more suitable heir to the throne. Elias put out his hand to ring the bell that connected his room to his mother's...and let it drop, the bell untouched. He was no babe in arms to ask for comfort, no little boy who needed his mother's soothing touch to fall back to sleep. He was a man grown, and though he had no magic as a Trueheart noble ought to have, he could still act the part. Besides, he knew what his mother would say.

"Tis only your magic trying to get out," she'd told him half a hundred times. "You have the power in you. I feel it, Elias. But it is buried deep—too deep to come out without cause."

Too deep to come out without cause. Well, then it will never come, for nothing of *importance ever happens at Castle Rowan*. It wasn't that he wished for misfortune, but it might be nice if *something* happened to trigger his magic's release—if he even had any, which he had long doubted.

Elias dropped his head to his knees and thought longingly of his cousin Aubrey's talents. He could conjure things from thin air—small things, to be sure, pretty little birds and rainbows and creatures of daydream. But at least his ability was proof he had Trueheart blood running through his veins. Elias had no such outward proof, for all his own mother was queen and the most powerful sorceress the line had ever produced. Even his looks were odd. He had the thick, curly black hair found in all of the Trueheart blood, but his eyes—his eyes were strange. Instead of being dark green, they were pale gold—a color that no one ever remembered seeing before in a true-bred Trueheart heir.

A throwback—that's all I am. A magicless dud. A Null. That was what they called him when they thought he couldn't hear. Elias had even heard Aubrey telling the visitors from Castle Black the month before when they had come to talk of peace. There had been a great banquet, and as the only living heir, Elias had been forced to dance the Spider's Web—an intricate tracery of steps that was as much about displays of power and diplomacy as it was skill on the dance floor.

It was traditionally a dance between men, but his mother, as ruling sovereign of their small realm, would have danced with King Ungor and said as much. She feared no man and demanded the respect of an equal from any male who crossed her. But the Blackwater king had shaken his head and said with false cheer, "*No*, *my lady. Let us not profane the dance. Allow our sons to do the honors for us.*"

Elias had been horrified at first, fearing he would have to do the elegant and intimate dance with the older Blackwater heir. Baynor the Beast frightened him and would have even had Elias possessed twice as much magical skill as his formidable mother instead of none at all. But the great, lumbering mountain of a man had laughed and waved at his younger brother, the cold-eyed, golden Prince Thrain, to dance in his stead.

Closing his eyes, Elias remembered that night...

Standing in the middle of the grand ballroom, boots planted firmly on the many colored mosaic tiles, the younger Blackwater prince looked every inch as deadly as his older brother. But while Baynor was a bull, ready to charge, Thrain reminded Elias of a hawk—swift and deadly to strike. He probably wasn't more than two or three years older than Elias's age of eighteen, but there was an air of menace about him that spoke of long experience with danger.

Thrain's broad shoulders were covered in a rich crimson cloak, and on his brow, below a shining cap of dark gold hair, rested a circlet of black iron—magic null. King Ungor and Baynor the Beast wore similar crowns to protect them from what Elias had heard them calling "unnatural acts and dark arts." For a moment he wished he had some magic of his own so he could test the efficacy of the black metal. Could it really turn aside a spell as those who wore it claimed? And did the Blackwaters really fear magic so much that they never took the black circlets off, even when they slept?

"Will you dance? Or do you fear to tread the Spider's Web with me?" Thrain's deep voice broke his train of thought, and Elias saw that the Blackwater prince's predatory gaze was focused directly on him. Even the man's features reminded him of a hawk, from the knife-blade nose to the keen, midnight blue eyes that seemed to pierce him with a glance. And judging from the look in those intense eyes, Thrain must have seen Elias as a rabbit—the hawk's natural prey.

"I fear nothing." Stiffening his spine, he glided forward, taking up the implied challenge. Thrain extended his hand, and Elias took it, entwining their fingers boldly as he matched the other man's gaze with what he hoped was a fierce look.

"So you are come to sue for peace," he said as the court musicians began the sensuous, flowing melody.

Thrain barked a laugh, raising one dark gold eyebrow in scorn. "Hardly that."

"You came under the white banner," Elias pointed out in irritation. Without asking, Thrain had taken the lead in the dance, pressing his broad chest to Elias's narrower one and looking down from a height that was several inches taller than Elias's admittedly modest five feet ten. They were close enough that Elias could smell him—a mixture of sandalwood and clean skin and some dark spice he could not name.

"We did," Thrain admitted and spun Elias without warning. He must have been hoping that Elias would trip, but though he had no true magic, Elias did have the Trueheart grace. He leaped nimbly, turning the spin into a move of power and poise that drew murmurs of appreciation from the assembled court. But before he could use the move to his advantage and gain the lead, Thrain pulled him back into his arms and was frowning down at him again.

"Why did you come if not to speak of peace?" Elias demanded, wishing he could wriggle out of the other man's iron grasp without looking undignified.

"Let us say we wished to learn about your little kingdom." Thrain gave him that cold, humorless smile again. "After all, there are no magic makers in all our land. That in itself is reason enough to be curious about a country full of them." "You have no sorcerers because you persecute them," Elias snapped, finally slipping from the other man's arms to turn in time to the music. "I have heard you burn them at the stake."

"The witch pyre at Castle Black never lacks for firewood," Thrain admitted, entwining their fingers again and putting an arm around Elias's waist. "My father has no love for those who practice the dark arts."

"All magic is not dark," Elias protested as they turned and spun together again. He had to admit that as irritating and superior as Thrain was, he was at least a worthy dance partner. Never had the steps of the Spider's Web come more easily, and Elias threw himself into them with confidence, knowing that the taller man had the strength to catch him during even the most difficult moves.

"So your family claims to only practice 'good' magic?" Thrain raised that annoying eyebrow again.

"Magic is neither good nor evil—it is the intention of the one who wields it that matters. Just because we practice it does not make us evil," Elias said stiffly.

"I have heard *you* do not practice at all. Are you not what they call a Null? A royal with no magic?" Thrain's face was innocent of offense, but his deep voice was mocking.

Elias felt his jaw clench. "I speak of my family as a whole, not myself in particular. We are not trolls living in caverns and conjuring demons at midnight. Trueheart magic comes from the Fairy blood that flows in our veins." He used a turn in the dance to throw an elbow into his partner's ribs with all his might, but Thrain barely winced. Elias frowned. Hitting the Blackwater prince was like ramming his elbow into solid iron.

Thrain seemed amused at his assault. "Fairy blood in your veins, hmm? No wonder you've such delicate features. They set off those strange golden eyes of yours." He lifted a hand and brushed Elias's high cheekbone with the tips of his fingers—a surprisingly gentle caress.

The light touch raised an angry blush on Elias's face. How dare the Blackwater bastard make amorous gestures for all to see? The Spider's Web was a dance of diplomacy. Attempting to seduce during its intricate steps was a grave offense. But he wasn't one to pass up a challenge. Growing up without magic in a household full of sorcerers had made him nothing if not resilient when it came to insults.

"Not all of us can have the rough-hewn features of a Blackwater, my lord," he murmured sweetly. Taking advantage of a particularly complicated step, he reached up and placed a featherlight kiss on Thrain's full lips, giving insult for insult. He spun away as the angry prince reached for him, and just then the music stopped and the dance ended.

Elias bowed low to the raised dais where his mother and the other royals sat with the delegation from Castle Black. King Ungor's face was bland, and Baynor's expression was like a thundercloud. Elias's mother looked worried. He shot her a triumphant look, his eyebrows raised, a mocking grin on his face. There was no doubt who had bested whom and won the dance. Elias reveled in his moment of triumph.

He turned to leave the dance floor, but a cruel hand caught his arm, and suddenly he was chest to chest with Thrain again. "This isn't over, little prince," Thrain growled, his hawk eyes narrowing. "I've been watching you. I wasn't certain at first, even with those Fay eyes of yours. But now I know—you're the one."

"The one what?" Elias stared at him in confusion.

"Never you mind. You'll find out soon enough." Thrain's fingers were still biting into his arm.

"Perhaps you hadn't noticed, my lord, but the dance is over." Elias made his voice icily polite. He refused to jerk against the stronger man's grip, preferring to take what would certainly be bruises tomorrow over the loss of his dignity. Nor was he stupid enough to call Thrain out—the Blackwater prince was known as a deadly swordsman, and Elias had spent much more time in the library than on the training field.

Finally Thrain released him. "Next time we meet, you may have cause to regret your actions here tonight," he warned.

"I'm certain I'll cry tears of sorrow for any pain I've caused you," Elias said lightly. Giving Thrain a last, mocking grin, he turned his back and strode into the crowd of lords and ladies waiting to dance. The night had been a great success, and he was pleased to have proved that a Trueheart noble did not need magic to best a Blackwater.

Elias opened his eyes in the darkness of his bedroom and sighed. Why did he keep playing that night over and over in his mind? Probably because it was the most exciting thing he could remember happening in the walls of the dull Castle Rowan. But not, apparently, exciting enough to awaken any magic in him. What would it take to do that?

Laying his head on his pillow, Elias closed his eyes and tried to rest. No more dreams. No more thoughts of Thrain or the rest of those beastly Blackwaters. Just sleep, he implored his brain. But just as his eyelids were drifting closed, he heard a woman scream.

It was his mother.

Chapter Two

"You take the east wing, and I'll have the west. That's where the witch and her son sleep." Baynor's piggy little eyes, the exact color of mud, were agleam with bloodlust.

Thrain nodded slowly. *Trouble already*. "Oh, do you think that is a good plan, Brother?" he asked, his voice carefully bland. "Not that I mind, but the guard's main garrison is down the east wing. Would not armed men give you better sport than a helpless old woman and a boy?"

Baynor narrowed his eyes. "You're no coward to shift the more dangerous task to my shoulders. Speak your mind, Thrain."

"It's nothing. Only...perhaps you remember the Spider's Web I danced with the Trueheart prince?"

His brother guffawed. "How could I forget? A right fool he made of you."

"Exactly." Thrain frowned. "I've a mind to pay him back for that little spectacle. In fact, it's the main reason I joined you on this *noble* quest."

Baynor grunted. "You came along because you knew Father would have your head otherwise. Still, I can understand wanting to get a little of your own back from the Trueheart brat. So go on. Have the west wing if you like. Just be sure to take enough men with you to hold it."

"I thank you." Thrain bowed his head courteously. "But I prefer to go quietly and alone. The better to take them unawares."

"The better to have some time alone with the little prince, eh?" Baynor chuckled, a sound like someone gargling with gravel. "Very well, Brother. Fuck him hard as you slit his throat. And make the mother watch. I'm sure she'll find it a much more entertaining spectacle than the Spider's Web."

Thrain tried to keep the distaste from his face. "That I will. I'll meet you back here in the courtyard when I've...had my fill."

"Do that." Baynor clapped him on the shoulder. The blow would have felled a lesser man, but Thrain was used to it. He nodded once and slipped silently into the darkened castle. He had only a little time to accomplish what he must before Baynor finished his own bloody business and came looking for him. Best to act quickly.

The arching stone hallways of Castle Rowan were pitifully unprotected. Thrain moved through them as silently as a cat, his falchion out and ready, and wondered how much gold his father had laid out to buy the place so thoroughly. Much good the kindness of the Truehearts did them if it didn't even earn the loyalty of their servants. But as King Ungor was fond of saying, every man has his price.

Thrain had made it his business to explore the castle thoroughly during the peace talks, and he knew exactly where he was going. He was almost to the royal bedchambers when a sudden noise made him look to the left. Emerging from one of the lesser chambers was a man a few years older than Prince Elias—one of the minor royal cousins, if Thrain remembered aright, although he could not recall the man's name. But he was sure about his lineage. He had the Trueheart hair, black and curly, and the dark green eyes every Trueheart but Elias sported as well. When he saw Thrain, his eyes widened in fear and then narrowed in anger.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded—a foolish question as far as Thrain was concerned. He was armed and making his way silently through the unprotected castle in the dead of night. What did the fool *think* he was doing? Without bothering to answer the question, Thrain thrust forward with the falchion. The man jumped backward, and its curving blade glanced across his chest, cutting a long slice through his foppishly lacy white nightshirt.

Thrain cursed under his breath. He'd missed the killing blow, and now this fool would raise the alarm if he wasn't quick. He stepped forward again, ready to run the idiot through.

The man jumped back again with surprising agility. Instead of shouting an alarm, however, he directed his gaze at Thrain and uttered a rush of foreign-sounding syllables. Thrain was surprised to feel a tingle of warmth from the magic-null circlet around his temples, and then, suddenly, the air around him was filled with tiny, rainbow-colored birds, all tweeting and cheeping in a cacophony of silvery sound.

"What the hell?" Thrain was actually surprised into breaking his own rules of combat—stealth and silence.

The lesser royal spoke again and made a gesture with one hand. The birds flew at Thrain's face as though to peck his eyes, but again he felt a surge of warmth from his black iron circlet, and they popped like soap bubbles before they could reach him. This time he was surprised into laughing. Was this the famous Trueheart magic? If so, his father had nothing to fear. No kingdom that Thrain had ever heard of had been felled by little magic birds.

The Trueheart royal seemed incensed at Thrain's laughter. "You son of a bitch," he hissed, his face nearly purple with rage. "That was only the beginning. I'll show you—"

Thrain took advantage of his opponent's anger to slash his throat with the falchion. "Tve no more time for magic tricks," he told the dying man as blood, rich and crimson, fountained out to stain the lacy nightshirt. "If you'll excuse me..." He left the man still choking on his own blood and headed for the royal bedchambers.

In his pocket was a collar made of the same magic-null metal he wore around his head. It clinked softly against the small stoppered flask of oil he'd brought to keep his gorget from squeaking. He had to neutralize Queen Alaina the Sorceress first, and then he would deal with Elias. Thrain continued down the empty stone corridor to the wide double wooden doors bound with gilded iron that he knew to be the queen's chamber.

He was prepared to pick the lock if necessary—it was a skill he'd acquired from one of the mercenaries his father liked to hire for his dirty work—but he thought to try the door first. To his surprise, it swung silently open with no more than a push. Thrain shook his head in disbelief. What trusting sheep these Truehearts were! His own father couldn't sleep without a full retinue of guards outside his bedchamber, but Queen Alaina didn't even bother to lock her door. *Fools*.

Ignoring the faint tingle of warmth from his magic-null circlet, he crossed the darkened room quietly, his gaze fixed on the slight lump under the rich fur and brocade bedclothes. If he could just get the collar on her before she woke up...

"I think you'll find me harder to kill than that, young Blackwater."

The voice behind him made Thrain start, but he had not trained with the deadliest men in the kingdom for nothing. He turned smoothly, his falchion at the ready.

"My lady," he said, stepping forward.

Queen Alaina raised one hand and uttered a string of syllables that sounded like water running over stones. This time the tingle in the magic-null circlet was actual heat. Thrain winced and half raised a hand to his head before he realized that, no matter how it burned, removing the black iron from his brow would be suicide.

There was a strange sparkle in the dark room, and a huge beast appeared from nowhere beside the queen. It was tawny orange striped with black, and its green eyes burned in the blackness. When it opened its mouth to growl, Thrain saw teeth the length of daggers.

Gods! A *tiger*! He'd seen pictures in an illustrated text his old milk nurse had given him, but had never thought to see such a wild and savage beast in the flesh.

It's not alive, Thrain reminded himself sternly. It's exactly like the birds. Swing at it and watch it disappear like the soap-bubble illusion that it is. There was an iron fist of fear in his stomach, but he stepped forward anyway, swinging his falchion in a wide arch.

The tiger sprang at him, and suddenly he was on the floor with its hot breath blowing in his face. The immense, furry paws were like lead weights planted on his chest until he could barely breathe.

"I saw what you did to poor Aubrey." Queen Alaina's voice was stern and sorrowful. "I think you'll find that my magic is slightly more effective than his."

Thrain held completely still, not daring to move under the huge cat that pinned him to the floor. He was waiting for the thing to bite off his head—its jaws were certainly of a size to do so—but it only sniffed him uncertainly, its enormous muzzle wrinkling in distaste when it got too near the black iron band that still encircled his temples. The magic null was burning like a brand now, making him wonder if he'd have a mark where it rested against his skin in the morning. If he lived to see the morning.

The queen spoke the strange language of sorcery again, this time sounding impatient. But again the huge tiger only sniffed Thrain and declined to attack.

The magic null. It's working! The realization came with a burst of relief. He might not be able to neutralize the tiger as easily as he had the little birds, but at least the black iron he wore kept it from attacking him. And maybe with a little more help... Slowly, thanking fate that his left arm was free, he snaked his hand down into his pocket. The ice-cold shape of the magic-null collar came to his fingers like a cool blessing, and he gripped it tightly. If this doesn't work, I'm a dead man. Well, at least if he died, it would be trying to fulfill his destiny.

Acting quickly, Thrain jerked the thick black iron collar from his pocket and pressed it to the tiger's furry, heaving side. The beast threw up its head, its mouth open in a silent roar. Thrain felt its claws digging into his chest, doubtlessly leaving furrows that would bleed and scar. And what if they do? What other man can say he was mauled by a magical beast in the bedchamber of a Fairy queen? Thrain gave a breathless laugh and pushed the iron collar harder against the tiger's flank.

And then, as quickly as it had appeared, it was gone.

Thrain was on his feet in an instant. Before the obviously surprised Queen Alaina could move or utter another syllable, he clapped the thick black iron collar around her slender white throat and snapped it shut. The collar's locking mechanism snicked into place, a loud sound in the quiet room.

"You should not have done that, my lady," he told the captive queen.

She put a hand to her throat uncertainly, her face pale. "What do you want? Why have you come for me? We did your father no harm."

"You do not have to harm my father to earn his enmity. And I have not come for you. It is your son I want. I believe he has the chamber next to yours, yes?"

She lifted her chin. "Do you really believe I would give up my child? What kind of mother would do such a thing?"

"I know nothing of that. I never had a mother myself." Thrain gave her a grim smile. "But if you want to live—and want him to live as well—you'll tell me where he is before my brother, Baynor, gets here."

Her lovely green eyes narrowed. "What do you want with Elias? He is nothing to you."

"On the contrary, lady, he is the entire reason I am here."

Queen Alaina opened her mouth; Thrain thought to answer him. Instead she let out a piercing shriek. "Elias, *run*!"

He frowned at her fiercely. "That was foolish, my lady. Now you may both die." Shoving her away from him, he ran for the door that connected hers to the far bedchamber. "Go while you can. Your foolish screeching will bring my brother here in moments, and we have orders to kill you both."

The queen frowned uncertainly, her hand still at the collar locked around her throat. "Then...why do you not?"

"I have no time for your questions," Thrain snarled at her. "Save yourself, and I'll try to save your son. Now go!" He turned from her and flung open the door to the next bedchamber, only to be confronted by a half-naked Elias holding a sword.

Despite his intense irritation at the loss of silence and secrecy, Thrain could not help admiring the lad's slender physique in the moonlight. Elias was lean but elegant, reminding him of a cat, as he had the night they danced the Spider's Web together. He was not nearly as composed now as he had been during the dance, however. His lovely golden eyes were wide and frightened beneath his tousled mop of black curls, and his breathing was fast and jerky.

"Take your hands off my mother," he said, though Thrain was nowhere near the queen.

"Or what? You'll kill me?" With a deft move of his falchion, Thrain disarmed him, and the sword Elias had been holding fell to the ground with a clatter.

"I..." Elias looked so uncertain that Thrain felt laughter bubbling up in his throat. He fought it down. There would be time for many amusing games later. For now he had to concentrate on keeping Elias alive.

He sensed a movement behind him and stepped out of the way just as a vase that had obviously been meant for his head crashed to the flagstones to his left. Turning smoothly, he hooked an arm around Elias's throat and faced the queen.

"I told you to go, my lady," he said sternly. "I do not wish to kill you in front of your son, but you are leaving me no choice."

"Let him go." Queen Alaina's green eyes filled with tears of rage and grief. "I beg you, Prince Blackwater. I know you're angry at the offense he gave you during the Spider's Web, but I swear—"

Thrain barked a laugh. "Do you really think I would undertake to sack your entire castle for one small slight?"

"Then what...? Why...?"

Thrain pulled the younger man close, making sure Elias couldn't escape. "Your son is my destiny, my lady. I have been told so by a very reputable source."

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"Nor will you, for I have no time to explain." Already there was a tromping of heavy boots punctuated by the shrieks and screams of dying nobles in the echoing stone corridors. "Do you hear that?" Thrain asked her. "It is my elder brother, Baynor, coming for you. Leave now, or you both die."

She wrung her hands in agitation. "I cannot. You don't understand. I can't leave my son."

"Mother, go." Elias's voice was surprisingly strong, considering that Thrain had his arm wrapped around the lad's throat. "Take the passageway. I will...be fine."

Thrain turned to the boy in his grasp. "There is a secret passageway? Show me." Elias shook his head stubbornly, but his gaze strayed to the far wall where a fireplace was carved into the gray stone. Reaching out, Thrain grabbed the queen's slender wrist and dragged them both in the direction Elias had looked. "Show me," he demanded again, frowning at the boy. "Show me, or she dies."

With a trembling hand, Elias reached out and pressed one of the stone roses carved into the mantelpiece. There was a low grating sound, and part of the wall to one side of the fireplace slid away.

"Excellent." Thrain shoved the queen into the narrow space, though she fought him all the way.

"No! Let me go! Or send my son with me," she begged.

Outside the chamber door the tromping boots were louder. "Brother!" a guttural voice shouted. "Where are you? Still buggering that little whore's son, or have you had your fill?"

Thrain felt a surge of frustration. They had only moments before they were discovered. If Baynor caught him trying to help an enemy escape, he would kill all three of them without a second's hesitation. Since the queen seemed to be beyond reason, he turned to Elias.

"Make her go," he said, low in the lad's ear. "If you want her to live, you must force her to leave you."

"Go, Mother." Elias pressed a different rose this time, and the stone wall began to close.

"No!" She reached out to him, and Thrain let the lad loose for a moment, half expecting him to try to flee. But Elias surprised him. Instead of trying to join her, he pushed his mother back into the narrow stone crawl space with unexpected strength.

"I love you," he said as, with a grating rumble, the wall closed before her tearful face.

"Elias! I will return for you." Her voice was muffled and faint beyond the stone, but still understandable.

Thrain pulled the younger man back and looped an arm around his neck once more. "Can she see you from there? Are there peepholes in the stone?" he demanded in a fierce whisper.

"No." Elias's voice was choked. "No, there aren't."

"Good." Thrain tightened his grip.

Elias stiffened in his arms. "Why? What...what are you going to do to me?"

"Whatever I must to get you out of here alive," Thrain said grimly.

"I don't—" Elias stopped speaking abruptly as the looming form of Baynor appeared in the bedchamber door.

"What's this?" He frowned menacingly. A massive tower of a man with the brawn to match his height, he was a fearsome sight—especially now, covered as he was in splatters of blood.

Thrain lifted his chin. "You came just in time, Brother. I'm finished here."

Baynor's greedy eyes narrowed. "How are you finished? Where is the witch's body? And why does her whelp still live?"

"Queen Alaina is gone—disappeared in a cloud of smoke," Thrain said, improvising quickly. "Her magic is even stronger than we thought."

His older brother glowered. "Father will not be best pleased to hear that."

"Which is why I am taking the boy as a prisoner." Thrain tightened his grip on Elias's throat, choking a gasp from his captive.

"You know what Father said—*no* prisoners. They must all die." Baynor stepped forward, a sword dripping with blood clutched tight in his meaty fist. "Step aside if you don't wish to do the deed yourself, Thrain. You always did have a soft heart."

"Back away from the boy. He's mine." Thrain lifted his falchion menacingly.

Baynor's bloodstained face broke into a lumpish grin. "Oh, like that, is it? You haven't had him yet, have you?"

Thrain cursed to himself. He should have torn the boy's clothes, made Elias look like he'd been well and thoroughly used. But there had been no time.

"I see that you haven't." Baynor took another step forward. "Well, hurry up and be done with it. We haven't got all night."

"I'll take him when I get him home," Thrain said. "There's no time now, as you say."

"I didn't say you could take him home. I said you could *fuck* him. And that, only if you hurry. You can't take a sorcerer back to the castle. Father's orders were—"

"I know what Father's orders were, but the witch will come back for her son," Thrain said evenly. "If we have him, we may yet capture her. Besides, the lad is no threat to us. He's a Null, remember? He has no magic of his own. Without his mother to protect him, he's helpless."

Baynor frowned, and Thrain could almost see the gears in his head working. His brother wasn't stupid—it would have been easier if he were. But he did take time to work things out. Thrain just hoped he could see the sense of what he was saying.

"Very well," Baynor said at last. "But it's on your head. He's your prisoner. And you'd better make sure he knows who's master."

"He knows." Thrain made a show of choking the lad again. "Come on. Let's go."

Baynor grinned. "Oh, we're not going anywhere until you fuck him, Brother. What do you think I meant by showing him who's master? So go on—shove it in. Or would you prefer for me to do the honors?" Thrain felt a peculiar protectiveness for the lad, as if he didn't just want to use Elias to serve his own ends. As if he wanted him because he...wanted him. "I told you, he's mine," he snarled.

"Then prove it—to him and to me. I'll not have a prisoner—especially a royal used to doing as he pleases—brought back to Castle Black without proper subjugation." Baynor crossed his arms over his chest, his sword still gripped in one hand, and glared. "Unless you're so besotted with the boy you're afraid to hurt his lily-white arse. In which case I should kill you both now and save Father the trouble."

"I'd like to see you try it," Thrain growled. "I'll not do to him what... I'm not going to do it."

Baynor strode forward and leaned down, putting his face two inches from Thrain's. "You fuck him or I will, Brother—your choice. But if I do it, you know how it'll end."

Thrain felt sick. Gods yes, he knew exactly how it would end if Baynor took the young Trueheart prince. It would end with Elias's blood pumping out on the flagstones as Baynor skewered him after slitting his throat. He couldn't let the lad die that way. So what were his options?

He could fight Baynor, but his older brother had a distinct advantage in such a confined space. Thrain was fast, but Baynor was huge with a long reach—Thrain would need plenty of open space to defeat him, which he didn't have here. And even if he killed Baynor, the men were loyal to Baynor, not him. It was certain they would turn on him if they saw him kill his older brother. No, he regretfully acknowledged, there was no way to get both himself and Elias out of this alive other than to do as his brother said, though it made his gut churn to break the old oath he had made to himself years ago.

"Do it now or step aside." Baynor's breath smelled like bad teeth and rotten food.

Thrain glared at his brother. He could feel Elias trembling against him, but there was no choice. He couldn't get them both killed just to protect the boy's honor or to keep his own oath. He would have to go through with it. Damn it, though, this was going to make it that much harder to win Elias's trust and cooperation. "Come on," he growled, shoving the younger man over to the side of the bed.

"Please!" The word broke in a panicky gasp from the boy's lips, and Thrain felt an unwanted surge of pity. He crushed it hard, like a bug beneath his boot heel. There was nothing to do but get this over with so they could go.

"Bend over the bed." Not waiting for Elias to comply, he pushed the lad facefirst into the rich brocade covers and made a show of ripping down his breeches with one hand. With the other, he pulled out the flask of oil in his pocket and flicked out the stopper with his thumb. Across the room, Baynor guffawed. "You're getting the lad all oiled up so you don't hurt him? You really *are* besotted with the little brat. Why not just shove it in?"

"I'll not hurt him more than I have to," Thrain said angrily. "I'm obeying your orders; how I carry them out is my business."

"Fine." Baynor raised a hand, palm up. "Do what you like, Brother, only get on with it."

Thrain didn't bother to answer him. Kicking the boy's legs apart, he poured a generous dollop of oil between his thighs as he got his own cock out. Then, trying not to hear his brother's coarse laughter, he leaned over Elias and used his fingers to massage the slippery liquid into the boy's tight entrance.

"No, wait!" Elias gasped and jerked upward as Thrain's seeking fingers penetrated his rosebud.

"Back down," he muttered in the younger man's ear. "And hold still. If you struggle, I might tear you. Trust me, Elias. You don't want to ride all the miles back to Castle Black with that kind of injury."

"I... But I..." Tears filled the lad's eyes, but at last he subsided and lay motionless, as tight as a bowstring upon the bed.

Thrain tried to feel nothing as he found Elias's entrance with the head of his cock. He wanted the boy—there was no denying that. He'd wanted him from the moment they'd danced the Spider's Web together. But to force himself on Elias like this made his stomach clench like a slick fist. He'd never had his brother's taste for rape, had never before forced himself on a man or maid who didn't want him. He had sworn not to, and for good reason. But now he had no choice.

As gently as he could, he slid into the tight confines of Elias's entrance. The lad jerked and moaned under him, but Thrain didn't stop—there was no point in delaying the inevitable. He pressed until he filled Elias to the hilt, until he felt his entire shaft massaged by the tight, slick velvet fist of the boy's body.

"All the way inside you now, Elias," he murmured in the lad's ear, hoping Baynor couldn't hear him. "Just hold still and let me fuck you. I swear I'll finish as fast as I can."

"Gods." The word came out in a broken sob, and Elias covered his face with one hand as Thrain began to move. Outside, there was a sudden clap of thunder, and lightning split the sky in a jagged, glowing fork.

"Did you see that?" Baynor jerked his head up to study the lovely stained-glass window that graced the royal bedchamber's casement. "A storm outside, gods damn it. And the night so fine and dry up till now."

Thrain didn't answer him; he was too busy trying to finish. Beneath him, Elias shivered like a broken thing, and outside, the sudden storm raged as rain began to fall in sheets. It was the kind of squall that was more usual for summer than early autumn, but Thrain wasn't really paying attention to the weather. He barely even noticed when the black iron circlet of magic null began to burn his temples again. "Open for me. I don't want to hurt you," he growled softly into Elias's ear. The lad was too tense, too tight. Thrain was afraid he was tearing him with every thrust. Hoping to ease the boy's pain with some pleasure, he reached under Elias and palmed his cock, which was only semierect.

Elias came alive, struggling under him. "Don't... Please don't," he begged in that broken voice that pierced Thrain's heart.

"Relax," he whispered, stroking the younger man's shaft. "If you'd just relax and open for me, I could finish, gods damn you." He punctuated his words with long, slow strokes in time with his thrusts inside the boy's body. He felt Elias stiffen again, and the boy's cock grew harder in his fist as the head of Thrain's shaft rubbed over something deep within him. Thrain recognized what had happened at once and felt a surge of relief. *Good, now I can make us both come and finish this damn thing*. Deliberately shifting his angle, he made sure his cock bumped over the same spot again and again as he fucked him deeper and harder.

Elias was moaning steadily now, his slender body undulating beneath Thrain's. The cock in Thrain's hand throbbed hotly, and his own shaft grew heavy with need. *Going to come. Gods, going to come so hard*! He worked them both harder, feeling the cum surging in his balls for release and knowing that Elias was right on the edge as well. He was close—so close—and then, finally, he came. Spurting his seed deep inside the lad, he felt Elias coming as well, his hot cum fountaining over Thrain's fist as he made a low sound in his throat like a wounded animal.

Thrain hated himself.

He wished their joining wasn't forced, that he might hear sweeter sounds come from the lad under other, less violent circumstances. His heart clenched like a fist, and he pushed the thought away—it was a vain hope. After tonight Elias would never give himself willingly. He would hate Thrain forever, and well he should.

As if to punctuate the thought, he felt a fierce surge of blinding heat from the magic-null circlet, and then there was another rumble of thunder and a crash of lightning. The stained-glass window shattered inward, spraying them with glass. A driving sheet of rain followed, drenching Thrain to the skin.

"Gods damn it!" Baynor cursed again over the howling wind. "Hurry up, Thrain. Aren't you done deflowering the little bastard yet?"

"You're the one who insisted I fuck him," Thrain pointed out angrily. "If you'd let me wait, we'd be halfway home by now."

Baynor made a disgusted face. "Shut up and get on with it."

"I'm done now. Are you satisfied?" Thrain motioned to Elias, who lay limp beneath him, and his older brother laughed.

"I'd say the boy does indeed look well and truly subjugated. He won't soon forget this night."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Thrain muttered, too low for Baynor to hear. He brushed the shards of glass away from his arms and face, feeling the slices of a thousand tiny cuts as he did so, but they were nothing to the pain in his heart. This night he had broken the oath he'd made long ago, and no matter how he tried to crush the feeling, he couldn't help the sick red rage that rose inside him.

Trying to be gentle, he pulled out of Elias completely and helped the boy to stand on wobbly legs. "Come, Elias," he said, pulling up the boy's breeches. "We've miles to go before we're home."

"Home," Elias murmured, his face slack with shock. "But we are home. This is my home."

"No more," Thrain told him, looping an arm around his neck possessively. "From now on, your home is with me."

He couldn't help noticing as they turned from the shattered window that the droplets that fell on his face weren't cold at all. They were hot—as hot as the seed he knew was trickling down the insides of Elias's thighs and the tears that stained the lad's cheeks. As hot as the blood they had shed this night in the service of their father, the king.

Thrain felt another spasm of self-hatred twist his gut. He tried not to let it show in his eyes as he followed Baynor out of the bedchamber, dragging his unwilling victim along with him. From now on, his path and Elias's lay twined together, and it would not be an easy road to tread—especially after what he had done.

Chapter Three

Elias woke in an unfamiliar room, his entire body throbbing. There was a cold circle of metal around his neck, like a chain made of ice. He reached for it, his fingers scrabbling blindly at the unfamiliar restraint. Gods, where was he, and how had he gotten here? What had happened to him? He blinked, trying to remember, although something told him the recent past was better left forgotten.

"Ah, there you are. I've been waiting for you to wake." The deep, familiar voice in his ear made Elias start. Jerking upright in horror, he tried to get away from Thrain, who was bending over him, watching him with a patient, calculating look.

"You...what...?" Elias tried to scoot backward and was rewarded with a sharp pain in the area between his thighs. Suddenly everything came back to him. Thrain's cruel hands and slick fingers, holding him down, opening him up. The pain of being invaded as the other man's shaft forced its way inside him. The fear and horror as he felt himself react to the intimate, unwanted touch. And worst of all, the shame when his body performed the ultimate betrayal, coming at his attacker's command. "Get away from me!" Elias felt the words squeezed from his throat and a hideous fear that the rape would be repeated. "Leave me alone. I'll kill you if you touch me again."

"Easy." Thrain held up both hands and settled back down on the edge of the bed. His face was hard, but there was something in his eyes that looked like regret. "I won't do it again."

"Why should I believe that?" Elias spat, gathering the fur bedcovers around him protectively. He was filled with rage and shame—a mixture that bubbled like hot bile inside him.

Thrain frowned. "Because my beast of a brother isn't here to force me to; that's why."

"Oh, so you only did it because you *had* to." Elias glared at him. "Forgive me if I find your excuse less than convincing."

"Convincing or not, that's the truth of it. If I hadn't taken you, Baynor would have killed us both." Thrain's mouth was set in a thin, hard line. "But be that as it may, I know that no excuse is good enough for what I did. I hurt you, and for that I am heartily sorry."

"Your apology is *not* accepted." The rage inside him came to a head, and Elias launched himself at the other man, knocking him over and locking his fingers around Thrain's corded throat. Madness took him, and he squeezed as hard as he

could, wanting to choke the life out of the Blackwater prince, to see him limp and dead on the bed before him.

For a moment Thrain lay still under his assault. Then he gripped Elias's wrists and began to squeeze. His fingers tightened until Elias felt the bones of his arms begin to creak. His hands went numb, and suddenly he was unable to squeeze anymore, no matter how much he wanted to. Panting, he let go and yanked out of Thrain's grip before retreating back to the head of the bed.

"Sorry." Thrain's voice came out choked and a little husky as he sat up. "Can't let you leave bruises on me where the rest of the court can see—not if we want to preserve the fiction that you're a completely harmless bed slave."

"I am not your bed slave." Elias glared at the other man.

"No, but you are my destiny. As I am yours."

"What are you talking about?"

Thrain shook his head. "You're not ready to know. Not yet. But in the meantime, you'll pretend to be my slave if you value your life. My father and brother think you're here because I'm fucking you. If they were to find out your real purpose—"

"What 'real purpose'?" Elias spat.

Thrain gave him a cold and level look. "To kill them both."

Elias was surprised into a broken laugh. "I'm sorry, but if you think I'm some kind of assassin, you've got the wrong man."

"I don't expect you to kill them with a blade or your bare hands," Thrain said patiently. "You're going to use your magic."

"What magic? I have no magic—you saw it for yourself. If I had magic, do you think I would have let...let you do what...what you did to me?" Elias stumbled over the words, feeling sick.

"You *do* have magic. That storm that broke when I was taking you—it was only over Castle Rowan. *Your* part of Castle Rowan—the west wing. And the raindrops weren't cold; they were hot. I've never felt rain like that before. Not to mention the way you shattered the window—I've still got cuts on my face to prove it." He pointed to the many tiny red scratches that marred the otherwise smooth, tan skin of his cheeks and forehead.

Elias closed his eyes, wondering if Thrain could possibly be right. His mother had always said that it would take some great or traumatic event to unleash his buried power. Could it be when Thrain had...had taken him...? He squeezed his hands into fists. *I can't think about that right now. Not if I want to stay sane.* Out loud, he said, "Why do you want them dead? Are you so eager for the throne?"

"I've reason enough to kill both of them many times over." Thrain's voice was cold. "Not that you need to know anything about that."

Elias opened his eyes and stared at the other man in wonder. "You really think I'm that powerful? And that's why you have me in a collar? To null my magic?" He touched the ice-cold collar as he spoke. The black metal hadn't warmed against his skin in the least, though he was sure he had been wearing it for hours.

Thrain nodded. "Baynor insisted on it as a precaution, but I'm perfectly aware you'd kill me without it—if you could control your magic, that is."

"I'm glad you have so much faith in my powers. You realize I can't so much as conjure up birds and flowers like my second cousin Aubrey?"

"Ah yes, the bird man." Thrain smiled grimly. "He sent a flock of those at me right before I cut his throat."

Elias's eyes burned, and his throat was tight. "You killed Aubrey?"

Thrain shrugged. "He would have killed me if he could have."

"Of course he would've! You were invading our *home*."

"So did you care for him—this second cousin of yours?" Thrain raised an eyebrow at him.

Elias was surprised into speaking the truth. "No, not particularly. He was always the first to jeer at my lack of magic. But...but he didn't deserve to die."

"People die during war—it's a fact. Besides, I spared your mother," Thrain pointed out. "Isn't she the one you would have wished most to save if you'd been given a choice?"

"Yes." Elias nodded slowly. "Why did you not kill her? I saw the collar around her neck. You had neutralized her magic. She could not have stopped you."

Thrain's eyes were suddenly hard. "Because if I'm to achieve my goals, I need your help and cooperation. And that is an act you could not have forgiven."

Elias nearly choked. "And you think...you think that I can forgive what you did to me last night?"

"I hope in time that you may." Thrain's deep voice was suddenly quiet. "Though I do not expect it to be anytime soon." He sighed and shook his head. "Was it your first time?"

Elias pulled his knees to his chest. "I'm a man grown, no matter what you seem to think. I've been with several maids."

"But it was your first time with a man," Thrain clarified. "Your first time being taken."

"I... Yes." Elias felt his stomach clench.

"I am sorry," Thrain said again, softly. "Did I hurt you badly? I have an ointment that will help if you are torn. If you'll let me see—"

"Do you think I'm mad?" Elias glared at him. "You actually think I'd trust you to doctor me after what you did?"

"Very well. I will leave the pot of ointment in the bathing chamber. You can use it yourself." Thrain's eyes were hard again, like two dark blue gems. "And since you won't let me tend your injuries, you can tend mine." With a single, fluid movement he drew his white linen shirt over his head, revealing a broad chest and muscular shoulders. His chest was marked with long, ragged gashes that looked strangely like claw marks, although what animal could have left such sizable wounds was beyond Elias. "Your lady mother conjured a tiger," Thrain said drily, answering his unspoken question. "And as I don't want the wounds to fester, you may bathe and tend them."

"I hope you die of them." Elias gave him a murderous glare. "I will never tend you."

"You will, or you will sign your own death warrant." Thrain's voice was iron. "Both Baynor and my father believe I have taken you as a bed slave and manservant. So if you want to live to see your precious mother again, you'll act the part."

Elias frowned. "We're alone in your chambers. Why should I act the part now?"

Thrain sighed. "To get used to it—and to get used to *me*. I don't need you jumping like a frightened girl every time I lay a hand to you. It takes a while to bear your attacker's touch after you've been taken as I took you."

"You seem to know a hell of a lot about it," Elias said sarcastically. "I guess I'm not the first one you've *taken*."

Thrain didn't answer, only gave him a level look, meeting his eyes until Elias looked away and swallowed.

"I...I don't want to touch you."

"I would expect nothing else. But touch me you will. And you'll submit to my touch as well." Thrain leaned forward and put a hand on Elias's shoulder. He squeezed gently, ignoring the tremor that went through Elias at the physical contact. "There, is that so hard?" he asked in a low voice.

Elias looked up into the Blackwater prince's midnight blue eyes. "I hate you," he said softly but with such feeling, he could taste each word in his mouth like a bitter pill. "I will never forgive you for what you did."

Thrain's face was like stone. "We'll have to work on that. Now get some warm water and bathe my wounds."

* * *

So began a new phase in Elias's life. He lived exclusively in Thrain's rooms and wasn't allowed out for any reason. Thrain brought him his food and took whatever he didn't eat back to the kitchens himself. Whenever Elias asked about the rest of the castle, Thrain would only reply, "You're not ready." And that was the end of the matter.

Thrain's rooms were sumptuously appointed, with a huge canopied bed, a marble fireplace, and several comfortable chairs. He even had a bathing chamber of his own, which was supplied with already heated water by a natural hot spring that ran beneath Castle Black, but after a while, the sameness of it all nearly drove Elias mad. In fact, he was certain he would have died of boredom had it not been for Thrain's surprisingly extensive collection of books. Elias's mother had undertaken his education herself rather than entrusting it to a court tutor as most nobles did, and some of his fondest memories were of sitting in her lap as a young child and poring over the huge, illustrated texts she'd ordered for him from distant lands. She was a patron of the learning arts and supported several monasteries that specialized in them. *"Knowledge should flow as freely as water, and all who have light must share it to ease the darkness,"* she had often told him.

Elias believed his mother was right, and reading was still one of his favorite ways to pass the time. He never would have pegged Thrain as a reader, but his extensive personal library spoke for itself.

There were books on history, strategy, and philosophy, books of maps, and most surprisingly, from Elias's point of view, many, many books of folklore especially magical creatures. He found one small volume especially interesting—it had been hidden behind several larger texts, and it was mostly about dragon magic. Dragon lore had been of interest to Elias since he had first learned to read, and he had studied it extensively. Everyone knew the dragons had all been killed years ago—in his grandfather's time, in fact—but the author of the book claimed that at least one dragon must remain, hidden away somewhere. For were it not so, no magic should remain. Dragons are the keepers of the old enchantments—they both feed and are fed by the mysterious powers that some men wield. The day the last dragon dies, then shall we see the end of magic in our world forever.

"Be careful with that." The words made Elias jump. He looked up to see Thrain reading over his shoulder in the last light of the setting sun.

"Why should I?" he asked, frowning.

"It talks a deal too much about magic. It's not really safe to have such a thing here at Castle Black."

"So why do you have it, then?" Elias demanded.

Thrain's face was closed. "I was seeking to find something out—something hidden."

"And did you find it?"

Thrain shook his head. "No. But there is enough useful information to make it worth the risk of keeping. Just put it back where you found it when you're done."

"Maybe I should take it to King Ungor and see what he thinks of it," Elias said, arching an eyebrow.

Thrain gave him a level look. "You'll get us both killed if you do that. Me for having a book on magic in the first place, and you for daring to read it. If my father knew that a magic user—even a supposed Null like yourself—was being allowed access to a text like that right under his nose—"

"Fine, you've made your point," Elias snapped, shutting the book. He was annoyed that he'd allowed himself to be drawn into a conversation with his hated attacker, but he couldn't help but acknowledge that it was the most excitement he'd had in ages. In the days and weeks following his capture, he had refused to talk with Thrain as much as he could, and Thrain, for his part, seemed content to allow it. He seemed to be patiently waiting for Elias to forgive him for what he had done something that Elias was sure would never happen.

"I'm glad," Thrain said shortly as Elias returned the book to the shelves. "Now come. It's time to bathe."

Elias frowned. "I don't want to." It was the same every night: Thrain insisted that they share the bathing pool and, afterward, the bed, though Elias would have rather slept on the hard stone floor than be anywhere near him.

"Too bad." Thrain gestured for him to come closer. "Help me undress, and I'll help you."

Elias came to him unwillingly, but he knew there was no way around this. His captor insisted on it, and as Thrain was faster and stronger, his will must be obeyed. Suppressing a sigh, he began helping the taller man out of his chain mail and then moved to untie the linen shirt he wore beneath it.

"If you think making me do this for you every night will make me hate you less, you're wrong," he said as the broad expanse of Thrain's muscular chest came into view. The claw marks from his mother's tiger had healed nicely, thanks to the medicinal ointment Thrain made Elias apply to them regularly.

"It's not to make you hate me less. It's to get you used to me," Thrain reminded him. "And you are—you barely even tremble when I touch you now." To illustrate his point, he brushed the back of his hand gently over Elias's cheek, just as he had when they danced the Spider's Web together.

Elias felt his cheeks grow hot. "Don't do that. I hate it when you do that."

"Do you?" Thrain studied him intently. "Do you really?"

"Yes." Elias looked downward, unwilling to meet those sharp hawk eyes, and began working on the fastening to Thrain's breeches. He tried not to notice that the other man was at least half-hard when he pulled them down and helped Thrain step out of them, or to watch as his long, muscular legs came into view. There was no doubt that Thrain would be considered an attractive man by many, but after what he'd done, Elias could never see him as anything but ugly. Which was why he ignored the play of firelight and shadow on the other man's dark, golden hair and smooth, tan skin as Thrain returned the favor and helped Elias out of his own clothes.

Elias hated their nightly ritual, but he had to admit that Thrain's plan seemed to be working. The first night his captor had ordered Elias to help him undress and share bath and bed with him, he'd felt like his heart would beat its way out of his chest with fear and horror. But Thrain didn't touch him other than to wash his back with a sponge, speaking soft, soothing words as he did, as though Elias were a horse he wanted to gentle. And he didn't touch him when they went to bed except to shake him awake once when Elias had had one of his dreams. So now, though he disliked it, Elias no longer feared their nightly routine. "Come," Thrain said when they were both naked. Elias sighed inwardly as he followed him to the bathing chamber. It was an unheard-of luxury to have hot water constantly at the ready, and if it hadn't been for the presence of his captor in the bathing pool with him, he thought he would have enjoyed it immensely. They lowered themselves carefully into the steaming waters of the sunken pool—Elias had learned the hard way not to just go charging in. The water was almost too hot to stand, and it had to be gotten used to gradually. It was waist-deep, but there were smooth outcroppings of rock carved around the sides where a man could sit and relax—if he could stand the heat.

They soaked for a few moments in silence at opposite ends of the circular pool, and then Thrain beckoned him over. "Come, I'll wash you."

"I'm perfectly capable of washing myself," Elias complained, as he always did. But of course it did no good. Thrain simply beckoned him again, and he had to come. He tried to stand patiently and endure as Thrain used a large natural sponge and the sweet-smelling soap he'd bought from an herbalist to wash him all over, lathering his chest and back before moving on to his arms and legs. But he couldn't help stiffening when the sponge brushed over his shaft. Against his will, he felt himself harden at Thrain's impersonal touch, and his heart began to race.

Elias didn't know whether to be angry or relieved that the other man made no comment at his reaction, but he wished his body wouldn't respond so. Damn it, why couldn't he hate his captor physically as he hated him mentally? Why did he still find the dark spice of Thrain's scent intriguing and notice the width of his shoulders or the way his eyes were so blue they were almost black?

Thrain, obviously indifferent to Elias's inner turmoil, dipped the sponge in the warm water again and began to wash his neck and shoulders. But when the sponge ran over his cheeks and face, Elias let out an involuntary hiss and jerked away.

"What's wrong?" Thrain frowned and beckoned him to come closer. "Did I hurt you?" $% \mathcal{T}_{\mathcal{T}}$

"No, I just..." Elias frowned and touched his temple. "I had a bad dream last night and knocked myself on the bedpost."

"You seem to have a lot of those. You're a very restless bedmate." Thrain put a hand up to lift Elias's hair away from his forehead and examine the small cut and bruise. "What are they about, these dreams?" he asked in an abstracted voice as he dabbed gently at the hurt spot.

"Nothing," Elias said hurriedly. He wasn't about to share that part of himself with a man like Thrain. Wasn't about to tell him about the dreams he'd had for years or the fact that they were getting worse, more intense. "Nothing I can remember, anyway," he said, adding to his lie.

"They have nothing to do with a dragon, then? A huge red one with eyes like the heart of a furnace?" Thrain's voice was still casual, but he was watching Elias sharply.

"What...? How did you know that?" Elias frowned. "Did I call out in my sleep?"

"As a matter of fact you did. You often do. But that wasn't how I knew." Thrain stopped dabbing and dipped the sponge back into the hot water. "That will have to do for now. When we get out, I'll put some healing balm on it." He passed Elias the sponge. "Here, wash me."

"How did you know about my dreams?" Elias insisted, rubbing the crumbly cake of fragrant soap against the sponge before beginning to wash Thrain's broad chest.

"Does he speak your name? Does he call to you?"

Elias ground his teeth in frustration. Damn Thrain and his irritating habit of answering a question with one of his own. "He... Yes, he does," he admitted. "But how did you know—"

"I know because the dragon calls to me too." Thrain's voice was quiet. "But he needs both of us."

"Both of us for what? What are you talking about?" Elias demanded.

"He is chained under this very castle. Did you know that? My father, hater of magic that he is, is keeping the last true magical creature in all the land captive for his own amusement."

"But how can he... How did he capture it? And why would he keep it?" Elias was fascinated despite himself. Could Thrain possibly be telling the truth?

"As to how he caught it, I believe he used a virgin sacrifice. And as to why he keeps it, it is for the pleasure of watching it die, a little at a time. Dragons generate magic and feed off it too. Every time my father puts another true witch or warlock to the stake, he kills a part of the beast." Thrain looked grim. "Of course, in his quest to rid the world of magic, many innocents have died as well—not that he cares."

"But why does he hate magic so?"

"It was foretold that magic would be his downfall. And it will be—*your* magic will be." Thrain sounded absolutely certain.

"I've told you time and again that I don't have any magic," Elias said irritably. "And even if I did, this damn collar you've got on me would neutralize it. When are you going to take it off me, anyway? It feels like ice."

"Magic null always feels icy to the touch unless it's warding off a spell. And as to when I'll take it off you, I won't do that until you stop hating me." Thrain nodded at his legs. "You missed a spot."

"I guess I'll be wearing it for life, then." Elias washed the area he was indicating with rough, short strokes, making sure it was the sponge and not his bare hand that touched Thrain's shaft. He couldn't help noticing that the other man got hard despite his forceful treatment, but he looked away from the sight quickly.

"Will you really?" Thrain's deep voice sounded almost wistful. "Will you wear your hatred of me like a collar made of ice forever? Can you never forgive me, Elias?" "Why should I?" Elias looked down at his hands, gripping the sponge. "Why do you even want me to? Oh, right, so I can use my all-powerful *magic* to help you get rid of your brother and father and get the throne."

"That's not the only reason." Thrain raised his chin gently so that their eyes met. "It used to be, but...it's not anymore."

For a long moment Elias looked into those midnight blue depths, and then he pulled away. "I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

"So you can have more dreams?" Thrain rinsed the soap off and stepped out of the pool. "They're not all of the dragon, are they?"

"How would you know?" Elias toweled himself off roughly, wishing he had a nightshirt or some night breeches to wear to bed. No one went to bed without being properly dressed at Castle Rowan, but here at Castle Black they had the barbaric habit of sleeping in the nude.

"You cry out sometimes." Thrain draped his towel over the carved wooden back of a chair. "You beg and weep. I hope...I hope I am not the source of those nightmares."

"I don't know what you're talking about, so I can't tell you," Elias said shortly as they walked back to the bedchamber. "If my dreams bother you so, I'll happily sleep on the floor."

"I think you'd be a bit cold," Thrain said mildly. He held Elias's chin steady with one hand and dabbed a bit of healing ointment over the cut on his forehead with the other. "Besides, I want you close."

"So you keep saying," Elias grumbled. Thrain let him go at last, and he slid into his side of the huge carved bed. The canopy overhead was of rich green velvet with blue and gold embroidery, but the linen sheets were as cold as ice. He shivered, wishing there was some way to warm up. It was hard to fall asleep in such conditions. Most nights it seemed that the chill of the bed combined with the icy grip of the collar around his neck until he felt like a human icicle.

"Good night," Thrain said, blowing out the candle and settling into the other side of the bed. "And don't fear, Elias. I'll wake you if you dream too loudly."

Elias opened his mouth to deliver a biting reply, but a gentle snore interrupted him. Thrain was already asleep, damn him. Closing his eyes, he huddled around himself, trying to get warm enough to drift off as well. He prayed that the dreams wouldn't bother him tonight, although if Thrain was telling the truth, maybe there was some reason for them. Could there really be a live dragon chained under Castle Black? And could that dragon be calling to him? Pondering that question, he drifted off into an uneasy slumber.

Chapter Four

Thrain pretended to snore until he heard Elias's deep, even breathing and knew the lad was asleep. Then he rolled over on his side and looked longingly at the delicate features and tousled black curls. Even in sleep Elias never really relaxed. He had a tense look about him, as though he was anxious even in repose. Of course he's anxious. He's been raped and captured and held against his will. And no amount of sweet talk and gentleness is going to make him forget it.

For the thousandth time, Thrain wished he hadn't broken his oath. That he had defied his brother and refused to take Elias, even if it had meant his own death. Elias hated him now, and though Thrain tried to tell himself he didn't care, that he had never cared for anyone or anything but achieving his goals, the lie no longer satisfied him. The more he watched Elias, the more he talked to him—and thank the gods the boy was finally willing to have a conversation instead of sitting there in silence—the more Thrain felt for the slender, dark-haired prince with the enigmatic golden eyes.

The emotions that rose in his chest when he looked at Elias were so unfamiliar, he didn't really have a name for them. Growing up motherless in the snake pit of intrigue and suspicion that was his father's stronghold, he had hardened at a young age. He'd needed a heart of ice to withstand a childhood at Castle Black, but something about Elias seemed to be melting it. Not that it would do him any good—the lad would never forgive him for the rape. And while Thrain understood that, he couldn't help feeling each cold look and harsh word the other man spoke like a dagger in his heart.

Get over it. At least he's coming out of his shell a little, talking a little more. Not to mention he's stopped flinching every time you touch him. And that was a damn good thing, as far as Thrain was concerned, because he couldn't keep Elias to himself much longer. His father had been asking for days to meet their "captive guest," and Baynor made crude references every time they met about how he must be wearing his princeling's sweet little arse out since they spent so much time alone together in Thrain's rooms.

But it wasn't only his father and brother who wanted to meet Elias. Whenever he closed his eyes and opened his mind, Thrain could hear the dragon calling. The huge fire lizard had felt it the moment he brought Elias through the gates of Castle Black and had been demanding to see him ever since. The dragon's desire was like a constant pressure in the back of Thrain's head, a slight headache he couldn't get rid of. As though thinking about it made the dragon's voice stronger, he felt the pressure increase and form into words in his mind. "Bring him," the dragon was saying. "To me. To me. Bring him to me, Thrain, son of Ungor, son of my hated captor. Bring me the boy. Bring me Elias."

Thrain pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, trying to ease the pressure. He didn't think that Elias was ready to be exposed to the court at Castle Black *or* to meet the dragon, but both things were going to have to happen soon—he couldn't hold them off much longer. Already he'd gone to see the dragon twice, though it was a dangerous thing to do, to promise it that soon, soon he would bring Elias down to its subterranean dungeon.

The pressure filled his head again until he thought it might burst like an overripe melon. *"To me, to me. Bring him to me!"* The dragon roared its impatience like silent thunder in his mind.

"Gods!" Thrain swore under his breath and sat up in bed. It looked like he would have to make at least one more trip to visit the dragon. Its voice was making his head ache horribly, but it always quieted a little after he spoke to it. He would have to beg it for one more week before he brought Elias to meet it. If only he could get the boy talking a little more, if he could get Elias to hate him just a little less, Elias might be ready to hear what it had to say.

He got up quietly, careful not to shake the bed. Elias was a light sleeper unless he was in the grip of one of his dreams. Then, though he shook and sweat and begged and cried out, he couldn't seem to wake. It was then that Thrain longed to hold him, longed to pull the younger man into his arms and whisper words of comfort in his ear until the nightmares let him be. But he dared not risk it. If Elias woke up with Thrain's arms wrapped around him and their bodies entwined, he would certainly believe he was being attacked again. His fear and hatred of Thrain would grow even greater. So Thrain confined himself to simply shaking the boy's shoulder when the dreams grew especially bad, knowing it was all he could do.

He slipped on his clothing and boots and put a dagger in one of them. It wouldn't do to walk about the castle unarmed. Half the mercenaries his father had knighted would slit a man's throat as soon as look at him. It didn't matter to them that he was the king's son either. The king had another son he favored much more—Baynor, the man who would one day be king of the realm. Thrain was just an extra, and as such, he was entirely expendable.

Careful of the door, which sometimes creaked, Thrain left his bedchamber silently and went down the long stone hallway. The path to the dragon was long, since his rooms were near the top of the castle, and the underground cavern that housed the fire lizard was deep in the earth. He hoped Elias's sleep would remain untroubled while he was gone.

Slipping from shadow to shadow, he easily avoided the men-at-arms posted around the castle. As a child, stealth had been his only weapon, and moving as silently as a cat still came naturally to him. He passed his father's rooms, with a full retinue of guards outside the ironbound doors, and none of them was the wiser as to his presence. Gods, how often had he daydreamed about slipping into that room at night and cutting the old king's throat as he slept? Since he was twelve, at least, Thrain reckoned. It was a bloodthirsty fantasy for a boy to have, but he'd had his reasons. He'd fantasized about killing Baynor as well, especially back when he was younger and unable to defend himself against his bullying older brother. Unfortunately his father was too well guarded and Baynor was too dangerous in his own right for Thrain to make either fantasy a reality.

That will change soon. As soon as Elias learns to use his magic and allows me to help him harness it. Thrain hoped so, anyway. From the blush on the lad's cheeks when he'd touched him, and the way his cock had hardened when Thrain washed him with the sponge, he knew Elias wasn't completely indifferent to him. As long as the younger man felt something for him, Thrain thought he might have at least some small hope of winning him over. Of winning his heart. He pushed that thought away; it was foolish and romantic, and he was neither of those things.

The trip down to the dungeon level took a good twenty minutes, but at last he stood before the huge oaken door bound with black iron magic null. Ounce for ounce the magic-null metal was more precious than gold, and Thrain knew the reinforced doors that led to the dragon's prison were worth a fortune. King Ungor didn't mind spending money when he considered the result worth the price. Of course, the doors were nothing compared to the enormous collar the dragon wore and the chain attached to it—those had cost his father the price of a small kingdom. But it had been money well spent, since it held the most powerful magical creature in the land hostage with no hope of escape.

Thrain spent some minutes dealing with the puzzle lock in the very middle of the door. It had been crafted by a master locksmith, and Ungor was the only one to know the combination, since he'd promptly had the man killed as soon as he learned it. As a youth it had taken Thrain several risky trips, spying on his father as he worked the lock, before he finally got the combination himself. He'd been driven to succeed by the dragon's voice in his head and its nightly appearance in his dreams, demanding that he come to it, promising him revenge.

Now, though the combination was second nature, he still took care with the lock. These days Ungor rarely came down to see the dragon—mostly only when he was putting a very powerful sorcerer or sorceress on the witch pyre and wanted to gloat. At any rate, Thrain didn't want the lock to appear too worn the next time his father visited his magical prisoner.

When the lock finally snicked open, he slipped through the door and closed it quietly behind him. He was at the top of a long flight of stairs spiraling downward into the darkness. It would have seemed that he was walking into a bottomless pit if it weren't for the pale golden glow far down in the blackness. The dragon generated its own heat and light, though both were growing fainter year by year as it slowly died. But dying or not, Thrain could still feel the immense pressure of it thrumming inside his head, crowding his thoughts.

He was glad he'd remembered to remove the circlet of black iron magic null he always wore. Being in the presence of the dragon while wearing it was like being crowned with molten gold—intensely painful. Of course, his father never took his own circlet off, even while visiting the dragon. Ungor would rather endure the pain than risk allowing the dragon's magic to touch him. It was probably a wise decision on his part, for the dragon's hatred of him burned as brightly as the fire in its gullet, as Thrain well knew.

"To me! To me! Bring him!" the dragon roared silently. Thrain couldn't understand its true voice, only the one inside his head, and he considered himself lucky at that. The strange words that came out of its pointed reptilian maw and flicked off the end of its forked tongue sounded like they might corrode the insides of a man's ears and poison his brain. Somehow the dragon was able to make itself heard inside his mind, so understanding its strange spoken language was unnecessary.

He had often wished that he could mind-speak to the dragon as it did to him. It would have saved him the long and arduous trip down to see it. But he had no magic about him at all, so for two-way communication to take place, he had to stand before it and speak aloud.

Despite the growing pressure in his brain, Thrain trod carefully. The stairs were narrow and without a railing, and one misstep would mean death. He had no wish to die here, though he had entertained thoughts of suicide in the past when coming to see the dragon. The fire lizard had helped him turn his self-destruction outward, had promised him sweet revenge and offered him hope in its own twisted way. Thrain supposed that was the reason he kept coming to see it. That, and the pressure inside his head.

"I'm here," he called when he was almost down the steps. "Right here. I'm coming. Let up, will you?"

The pressure in his mind eased as the dragon came into view. It was thirty feet long from snout to tail, and each red scale of its monstrous hide was bigger than his hand and outlined in golden, glowing light, as though it were lit from within. Back when he'd first come to it as a lad, the dragon had been almost too bright to look at. But the long years of Ungor's purging of all things magic had taken their toll; Thrain could look at it easily now. It wasn't the hide that drew his gaze, however. It was the beast's eyes he had to be wary of.

The dragon's eyes were pools of liquid flame, dancing, changing, drawing a man in, inviting him to get lost in their depths. Thrain had spent hours gazing into those eyes when he was younger before his study of dragon lore had led him to understand that if a man looked into a dragon's eyes too long, it would drive him mad. Truly the beast was even more dangerous than his father believed it to be, and Thrain knew it could easily have been the death of him. But killing him wouldn't free it, and that was what the dragon wished most of all—freedom to roam the skies again, to soar in the high blue heavens it had been denied these many years of captivity in the black cavern of its prison.

"Thrain, son of Ungor," it greeted him as it always did, nodding its great head, which was longer than Thrain was tall. Its words hissed like snakes in his brain. "Where is the one you promised me? The one I sent you to get? Why have you not brought Elias?"

"He is not yet ready, oh dragon." Thrain spoke respectfully. Just because the beast was chained with magic null didn't mean it was helpless. "I have told him of you, though," he added. "And he admitted to dreaming of you."

"Yes, I have been sending him dreams these many nights. He knows in his heart I am real."

"I believe you're right. But I can't bring him to see you until I can trust him not to run from me. He still harbors anger against me for the way I...shamed him." Thrain's throat was tight as he admitted his guilt. He knew his words didn't adequately describe what he'd done to Elias, but the dragon could pick his true meaning out of his mind, and he couldn't bring himself to say it aloud.

"You have done him a grave injustice," the dragon acknowledged after a moment. "But his heart will warm to you. Only you must bring him to me soon. We have not much more time."

"More time before what?" Thrain asked, frustrated. Sometimes the dragon spoke in riddles or hinted darkly of things to come. All he wanted were straightforward answers to his questions, but he almost never got them.

"Soon," the dragon hissed. "Your destiny awaits you, Thrain, son of Ungor. But it may pass you by if you are not careful. I see two paths before you. One leads to glory and one to death. Only with Elias by your side may you take the brighter path and win through to your revenge and the splendor that lies beyond."

"I want that—more than anything." Thrain's heart throbbed with the old hatred. "I want them both dead."

"Then you must bring me Elias. Only he can help. He knows me better than I know myself, though he does not understand that yet."

"How can he know you if I haven't brought him to meet you yet?" Thrain frowned. "What do you want of him, anyway?"

"Besides myself, he is the most magical being in all the realm. If we are to live, we must help each other. I must see him. Time is of the essence."

"One more week," Thrain pleaded. "I'm working with him, truly I am. I can't make him stop hating me all at once."

"Hatred is the dark sister of love. Turn your heart toward his, and he will seek you out as night turns to day."

"I hope you're right." Thrain shook his head. "I will bring him in a week one way or the other, though. I promise you that." "A week and no more. Your life and Elias's are entwined, and your fate hangs in the balance, Thrain, son of Ungor."

"But how? Can't you at least tell me something?"

"I cannot say more until I see Elias. He knows what I have forgotten and sees that which is hidden. Bring him to me, and your destiny will be clear."

"I will bring him." Thrain swallowed his frustration and thought, not for the first time, that the dragon's long, dark captivity had driven it more than a little mad. But mad or not, it was still very powerful. Next time he came he would have to bring Elias with him—of that he was certain. He could no longer put off the meeting.

He took the stairs slowly and thoughtfully, grateful that the pressure in his head had finally eased. Tomorrow he would speak to Elias again, would tell him that he must come to meet the dragon. If he started getting used to the idea now, he would be ready to come with Thrain a week from now—or so Thrain hoped.

The door closed silently behind him, and he reworked the lock with care before leaving the dungeon. But just as he was about to ascend the stairs that led to the main floor of the castle, he heard low voices talking in a shadowy alcove to his left. He would have passed them by, keeping to the shadows and out of sight, but they sounded disturbingly familiar. With habit born of long practice, he slipped behind a pillar and listened.

"Be careful," whispered the dragon in his head. "Be oh so careful, Thrain, son of Ungor."

He wanted to tell it to leave him alone, that he knew what he was about, but then the voices started again.

"Please don't," whispered a soft, pleading voice. "Please, I beg you. Please."

Thrain stiffened, going for the dagger in his boot.

The voice belonged to Elias, and he sounded like he was begging for his life.

Chapter Five

The creaking of the door woke Elias, and he sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. A quick scan of the room told him Thrain was gone, but where? This same thing had happened twice before, the Blackwater prince disappearing in the middle of the night only to reappear hours later looking tired and spent. What was he doing when he sneaked out at night? Where was he going that he did not wish Elias to follow? *Find out. Follow him.*

For a long moment Elias hesitated. Thrain had hinted darkly of how dangerous the rest of the castle was. It sounded very different from the airy, bright Castle Rowan, where Elias had been raised. There, a man might walk freely about without fear, but to hear Thrain tell it, you had to be armed to the teeth to walk through Castle Black. But it's the middle of the night; who's even going to be up? If you don't hurry, you'll lose him, and then you'll lie awake all night wondering what's going on, just like you did the last two times.

Curiosity overcoming his fear, Elias jumped out of bed and pulled on his clothes. He was about to walk out the door when the cold touch of the magic-null collar reminded him that he would be instantly recognizable to anyone who saw it. Looking around, he saw Thrain's dark green cloak, grabbed it, and pulled the hood well down over his head. Good. Now he was just another knight or guardsman, bundled up against the chill of the night. Hoping he wasn't too late to catch Thrain, he slipped out and shut the door behind him.

For a moment, out in the darkened corridor, he considered the possibility of escape. It was the dead of night, and his captor was gone—what better opportunity would he have? However, to win free of Castle Black, he would have to get past the guard garrison at the front of the castle and then swim the vast moat—as wide as a lake—that surrounded the grounds. He could swim well enough, but the moat was stocked with monstrous fish—pike as long as a man's whole body and with teeth like daggers, and those were some of the milder species that inhabited the murky depths. King Ungor took no chances with the security of his fortress. Reluctantly Elias put the thought of escape out of his mind and concentrated on following Thrain's trail.

His captor had gotten a good lead on him and was moving so silently that Elias almost missed him. However, just as he was about to give up and go back to bed, he saw the faint glint of torchlight on Thrain's dark gold hair. Elias blessed the natural grace that came from the Fairy blood of his Trueheart ancestors as he undertook to follow him. Without it, he could never have matched Thrain's stealth or managed to keep up with him without the other man knowing he was there.

He was amazed and a little uneasy at how deftly Thrain avoided the guards and men-at-arms stationed at various points along the castle. They were a roughlooking bunch indeed, but were they really so dangerous that Thrain felt the need to walk among them without being seen? Would they not have respect for their prince? If the king's own son had to fear for his life in his father's castle, a captive like Elias wouldn't stand a chance if he were caught out without protection. Knowing that, he redoubled his efforts at silence and secrecy and was pleased when he was able to follow Thrain all the way to a huge oaken door bound with the black iron magic null he was becoming so familiar with.

Elias waited patiently in the shadows as Thrain worked on an intricatelooking lock, twisting and turning various parts of it for long moments until it finally gave with a soft *snick*. Then he watched as the Blackwater prince slipped through the huge door and shut it behind him.

Should I follow him? What if he's gone into a dark room and the light from the torches out here gives me away? Elias stood indecisive for several long minutes until he finally decided to try the door. When he got there, however, he found that the lock was back in place. There must have been a quick-release latch on the other side of the door for Thrain to have risked locking it behind him, but that didn't help him on this side. He tried to work the lock, but it was an unsolvable puzzle, and he had no magic to help him. If he'd had a tenth as much as his mother, he could have waved a hand and said a few words in the Old Tongue, and then...

Elias grew still. *The Old Tongue—someone is using it behind that door*. He pressed his ear to the thick wooden panel, but that did no good. Nothing but muffled sounds could be heard. But then, how had he heard what he'd heard in the first place? He remembered what his mother had taught him when she schooled him in the ways of magic, in case his own powers ever manifested. "Listen with your heart, Elias. Open your mind," she'd instructed. Taking a deep breath, Elias did just that, and slowly—very slowly—he began to hear an ancient, hissing voice speaking in his head.

"Your life and Elias's are entwined, and your fate hangs in the balance, Thrain, son of Ungor." The words hissed in his head. Could it be the voice of the dragon? Elias knew from his studies of dragon lore that some of them were said to be able to see different paths into the future. That which might be, a shifting kaleidoscope of different possibilities. But could it really be that what Thrain had told him was true—that they were each other's destiny?

Can't be. That's unthinkable. The thought of spending the rest of his life with his attacker was loathsome—or so Elias told himself. Yet he couldn't help remembering the gentle way Thrain had touched him ever since he'd brought Elias back to Castle Black. Or the soft, soothing words he whispered in the darkness when he woke Elias from a bad dream. "*It's all right, Elias,*" he would murmur as

Elias lay shaking beside him in the huge bed. "I'm here with you. I'll not let anyone hurt you."

The more he thought of it, the more Elias realized that Thrain truly did seem to regret what he had done. And to be fair, it *had* been his older brother, Baynor the Beast, who had ordered him to do it in the first place. He'd tried to resist and had only given in when Baynor had threatened to kill them both.

I suppose he was as gentle as he could be, under the circumstances. At least he used oil to ease the way... No. What am I thinking? Elias shook his head angrily. Thrain had stolen into his home in the dead of night and attacked him. There was no excuse for what he had done. No forgiving his evil deeds. Because of him my mother is gone—perhaps dead, I know not—and our kingdom is overrun with his father's mercenaries. I shall never forgive him!

"Well, well, well. What have we here?"

The rough voice behind him made Elias jump. He was about to run, but before he could move an inch, a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. Then someone yanked him around and shoved him back against the hard oaken door.

"Well? What are you doing here, little princeling?" It was Baynor, looking every bit as huge and terrifying as Elias remembered him.

"I was...exploring the castle," he said desperately.

"Oh?" Baynor's small eyes narrowed. "And did my fool of a little brother say you could go out exploring all on your own in the middle of the night?"

"No," Elias almost whispered. His pulse was racing, and his breathing was shallow. He didn't need anyone to tell him he was in a very bad position—Baynor the Beast was the most dangerous man in Castle Black, and Elias was in his power. He wondered if he could take Thrain's older brother by surprise with a punch to the gut or a gouge to the eyes and get away. But even if he did, he was a prisoner here in Castle Black. Unless he was going to try to escape from the castle tonight, he would eventually have to deal with the consequences of whatever actions he took to get away from the crown prince.

"We don't hold with spies here, little princeling," Baynor growled, shaking him like a child's doll. "Maybe someone needs to teach you that."

"I wasn't spying," Elias protested. "Honestly. I was just...bored. I wanted to see something of the castle. That's all."

"And you just *happened* to end up down here, at the other end of the castle from Thrain's rooms, in front of this *particular* door." Baynor clearly wasn't buying his explanation.

"I...I was wondering where it led; that's all." Elias tried to slip away from him, but the big man only gripped his shoulder harder.

"You expect me to believe that? Like calls to like." Baynor glowered at him, eyeing the collar around his neck. "Still, you wear the magic null. If it's strong enough to keep that great lizard imprisoned, it ought to keep the likes of you from doing magic."

"I have no magic," Elias protested. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about teaching you a lesson you won't soon forget, you little whore's son." Tightening his grip even more, Baynor began to drag him away from the solid wood door and into the shadows. Elias dug in his heels and squirmed to get free, but it was no use. Before he knew it, he was pressed up against the cold stone wall of a dark alcove to one side of the stairwell.

"Leave me alone," he gasped, struggling to get free. "Or just take me back to Thrain and let him punish me."

Baynor let out his gravelly laugh. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? I'm sure Thrain *punishes* you often enough that you have a taste for it now. He always was too soft and gentle. Tell me, princeling, how'd you like to be fucked by a real man?"

Elias had thought that his heart couldn't pound any faster than it already was, but now it battered his ribs so hard, he could have sworn it was trying to beat its way out of his chest. The remembered pain and shame of his past attack rose to drown him, and he felt his stomach clench in fear. *No, not again! I can't bear it again!*

"No!" The word was torn from him, and suddenly he was fighting like a wildcat. Damn the consequences of injuring the crown prince in a castle where he was a captive. He would rather die than let himself be taken against his will again.

In his desperation, he actually landed quite a solid blow to Baynor's lumpish face, taking him squarely in the nose. The huge man howled and loosened his grip, and for a moment, Elias was almost free. He ducked and scrambled madly through Baynor's tree-trunk legs, the flagstones hard and cold beneath his sweating palms. *If I can just get away, I know I can outrun him. He's big, but I bet he's slow. If I can just*—His thoughts were choked off as abruptly as his breath. Baynor had him by the long green cape he'd taken from Thrain's rooms. Before Elias could so much as struggle, Baynor yanked him back upright and pulled him into a bear hug.

"You have some fight in you. I like that." Baynor was grinning, the blood streaming from his nose staining his crooked teeth. His breath gusted in Elias's face, hot and rotten as he held him tight to his massive chest.

"Let me go!" The words were barely a whisper—Elias was faint from lack of air.

"I'll let you go. But not till I've had my fill of you." Baynor turned him suddenly, shoving his face into the stone wall of the alcove and twisting his arm behind his back.

Elias barely felt the rough stone scraping his cheek. All he could think about, all he could feel were the pain and shame and horror that threatened to drown him. Baynor shoved down Elias's breeches, and a big, cold hand groped between his legs. Then thick fingers were thrusting between his buttocks, probing his entrance.

"No!" Elias tried to wiggle away, despite the wrenching in his shoulder, but there was no breaking Baynor's cruel grip. "Still so tight," he muttered, his voice thick with lust. "Tell me. Is that fool brother of mine still using oil or ointment to ease his way? You'll get none of that with me, little princeling. I like a man to know when I've fucked him."

"Please don't," he gasped. "Please, I beg you. *Please*." He couldn't bear the horror and the shame of it. A sharp pain lanced through him, a tearing agony in the tender flesh of his entrance, and it was only Baynor's thick fingers inside him. He couldn't imagine taking the man's thick shaft with no lubrication. *He'll rip me apart. I'll bleed to death*! "Please." He moaned again.

Baynor let loose a burst of trollish laughter. "Keep begging, little prince. I like to hear you beg."

"How do you like *this*?" a new voice said behind them, and suddenly the probing stopped, and Baynor was very, very still. "How do you like the feel my cold steel against your fat neck?" the voice continued.

"Why, little brother. What are you doing down here in the dead of night?" Baynor growled.

"Keeping you from taking what isn't yours. Let go of the boy, Baynor. Do it now, or I'll slit your throat."

"Please," Elias croaked. "Don't...don't let him. Please, Thrain."

"Up to your old tricks again, I see." Thrain's voice was thick with fury. "Have you taken him, Baynor? You'd better pray to all the gods your answer is no, or I'll cut off your cock and shove it in your mouth to muffle your screams while you bleed to death."

"Possessive, aren't you? You really are besotted with the little whore's son." Baynor laughed, but his grip on Elias relaxed a bit. "No, I haven't taken him. Let me guess—you want to save his sweet arse for yourself."

"No, I want to keep you off him, *Brother*." Thrain spit the word like a curse. "I know your ways. Now will you let him go, or shall I slit your throat?"

"I'll let him go—this time."

Elias let out a sob of relief as the thick fingers withdrew and his aching arm was released. He scrambled for his breeches and pulled them up before he turned around. Baynor was standing perfectly still, his head thrown back, and Thrain was behind his shoulder, one hand buried in his brother's greasy hair and the other holding a dagger to his throat.

"Thrain—" Elias began.

"Get back to my rooms." There was a mad glint in Thrain's dark blue eyes. A rage so fierce it was frightening. "*Now*," he barked when Elias froze in fear.

"All right!" Carefully Elias edged around the still-unmoving Baynor, backing out of the tight alcove and heading for the stairs.

"You'll pay for this, Thrain," he heard the crown prince growl. "Father won't be happy to hear your pet warlock was sniffing round the dragon's door." "I don't give a fuck what you or Father think," Thrain spat. "Elias is mine, and you won't touch him."

"You can't keep him to yourself forever. I was looking for you when I caught him. Father says you're to attend him in court tomorrow, you and your little bed slave both."

Elias didn't stay to hear Thrain's reply. He was too busy racing up the stairs, getting away from Baynor the Beast as fast as he could. But his mind was crowded with questions as he ran. Thrain had saved him, but at what price? What would his captor do to him for following him to the dragon's lair? For now, Elias was sure that it *was* the dragon he had heard speaking the Old Tongue, and it had said that his fate and Thrain's were intertwined. Dragons never lied, but could this one somehow be mistaken? He fervently hoped so.

Chapter Six

When he reached Thrain's rooms, Elias was panting like a dog and his legs were trembling with fatigue. Not only that, he was fair certain from the sharp pain between his thighs that Baynor had torn him with his rough fumbling. *Could have been worse. Could have been his cock instead of his fingers.* Yes, that was true. But things were still bad enough, and Elias was hurting. He needed to clean up and use some of the healing ointment Thrain had left out for him earlier. Elias hadn't had need of it before, because despite the abrupt nature of Thrain's attack, he had still managed to be somewhat gentle. *And I thought he was so rough. What he did was nothing compared to what Baynor would have done if he'd*—He shook his head, trying to shoo the thought away. He couldn't dwell on his narrow escape, or his emotions would overcome his reason. He needed his wits about him to deal with Thrain when he came back.

Elias staggered to the bathing chamber and tried to strip off his clothes. His right arm, he discovered, was all but useless. It ached like a rotten tooth from the way Baynor had yanked it up between his shoulders. He managed to discard the cloak and work his shirt halfway off, but the pain in his shoulder was so intense, he didn't see how he could manage the rest. Just as he was deciding he should give up and go lie back on the bed, Thrain entered the bathing chamber, silent as a cat, and stood staring at him in the candlelight.

Elias eyed him warily. How angry was he? His deep blue eyes were unreadable, and there was a fresh bruise on one lean cheek. "I was trying to get undressed, but I can't quite manage," Elias muttered awkwardly, feeling like he had to say something to break the silence between them.

"Here." Thrain came forward and helped peel the shirt off his back and hurt arm. Elias hissed as he moved the shoulder, and Thrain frowned. "Yanked your arm up behind your back, did he?"

"Yes. How did you know?" Elias winced again as Thrain felt the joint and then rotated his arm gently. "Did you see him do it?"

"No, but it's one of his favorite tricks. Don't worry. It doesn't look to be dislocated, just sprained. You'll have less pain later if you soak it in the bathing pool now."

A soak in the steaming water suddenly sounded wonderful to Elias. Thrain didn't seem inclined to be angry with him for his escape and exploration of the castle, and he found himself relaxing around the other man despite himself. He didn't even flinch when Thrain knelt to loosen his breeches. "Thank you for saving me," he said as Thrain pulled the breeches down his legs.

"Did I? Was I in time?" Thrain was holding very still, his hawk's gaze locked on something Elias couldn't see. Bending down a little, Elias saw that there was a thin trickle of dark blood running down one of his thighs.

"I..." He wasn't sure how to answer Thrain's question, but the other man gave him no time to anyway.

"Did he hurt you?" Thrain demanded. "Did he...did he take you, Elias? Tell me the truth."

"No, all right? He did that with his fingers." Elias nodded at the blood on his thigh. "He was...he was touching me, and he was rough. But he never..." He let the sentence trail off, unable to finish.

"Thank all the gods that ever were." Thrain closed his eyes in obvious relief. "I couldn't bear it if he had done that to you."

"Why not?" Elias heard himself asking. "*You* did." Part of him felt it was unfair to level the accusation after Thrain had just saved him from his brute of a brother, but the words slipped out before he could stop them.

Thrain didn't deny his charge. "I know I did, Elias. But I never should have. I should have fought Baynor to the death before I did to you what he..." His lips tightened to a white line, and when he opened his eyes, Elias was surprised to see the gleam of tears in them. Thrain had always seemed so cold; an open display of emotion, however subtle, was unheard-of, and Elias didn't know what to make of it.

"He hurt you too," he said uncomfortably, trying to change the subject from his own wounds to the new bruise on Thrain's cheek.

Thrain nodded. "Yes. The first time I was but twelve. He is six years older than me, so he was eighteen and a man grown—already knighted. I was to act as his squire. He...told me it was part of my duties."

"What?" Elias forgot all about his own hurts or the fact that he was standing naked on the chilly stones of the bathing-chamber floor. He couldn't believe what he was hearing, but the old pain in Thrain's eyes made it clear he was telling the truth. "He *didn't*," he said, incredulous and horrified at the same time.

"He did." Thrain closed his eyes again. "Over and over again. I couldn't stop him, though in time I grew quite skillful at dodging him. I've always been faster than he, so as long as he didn't corner me—"

"But how could you—Couldn't you tell your father? Couldn't *he* stop it?"

"I tried." Thrain took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as though trying to think of how to continue. "It's no easy thing to tell, even when you're a lad. He understood my hints and half-truths, though. I'm fair sure of that."

"Then why didn't he stop it?" Elias demanded. He'd never expected to feel sympathy for his attacker, but the idea of Thrain as a helpless, towheaded lad of twelve being attacked by the hulking Baynor wouldn't leave his mind. "He said it was up to me to learn to defend myself." Thrain opened his eyes and lifted his chin. "I fought Baynor to a draw for the first time when I was sixteen, and he hasn't had me since. But those four years when I was too weak to stop him— " He broke off, shaking his head. "Forgive me. I shouldn't be telling you this. It's just that seeing him covering you like he was put me in mind of—"

"Don't." Elias had never seen the strong man who had taken and captured him look like this. Thrain's eyes were hard, his face expressionless, but his deep voice shook when he talked, and his broad shoulders were as tight as fists with tension.

"I must." Thrain was still kneeling on the floor, and now he looked up at Elias. "I swore an oath that I would never inflict that kind of suffering on another human being. And then I broke it the night I came to get you. I tore you from your home, your family, and I brutalized you, just as Baynor did to me. I don't blame you for hating me."

"I don't hate you—not anymore." The words broke from his lips before he could call them back. But once spoken, Elias realized they were true. He *didn't* hate Thrain anymore. If anything, he pitied him. He had hurt Elias grievously; it was true. But he had been as gentle as he could possibly have been about the attack. Now that Elias had a frame of reference, he understood that the rape he'd endured could have been much, much worse. "Please," he added, reaching out tentatively to stroke a strand of bright gold hair off Thrain's brow. "Let us speak of it no more."

"As you wish." Thrain took a deep, shuddering breath. Then he stood and nodded at the tub. "You really should soak. When you get out, I'll rub some liniment into your muscles to ease the ache."

Elias opened his mouth to comment on the number of healing ointments, lotions, and salves Thrain had—he was better than any apothecary. And then he closed it again. Possibly the other man's interest in the healing arts and the medicines and tinctures that went with it were a direct result of his rough childhood. If so, it would be better not to say anything. Instead of speaking, he allowed Thrain to help him into the bathing pool for the second time that night. Hissing a little, he sank down to one of the submerged stone ledges in the pool and sat, soaking his hurt shoulder.

"So you followed me down to the dragon." Thrain stripped off his boots and rolled up his breeches to the knee before sitting opposite Elias on the lip of the pool and dangling his feet in the steaming water.

Elias shifted uncomfortably. "I was...curious as to where you go on the nights you disappear."

"Now you know. I go to see the dragon. I had to go down to placate it tonight. It wants you—and badly at that."

"What? Why does it want me?" Elias was alarmed. "What you said about your father catching it with a virgin sacrifice—you do remember I'm no virgin, don't you?"

"As if I could forget," Thrain said wryly. "I saw to it myself, remember?"

"Of course." Elias could scarcely believe they were speaking so calmly. *Am I getting over what he did? Even a little bit?* He fervently hoped so. He just wanted to feel normal again—although Thrain was the last person he would have expected to be able to feel that way with.

"The dragon doesn't want to eat you; it wants you because of your magic," Thrain said, breaking his train of thought. "It says you know it."

"It must be mistaken," Elias protested. "I've studied dragon lore since I was a boy—it's always interested me. But I've never in my life met a real, live dragon."

Thrain shrugged. "It says a lot of things that don't exactly make sense—that you know what it has forgotten, that you can find that which is hidden. Whatever that means."

"That our destinies lie together," Elias said softly.

Thrain arched one dark gold eyebrow at him. "Oh, you heard that, did you? You must have the ears of a bat to hear through that thick door."

"I heard it with my mind. It was speaking the Old Tongue." Elias frowned. "It must be wrong, though. How... Why should you and I be bound together?"

"I don't know. I only know you're to help me get my revenge." Thrain's eyes were suddenly murderous, and Elias thought if the water hadn't been so hot, he would have shivered. *Revenge. Of course he wants revenge. His own brother doing that to him and his father turning a blind eye. I'd want to kill them too, were I him.*

"I still don't see how I can help," Elias protested. "Or why I should want to help you even if I could. I appreciate your saving me from your brother, but we're still enemies. I'm still your prisoner."

"True." Thrain frowned. "What if I promised you your freedom in return for your help? I'll get you past the guards and over the moat—I'll even give you a horse and supplies."

"What about afterward? If we should succeed—although I don't see how you'll ascend the throne. Will you swear to leave my family's lands in peace?" Elias demanded.

Thrain put a hand over his heart. "I do so solemnly swear. Believe me, Elias. I want nothing of your lands, or mine either, to say the truth. I just want to see justice done." His eyes glinted in the candlelight. "I want them both dead at my feet. I don't really care what happens afterward."

"Afterward you'll have a kingdom to rule, people depending on you," Elias pointed out, remembering the many lessons on ruling fairly that his mother had subjected him to. "You have a duty to your people."

Thrain shrugged again. "I suppose. So do we have a deal?"

"I...suppose so. But I don't want you to be angry with me if the dragon is mistaken. I've never shown a spark of magical ability in my life."

"You will." Thrain sounded absolutely confident of it. "The dragon cannot be wrong there—it told me where to find you. That I would know you by your golden eyes." He smiled. "I have never seen eyes quite like yours, you know."

"No one has." Elias sighed. "Aubrey always said they were proof that I was a throwback—the only Trueheart in six generations without magic."

"They're very beautiful," Thrain said quietly.

Elias looked down at the water, feeling a hot blush wash over his cheeks. "I... Thank you, I suppose. When...when do we go to see the dragon again?" he asked, hoping to change the subject.

"I've promised to take you down to see it in another week."

"Why a week? Why not tomorrow night?" Since Thrain seemed certain the dragon didn't want him for lunch, he was eager to meet the embodiment of so many of his childhood fantasies.

Thrain frowned. "We need to stay away from the dungeon for a while. Baynor will be suspicious, and if he says a word to Father, we'll be hard put to go anywhere in the castle without someone knowing." He sighed. "And speaking of my father, he's requested our presence in court tomorrow."

"What does that mean? I mean, how does your father conduct court?" Elias asked. "My mother used to set aside one day a week to hear complaints and concerns from the common people. She had advisers who helped her with the more difficult situations, so she could make fair and just rulings."

"Fair and just, eh?" Thrain barked out a laugh. "Well, isn't that nice? Your life was all sunshine and roses until I came to steal you away, wasn't it?"

"Not a bit of it." Elias was stung. "I was the only noble without magical ability, an object of ridicule and pity. I spent most of my time in the library because I couldn't join in games that involved magic when I had none."

Thrain sobered. "I'm sorry. I guess I just thought..."

"You thought I had it better than you," Elias said quietly. "And I'm sure I did, but my life wasn't perfect, even before you came along to ruin it." He gave Thrain a rueful little half smile. "You know, my mother was looking for a man or woman of noble birth to marry me off to who had enough magic to run the kingdom? I was to be a figurehead, and whoever was unlucky enough to have me would have been the power behind the throne."

Thrain snorted a laugh. "I hope Aubrey wasn't in the running. I can't imagine being able to conjure tiny little birds would help much in running a country."

Elias felt his mouth quirk upward in amusement. "No, I would have murdered him in the first five minutes. Killing people was generally frowned upon at Castle Rowan."

Thrain was suddenly serious. "Not at Castle Black. All you've got to do is label someone a witch or warlock, and they're off to the witch pyre before you can blink." He leaned forward, catching Elias's gaze with his. "That's why we have to be so careful tomorrow, Elias. My father mustn't see you as a threat. If he does, nothing I can do or say will save you. You must play the part of a harmless bed slave. Both our lives hang on it."

"I'll try," Elias said uncertainly. Thrain's obvious fear of his father's court was unnerving. The other man couldn't have looked more worried if they had been walking barefoot into a room filled with poisonous snakes.

"Don't just try—*do* it," Thrain advised. "You have a sharp wit, and you brandish it like a rapier. I saw as much the night we danced the Spider's Web together. But my father's court is no place for it. If a servant talks back to him, he cuts out the man's tongue."

"I can handle myself," Elias said, stung. "Don't worry. I won't do anything stupid."

"See that you don't." Thrain sighed. "I wouldn't lecture you so if I didn't fear for you. I was hoping I'd be allowed to hide you away in my rooms indefinitely, but it is not to be." After getting up, he dried off his feet and got a towel for Elias. "Time to get you out. How's the arm?"

Elias flexed his shoulder experimentally. "A little better," he said cautiously. "Still hurts, though."

"It will for a few days. But the liniment I have will help. Come." Thrain helped him out of the tub and dried him off. Then he led him to the bed and assisted Elias in lying facedown on it.

Elias tried to get comfortable lying on the furs that covered the bed, but he couldn't help feeling very naked and vulnerable as Thrain knelt over him and prepared to rub the medicinal lotion into his skin.

Thrain seemed to notice his discomfort. "Are you all right, Elias?" he asked softly.

"I...I'm fine." Elias swallowed. "I think it's just...having you behind me as you are..."

"Ah yes. I understand." There was genuine sorrow in Thrain's voice. "Forgive me. I didn't think, but of course our positions on the bed—"

"Are fine." Elias cut him off. He took a deep breath. "As long as you promise never to...to..."

"I know I hurt you, but I swear to you I will never do that again." Thrain's voice was soft but firm.

"Then, as you tell me I have nothing to fear, I fear not." Elias spoke as lightly as he could. He closed his eyes and took another deep breath, trying to release the tension in his body. It helped that when Thrain's hands touched him, they were warm and soothing, coated in the liniment, which seemed to have some sweetsmelling oil as its base.

Thrain rubbed his hurt shoulder, working the damaged muscles gently for a long time. Then, without asking, he moved on to the rest of Elias's back, alternating a firm kneading pressure with long, slow strokes until Elias almost moaned with pleasure. It was then that he realized he had finally relaxed and wasn't just forcing himself to hold still anymore. Who could have guessed that the hands that had treated him so brutally could have healing in them as well? Or that Thrain would wish to touch him like this, to caress and knead his knotted muscles until he felt like a cat being stroked before the fire? *Is he doing this because he's sorry and wants to make up for the way he took me without my leave? Or does he actually want to touch me so*? Elias had no idea, but the strong hands on his back were so soothing, he almost didn't care. He closed his eyes and drifted until Thrain's deep voice pulled him back to reality.

"Feeling better?"

"Much better," Elias admitted, flexing his shoulder carefully. "It still hurts in certain positions, but at least I can move it."

"Let it rest," Thrain advised. "It will be a while before you're completely yourself again. Ah..." He hesitated. "You're still bleeding a bit here." His fingertips brushed the inner curve of Elias's thigh.

Elias jumped, surprised. "Am I?" His arm had been hurting so much, he could scarce think of anything else. But now with the ache mostly relieved, he realized that the sharper sting of his other injury was still with him.

"Would you like to use the ointment I offered you before?" Thrain asked. "It numbs the pain and helps stop the bleeding as well."

"I would, yes." Sitting up, Elias reached for the small pot Thrain was holding out to him. Without thinking, he used his hurt arm. "Ah! Gods," he gasped, pulling the arm back to his body and holding it close to his side. "Sorry. Forgot I couldn't do that."

Thrain looked troubled. "You should lie back down and rest that arm, but you still need to use the ointment. Could... Would you trust me to apply it?"

Elias thought about it for a long moment. Thought of the last time he'd had Thrain's hand between his thighs and the rough way he'd massaged the oil into Elias's untried entrance. Could he bear to have the other man touch him there again? Would it be too frightening, or could he trust Thrain now?

I trust him. The realization came as something of a surprise, but Elias realized that he saw Thrain as a person now, not some nameless evil entity. And he didn't feel so much like Thrain's prisoner now—it seemed more like they were prisoners together here in the grim Castle Black. For clearly Thrain was in almost as great a danger as Elias was every moment they were within its stone walls. They were captives together, but they had a plan to get out—he hoped, anyway.

His new view of Thrain added up to the fact that Elias was willing to let the other man touch him, even in such an intimate place. It will be all right. He won't hurt me this time. I will be calm and not fear when he touches me.

"Elias? I understand if you'd rather that I didn't—"

"No, it's all right." Elias realized that he had taken too long to answer. "I was just thinking, but...I trust you. I would welcome your help if...if you would care to help me in that way," he added, feeling almost shy. "I would do anything I could to heal you." Thrain's voice was soft but passionate. "I swear I will be gentle, Elias."

"A-all right," Elias stuttered, lying back down on the furs. Despite his inner resolution to be calm, he could feel himself tense again when Thrain parted his thighs. When he felt the other man's fingertips probing gently for his entrance, it took every ounce of willpower he possessed not to close his legs and jump off the bed.

"Easy," Thrain murmured, as if to a spooked horse. "Easy, now. You're torn a little, but it's not too bad as these things go."

"I'll take your word for it," Elias muttered through gritted teeth. "It hurts badly enough for my limited experience."

"Pray a limited experience is all you get. And it won't hurt much longer. I'll use plenty of ointment."

Elias opened his mouth to answer, but just then Thrain's fingertips, slippery with the healing salve, stroked over his tight rosebud again, and he felt a blessed numbness begin. "Ah..." he gasped in relief.

Thrain stopped at once. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, not at all. It's finally feeling better, just as you promised."

Thrain was silent for a moment. Then he said, "You're torn a little on the inside too. Might I have your leave to use some ointment there as well?"

Elias bit his lip. It was one thing to allow Thrain to touch the outer entrance to his body, but quite another to grant him leave to enter. "How...how far in would you...would you need to go?" he asked at last.

"Not far," Thrain assured him. "If it reminds you too much—"

"No." Elias shook his head. "I... If you wouldn't mind, then yes, I suppose it's best to be thorough."

"Best indeed," Thrain agreed and dipped into the pot of ointment once more. When his fingers returned to the wounded spot between Elias's thighs, Elias felt himself tense once more. "Relax," Thrain murmured, probing gently with slippery fingertips. "It won't be like the first time. Then I was trying to prepare you to receive me without tearing. Now I'm just trying to heal you."

"I suppose I should thank you for that—if there is any thanks to be had for what...what you did," Elias said haltingly. "There are some who would not have bothered."

"My brother, you mean." Thrain's voice was bitter. "No, Baynor isn't one to use anything to help ease the way."

"But you did," Elias murmured.

"I didn't want to hurt you. Didn't want you to hate me forever." Thrain stroked deeper, and Elias moaned softly.

"There's something I want to ask you," he murmured, eyes closed tightly as Thrain explored him. "How did you make me...? I didn't want to come. But you... I thought at first it was magic. How did you do that to me?"

Thrain laughed softly. "No magic needed. There is a spot deep inside every man that gives pleasure. Would you like me to show you?"

"Deep inside, you say?" Elias was uncertain. Was he really contemplating letting Thrain slide his fingers deeper into his body?

Thrain made a noise of assent. "But if you'd rather I didn't—"

"No, I... For a moment. It should be all right for just a moment, I think."

"Very well, then. Relax and open for me."

Thrain's words were similar to what he had said the night of the attack. But his voice...his voice was completely different. Soft, gentle, and so deep, Elias felt it like a rumble in his bones. Moaning, he complied, spreading his legs a little wider and arching up into the other man's careful touch.

"It's just...*here*." Thrain's fingertips brushed over something inside him, and Elias gasped at the sudden shock of pleasure. He remembered it well from the night Thrain had taken him, remembered the feel of the other man's heavy cock rubbing mercilessly over this tender spot as Thrain fucked him hard and long. But this was different—there was no pain this time, no fear. Only the breathless sensation of being opened and stroked from the inside out. And something else too... The magicnull collar he wore had finally warmed up. In fact, it was nearly hot against his skin, though he barely noticed, being so absorbed in the other sensations Thrain was causing in him.

"Gods!" he gasped as Thrain rubbed the spot again. "That...that's it. That's how you did it. And I thought...all along I thought it was my fault. That I somehow wanted you to—"

Thrain withdrew his fingers abruptly. "You're not to blame for what I did. Or for your body's reaction," he said roughly. "I see now I shouldn't have made you come, but I wished to ease your pain with some pleasure. Can you forgive me for that, Elias?"

Feeling abruptly empty and unsatisfied, Elias turned over to face him. "I think I already have, mostly anyway. I—" He broke off, blushing when he felt the brush of his cock against his belly. Looking down, he realized that he was achingly hard.

"Don't worry about it. It's only the effect of the way I was touching you." Thrain nodded at his erection. "You need not fear that it means you care for me in some way."

"I...I never..." Elias shook his head uncertainly. Care for Thrain? The thought had never entered his head. Then again, the thought of allowing his former attacker to caress and stroke inside him had never come to mind either. Suddenly he was extremely confused.

"Come." Thrain was already getting undressed and sliding under the covers. "We should get some sleep. Tomorrow will be difficult enough at it is." "I suppose so." Elias lay in the darkness after the candle was blown out, trying to will his hardness away. He wanted to sleep, but his head was filled with bewildering thoughts. Why had he allowed Thrain to touch him in that way? And why had he not found the touch revolting? Far from that—it had actually been...pleasurable. And not just because Thrain was touching that secret spot inside him that seemed to cause such intense gratification. It was also the fact that he had been so gentle, so careful not to startle or hurt Elias. He was strong enough to do what he liked. He could have taken Elias again many times over. But instead he went slowly, asking permission, giving pleasure instead of pain.

Gods, what's wrong with me? Am I actually thinking how much I enjoyed his touch? Though it was hard to believe, it seemed to be true. Elias could scarcely believe it himself, but he was rather sorry that Thrain had stopped when he had. Though I suppose he didn't want to make me come against my will again. But the way it felt when he had his fingers so deep inside me... Stop it! Just stop it and go to sleep.

Rolling over, Elias closed his eyes tightly and tried not to think about the long, confusing night he'd just had. Or the fact that he could smell Thrain's familiar dark, spicy scent beside him in bed. He tried even harder not to realize that he wished Thrain would touch him again. It was wrong to think such things, and he refused to let them enter his head. And yet he couldn't get the sound of Thrain's low, reassuring voice or the feel of his fingers stroking deep inside his body out of his head.

When sleep finally claimed him, he dreamed of an enormous red dragon with scales outlined in fire and eyes like flame. The dragon was telling him that his destiny and Thrain's were intertwined. But then the dream changed, and Elias was naked and facedown on the bed, with Thrain hovering over him once again.

"There is a place inside of every man that brings pleasure. Shall I show you?"

Elias opened his mouth to say that Thrain had already shown him the secret spot, but the words wouldn't come out. Instead he said, "Yes, please," and spread his legs wider for Thrain's seeking fingers.

As before, the fingers entered him and found the special spot that shot pleasure through his entire body. But this time Thrain didn't stop touching him. Elias moaned and writhed beneath the gentle penetration, his cock hard and throbbing as it rubbed against the mattress. Gods, it felt so good, so incredible...

"I can heal you, you know," Thrain murmured in his ear as he continued the intimate massage. "Right now, tonight."

"You can? H-how?" Elias could scarcely get the words out. The pleasure was so intense now that it seemed he must come or die, but somehow he couldn't quite get to the edge of orgasm, no matter how good Thrain's fingers felt inside him.

"The Blackwaters have no magic, but our seed has healing properties. My cum can do for you what no ointment, no matter how strong, can do."

Elias had never heard of such a thing before, but somehow it seemed to make perfect sense. He bit his lip in indecision. "I...I don't understand. Are you saying you would have to...to come on me?"

"In you," Thrain corrected him, still rubbing with that gentle but firm rhythm that had Elias writhing helplessly on the bed.

Elias felt a dreamy sort of unease, but to his surprise, the idea of Thrain inside him didn't make him afraid so much as uncertain. "I don't know," he said carefully. "How...how far would you have to...have to be in me?"

"I could just put the head of my shaft in you, if you like." Thrain's deep voice was coaxing. "It wouldn't be like before. I promise you. I could just barely slide inside you and fill you with my cum. If you were the least bit uncomfortable, I would withdraw at once. I swear."

"Well..." Elias wondered if he was mad to be considering such a thing. But Thrain's fingers felt so good and soothing. Could it really be so bad to let him slide just the head of his shaft in and heal Elias with his cum? "I suppose if you were very, very careful," he murmured uncertainly.

"I will be," Thrain promised. "Just relax, Elias. Open yourself and let me heal you."

It seemed to Elias that he ought to be frightened, especially since Thrain was behind him as he had been on the night of the attack. But for some reason the position felt right. Spread out as he was, waiting to receive the other man's cock into his body, Elias felt vulnerable. No, that wasn't quite the word. He felt *submissive*, but in a good way.

He felt the broad head breach the tight ring of muscle that guarded his entrance, and moaned softly as it entered his body. Thrain's hands on his back and buttocks were gentle as he murmured for Elias to just relax and breathe.

How long they stayed in that position, with just the head of Thrain's cock buried inside him, Elias didn't know. But after a few moments of waiting to feel the other man's hot cum inside him, he understood that something wasn't quite right.

"Thrain?" he whispered uncertainly. "Is...is everything all right?"

"Just fine, Elias." The other man stroked his side. "It's only that I need a little more stimulation to release my seed."

"Maybe...maybe if you were deeper inside me? Just a bit?" Elias couldn't believe he was saying such a thing, but the words came out of his mouth on their own.

Behind him, Thrain was very still for a moment. "How would you feel about that? Would you be willing to take me inside you, Elias? All the way inside?"

Elias felt as though a hundred butterflies had just taken flight in his stomach. But his need was too great to deny. Besides, a little voice in his brain was whispering that the deeper Thrain was inside him when he came, the better the healing would be. The idea made no sense and made perfect sense at the same time. Before he could figure it out, Elias heard himself saying that yes, he did want more. "In me," he murmured, arching his back so that another thick inch of Thrain's cock entered him. "Deeper in me, *please*."

"As you wish. Spread wider for me and arch up again so I can get deep inside you, Elias." Thrain's voice was a low, lustful growl that sent shivers down Elias's spine. He did as he was told, arching his back and spreading his legs, offering himself as Thrain opened him. As he filled him with his long, hard cock.

Elias moaned softly, but the sound was not of pain. He could feel himself stretching to accommodate Thrain's shaft, but it was a pleasurable sensation, a feeling of being taken by one who cared for him. And the entire time he was penetrating Elias's tender entrance, Thrain was murmuring reassurances and caressing his naked skin. "That's right, Elias. Just let me in. Open yourself for my cock," he whispered soothingly, and Elias was more than glad to comply.

Somewhere at the back of his head a little voice said that this couldn't be happening, and if it was, he shouldn't be enjoying it. He had never really desired another man like this, not even Thrain. *Especially* not Thrain. But Elias couldn't help himself. The pleasure was too intense to deny. The feeling of having Thrain inside him, the heat of the other man's body, and the warm murmur of his deep voice were all combining to push him higher and higher, closer and closer to the edge.

At last he felt the brush of Thrain's trim hips against his buttocks and knew he was all the way in. "Gods," he moaned softly. "So deep, Thrain. You're in me so deep."

"Need to be deep inside you to fill you with my cum." Thrain's voice was rough with suppressed need, but his hands on Elias's back were still gentle. And then he slid one hand around the front of Elias's body to cradle his shaft. "Going to come in you now," Thrain growled in his ear. "Going to fill you up, and I want you to come with me."

Elias opened his mouth to protest, but all that came out was another moan of pleasure. And then he felt the press of Thrain's heavy cock over the special spot inside him while at the same time a large, masculine hand stroked his cock. "Gods," Elias gasped. "Please... That feels so...so..."

"Elias? Are you all right? Elias, wake up. You're having another dream." The voice in his ear and the firm hand shaking his shoulder pulled Elias out of the dream. He opened his eyes to see Thrain looking down at him, a worried expression visible on his strong features in the dim light of the dying fire. For a moment he was confused. *What is he doing up there when he was behind me—inside me?*

"I..." Elias opened his mouth to ask but closed it at the last minute as reality reasserted itself.

"You were dreaming again." Thrain was still looking at him in that worried way. "Was it a bad one this time?"

No, it was a good one—an amazing one, in fact. You were inside me again. You were going to come inside me and heal me. Elias shook his head. "I'm fine. I don't...don't even remember what it was about now. Thanks for waking me up."

"Of course." Thrain yawned. "Anytime. Now, if you're really all right, let's go back to sleep. Long day tomorrow."

"Right," Elias agreed. He turned on his side, trying to get more comfortable in the big bed and wishing the hardness between his legs would go down. Why in the world had he had such a dream? What did it mean? Surely he didn't want Thrain inside him that way. But then why had he dreamed it?

His head full of questions, Elias tried to go back to sleep, but it was a long time before he could drift off again.

Chapter Seven

"Just keep your head down and do as the other slaves do," Thrain muttered, giving Elias one last glance before they entered his father's presence. The lad looked well enough. He ought to; Thrain had dressed him himself. He had followed the fashion of those who brought a bed slave they cared for to court, dressing the younger man in clothes he himself had worn the season before. The outfit was a little big on Elias and not quite the latest trend, but by dressing him in his own castoffs, Thrain was sending a clear signal that he cared for the boy and would tolerate no injury to him.

Thrain hoped he was doing the right thing. He had thought about going another way and dressing Elias in rags, as though he cared nothing for him, in an attempt to throw Baynor and his father off the scent. But he feared that his brother already knew the extent of his feelings for the younger man, and Baynor had no doubt already told their father. So it was best that he make it obvious Elias was under his protection and have done with it.

The guards before them were standing at attention, their long, cruel-looking iron pikes locked together. When Thrain approached with Elias a step behind him, as was fitting, they snapped the pikes upward, clearing the way. Chin up and eyes narrowed as he searched for possible threats, Thrain strode into the great hall of Castle Black, where his father held court. It was a vast, echoing space, its walls hung with somber-colored tapestries depicting battles and hunts. Today it was crowded; the left side of the hall with nobles who had come to pay their respects and the right side with peasants who had come to air grievances and beg favors.

Based on clothing, it was easy to see who belonged to which group. The lords and ladies wore rich, colorful fabrics—shimmering samite, fine linen, and silks from the Orient. The peasants made do with drab, homespun garb, which was obviously meant more for protection from the elements than fashion. But huddled in one corner of the great hall was another group entirely—a ragged bunch of men and women with beaten looks in their eyes. Elias must have noticed them, because he stepped closer to whisper in Thrain's ear.

"Who are they? The ones in the corner with the guards all round them?"

"The accused," Thrain murmured back.

"Accused? Accused of what?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Now be quiet." Thrain gave him a warning look and returned his attention to the scene before him. Things could happen fast at Castle Black, and if a man didn't want them happening to him, he had best keep his wits sharp and his sword sharper.

Atop a raised dais at the far end of the room, King Ungor sat on a throne carved of stone as hard and cold as his heart. His short, iron gray hair was crowned with a circlet of magic null, the same kind that Thrain and Baynor wore, but much thicker and worked into an intricate knot at the front. It wasn't the official crown of the kingdom, but it might as well be, for he never took it off. The real crown jewels were locked away, only taken out for state ceremonies, and even then the king was ill at ease until he could take off the priceless, jewel-encrusted, golden crown and replace it with his plain black iron ring.

He fears that magic will end his life and his reign. If he knew my secret thoughts, he would fear my dagger at his throat in the middle of the night more. Thrain stepped into line behind another noble, who was speaking to the king. The peasants crowded to the right of the hall said nothing. As long as anyone of noble birth was waiting for an audience with the ruler of the land, they would always take precedence over a baseborn man.

The noble in front of him bowed and backed away, but before Thrain could speak, the king raised his hand for silence and murmured something to one of his guards.

"His Majesty would speak to Goderich, the witch finder," the guard proclaimed. A tall, cadaverously thin man with sharp features detached himself from the crowd of milling nobles and came to stand before the throne.

"I am here, Your Majesty," he said smoothly. "As you command."

"Very good, Goderich." Ungor nodded at him gravely. "I see we have a rather worrying number of accused to see to today. What do you attribute this to?"

The tall man frowned. "Evil is afoot in the land, sire. The use of magic is spreading most alarmingly. It must be stopped before it is too late."

"I quite agree, which is why we are working to stamp it out wherever its evil flower flourishes. I have even undertaken to crush it in other kingdoms."

"Your Majesty is most wise to do so," the witch finder agreed in an oily voice.

Thrain was worried for a moment, but Elias held his tongue, despite the blatant reference to the sacking of Castle Rowan.

"Well, let's get on with it," Ungor continued. "I would rather dispense with this distasteful business before we continue with the regular business of the court."

"Of course, sire." Goderich bowed and motioned to the guards who were keeping watch on the group in the corner. "You heard His Majesty, bring forth the first of the accused."

The guards herded a young man forward and pushed him to his knees before the throne. "Please, Your Majesty," the man babbled. "I never did nothing to nobody. What they're saying is a lie. I wouldn't never. I swear."

"Enough. Speak when you're spoken to and not before." Ungor looked at the witch finder. "Who is he, and what is he accused of?"

Goderich unrolled a scroll of parchment and began to read. "This is Henry Jakes, a peasant from Lord Eldred's holdings. He is accused of making the milk of his neighbor's goats dry up."

"I never!" the man burst out again. "I don't have nothing to do with no goats."

"But why would your neighbor lie about such a thing?" Goderich inquired smoothly. "It says here that he saw you up in the dead of night, dancing around a fire—obviously consorting with demons and other evil magical beings."

"I was trying to get my crops in before it rained," the man protested. "I lit a fire to keep warm and give some light. I couldn't work in the dark."

"But it appears that dark work is exactly what you have been doing," thundered Ungor. "And as for lighting fires, mayhap the fire of the witch pyre will teach you a lesson. Guards."

"No, no!" The man was dragged away, howling.

Ungor nodded at the witch finder. "Next?"

Thrain watched with barely concealed disgust as one by one the hapless men and women accused of witchcraft were brought before the king. In the past his father had taken care to listen to each account and had occasionally spared someone if the charge against them was particularly unlikely or unreasonable. Now, however, he seemed bored by the whole process, as though he just wanted to be done with it. Every person brought before him was condemned to the witch pyre, sometimes even before Goderich could finish reading the charges.

As always the short and summary trials of those accused of magic or witchcraft tied Thrain's stomach in knots. He had avoided this part of court as well as he could since he was twelve, for he knew from bitter experience that it did no good to try to reason with his father. When it came to magic, all who came before the king's throne were automatically considered guilty, despite the lack of evidence. And the sentence was always death.

He watched Elias out of the corner of his eye as the accused were sentenced. *The lad looks ill.* No doubt the ways of Castle Black seemed barbaric to him, and no doubt he was right.

Thrain thought of the light, airy, open feeling of Castle Rowan when they had visited it, of the freedom its inhabitants seemed to feel to go where they chose and to speak their minds. That is what I want for Castle Black, he thought. If the dragon is right and Elias can help me, I want to make it a place where knowledge—all knowledge—is valued and freely shared. A place where a man can speak as he chooses and live as he pleases without fear for his life.

It was the first time he had really considered any kind of plans for the aftermath of his revenge, and it felt strange, but in a good way. Elias had had the right of it when he'd said Thrain would have to see to his people—they would need a strong leader. One strong enough to leave the ways of the past beyond and build a better, brighter future.

Thrain was so absorbed in his thoughts that he barely noticed when the last of the accused was brought forward. But when Goderich read her name from the scroll, his head snapped up, his hopeful dreams forgotten.

"Nan Fernpenny," the witch finder announced. "You are accused of conspiring to poison His Majesty, the king, with magic."

"What?" The word broke from Thrain's lips before he could stop it, despite the fact that he knew how much his father hated interruptions. He stared at the bent old woman, her gray hair tied in a wispy bun and her blue eyes faded with too many years to count. "Old Nan a witch? Ridiculous. She's been working in the castle kitchens since I was a little boy."

Ungor frowned. "You have not yet properly introduced yourself to the court, Thrain. You should not be allowed to speak."

"I bid you good morrow, sire, and the court as well." Thrain bowed stiffly. "Now, may I inquire why a dear, kindly lady like Old Nan stands accused of the dark arts?"

"Nan stands among the accused today because I was ill after I ate the dinner she made me last night." Ungor sounded peevish.

"You couldn't have been *that* ill. You're here today," Thrain objected.

Ungor scowled. "You will *not* take that tone with me. I was most gravely ill, and Nan made the food with her own hands. What else am I to think but that she put a magic spell or potion in it?"

"What else are you supposed to think? Any *number* of things. Perhaps the meat was bad, or maybe the meal was simply too rich and it disagreed with you for that reason," Thrain argued. "Father, please, think about it. Did you feel a warmth or tingling from your circlet when you ate the food? Anything at all that indicated magic was being done?"

King Ungor reached up and touched the black iron circlet of magic null on his forehead, as if for reassurance. "Well, no—"

"That signifies nothing, sire," the witch finder interjected smoothly. "Unless you were in the same room with the witch as she cast the spell that made you ill, you would feel nothing at all from your circlet as you ate it."

Thrain ground his teeth in frustration. "Father, Old Nan is *not* a witch. She is a sweet old woman who has served you faithfully and well for many years. She does not deserve to be burned alive because you had a single night of indigestion."

Ungor's eyes were cold. "I hand out the punishments here, not you, Thrain. And if you do not wish one for yourself, you had best remember that I am your king as well as your father."

Thrain opened his mouth to object again, but Elias spoke before he could.

"If it pleases Your Majesty, though I have no magic myself, I grew up in the presence of it. And I can tell you that the woman before you has no magical ability that I can ascertain," he offered in a soft, clear voice.

"Elias, *no*," Thrain whispered fiercely. He had wanted to keep the lad as much out of the king's eye as possible and had warned him again and again to remain quiet. Yet here he was, talking about magic and making himself a target at the first opportunity. Thrain's misgivings seemed well justified when he saw the look of interest on King Ungor's face.

"Well, well...so it seems you are more than just a pretty face. You are a talented witch finder as well."

Elias shook his head. "I am hardly that. But I can offer my expertise to you in this matter, sire. This woman has no magic."

"Careful, boy." Goderich gave him a hard stare. "Those who claim expertise at magic do not long escape the pyre. At Castle Black, we have an honest king who does not abide such evil."

"Goderich is correct, but in this case I believe there may be something to what the boy says, providing that he is speaking the truth." Ungor gave Elias a searching look.

"Why would I lie?" Elias's expression was one of wide-eyed innocence. "I do not even know this woman. I speak only because it seems a shame that an innocent should burn for crimes she has not committed."

"True, very true." King Ungor nodded. "Very well. Nan is pardoned from the charge of witchcraft." He frowned at the trembling old woman, who immediately fell to her knees, weeping.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I'm that grateful! And I swear my food will never make you sick again. Never, ever!"

Ungor's eyes, the same iron gray as his hair, hardened. "You are correct on that count, crone. For though I pardon you for performing witchcraft and magic, you are still charged with making your king seriously ill. For this charge, you shall be hanged from the neck until dead." He nodded at one of the guards. "Take her away."

Goderich bowed, a sly smile playing around his thin lips. "Your Majesty is very wise."

"Wait!" Elias made as though to step between the witch finder and Old Nan, but Thrain put an arm around his shoulders and held him back. To the outside eye, he knew his grip on Elias would merely seem an affectionate embrace, but he was actually holding on with all his might.

"Quiet," he muttered fiercely in the other man's ear.

"But...but he... But she..." Elias protested.

"There's nothing you can do. Do you understand? Nothing!" Thrain gave him a sidelong look of warning. He knew what Elias must be feeling, because it was the same thing he'd felt himself a hundred times before. The horror, the helpless anger at seeing such gross injustice, the sick knowledge that someone innocent was being sent to a needless death. But once the king's mind was made up, there was no changing it—trying was liable to result in a severe punishment. Thrain had no wish to see Elias take fifty lashes across his back because he could not hold his tongue.

Apparently unaware of the nearly silent struggle going on before him, Ungor turned his attention to Thrain. "So this is the royal prince you've taken as a bed slave—the same one you danced the Spider's Web with when we visited Castle Rowan, I believe."

"He is indeed, sire," Thrain answered, still holding Elias firmly. "And I have wanted him from that night. When you declared your intention of making war on his kingdom, I vowed to make Elias mine. And so I have, as you see."

Ungor looked over Elias with a cold eye. "Yes, well, I can see why he attracts you. Yet your brother, Baynor, tells me that your love of him verges on infatuation."

"Baynor speaks ill of what he doesn't understand." Thrain ran a hand up and down Elias's arm in a possessive caress. "My brother is wroth with me because I came upon him trying to take what was rightfully mine and stopped him."

Ungor frowned. "Baynor also says that your bed slave was found in a most *sensitive* part of the castle last night. He seems to think the lad's true nature was calling him to our subterranean guest." It was not common knowledge that Ungor had the last living dragon in captivity, so he was careful not to allude to it too openly in public.

"As Elias told you, he has no magic. He is what his own people call a Null." Thrain wanted to be very clear on that count. If Ungor suspected even a whiff of magical ability about Elias, he'd have the young man to the witch pyre before Thrain could blink. And there would be nothing Thrain could do but fight until they both died by the sword, which was a kinder death than fire, anyway.

"No magic, hmmm?" Ungor eyed Elias dubiously. "But by virtue of his blood—"

"The virtue of his blood is neutralized by the magic-null collar he wears," Thrain interrupted. "He is no threat to you, sire, and he pleases me greatly in the bedchamber. Also, as long as we hold him, we may yet capture his mother—if she tries to rescue him."

"All fine points. But the fact remains that a royal bed slave is a risk, especially if he is not properly broken." Baynor came into view, stepping out from behind the stone throne with an ugly look on his face. It was a testament to how massive the king's seat of power was that such a large man could hide behind it.

Thrain glared at his older brother. How long had he waiting there, biding his time until the perfect moment to come out and speak? What had he been plotting? "Elias *is* broken," he answered, frowning. "You saw to it yourself the night we took him from his home—or forced me to see to it, more like."

"Then why did he fight me last night when I tried to take him?" Baynor challenged. "He is but a slave, while I am the crown prince. He should have submitted to me as a proper bed slave would. Why did he not?"

"Perhaps he did not wish to be torn apart by your brutal lusts," Thrain shot back. "The whole of the castle knows your ways, Baynor. How many bed slaves have you killed? Five? Six?" "Thirteen," Baynor growled. "But most of those were female and weak. I'll warrant the lad is strong enough to take me."

"That is a speculation you shall never put to the test. Elias is *mine*."

"He would be a better slave for me," Baynor objected. "As the crown prince, it is much more fitting that I have a bed slave of royal blood than you, Brother."

Ungor looked thoughtful. "Your brother makes a good point, Thrain."

Thrain took a deep breath. He hadn't wanted to have to do this now, here, today. But it was clear that Baynor was set on having Elias for himself, and there was only way to stop him.

"I, Thrain Blackwater, son of Ungor Blackwater, rightful king of Castle Black and the surrounding lands, do here, now, and forevermore take Elias Trueheart of Castle Rowan as my own," he said formally. "I will bind my life to his and *never* cede him to another. I claim him till kingdom come and beyond."

There was a shocked murmur throughout the court. The words Thrain had used were from an ancient ceremony, not often heard anymore since only one of royal blood could claim another. Moreover, his words were absolutely binding by the old laws—by contrast, a marriage vow was flimsy and impermanent.

Ungor raised both eyebrows in obvious surprise. "A public vow of claiming? And to a bed slave? Have a care, Thrain. Such overweening love for an inferior is not seemly."

"Nevertheless, I will not take the words back." Thrain drew Elias closer and tucked his curly black head against his shoulder. He could feel the younger man trembling in his grasp and hoped he wasn't too frightened to understand what was happening and play along.

"This is rank nonsense. The boy should be mine. I would break him properly, teach him that his royal blood does not give him the right to refuse his betters." Baynor was glaring at Thrain, but his words were obviously directed at the king.

"There *is* that." Ungor nodded. "What say you to your brother's accusation that the boy is not properly submissive?"

"That it is a lie. Elias is perfectly submissive."

"Truly?" Ungor raised an eyebrow at him. "And are you prepared to stake your claim to the boy on that, Thrain?"

"I am." To prove his point, he turned Elias to face him and slanted his mouth across the other man's. Then he took Elias's lips in a passionate, possessive kiss that left no doubt as to whom the young prince belonged.

The kiss was a terrible risk, and Thrain knew it. If Elias fought him—if he seemed even a little hesitant in receiving Thrain's mark of affection and possession—he would doom them both. When he felt the lad stiffen, he feared he had overplayed his hand. *Gods, Elias. Please*! Was he still too traumatized by the way Thrain had taken him? He'd seemed better the night before, but Thrain had been doing his best to be gentle and slow, which was pretty much the exact opposite of how he was acting now.

And then, suddenly, just as Thrain was wondering if his father would allow him to take a proper leave of Elias, or simply give him directly to Baynor, the lad yielded. The stiffness in his body melted away, and he flowed into Thrain's arms as naturally as water running downhill. Tilting his head, he opened his mouth, giving Thrain free access, even inviting him in with a flick of his tongue.

The way Elias was returning his kiss was both surprising and arousing. Thrain found he was suddenly hard, despite the danger they were both in. Threading his fingers through Elias's thick black curls, he deepened the kiss, exploring the younger man's mouth with his tongue and nipping lightly at his full lips. *Gods, so sweet! He tastes like honey.* Then, just as he was really getting into it, Elias pulled gently away.

"Elias," he rasped hoarsely, but the younger man only shook his head and placed a teasing kiss on his cheek.

"Hush, my lord," he murmured. He then kissed Thrain again, this time on the throat, just above his Adam's apple. The next kiss fell in the hollow of his neck, and the next on his chest, directly over his heart. Thrain watched with a dry mouth and pounding pulse, all else forgotten as the boy continued to kiss a trail down his body until he was kneeling at Thrain's feet. Wondering what he was going to do next, Thrain looked down at the younger man uncertainly.

"Elias?" he murmured, stroking the soft black curls.

"My lord." Elias pressed his mouth against the aching bulge in Thrain's breeches, his breath hot through the fabric against Thrain's cock. "I am yours," he murmured, looking up. "Yours and yours alone, always."

The look in his golden eyes was so meltingly sincere that for a moment Thrain was almost willing to believe Elias was speaking his true feelings. Then he chanced to look up and caught the sour expression on his brother's lumpish face, and realization hit him. Of course the lad is playing along, doing all he can to make it obvious he's yours. The alternative is being brutalized by Baynor.

"That's enough, Elias," he murmured, indicating that the other man should stand up. "I think you've made your loyalties clear."

"Clear enough." Ungor gave them a look of cold disapproval. "Very well. Since the lad is clearly submissive to you, your claim shall stand, Thrain."

"But, Father—" Baynor began angrily.

"Enough." Ungor held up a hand for silence. "Thrain has made a public claiming, according to the old laws. I will not risk angering the gods by breaking them just to suit your fancy, Baynor—not so close to the end of my reign." He gave his older son an indulgent smile. "When you wear the crown yourself, you may feel differently."

"Indeed." Baynor gave Elias a measuring glance that Thrain didn't like a bit. "When I am king—three weeks hence."

"What?" Thrain frowned at his father. "Sire, what is Baynor talking about?"

"If you'd bother to come to court instead of spending all your time bedding your slave, you might know," Ungor snapped. "It is my royal decision to hand the crown down to Baynor in three weeks, on his twenty-eighth birthday. He has sufficient experience to run things now, and I am tired of the daily concerns of the kingdom."

Baynor to be king? And in less than a month? Thrain could think of nothing worse. "But, sire, will you not be bored without the daily challenges of the court?" he asked, hoping to change his father's mind. But Ungor shook his head.

"I shall be content to advise your brother and spend my twilight years quietly."

"Quietly, he says. He just wants more time to drink and wench!" Baynor quipped. The court roared with laughter, and Ungor clapped his firstborn son on the shoulder and laughed as well.

"Well, there is that," he admitted. "So you see, Thrain, you must treat Baynor with more respect, for he is soon to be your liege as well as your older brother."

"Indeed." Thrain felt sick. "Come, Elias," he murmured. "I think we've had enough of court today."

"That's right. Run out with your tail between your legs." Baynor's jeering voice was like a knife in his gut. "And remember, little brother. Things are going to change around here when I wear the crown. You're going to have to learn to share."

Chapter Eight

"We will have to see the dragon tonight. There's no time to lose." Thrain was pacing in his chambers while Elias sat quietly on the bed, watching him.

"I thought you said it was too risky to go back in such a short time," he objected.

Thrain whirled to face him. "We'll have to risk it. If there is some way it can help us—help unlock your magic—we need to know about it now, before my brother takes the crown."

"I can't believe your father is going to step down." Elias shook his head. "He seems to enjoy ruling. Why would he give it up?"

"He knows Baynor has waited as long as he's going to wait. If he keeps him in the wings much longer, he'll have to start worrying that my brother will lace his cup at dinner or hire an assassin to find him in a dark corner of the castle some fine day."

"Your brother would do that?" Elias was shocked.

Thrain rolled his eyes. "Can you doubt it, knowing what you do of Baynor? He loves my father well enough—as much as a man like him *can* love—but he loves power more, and the band of knights that are loyal to him is growing daily."

"Is your father's court always like it was today?" Elias asked.

Thrain laughed, but it was not a happy sound. "Which part? The part where dozens of ordinary people were sentenced to death on a whim, or the part where I had to claim you publicly as my own to save you from Baynor's tender mercies?"

Elias could feel hot blood creeping into his cheeks. "I... Thank you for that," he said haltingly. "I know you probably didn't mean what you said, but the fact that you were willing to say it to save me—"

"Nothing I said was false." Thrain's voice was quiet, but his eyes were intense. "I meant every word of it, Elias."

"Oh, I..." Elias didn't know what to say. Had Thrain really been serious about binding his life to Elias's? About claiming him forever?

"I suppose you must have thought I was playacting, the same way you were when you kissed me back and vowed you belonged to me and me alone," Thrain continued, beginning to pace again as he looked at Elias from under his dark gold brows. "But I assure you, I would not make a public claiming lightly. The vows I took are binding on my heart even if they are not on yours." "I was not pretending or playacting when I kissed you," Elias protested. "I... That is to say, I would not fake such emotion."

"You were in earnest when you pledged yourself to me?" Thrain came to stand in front of the bed, gazing at him in that possessive, hawklike way that had made Elias's pulse race with anger the night they danced the Spider's Web together. Now it made his pulse race again, but for a different reason—a reason he did not understand. All he knew was that his heart was pounding, his palms were sweating, and it seemed difficult to get a deep-enough breath. "Well, Elias?" Thrain prompted him, and he realized he must answer.

"Who...who else in the court of Castle Black would I wish to belong to? If I must pick my captor, I choose you, Thrain." He tried to speak lightly, but he couldn't help remembering the fire Thrain's kiss had sent racing through his veins. Gods, had he ever been that hot before? He felt a stab of shame as he remembered the wanton way he had knelt at the other man's feet and pressed his mouth to Thrain's hard shaft. It was so much like the strange dream he'd had the night before, it made him wonder. What had driven his show of submission? Fear of Baynor, certainly, but that wasn't all.

"So it is only that you prefer me to my brute of a brother?" Thrain's gaze searched his intently.

"No, it isn't only that," Elias admitted softly. He could still feel the other man's cock, like a bar of hot iron, branding his lips. Could still hear Thrain's deep voice calling his name and feel Thrain's warm hand carding through his hair.

"What is it, then? When you kissed me back so readily and declared yourself as mine, I thought it was only to avoid being given to Baynor. Now I am left to wonder what you were thinking and why you acted as you did."

"I..." Elias looked down. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"Don't you?" Thrain cupped his cheek and raised Elias's face so that their eyes met. Leaning down, he then brushed Elias's lips with his own—a featherlight kiss that Elias barely felt. Nevertheless it sent his heart racing even faster, until he thought it would beat right out of his chest.

"Please...I can't...can't do this." Though he ached to kiss back, to open his mouth and feel Thrain deepen the kiss as he had in the great hall, Elias drew away instead and looked down at his hands. "Was the old woman—Nan—very dear to you?" he asked, seeking to change the subject.

Thrain shook his head and sank onto the bed beside Elias, a troubled look in his midnight blue eyes. "No, but she reminded me of one who was."

Elias gave the other man a sidelong glance, wondering at the sudden change. Apparently he could not have picked a better topic to dampen Thrain's ardor, but far from being relieved, he felt sorry at the despair he saw on the other man's face. "Tell me about it, then," he said softly. "If you wish."

Thrain sighed. "It's an old story and sad. The woman I speak of was naught but a servant, but she was my milk nurse. She raised me from a babe since my birth killed my lady mother—as my father has never tired of reminding me. Anyway..." He sighed, running a hand through his hair and turning it into a rumpled dark gold halo about his head. "She was the castle wisewoman as well—very skilled in the art of healing and medicines. It was she who taught me how to make the various ointments and salves you have seen me use."

"Truly a wondrous, talented lady," Elias murmured.

"Indeed. Too talented by half," Thrain said bitterly. "She was my whole world as a child, and I thought nothing could ever happen to her."

"But something did." Elias thought of his own mother as he spoke. Was she living or dead? He missed her greatly. They had always been close, and he had grown to manhood in a loving and secure environment. With a coldhearted bastard like Ungor for a father and a snake pit like Castle Black to grow up in, how much more must Thrain have needed the love and comfort of a kind hand to guide him when he was young? "What happened?" he urged when it seemed that Thrain was hesitant to answer.

"She...overstepped her bounds. After Baynor took me as his squire—and took me in other ways as well—she noticed I was not myself. I did not wish to share my shame, but she guessed it. Baynor's brutality had not escaped her sharp eyes. I told her what my father had said, that I must defend myself, but she refused to let the matter lie. She went to him and demanded a private audience."

"I take it the audience did not go well?" Elias asked softly when Thrain paused for a long moment and stared into the fire crackling in the fireplace across from the bed.

"I was not there, but I have heard many things. That she accused my father of having a heart of stone, that she threatened to leave and take me with her, that she vowed to put a curse on him if he did not make Baynor leave me be." Thrain shook his head. "In the end, the only thing that mattered was that the next court day she was among the accused. He—my father—had tolerated her skills as a wisewoman for years because she had taken over the care of me and saved him the trouble. But after their private audience, he decided I was old enough to fend for myself. So he had no more use for her."

"She was tried for using magic, then?" Elias could see where this was tending, and wished he could stop before he had to hear the final awful details. But something told him this was a tale Thrain needed to tell, one that had been festering in him as long as the story of his brother's evil acts of betrayal.

Thrain barked a laugh that sounded anything but happy. "Tried indeed, if you can call what my father does a trial. Tried, convicted, and burned at the witch pyre." He looked down. "I...was made to watch while she screamed my name with her last breath."

"Gods!" Elias had known it would be bad, but this...this was almost beyond reasoning. "No wonder you want your father and brother dead," he whispered, putting a hand on Thrain's broad back. "They killed your mother." "No." Thrain shook his head, still looking down. "I told you, she was but a servant."

"Servant or no, she was the only mother you ever knew," Elias insisted. "And they burned her before your eyes. How you are not completely mad or as cruel and twisted as your brother, I do not know."

"Am I not?" Thrain looked up at him at last, his dark blue eyes shimmering with unshed tears in the firelight. "Look what I did to you. Do you think she is proud of me, if she can look down and see me now?"

"We will not speak of that now." Elias dared to cup Thrain's cheek as the other man had cupped his earlier. "What was her name?" he murmured, wanting to know it all.

"Hartha." Thrain let out a shuddering breath. "Gods, I have not spoken it aloud in years."

"Nor allowed yourself to feel the grief of her death, I suppose." Elias swept a thumb over the other man's high cheekbone. It came away wet.

Thrain looked grim. "The night after she died—after they killed her—I was so overcome with grief I thought I should go mad. I...I wanted to die. But that was the first night I heard the dragon's call as well."

"It felt your pain?" Elias was surprised. In his studies of dragon lore, he had never heard that they were particularly sensitive to the emotions of the humans around them. Of course, he had only read of one other case where a dragon had been imprisoned by men before, and that tale had ended very badly, so anything was possible.

Thrain shrugged. "I suppose so. Anyway, it called to me. It took months of skulking around, watching my father work the puzzle lock before I could get to it, but when I did..."

"It gave you hope," Elias said quietly.

Thrain nodded. "Hope of revenge and something else as well. It spoke to me of you, Elias. Of a man with golden eyes who would be my destiny, as I would be his. It taught me to be patient and wait, but despite its promises, I had nearly given up hope when I first saw you at the ball your mother held."

Elias gave a rueful laugh. "I thought you hated me on first sight."

"I wanted you on first sight," Thrain corrected him. "How could I not?"

It was Elias's turn to study his hands. "I am not accustomed to such things. To being...wanted. Having no magic made me less than desirable at Rowan. Even the maids I lay with were of the common folk—none of the ladies at court wished for my attentions."

"And the lords?" Thrain asked softly.

"The lords... I did not much consider them, though some of them would perhaps have considered me," Elias admitted. "If only for a night's pleasure. But I had no interest in taking another man in that way, and I was certainly not interested in being taken. Not...that way."

"So you have no interest in other men?" Thrain sounded surprised. "I have always known I preferred my own sex."

Elias could feel the other man looking at him intently. "I...don't know," he admitted uncomfortably. "As I said, it wasn't something I ever had to consider before."

"And I forced you to consider it." Thrain's tone was bitterly self-reproaching. "I thought that you had some interest from the kiss you gave me when we danced the Spider's Web."

"I only wished to shame you as you had shamed me," Elias admitted. "And yet...now I cannot say. I really *wasn't* playacting when you kissed me in the court earlier. It's all very confusing."

Thrain sighed and patted him on the knee. "Many things are clouded right now. One thing we do know, however, is that we must get to the dragon tonight. Now if I know Baynor, he'll be prowling around outside my rooms, just waiting to see if we try to sneak out again. We must find a way to get past him."

"That we must," Elias agreed, glad to change the subject. "But how?"

Thrain frowned. "I have an idea, but it will take the both of us, and you may not like it."

"Just tell me," Elias urged. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he scooted even closer to the other man, so that their thighs touched as they sat. He had no idea what to do with his strangely tangled feelings for Thrain, but it seemed to help to be close to him, to look into his eyes and hear his voice. Even if that voice was only talking about a plan to get past Baynor and see the dragon.

* * *

"Please be careful," Thrain urged for the fourth or fifth time. "Are you certain you want to do this?"

"I want to see the dragon, want to hear what it has to say of my future. And yours as well, I suppose." Elias shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Thrain. I'm a man grown. I can handle myself."

"I know, I know..." Thrain sighed. He knew he was acting like a mother hen, but he couldn't help himself. He was growing to care for Elias more and more, especially as he shared the old hurts inside that he had never dared to tell another before. There was no use denying it—Elias was becoming very dear to him. And if anything happened... No, it mustn't happen. I won't let him come to harm.

"Come. Give me the ale." Elias held out his hand. "You say it's been well laced?"

"With the strongest sleeping draft I could make." Thrain handed him the cool, sweating pewter mug filled to the brim with Castle Black's best brown ale. It was a

drink Baynor could not resist—especially if he believed he was taking it away from his brother.

"All right, then. Let's go." Holding the pewter mug in one hand, Elias eased open the door to Thrain's chambers with the other. "I see him," he murmured after a moment. "He's standing at the spot where the main hall and your corridor intersect."

"I thought he'd be there." Thrain took a look himself.

Sure enough, his brother was standing far down the hallway, looking this way and that, waiting. Apparently he thought that by blocking the main way out of Thrain's rooms he could keep them from going elsewhere in the castle. Of course, they could have sneaked past him without too much trouble. Thrain had been an expert at finding secret ways around Castle Black since he was a child. But he didn't want to risk Baynor's bursting into his rooms and finding them gone, or worse, guessing where they were going and seeing him work the puzzle lock only their father was supposed to know how to use. No. Better by far to put him completely out of commission while they visited the dragon.

"He looks angry," Elias observed in a whisper.

"He's always angry when he doesn't get his way." Thrain put a hand on the lad's shoulder and felt the slight tremble of nerves as Elias keyed himself up for what he was to do. "You're to come along from the west hall, as though you used the servants' corridor to come up from the kitchens," he said softly. "Are you certain you can get past without him seeing you in the first place?"

"I followed you all the way down to the dragon's dungeon last night, and you were none the wiser," Elias pointed out.

"True enough." Thrain gave him a rueful smile. "All right, then. He's looking the other way now. Off you go." He gave Elias a final pat and watched as he slipped out the door and into the shadows.

Elias moved with a silent grace that put Thrain in mind of a cat. He slipped past Baynor effortlessly and positioned himself far down the hallway before coming out into the middle of the corridor and into the light. Then Elias scuffed his boots against the flagstones as he walked, deliberately making a noise to draw Baynor's attention.

"Well, well, what have we here?" The big man looked up and stepped out into the middle of the hall, arms crossed over his massive chest as he blocked Elias's way.

"Oh!" Elias made a show of being startled and nearly dropped the mug of ale. "Forgive me, my lord," he said nervously. "I did not realize you were there."

Baynor frowned. "I thought you were in my brother's rooms *servicing* him, little princeling."

"I—He sent me to the kitchens to fetch him this. So if you'll pardon me, my lord, I must give it to him." Elias motioned at the mug of ale and made as if to move past him, but Baynor moved with him, blocking his path. "I don't think so, bed slave." Baynor gave him an ugly smile. "Tell me. Does he use you well?"

"Well enough, but he does require refreshment between bouts of taking me." Elias's tone verged on insolent. Obviously he was trying to draw Baynor's attention to the mug and provoke him into taking it. But Baynor seemed more interested in Elias than the ale.

"Tell me about it," he said, his smile widening. "Do you still cry and moan as you did the first night I made him take you?"

Thrain's hands tightened into fists. Damn Baynor for reminding Elias of the rape! But Elias appeared unfazed.

"The only time I moan is when my lord gives me pleasure," he replied, his tone even more insolent than before. Thrain, watching, frowned. *Gods, Elias, watch out*.

"He gives you pleasure, eh? But it is your job to pleasure your master, as you would learn were you *my* slave."

"But I am *not* your slave," Elias said archly. "And my master is thirsty. So if you would be so kind as to let me pass..."

"I am not so kind, as I think you know." Baynor took a step toward Elias, glaring down at him. Thrain drew his dagger, his hand tight on the hilt. If his brother so much as touched the boy... But Baynor seemed content to talk. "Tell me," he continued, his gaze running hungrily over Elias's slim form. "What does he do to you that gives you so much pleasure?"

For a moment Thrain was afraid Elias would falter. The lad looked uncertainly at Baynor, clearly at a loss. Then, just as Thrain was certain their charade was falling apart, Elias rallied. "He...kisses me," he told Baynor. "Deeply. For...for hours."

Baynor snorted. "You expect me to believe all he's doing is kissing you?"

"He...he touches me too."

"Touches you, eh? Where?"

Elias swallowed audibly. "All...all over."

"Does he touch your cock? Put his fingers inside you to stretch that tight little arse of yours, boy?" Baynor leered at him, and Elias flushed a bright red. Doubtless he was remembering the night before, when Thrain had used the healing ointment on him. He had seemed receptive enough then, at least to being healed, but how would he view what had happened now that Baynor was putting it into a different, more sexual light?

Thrain was afraid the boy would feel disgusted or shamed and show as much to Baynor. But he need not have worried. Elias lifted his chin, the light of resolve shining in his golden eyes. "Yes," he said clearly, looking Baynor full in the face. "He strokes my shaft as he kisses me, and he puts his fingers deep inside me, though he uses oil or ointment to ease the way, unlike *some*."

"Some don't give a damn about easing the way," Baynor growled.

"An unfortunate oversight, since Thrain's gentle touch makes me even more eager to pleasure him," Elias declared.

"Does it now?" Baynor took another step forward, and Thrain's eyes narrowed. "And what do you do for him, little princeling?"

Elias seemed to have lost all hesitation now. "I suck him," he said, his voice softly seductive. "I take his cock down my throat and stroke him with my tongue for hours until he begs me to make him come."

"You do, do you?" Baynor's piggy little eyes were dilated with lust. "And when he comes, then what?"

"I swallow every drop," Elias murmured with a knowing smile. "But I never stop sucking him. I have to make him hard again so he can take me."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." Elias seemed wholly transported now, almost as if he believed what he was telling Baynor. "And when he takes me, he looks into my eyes," he continued. "And he calls me by name with each thrust. He tells me he is my master, that I must yield to him, open to him, and give him whatever he desires."

"And do you?" Baynor's voice was a hoarse growl. Clearly Elias's story was affecting him.

To say the truth, it was affecting Thrain quite a bit as well. He shifted from foot to foot, trying to ease the ache of his cock as he watched the scene before him. Gods, the things Elias was saying. It was almost as though the lad had fantasized about doing what he talked about. As though he wanted Thrain the way Thrain wanted him. Don't be a fool. He's just playing Baynor like a fish, leading him along. Right. Thrain frowned and gripped his dagger tighter. Get on with it, but for the gods' sakes, be careful! Elias was on very dangerous ground, inciting Baynor's lust. He needed to be very, very cautious how he trod.

"I do," Elias said, giving Baynor a taunting look. "I open for him willingly because he doesn't force me. Because he's gentle. I give him all that he desires and more. And in return he makes me come as well. He strokes me with his hand as he takes his pleasure inside me."

Baynor's eyes narrowed. "Never would have pegged you for one who liked being fucked so much."

"I only like it when Thrain fucks me," Elias said boldly. "I want no one else, especially not one who is unskilled and crude in the ways of love."

"Why, you..." Baynor took a step toward him, but Elias danced gracefully out of the way and held up the pewter mug.

"Of course, such passionate love works up a powerful thirst, which is why I am on my way to give him this ale. I hope that he may take me several times tonight before we fall asleep, exhausted, in each other's arms."

"I'll show you what it means to be fucked," Baynor growled. "I'll take great pleasure in giving you the exact opposite of what my weakling brother gives you." Elias's eyes widened. "You wouldn't dare! Thrain would thrash you again as he did last night."

"Oh, I'll dare, all right. And as for thrashing, we shall see who thrashes whom." Baynor's eyes flashed with anger as he stepped even closer to Elias.

"Please..." Elias raised the mug between them, as though to shield himself from Baynor's advances. "Why can't you leave me alone? I belong to Thrain and to him alone."

"But I *like* taking what belongs to my little brother. I always have. And I will again tonight, starting with this." Baynor snatched the pewter mug from Elias's trembling fingers and drank it down in two long swallows.

Gods, finally! Thrain nearly sagged with relief when he saw Baynor cast the mug aside, empty. Elias looked relieved as well, though still wary of the huge man advancing on him.

"And now." Baynor took another step forward, staggering a little. "And now I will show you what it really...really means to be..." The words slurred together, and he stopped, frowning. "What it meansh ta be fucked by a...by a real..." Abruptly he collapsed in a heap at Elias's feet.

"Gods!" Thrain was out of the room and by Elias's side in an instant.

"Well, there's that finished." Elias grinned at him and poked Baynor experimentally with his foot. "Out and snoring. That ale was well and truly laced indeed."

Thrain didn't feel like joining the celebration. "What the hell were you playing at, taunting him like that?" he demanded, glaring at Elias. "You know how dangerous he is. Why did you incite his lust?"

Elias flushed. "I only thought to put him off his guard."

"You were meant to get him to drink the ale, no more," Thrain growled.

"And that I did." Elias frowned. "I told you I could manage the situation. Just because I didn't do it exactly as you might have is no reason to be angry with me."

"I don't like you putting yourself at risk, no matter what the reason." Thrain sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He couldn't say exactly why he was so angry. Possibly because he had been so worried for Elias's safety. Or maybe because he knew all the things Elias had said to Baynor were no more than falsehoods meant to entice. Promises that would never be kept. "I am sorry," he said at last. "It's just... Some of the things you were saying..."

Elias blushed again and looked down. "I was just... I wanted him to think... I mean, it's not that I would actually want to...or want you to—"

"Of course not." Thrain frowned. "Come. So far everything's going to plan, but we need to keep moving."

"But what will Baynor say when he wakes up? He'll be furious, and he's sprawled out right in front of your rooms. It'll be a short trip for him to seek revenge." "As to that, don't worry. I gave him enough potion to keep him down for the rest of the night and probably most of tomorrow as well. When he wakes, he'll think he was drinking too much and dreamed the whole thing."

Elias gave him a curious look. "Why not kill him now? You say you want revenge, and here he is, completely vulnerable."

"You think I haven't thought about that?" Thrain frowned. "Drugging him and slitting his throat? That's too easy a death for Baynor the Beast. And besides, my father would know I had done it. Baynor is his favorite—always has been. He'd have me hanged in an instant. Of course, Baynor would do the same thing to me if I managed to kill Ungor."

"So until you can kill both of them at once, you don't dare kill either of them."

"Unfortunately, yes."

"All right, fine. But do you mean to leave him here to sleep it off?"

"Certainly not." Thrain grinned. Jogging down the hallway a few feet, he called, "Guards! To me."

After a moment several men-at-arms came running, their chain mail jingling as they moved. "Yes, Prince Thrain?" one asked. Glancing at Baynor, he asked, "Has Prince Baynor hurt himself?"

"My brother has been at his cups again." Thrain made a face. "I fear to see his reaction if he wakes on the cold stone floor. You must put him to bed."

The guard frowned. "But my lord, Prince Baynor is a very, er, large man, and his chambers are many flights down. I do not know—"

"Find some help if you need it, but get him to his own bedchamber," Thrain barked. "Baynor will not be best pleased when he wakes if I tell him that his own men refused to help him to bed."

The guard snapped to attention. "Yes, sire, of course. We'll do as you say at once."

"Good. And don't bother me any more about it. I shall be in my chambers with my bed slave." Thrain looped a possessive arm around Elias and pulled him close for a passionate kiss. Elias stiffened at first and then, as he had in the great hall, suddenly relaxed and returned the kiss. *Gods, such sweet lips*! Thrain had only intended the kiss for show, but when he finally pulled away from Elias's full mouth, he found that the guards had already managed to drag Baynor down the hall and almost out of sight.

"Was that really necessary?" Elias's eyes were bright, his lips swollen from the kiss.

"Had to make them believe I was telling the truth." Thrain gave him a penetrating glance. "Now that they're certain I've taken you back to my rooms to fuck you, they won't be the least bit suspicious."

"I suppose so." Elias bit his lower lip in a way that was distractingly erotic. "I guess if they think we're...that you'll be taking me over and over, all night long..."

"As far as they're concerned, I'm having you in my bed right now." Thrain looked down, his gaze locked with Elias's. In the dim torchlight of the corridor, they looked like twin pools of melted gold. "For all they know, I've got you spread out under me, telling you to submit, to open for me so that I can make you come."

"Gods," Elias murmured. His breathing sounded erratic.

"So of course it would never occur to them to come looking for us while we go to see the dragon."

"Oh, right. The dragon." Elias straightened and ran a hand through his black curls as though trying to smooth them down. "We must... We'd better go see the dragon."

"Indeed." Thrain nodded solemnly, but inside he felt a flare of triumph. Say what he might, Elias had at least *some* feeling for him. And this time Thrain was certain that the kiss he'd given the lad had been truly and wholeheartedly returned with no pretense. Perhaps there was hope after all.

Chapter Nine

Elias heard the dragon long before he saw it. The deep, hissing voice was calling his name—calling his name in the Old Tongue. "Elias... Elias... Elias... Come to me. To me. To me!"

The magic in the air was so strong he could smell it, like some dark spice pervading the cavernous blackness. Elias took a deep breath at the top of the long spiral staircase, filling his lungs. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed this. All his life he'd grown up around magic and magic users, from his mother's strong sorcery to his cousin Aubrey's useless little birds. And even though he'd never had any magic of his own, he loved the feel of it tingling along his nerves, the rich, mysterious scent of it in his nose, the sound of the Old Tongue, so beautiful and convoluted in his ears.

"Elias," the dragon called again, and this time he heard it with his ears as well as his mind. He wanted to run to it, run to the sound that meant home, but a strong hand caught him and held him still.

"Careful, it's a long way down," Thrain cautioned. "And be careful of the dragon too. Don't look into its eyes."

"I've studied every book on dragon lore I could get my hands on since I was ten years old. I know not to look into its eyes," Elias said, stung.

"What you know and what you feel are two different things," Thrain told him sternly. "The dragon says you have magic—very strong magic—and that calls you to it. Don't get so wrapped up in talking to another being like yourself that you do something foolish or careless. After all, you could be the most powerful sorcerer the world has ever seen, but it won't do you any good if you plunge from the stairs to your death." He nodded at the steep spiral staircase and the inky blackness below them.

Elias was abashed. "I suppose you're right. Very well. Let's go, and I'll try to keep my head."

"Glad to hear it," Thrain said sardonically. "Come on." He led the way down the steep steps, treading carefully, until at last they were standing on a narrow walkway that led across a bottomless drop to an immense pedestal. On the pedestal crouched the dragon, every scale lined with pure golden light.

Elias tried to trace the glowing pattern on its hide to avoid looking into its eyes, but he couldn't help himself. He'd been dreaming about the dragon for years, and since he'd come to Castle Black, he had dreamed of it every single night. He had to see it—all of it—with his own eyes, no matter what the price. He stared into its eyes, those flickering depths he'd seen in his mind's eye already a thousand times. Stared and felt the dragon staring back at him.

"Elias." The voice of the dragon was deep and deceptively soft—it spoke the Old Tongue with a refined accent. He heard an echo of the words in his head, and a quick look at Thrain made it clear the other man was hearing the dragon's mind-voice as well. Good, so they would all be able to follow the conversation even though Thrain didn't speak the Old Tongue.

"Dragon," he said, respectfully inclining his head. "I would not speak your name even if I knew it." The heart of a dragon's magic was its name—a secret each dragon guarded with its life. A dragon master was one who was able to discover that which the dragon wished to keep hidden and use it for his own ends. But dragon masters, like the dragons they studied, had died out many years before.

"Would that you could speak my name." The dragon sounded mournful. "I would gladly hear it from your lips. The chain and collar Ungor binds me with have robbed me of it."

"You do not know your own name?" Elias was surprised. A dragon without such basic knowledge of itself is like a man without sight.

"More like a man without magic," the dragon rumbled. Obviously it still retained enough power to read his thoughts.

"I am such a man," Elias told it, but the dragon shook its massive head, the thick black iron chain of magic null clinking with its movement.

"You are wrong. Your problem is not that you have no magic. It is that you have too much. Too much to harness, too much to control—without help, that is."

"And you can help me?" Elias asked eagerly. Finally, *finally* he would have what he had wished for his whole life—magic of his own!

But the dragon shook its head again. "Not I."

"Then who—"

"The one who stands behind you—Thrain, son of my hated captor, Ungor. He shall be as the lightning rod to your lightning."

"He what?" Elias frowned, throwing a glance over his shoulder to Thrain, who was watching the dragon intently. His hair was as golden as the dragon's eyes in the glow from its scales.

"I think he means I'm to help you control your magic—focus it, maybe," he murmured.

"Thrain has the right of it." The dragon inclined its head. "He has already unlocked the door for you; now all you have to do is take his hand and step through it."

Elias shook his head. "I don't understand."

"He has freed your magic. Would you but remove your collar, you would feel it flow."

"Of course, the collar. I'm sorry, Elias. I forgot you were wearing it." Thrain worked to unlock the collar, his fingers warm on the icy metal around Elias's throat.

"But how?" Elias began as the collar came away. "I still don't—Ahh!" He gasped as a flush of burning heat enveloped his body, rushing from the tips of his toes to the top of his head and back again. It was like being dipped in flame.

"Elias! Are you all right?" Thrain dropped the collar and gripped Elias's arms with both hands, peering into his face anxiously. At once the rush of painful heat lessened in intensity. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it was at least bearable *just* bearable, Elias decided, trying to catch his breath. "Are you all right?" Thrain insisted, shaking him slightly.

"Yes," Elias managed to gasp. His entire body was still tingling, but somehow he knew that he was safe as long as Thrain's hands were on him. "Just don't...don't stop touching me."

Thrain looked mystified. "Very well, if you wish."

"Felt that, did you?" the dragon asked, cocking its head to one side. Elias had the distinct impression that it was amused.

"I did. It burns."

"Of course it burns, young Elias. You've been wearing that collar for weeks, letting the newly released magic build up inside you. As you value your life, do not put it on again until you can control your magic. Another such buildup of power might kill you when the collar is removed."

"Is that why you wanted to see him so urgently? To tell him to take off the collar?" Thrain sounded angry. "You could have told me that, dragon. I would have taken it off him myself."

"And risk having Elias burn you to a crisp in his fury? I think not," the dragon said drily. "You told me the last time you came that he was still wroth with you."

"So he was," Thrain said, frowning. "Nevertheless I would not have risked his life to spare my own. Had I known the collar was a danger—"

"Peace, Thrain, son of Ungor. No harm has been done. Elias is safe as long as you do not replace the collar. Let it lie." The dragon looked at Elias. "Now do you understand?"

"Somewhat," he confessed. "Though not nearly as well as I would like. You say Thrain awakened my magic. How?"

"Think back to the first night you were together." The dragon's breath was a soft hiss from its great red throat.

Elias frowned. "The night we danced the Spider's Web?"

The dragon shook its head. "The night you danced, Thrain marked you as his own, but he had not yet staked his claim."

"I think he means the night we took Castle Rowan," Thrain said quietly. He had let go of Elias's arms in favor of holding his hand. At his words, Elias tensed but didn't pull away, for fear of the magical heat returning. "What makes you say that?" he asked, not looking at the other man.

"I told you before. The thunderstorm only happened right outside your window. The hot rain, the shattered glass. And the fact that the magic null I wore was nearly white-hot as I..."

"As you took me," Elias finished for him. Gods, he still had so many conflicting emotions about the man standing beside him. Could the dragon be right? Had Thrain's rough love really opened the gates to his magic as Thrain had opened Elias's body with his shaft? *I will not think about that now. I cannot.*

"You will have to think of it at some point, Elias. Think of it, and consider it carefully," the dragon murmured in his mind, and somehow Elias sensed that this time he was the only one hearing it.

He shook his head. "Look, never mind how or why my magic finally manifested. The real question now is, how can Thrain help me control it? Will I always have to be touching him in order not to feel like I'm being burned alive from the inside out?"

"The burning is because of your great magic. You have the soul of a dragon, and all of us are on fire inside," the dragon informed him. "As for the rest, you must discover it for yourself."

"But I don't understand." Elias felt a surge of frustration. "Thrain said you told him I was his destiny and he mine."

The dragon nodded. "And so you are. Together you shall unite all the realms into one great kingdom—something that has not been done since the days of Lorik and Sandor."

"Lorik and Sandor, the kings of old who ruled the Kingdom of the Sun? That's just a legend," Thrain objected.

"Not so." The dragon blinked slowly, throwing shadows on the sheer stone wall behind them. "They were real. I saw them rule when I was a hatchling, barely out of the egg. The realm prospered beneath their reign, and magic users and magical beings thrived. You and Elias may bring such peace and prosperity again, but only if you tread carefully."

"But how?" Elias demanded. "How can Thrain and I become like ancient heroes we thought were myths and unite all the realms in peace and prosperity when I don't even know how to harness my magic? And how do we get rid of Ungor and Baynor?"

"That is too many questions by half." The dragon sounded displeased.

"I thought you wanted to help us," Elias said. "But you haven't answered any of our questions. Not really. How are we supposed to go about accomplishing this destiny you've laid out if we don't know how we're to do it?"

The dragon closed its eyes. "I am allowed to tell you three things to aid you, Elias, son of Alaina. Three and no more." It stopped speaking aloud, and Elias heard it in his mind instead. "You must give freely that which was already taken. You must remember that which has been forgotten. And you must claim that which love bids you deny. Only then will you be free to fulfill your destiny," the dragon said, hissing in the Old Tongue.

"None of that makes any sense," Elias objected.

Thrain squeezed his hand reassuringly, letting Elias know he had heard the dragon as well. "That's the way it talks. Believe it or not, you've gotten a lot more answers from it than I ever have."

"But—" Elias began.

"Leave me now. I am tired." The dragon laid its long head on the stone pedestal where it was chained. "Go fulfill your destiny or die trying. But know this, Elias, son of Alaina: if you die, I shall die with you, for I cannot withstand the loss of your magic. And if I cease to exist, the rest of the magic users in the realm will disappear with me, including your mother."

"You know of my mother? She lives?"

But the dragon would not say anything else. It lay still and silent, looking tired and old and almost used up. The light shining between its scales was little more than a dull glow, and the dragon seemed shrunken somehow, as though giving them the benefit of its wisdom had depleted it.

Elias felt sorry for it, despite his frustration. He supposed he ought to be grateful for what information he had gotten. Thrain was right—dragons weren't known for their straightforward natures, and he had the feeling that this one had helped him all it could. Still, it was maddening to know that he had the pieces of the puzzle before him and no idea of how to put them together. *Give that which was taken; remember what was forgotten; claim what love would have me deny. Perfect.* As clear as mud.

"Come," Thrain murmured, tugging at his hand and breaking his train of thought. "It's getting late, and we need to go before the morning guard change."

"All right." Elias sighed. "But I still don't understand."

"We'll figure it out together," Thrain promised.

Elias hoped that he was right.

* * *

The second time he forgot and dropped Thrain's hand, Elias wanted to put the collar back on. "It burns," he gasped, slumping against the cool stone wall before sinking to the ground. "Let me put on the collar, just for a little while."

"Absolutely not—you heard the dragon. A second buildup of power before you learn to control the magic could kill you."

Elias shook his head. "I've been around magic users all my life, and none of them ever talked about how much it burned to be filled with magic."

"Maybe it doesn't burn them." Thrain sank down beside him, holding Elias's hand loosely between both of his. "You heard what the dragon said. You have the soul of one of its kind. So much power is bound to be searching for an outlet. Maybe you need to do some magic to burn some of it off." "Maybe," Elias agreed. "But not here. Wait till we get back to your rooms."

"Almost there. Come on." Thrain pulled him to his feet and half supported him until Elias was able to walk on his own. The trip up from the dragon's dungeon seemed a lot harder than the trip down had.

When at last they collapsed on the bed, fully clothed, he would have been happy to sleep. But while holding Thrain's hand helped the pain some, the burning inside him was still intense enough to make relaxing impossible. Thrain seemed to sense his restlessness, because he sat up in bed, careful to keep in contact with Elias.

"Come. Neither one of us can relax like this. We must get undressed and sleep as usual."

"I can't sleep tonight. I'll never be able to sleep again, the way I feel," Elias complained. But he allowed Thrain to help him strip and then to get undressed himself—a ticklish operation while retaining some form of contact at all times. At last, however, they were lying naked in bed together, side by side, holding hands.

"Try some magic," Thrain suggested. "Release some of it. Maybe you'll be able to sleep."

"What should I do?" Elias looked around the room for something that could be accomplished magically.

"Light the fire." Thrain nodded at the darkened fireplace. It's gone out, and it's damn cold in here."

"I'll try," Elias murmured doubtfully. "I've seen magic done all my life, but I've never actually attempted any of it myself." Staring at the fire, he spoke in the Old Tongue. "Burn."

A solid sheet of flame like something from a blast furnace filled the fireplace and shot up the chimney with a roar that made the room shake.

"Gods!" Thrain sat up again, his eyes wide. "Elias, what did you do?"

"Nothing. Only told it to burn." Elias couldn't believe it either. All his life he'd spent wishing for even a tenth of his mother's power, and now it seemed he had ten times—a hundred times—the amount she commanded. *That's the difference, though. Mother was able to control her power. If I'm not careful, this power is going to control me!*

"Well, did it make you feel better at least?" Thrain asked, studying the blackened mantelpiece and soot-marked stones that made up the fireplace. The fire was still blazing, barely confined by the stones of the hearth.

Elias shook his head. "No. In fact...in fact, it's getting worse." He closed his eyes tightly, struggling with himself. The magic inside him was like a burning pressure, demanding to be let out. Now that it had found an outlet, it wanted more...and more...and more. "Gods," he murmured, opening his eyes to find Thrain staring at him with obvious concern.

"Elias...your eyes." He reached out as though to brush Elias's cheek but let his hand drop instead.

"What about my eyes?" Elias demanded. "I know they're a funny color. It can't be helped."

"It's not the color. They've gone like the dragon's." Thrain frowned. "Elias, they're *glowing*."

"It's the magic." Elias tried shutting his eyes again, but it only made him feel like his eyelids were on fire. "It wants out." He groaned as the pressure inside him grew and grew. *Gods, the pain. Heat upon pressure upon heat*. His skin felt hot and stretched too tightly over his bones, almost as though there were something living inside him, something living and burning and demanding to be set free. "You...you'd better leave me, Thrain," he gasped, fighting to get the words out. "Save yourself. I feel like...almost like I might explode."

He expected Thrain to drop his hand and run from the room—it would have been the sensible thing to do, after all. But the other man's reaction surprised him.

"I'll not leave you." Thrain glared at him fiercely, and Elias could see himself reflected in the midnight blue depths of his eyes. Then Thrain pulled him close and wrapped him in a bear hug.

Elias gave a great gasp as the pressure reached an almost unbearable point, and then...then, mysteriously, it began to ease. He closed his eyes in relief, glad that his eyelids no longer felt like they were on fire. At the same time, he became aware that the blaze in the fireplace had died down as well.

"Elias?" Thrain's arms were clamped around him like iron bands, their bodies touching from chest to flank. And everywhere Thrain's skin touched his, Elias felt a blessed coolness. It enveloped him and spread even to the parts where Thrain wasn't touching him.

"Now I understand how a sword feels after the blacksmith takes it from the forge and thrusts it into a bucket of cold water," he murmured, laying his hot forehead against Thrain's broad shoulder. The relief from the burning pain and pressure was so immense, he could barely move.

Thrain's laughter was a low rumble under his cheek. "Feeling better now, then?"

"Much," Elias admitted. "Although now that I'm not about to explode, I am much troubled."

"Oh? How so?" Without seeming to realize he was doing it, Thrain had started rubbing long, soothing strokes up and down Elias's spine. His hands were cool and gentle and slightly rough from where he gripped his sword. It was a beautifully comforting sensation.

"Well... We can hardly sleep like this all night."

"Why not?" Thrain pulled back to look at him, the corner of his full mouth twitching up in a half smile. "Or do I make you nervous when we're this close?"

Elias laughed uncertainly. They certainly were *very* close. He could feel every inch of Thrain's muscular chest pressed against his own, and the dark spice of the other man's scent invaded his senses with every breath he took. "*You're* the one who

ought to be nervous," he said, trying to break the tension. "I almost let my magic tear both of us and the entire room apart. Speaking of which, what happens if one of us accidentally rolls over and loses contact in the middle of the night?"

"There is that," Thrain admitted thoughtfully. "It seems to me that the magic needs some kind of release. There's too much of it in you, and something's got to give."

"That's what you said before," Elias objected. "And look what happened when I tried to let some of it out. It nearly killed me."

"Not that kind of release." Thrain furrowed his brow, obviously deep in thought. "Let's think about this logically. It's better when I'm touching you, right?"

"The magic is less intense, yes," Elias said. He didn't mention how, even as the magic seemed to die down inside him, there were other sensations, just as intense in their own way, that grew each time Thrain touched him.

"How's this, then?" Thrain shifted against him, and now Elias could feel much more than just the planes of his chest. Something hot and hard was rubbing against him—rubbing against the spot where he was hot and hard himself. *His shaft... Gods, his shaft is rubbing against mine!*

"What...what are you doing?" he managed to gasp as Thrain shifted, rubbing their hard cocks together in a long, slow slide. "What...what is...?"

"That's my cock, rubbing against yours, Elias." Thrain shifted again, drawing another helpless moan from Elias. "Tell me. When I do that, is the burning from the magic better or worse?"

"Better," Elias admitted. "But I don't know...know if this is the best way to be...to be controlling it."

"You have a better idea?" Thrain leaned down and kissed his throat—a soft, hot, possessive kiss that made Elias gasp as the other man's hard shaft pressed against his own.

"No, I just... I've never..."

"Never thought you could want something like this?" Thrain finished for him, murmuring the words as he kissed Elias's neck again.

"I don't...don't know that I want it now," Elias objected, but he knew his body's reaction to Thrain proved the words to be a lie. "What...what are you going to do to me?"

"Going to make you come. Make us both come—if you'll let me." Thrain shifted again, and this time he was on top of Elias, his long shaft fitting perfectly against Elias's as he slipped into place between Elias's spread thighs.

How did this happen so fast? And what is he going to do next? Elias felt a sudden stab of fear at the feeling of being so controlled. This was the same way he'd felt when Thrain had taken him the first time—as though his body was doing something independently of him, something he was powerless to stop.

"Wait!" He pushed at Thrain's broad chest with a strength born of panic. "Wait, don't! I don't want you to."

Thrain rolled them over immediately so that they were side by side, facing each other, and he was no longer pressing Elias into the bed. "Forgive me." He studied Elias's face intently. "I didn't mean to make you think I was going to—"

"I didn't think that," Elias denied hastily, although of course, he had. "I just... I'm still a little...uncertain."

Thrain sighed. "As well you should be. I've certainly given you reason to be in the past, though I have tried to make up for it."

"You've more than made up for it. And anyway, I thought we decided not to speak of that." Elias reached up tentatively to cup Thrain's square jaw. "It...it felt quite nice, actually," he admitted in a soft voice. "And it really did help the burn from the magic. It was just having you on...on top of me and thinking..."

"I know what you were thinking, even if you do not wish to speak of it." But Thrain's expression was a little softer. "Why do we not try it the other way?"

Elias frowned. "The other way?"

"You on top of me." Thrain rolled again, this time moving Elias on top of him. They both gasped as their bodies reconnected, hard shafts falling into place side by side. "Like this," he whispered, pulling Elias close. "Could you bear it like this?"

Elias gasped softly as Thrain rocked against him, rubbing him in just the right way. "I... Yes, I suppose."

"Good." Thrain's eyes were half-lidded with lust as he looked up at Elias. "Then since you are in the superior position, you must take the lead."

"Oh." Elias felt a wash of uncertainty. "I... How? Forgive me, but I've never..."

Thrain nodded. "That's right. I forgot you'd never been with a man before."

"None before you." Elias dared to look into his eyes as he spoke. "But if you'll show me the way..."

Thrain uttered a low growl of lust. "I will. You must move against me—like this." Putting his hands on Elias's hips, he pushed, showing him how to begin a slow, fluid motion that slid their cocks together in an intimate dance.

"Gods!" Elias moaned. Lying flush against Thrain as he was, his shaft was trapped between both their flat bellies, intensifying the friction when it rubbed against Thrain's.

"That's good," Thrain murmured, urging him on. "Keep going, Elias. You must make the same motions you would if you were taking me—*fucking* me."

The breath caught in Elias's throat. "I...I had never considered..."

"You hadn't, eh?" The look in Thrain's eyes was half-amused, half-amorous. "But that is one of the advantages of being with another man. You can give as well as receive."

"And have you ever...?"

Thrain's eyes hardened. "I *received* as much as I cared to as Baynor's squire." He kissed the corner of Elias's mouth. "However, with the right man..."

"You would let me do that? Let me take you—fuck you?" Elias felt as though a whole new arena of lust had opened itself up to him. He'd never before considered being the one who did the taking instead of being the one taken. To his surprise, the idea was powerfully erotic.

"I would try," Thrain said gravely. "I owe you that much, at least."

"Oh, of course." Elias bit his lower lip and looked away. *He would give himself* to pay me back—because he owes me. To him, the act of love between us would just be paying a debt.

"Tonight is not the time to speak of such things." Thrain gripped his hips harder and thrust up to meet him. "Tonight we must find a way to control your magic, must find a release that doesn't include your burning down the castle."

Elias moaned as a new wave of pleasure swept over him. "As you say."

"Come here." Thrain let go of one of his hips and slid his hand up Elias's back to bury it in his hair. "Come," he said again and tugged gently, bringing Elias's face down toward his. "I want to kiss you while we do this. Your mouth is so sweet, I long to taste it again."

Elias didn't even hesitate. As he had on the two occasions before, he found himself flowing to Thrain naturally. Despite his conflicting feelings, there was no denying the attraction he felt, the strong desire to give himself when the other man touched him. Elias didn't know why it should be so—he'd had kisses before, but none of them had made him feel so desired, so completely *owned*. It was as though when Thrain took possession of his mouth, he was taking possession of Elias's soul.

"Like honey," Thrain murmured against his lips. And then he was delving deep, lapping at Elias's mouth and stroking Elias's tongue with his own as Elias thrust up against him, rubbing their shafts together in a dance of delicious friction that made Elias feel as though he might explode or go mad at any moment.

Eager to give as good as he was getting, Elias thrust back, pressing down against Thrain. Gods, what would it be like if I were inside him right now? What would it feel like to have him tight and hot around me as I filled him over and over the way he filled me? The thought of taking Thrain—of fucking him—was surprisingly erotic, and Elias found himself giving in to the passion rising higher and higher between them.

Hips grinding against hips, mouths meshed together, cocks sliding in an endless rhythm of need and lust... He had never felt so lost in all his life. This was Thrain—the man who had come to his home and taken him against his will. The man who had stolen him away and made him captive in a rough and ruthless place he hated. How could he be feeling such things for him? And yet there was no denying the pleasure he felt in Thrain's touch or the heat building in his groin.

Thrain pulled back from the kiss and murmured in his ear, "Going to come now, Elias. Can you come with me?"

"Yes." The word left his lips as a moan at the same moment the pleasure crested inside him. He felt the hot seed leaving his shaft, coating his belly and Thrain's as well. At the same time, he felt Thrain's cock harden even more against his own, and then the other man was joining him in orgasm, pumping his cum between them in hard, short spurts.

Gods! Elias couldn't help thinking of the last time they had come together. Then Thrain had been buried deep inside him, and his seed had filled Elias instead of bathing his belly. Then he had hated Thrain as he had never hated anyone before. Now... Now I don't know how I feel about him. How can I do this with him and enjoy it? And why am I already wishing to do it again?

As the pleasure ebbed, Elias felt his confusion returning. But one thing did *not* return—the feeling of burning pressure barely held in check by Thrain's touch was gone.

"How do you feel?" Thrain whispered in his ear. "Better? Worse? Completely boneless?"

Elias was surprised into laughing. "I *do* feel more relaxed than I did. As for the magic..." Daring greatly, he rolled off Thrain and pulled away until only their hands were touching. Then, taking a deep breath, he withdrew his hand.

Nothing happened.

Elias breathed a sigh of relief. It was as though the magic in him were a fire that had started as a roaring flame, but the pleasure he had shared with Thrain had somehow banked it. He could still feel the magic, like glowing embers buried within him and ready to blaze up if provoked, but he no longer felt as though they would burn out of control and destroy him and everything around him.

"It's better, isn't it?" Thrain grinned at him, and Elias found he was grinning back.

"I guess you were right. What made you think of it, though?"

"My milk nurse used to tell me stories of Lorik and Sandor. In all her tales they were more than just the great friends all the old tales make them out to be." He shrugged. "And since the dragon said we are to recreate their reign, I thought..."

"I suppose you thought right." Elias frowned. "Do you think we've put paid to the problem? Or will the magic build up again?"

"As to that, who can say? But now we know how to deal with it—at least how to damp it down some." Thrain gave him a slow smile. "And I, for one, don't mind repeating the process as often as necessary."

Elias felt a heated blush suffuse his cheeks. "I—we should get cleaned up."

"That we should. And try to get a little sleep. I've got to get up at first light and get down to the castle forge." Thrain threw him a towel.

"Why the forge?" Elias caught the towel and rubbed his belly briskly, cleaning away the evidence of their mutual pleasure.

"Got to get you a new collar. One that looks like magic null but isn't." Thrain yawned. "Kill the candle. I'm exhausted."

"I am too. But just because we've learned to damp down the magic doesn't mean I know how to control it. How am I going to work a spell without blowing everything to bits? And what are we going to do about Baynor and your father?"

"We'll figure it out, all of it." Thrain sounded sleepy.

"But what—"

"I'm beginning to have some sympathy for the dragon." Thrain pulled him close and shifted them until Elias's head was resting on his shoulder. "I promise you, Elias, we'll find the solutions we seek together. But later. We cannot do any more tonight."

"I suppose not," Elias murmured reluctantly. Now that they were lying together in the dim glow of the fire, which had died down considerably, he found that he was almost too tired to think. But tired or not, the questions still went round and round his head, tormenting him with worry.

Uppermost in his mind, however, wasn't his concern for the future; it was the way Thrain had them settled in bed together. It was extraordinarily comfortable to feel Thrain's arms like steel bands around him and the smooth, muscular chest and shoulder under his head, but they hadn't been used to lying in each other's arms while they slept. In fact, Thrain always took care not to touch him at all when they were in bed, except to wake him from his frequent nightmares. "Um..." He shifted a little against the other man.

"What is it, Elias? Speak your mind." Thrain sounded tired but patient.

"It's just... Why are we lying like this?" Elias moved again, feeling the rockhard muscles under his cheek.

"In case the magic comes back, of course." Thrain made it sound completely logical. "I don't wish to be burned to a crisp in my bed if you have a sudden surge you can't control."

"Oh...of course. When you put it *that* way." Elias sighed and settled more firmly against Thrain's side. It really was comforting to feel the other man's deep, even breathing and smell the dark spice of his skin with every breath he took. Not to mention that nights at Castle Black were terribly cold, and this was the first time he hadn't felt like a block of ice as he was trying to drift off to sleep. Part of it was that he was no longer wearing the magic-null collar, but another part was that he and Thrain were sharing body heat, and it made him feel deliciously warm.

"That, and the fact that I like to have you near me. You feel right in my arms." Thrain's deep voice was soft as he pulled Elias closer.

Elias didn't know how to feel about Thrain's words, but he was suddenly too weary to care. Though he would have liked to deny it, Thrain was right—it *did* feel right to be in each other's arms. He could feel the strength of Thrain's muscular body surrounding and protecting him—both from the outside threats of the castle and from the burning magic that now resided within him. Safe. In his arms, I'm safe. We're safe together. It was a thought that never would have occurred to him before. But the moment it entered his head, Elias knew it was the absolute truth. He wondered drowsily why he should feel so protected in the arms of his captor and then wondered how Thrain felt about him. There was no doubting that the other man desired him, and Elias had to admit that he wanted Thrain too, although how far he wanted to take that desire, he still didn't know. But did Thrain's feeling for him extend beyond lust? Or did he only want Elias because of his magic, because Elias could help him get his long-sought revenge?

Too tired to worry about that now. Elias sighed and settled more comfortably against Thrain's warmth. Surrendering to the feeling of warmth and safety he felt in Thrain's arms, he allowed himself to drift to sleep with the dragon's words ringing in his ears.

"You must give freely that which was already taken. You must remember that which has been forgotten. And you must claim that which love bids you deny."

Chapter Ten

Thrain woke early, as the first gray tendrils of dawn crept through his tower window. The fire had died down to glowing embers, and the room was chilly. Elias huddled against him, deep in sleep, his back pressed to Thrain's front.

Having the other man close to him felt incredibly right, and the fact that Elias no longer seemed reluctant to touch him made it even better. He knew Elias still had some reservations—that was perfectly natural—but he seemed to have forgiven Thrain for taking him against his will, and he was willing to at least acknowledge the attraction between them. That was a big step in the direction they wanted to go, which was toward the future the dragon had foretold for them.

Thrain practically hummed with satisfaction as he gave Elias a gentle squeeze. *Perfect. Wouldn't mind waking up like this every morning.* Lifting the tangle of black curls, he kissed Elias's vulnerable nape softly, wondering if that would ever be possible. They had a difficult and dangerous task ahead of them—mastering Elias's magic and getting rid of Baynor and Ungor before his brother took the throne. Thrain had no idea how they were going to do any of it, but at the moment he felt so content, he wasn't even worried.

He was tempted to lie in bed a little longer, but the light at the window was growing brighter. If he was to get down to the castle forge and get a new collar for Elias without anyone seeing, he would have to be quick. The castle smith was a taciturn man, and Thrain had never known him to carry tales before, but any man's head might be turned with gold or the promise of a reward, so he preferred that the smith not know.

At first he thought to slip out of bed and leave Elias to his dreams, but then the frightening memory of the lad's eyes, burning like golden flames, occurred to him. Best to make sure the magic hadn't grown unmanageable in the night while Elias slept. It would be bad if Thrain left and Elias woke with no way to control his new power.

"Elias? Elias?" Thrain nudged his shoulder. He would have much preferred to reach around and stroke Elias's cock—it would have been a perfect way to awaken him. But he was very aware of how fragile the younger man's trust in him was, and he didn't want to break it by assuming too much. So he contented himself with another nudge and a third whisper of "Elias!"

"Hmm?" Elias stretched and pressed back against him, making Thrain groan softly as Elias's ass connected more intimately with his pelvis. He gritted his teeth, restraining the urge to thrust his achingly hard shaft against the inviting softness, not wanting to frighten the lad.

"I've got to get down to the forge," he murmured in Elias's ear. "But I wanted to be sure you were still all right. Has the magic returned?"

Elias shifted again and then seemed to realize what he was bumping against and froze. "Er...not sure," he mumbled. "I guess I can't tell as long as I'm, um, touching you."

Thrain bit back a laugh at the lad's uncertainty. "It's all right, Elias. I don't mind if you touch me." He let his voice drop to a low, intimate tone. "As long as you don't mind my touching you, that is."

"Oh...um..." Elias seemed at a loss for words, and Thrain sensed he was conflicted.

"I didn't wake you to torment you, you know," he said lightly. "I just wanted to be sure you felt well before I left you for a time. Do you?"

Elias moved tentatively away from him, obviously a little afraid of losing contact completely. Thrain waited patiently until the younger man finally pulled completely away, putting about a foot of space between them in the huge bed. "All right?" he asked at last.

"Yes, fine." Elias turned to face him. "I mean, I'm cold, but other than that..."

"Good." Thrain smiled. "Would that I could stay and warm you, but I must get down to the forge. Will you be all right while I'm gone?"

"As long as you don't take too long. I mean..." Elias looked like he wanted to add something else, but he stopped and shook his head instead. "Just don't be too long," he said at last.

Thrain got out of bed and reached for his clothes. "I'll bring breakfast when I return. The kitchens should be up at least. How does hot bread and butter and honey sound to you?"

"Lovely." Elias smiled. "I suppose I shall pass the time reading."

There were plenty of other things Thrain would have liked to do to pass the time. Still half-asleep, his black curls messy and tousled around his face, Elias looked entirely too inviting, naked and tangled in the sheets as he was. Thrain felt his cock stir again and had to remind himself to take things slowly. Elias was just beginning to come around, and rushing things would only set him back. Besides, he really *did* have to get down to the forge.

"Have fun," he said, smiling as he slid his dagger into his boot. "But not *too* much fun."

"Which is to say, don't burn anything down while you're gone," Elias said with a short laugh.

"Exactly." Deciding he couldn't go without making *some* kind of gesture, Thrain leaned over and gave him a swift, gentle kiss on the lips. "I'll be back soon." When he left, Elias was touching his mouth tentatively, as if to make sure the kiss had really happened, and there was an uncertain look in his golden eyes.

* * *

Getting down to the forge and stealing a plain iron collar was no trouble at all. Ungor believed in having all his slaves and thralls wear them as a mark of their servitude, so there were always plenty to spare. Nicking a pot of black paint from the artisan who had been hired to paint a mural in the great hall was a little more difficult, but Thrain managed it. He hoped the collar would have time to dry before Elias put it on again. It needed to look exactly the same shade as the dull black magic-null metal in order to fool anyone.

A quick stop at the kitchens, and he had a hot loaf of bread, a small crock of fresh butter, a clay jar of honey, and a jug of fresh milk. Then he took the servants' way back to his rooms to avoid contact with anyone of rank. He'd gone as quickly as he could, but the sun was still high in the sky when he arrived outside his own door. *Hope Elias is all right*! Nothing appeared to be on fire, which was a good sign, but he was still worried about the lad.

As it turned out, he needn't have been concerned. When he walked in, Elias was sitting quietly at the table with a couple of dusty, tattered books, an intent look on his face as he scanned a faded page.

"Elias?" Thrain put his loot on the table. "What's the matter? You look deep in thought."

"Hmm?" The younger man looked up, a faraway look in his golden eyes. "Oh sorry, I was just reading. This book is fascinating."

Thrain laughed. "Don't tell me you actually found something new to read. I would've thought you'd gotten through all my books long ago."

"I would have thought so too. But these were hidden." Elias pointed to the dusty tomes before him. "Did you know you have a secret compartment in your bookshelf?"

"What? Where? Show me!" Thrain demanded.

Standing, Elias went to the massive wooden bookshelf and reached into a corner created by the center support. "I was reaching for a book in the back, and I felt a carving—here." He showed Thrain, who, being taller, was able to see what he was talking about instead of just feeling it.

"It looks like a flower—a daisy," he said, peering into the dim shelf.

"Press it," Elias suggested. "And then press on the wood of the support."

Thrain did as he said and was surprised to find part of the bookcase folded in on itself as a secret compartment was revealed. "The books were in here?"

Elias nodded. "Did someone else own these shelves before they came to you?"

Thrain looked thoughtful. "My milk nurse. You know, daisies always were her favorite flower. And I remember her telling me that there was more to books than met the eye. Mayhap this was what she was speaking of." "I wonder if the notations I found in the books are hers." Elias sounded thoughtful. He went back to the table and brought the two books to Thrain to examine. "This one I remember seeing in the Castle Rowan library as a child," he said, handing the crumbling volume to Thrain, who took it carefully.

"A Catalogue of Dragons. It's written by the mage Brogan," he said, examining it. "The greatest dragon master to ever live."

Elias tapped the book. "He actually catalogs the various types of dragons and tells their powers. He even names the ones he's met and mastered. There's a listing in the back."

Thrain flipped carefully through the crumbling pages and frowned. "I see no listing."

"That's because it's been ripped out of this copy of the book." Elias pointed sadly at the ragged binding and missing pages. "It's too bad, really. I can still remember thinking how exciting it was that he had actually mastered over a hundred dragons and called them by name. I used to pore over the names for hours. They're all in the Old Tongue, you know, so they all have power and meaning."

"Fascinating," Thrain agreed. "But what is the other book about?"

Elias went suddenly red. "It...it's about Lorik and Sandor, actually. But it's like no history *I've* ever read."

"How so?"

"See for yourself. There are some passages underlined here and here." Elias pointed over his shoulder. "And someone has written in the back and in the margins."

Thrain flipped to one of the underlined passages near the front and read it aloud. "Now Lorik was a warrior strong and true, with hair like the sun and eyes like the sky at midnight, and none could defeat him in battle. But his heart was cold until he met Sandor, with hair as black as coal and eyes like golden flame. He was an untried boy—a mage born, full of magik, but as yet unskilled in wielding it." He cleared his throat and looked up.

Elias nodded. "Go on. It gets better."

Thrain looked down and continued. "Now when Lorik saw Sandor, he burned for him. He captured the boy and took him prisoner, thinking to force his love. But Sandor hated him with a hatred as fierce and as hot as dragon fyre, for Lorik did him a great wrong and took him as a man does a woman, for his lust for Sandor could not be slaked."

"It might almost have been written about us," Elias said quietly.

Thrain studied him, trying to gauge the younger man's feelings. "It might at that. Does it say if Sandor ever *really* forgave Lorik?"

"He did." Elias looked down. "He...he found out he needed him. To help control his magic. See the next underlined bit?"

Thrain skipped ahead to the next marked passage and read silently. "Hmm." He coughed. "Seems they became the best of friends."

"Certainly they did. After Sandor learned to submit to Lorik." Elias's face was calm, but his voice was ever so slightly bitter. "Read the end where Lorik tries to slay the black dragon Ulliath Stormbringer and fails."

Thrain flipped to last page. "Then did Lorik smite the dragon a mighty blow, which should have killed it. But in the sword he carried, there was a flaw. For it was enchanted by Sandor himself, who loved and hated in equal measure he who bore it. So did the blade break upon the dragon Ulliath's scaly breast, for the love that tempered the sword was weakened by Sandor's hate. Ulliath breathed flames of fyre, engulfing Lorik and ending his life. Then did Sandor know what was in his true heart, and it was love for Lorik, but he was too late. For even magik cannot bring back that which has been burned in the heart of the dragon's flame." He looked up at Elias again. "Gods…that's morbid stuff. Like a ballad a minstrel would sing for ladies who love to weep and hear sad songs."

"It gets sadder," Elias remarked. "Sandor vows revenge and tracks the dragon to his lair. He kills it but dies himself in the process when he slits it open and the liquid fire of its insides pours out upon him."

"Ugh." Thrain shivered. "I don't remember that part of the legend."

"There is much in that book that doesn't come into the legend we all learned as children," Elias pointed out.

"Indeed," Thrain said. "All I recall my milk nurse saying was that they lived happily ever after to a ripe old age, and that their love was ever true." He frowned and flipped to the very back. "In fact, I believe this is her handwriting. What does she mean by writing 'Thrain is Lorik'? That's ridiculous."

"Read the very end," Elias said, gesturing to the last passage.

Thrain cleared his throat and read. "But there are those who say the kingdome of Lorik and his true love, Sandor, shall come again. And thus do we say when we vowe an oathe 'till kingdome come,' for we speak with hope of that which may come to pass in the future." He gave a disbelieving laugh and looked up at Elias. "Surely you don't believe this?"

Elias crossed his arms over his narrow chest. "Your milk nurse did. Why else would she think that you were the second coming of Lorik?"

"You said yourself she was like a mother to me. What mother does not want greatness for her son? But she always did set more store in such legends than I." Thrain shook his head. "No, I am not vain enough to believe myself an equal to the legend of Lorik. I am nothing but a second son with a thirst for revenge. And speaking of thirst..." He walked to the table and put the book down carefully before pouring a mug full of the rich, frothy new milk. He held it up silently to Elias.

"But what about the similarities?" Elias took the mug from him and took a sip, then made a little noise of appreciation in the back of his throat. "You cannot deny them." "There is that," Thrain admitted, but he was far from believing that their destinies, however intertwined or foreordained, had anything to do with a centuriesold legend. He cut a slice of bread and began slathering it with butter. "Well, let us hope we meet a less tragic end than Lorik and Sandor, then."

"I hope so. It's all very troubling." Elias sank down at the table and cut his own slice from the loaf. But though he was liberal with his use of both butter and honey, Thrain could see he was not really enjoying the excellent bread.

"Look," he said before taking another sip of milk. "I know all seems hopeless now, but I feel we're on the right path. When you learn to control your magic—"

Elias rounded on him. "That's what's so troubling. I was thinking—hoping that what we had to do last night was a onetime occurrence. But if the book is right... There was one passage especially, I..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

Thrain wiped his fingers carefully and picked up the book again. "Where exactly *is* this oh-so-troubling passage," he murmured, flipping pages until he found another underlined part he hadn't read. "Oh yes. *Therefore did Lorik hold Sandor to him closely, for the magik was too much and would have torn Sandor apart, else he did. Lorik's touch calmed the wild beaste of magik in Sandor's breast, and he helped to tame it with the pleasure of his hand."*

"You see?" Elias said, and his voice carried more than a trace of bitterness this time. "I must submit to you if I am ever to control that which resides within me."

"You find my touch that repulsive, do you?" Thrain shot him a level glance, and Elias had the grace to blush.

"You know I do not," he murmured, looking down. "It's just... I always longed for magic of my own. But I never dreamed that when I got it, I would be tied to someone else, dependent on them to help me control it."

"I am sorry it should be so distressing to you," Thrain said quietly. "And sorry that I am the one you must be tied to." He looked at the half loaf of bread that was still steaming on the table and looked away again. Elias's admission had taken away his appetite.

"Thrain—" Elias's golden eyes were troubled.

"Never mind that now." Thrain shook his head briskly. He picked up another piece of bread and forced himself to take a bite he didn't want. "Moaning and morbid details aside, I think your finding these books—or this one at least—is most fortuitous." He tapped the ancient leather cover of the book about Lorik and Sandor.

"Oh? How so?" Elias took another bite of bread as well, though he still didn't look as though he was enjoying it.

"It's shown us how to proceed. How to go about taming your magic," Thrain pointed out.

"I thought you didn't set much store in old legends." Elias frowned.

"Just because I don't believe we are truly Lorik and Sandor come again doesn't mean I don't think the entire legend is useless. In this case, it's been very useful indeed, telling us what to do." Thrain smiled at him, letting the heat show in his eyes. "And it appears that it will be a most pleasurable process all around."

Elias's breath hitched in his chest, and his eyes widened for a moment. "You...you think we ought to try what...what Lorik and Sandor...?"

"I *absolutely* think we ought to try." Thrain put down his bread. Slowly and deliberately, his gaze never leaving Elias's, he licked the warm, sticky honey from the tips of his fingers.

"When?" Elias's breathing was definitely uneven now, and Thrain felt a familiar flash of triumph. So the boy wasn't quite over resenting him—what of it? The fact that he could bring a flush to Elias's cheeks and cause a bulge in his breeches without even touching him was proof enough that the younger man would come around in time. And Thrain was determined to be patient, no matter what.

"No time like the present," he said and watched Elias's thick black lashes fan down over his high cheekbones as the boy drew in a gasp. Oh yes, Elias was definitely affected, whether or not he admitted it. "That is," he continued, "if you're done with your breakfast?"

"Yes, thanks." Elias pushed the bread away. "I...I think I've had all I want."

"I haven't," Thrain said and leaned over to capture Elias's honey-sweet mouth with his own. The kiss lasted for a long, delicious moment, and then he pulled reluctantly away.

"Why...? What...?" Elias looked at him uncertainly. His pupils were dilated, his eyes a velvety black with just a ring of gold around them.

"We need to get ready." Thrain smiled at him and got up from the table. "Come. There isn't a moment to lose." He ignored the mystified expression on the younger man's face and went to make his preparations.

This was going to be one magic lesson neither of them would ever forget.

Chapter Eleven

Elias felt like his heart might stop in his chest. Could this really be happening? Could he really be doing this?

To be fair, the mirror was Thrain's idea.

"Your eyes give the danger away," he told Elias as he positioned it at the foot of the bed. It was a heavy thing in a gilt frame on carved wooden feet, but Thrain lifted it as if it weighed less than a pillow.

"What do my eyes have to do with *that*?" Elias nodded at the mirror. "And why are you putting it there?"

"You're going to watch," Thrain instructed. "Watch your eyes in the mirror as you do magic. If they flame up—go like the dragon's—you'll know you need to back it off a little."

"I can't back it off. That's the problem," Elias protested.

"That's where I come in." Thrain gave him a lazy grin that seemed to make his stomach do flip-flops. "If you start to feel it get out of control, tell me, and I'll touch you. We'll back it off together."

"Touch me?" he said stupidly. He can't mean what I think he means, can he?

"Stroke you. Your cock," Thrain clarified matter-of-factly. "Come, Elias. It isn't like I haven't touched you before. Last night—"

"Last night it was dark and under the covers." Elias could hear the panic in his voice but couldn't seem to control it. "You're asking me to sit here in the broad light of day and watch you...watch you..."

"Watch me help you," Thrain said simply. "Or can you think of another way to do it?"

Elias tried, racking his brain for an idea that was less embarrassing. Less...*intimate*. But nothing came to mind. The book about Lorik and Sandor had made it fairly clear what had to be done, and that was exactly what Thrain was proposing. Still, there was something about the idea of sitting there while the other man stroked his naked shaft that made him feel hot and cold at the same time.

"It won't be so bad," Thrain said, breaking his train of thought. He was positioning an unlit beeswax candle on the somewhat charred mantelpiece, where it would be visible from the bed. Apparently satisfied, he turned and walked back. Settling at the foot of the bed, he patted the space between his thighs. "Now then, come and sit here." Dragging his feet every step of the way, Elias did as he was told. "Are you sure this is necessary?" he asked when he was standing between Thrain's spread thighs.

"If you ever want to learn to control your magic, yes," Thrain said firmly. "Now sit." He patted the space on the bed between his legs again, and Elias knew he had no choice.

Feeling incredibly vulnerable, he sat stiffly between Thrain's legs and looked into the mirror. Since Thrain was taller than he, it was easy to see both of them. Elias had a nervous expression on his face, but Thrain looked speculative, as though they were about to perform an experiment, and he was eager to see the outcome.

"You're not wearing your magic null," Elias blurted, looking at the other man's dark gold hair, unmarred by the usual dull black circlet.

"No," Thrain said simply. "I trust you not to hurt me."

"I wouldn't on purpose, but the magic is wild—fierce. You might be safer with it on," Elias pointed out. He still half wished he was wearing the ice-cold collar of magic null himself.

"I do not fear you or your magic, Elias. Come. Relax a little." Thrain put his arms around Elias's waist, tugging at him until Elias's back connected with his chest. As they were both wearing plain linen shirts—Elias's was slightly too large since it had been made for Thrain—Elias could feel the heat of the other man's body quite clearly. Thrain put his chin on Elias's shoulder and nuzzled his neck. "Mmm," he rumbled, his breath hot on Elias's throat. "You always smell so damn good."

"Really?" Elias was surprised into saying. "I always think that of you." Then he blushed, wishing he'd bitten his tongue. It was true, though; this close he could smell the dark, spicy scent that was at once and entirely Thrain. And there was no denying that being this close to the other man did something to him. Already he could feel his cock hardening in his breeches, and Thrain had yet to touch him.

Thrain laughed softly. "I am glad you like *something* about me at least. Well, let us begin."

"What do you want me to do, try to light the candle?" Elias looked across the room at the innocent beeswax pillar, wondering if it would melt into a messy puddle on the floor or if the fire of his magic would incinerate the whole thing completely.

"Exactly," Thrain said. "And watch your eyes in the mirror. If the power inside you becomes too much to bear, let me know."

"So you can...touch me?" Elias's throat was so dry he could scarcely get the words out. He wished it were dark in the room as it had been the night before. Wished he couldn't look at the mirror and see Thrain's hawklike eyes watching him so sharply.

"Yes. Look. We'll try it like this to start with if it makes you so uncomfortable." Thrain reached in front of him and cupped the bulge in Elias's breeches. Rubbing it gently with the flat of his hand, he murmured, "There now. That's not so bad, is it?"

"I...I suppose not." Elias struggled not to press his hips forward and lean into the gentle, intimate touch. Gods, if he was still uncertain about what he should feel, why did Thrain's hand on his cock feel so right? He was soothed and aroused at once, an odd combination and a feeling he'd never had before.

"Good," Thrain said in a low voice. "I won't do more unless I must. Now, look at the candle, Elias. Concentrate. I want you to light it."

Elias took a deep breath and looked at the wick, imagining a candle flame in his mind. Nothing big or frightening, just a tiny, safe little flame. "Burn," he whispered in the Old Tongue.

The magic came at once, the power filling him like a cup to overflowing. A flame three feet high shot up from the wick. At the same time his eyes blazed gold, as bright as dragon fire in the mirror.

"Too much." Thrain's voice was low and firm in his ear as he gently massaged Elias's cock through his breeches. "Back it down. Concentrate, Elias."

"I...I can't." Elias felt close to panic. He could feel the magic growing in him once more, pushing at the boundaries of his mind. How stupid he'd been to call it to him! It was like letting a huge, rampaging beast into the house and expecting it to lie down quietly and do nothing.

"All right, then." Thrain's hands were busy with his breeches. Suddenly they parted, and Elias felt cool air on his aching shaft. The draft was shortly replaced by the feel of Thrain's callous palm gripping him firmly. "Slowly," he murmured in Elias's ear as he began to stroke in a gentle rhythm that sent sparks of pleasure down his spine. "Call the magic to you. Feel it. Calm it."

As before, the warm pleasure of Thrain's touch seemed to center him somehow, and Elias felt his panic melt away as the other man stroked him. "Less," he whispered to the dripping candle, which was much shorter than it had been before they began. "Much less."

To his surprise and delight, the candle flame flickered and began to shrink. Soon it was barely bigger than a normal flame, and except for the runnels of melted wax dripping from the mantelpiece, it looked perfectly all right. More importantly, the magic inside him was no longer pushing to get out and threatening to burst him apart with its demanding power.

"Good, very good," Thrain said softly in his ear. "Look at your eyes."

Elias obediently looked into the mirror, but it wasn't his own eyes that caught his attention. It was the sight of Thrain sitting behind him, his muscular arms encircling Elias's waist and one large hand gripping his cock. Elias's shaft was achingly hard, practically throbbing in Thrain's hand, and he saw with a surge of shame that the plum-shaped head was shiny with precum. The sight was at once incredibly erotic and terribly embarrassing. "Gods," he whispered, feeling the hot blood rush to his cheeks. "I can't believe I'm letting you do this."

"Why? It helps, does it not?" Thrain went on stroking as though it was no big deal to work Elias so with his hand. "Does the pleasure not help you bring your magic under control?" "It does," Elias admitted shakily. "It's just... I never thought to have to watch myself being so handled. Especially not by another man."

"So we're back to that, are we? Your uncertainty about feeling attraction for your own sex?" Thrain sounded amused. "Let me assure you, Elias, did you not have at least some feelings for other men, the touch of my hand would cause you to wilt, not harden."

"I suppose," Elias said reluctantly. He couldn't seem to take his eyes from the sight of Thrain stroking him in the mirror. Was he actually working his hips in time to the rhythm the other man had established? Actually thrusting up into Thrain's hand? He made himself stop at once.

Thrain chuckled in his ear. "It's all right to enjoy yourself a little. You can move. I don't mind."

"I do. I don't want to move. If I do, I might..." Elias trailed off, embarrassed.

"Don't worry that you might come." Thrain pressed his lips to the side of Elias's neck, a hot, possessive kiss that made him feel weak. "I won't let you do that until we're done."

"But I don't *want* to come." Elias tried to hold rigidly still, but it was difficult with the slow, sensual pleasure Thrain was inflicting on him. Gods, he'd been touched before this, but never with such a warm, knowing hand. Thrain stroked him as though he knew exactly how to make him lose control—which made it doubly strange that his touch actually *helped* Elias control the magic.

"But you will," Thrain responded matter-of-factly. He kissed Elias again, this time using his tongue to lick a burning trail just under Elias's ear. "You'll come when I feel you've made some progress and mastered the magic a little more. 'Twill be your reward for a job well done. Now kill the candle, Elias. Douse it."

Giving up the argument with Thrain as a bad job, Elias decided to concentrate on the magic instead. Pointedly ignoring the erotic sight in the mirror, he stared at the candle flame and whispered, "Out."

At once a sheet of water splashed over the candle, killing the flame with a hiss. It was as though an invisible hand had dumped a bucket full to the brim over the wick.

"Well, that got the job done, but I think it was a bit of overkill," Thrain said drily as they both stared at the blackened wick and the puddle beneath the mantelpiece. "Let's try to light it again. But *gently* this time. *Slowly*." He stroked Elias's shaft to emphasize the words, drawing a soft gasp from his lips.

"Gods!" Elias let his eyes flutter closed for a moment, enjoying the sensation of the other man's hand on his cock and the feel of Thrain's warm, wet tongue stroking his neck roughly. But his moment of relaxation didn't last.

Thrain nipped his earlobe sharply enough to make him jump. "Open your eyes."

"Ouch!" He rubbed his ear and glared at Thrain in the mirror. "Why did you do that?"

"You're meant to be practicing your magic, not relaxing while I stroke you off," Thrain pointed out. "Now do it again, but better this time."

"You're a hard taskmaster," Elias grumbled, and Thrain chuckled softly in his ear.

"Indeed. I'm near as hard as you." He pulled Elias closer and pressed his hips forward. The branding heat of his shaft, like a hot bar of lead, thrust against Elias's lower back, making him bite his lip. Apparently Thrain enjoyed touching him almost as much as Elias enjoyed being touched. But wait... *Was* he enjoying this? Just because he'd forgiven Thrain didn't mean he was ready to give himself up entirely to the other man and let him do what he would. And yet here he was, leaning back against Thrain's broad chest, his legs spread like an eager wench, allowing the other man to touch and stroke him at will. What was he coming to?

Not coming at all unless you make some progress with the magic. The thought refocused him. This was simply something Thrain had to do to help him control his magic—it didn't have to mean anything. The important thing was getting the job done. Better get on with it, then. Unless you want to sit here with him like this all day. Elias didn't want to admit—even to himself—how appealing that idea was, so he decided to get back to work.

Taking a deep breath, he concentrated on the blackened wick and whispered, "Burn." This time he managed to make a flame that was a mere two feet high. With Thrain's murmurs of encouragement in his ear and the warm pleasure of his hand on his shaft, Elias began to shrink the flame slowly down to size.

"Good, Elias. Very good," Thrain said softly when he'd gotten it down to normal again. "I think you're making real progress." His hand left Elias's cock for a moment, and when it came back, there was something cool and slippery in his palm. Elias bit back a groan as the pleasure intensified.

Aided by the oil he was using, Thrain's fingers glided skillfully up and down Elias's shaft, making his spine feel like melted butter. Happening to look in the mirror again, he couldn't help watching as Thrain's big hand engulfed his cock, sliding along his shaft, which was glistening with oil. But it was the look of intense concentration in Thrain's eyes when Elias met his gaze in the mirror that pushed him even closer to the edge.

"Beautiful," Thrain murmured, his gaze never leaving Elias's. "So beautiful when you submit to me. To my touch. Do you like this, Elias? Do you like to watch me touch you—take you? My hand on your cock as you thrust for me?"

"Gods," Elias gasped. The erotic sight of the other man stroking his shaft while he lay back against Thrain, his legs spread, helplessly receiving the pleasure the other man was giving, as well as the soft, deep voice in his ear speaking such heated words was too much. Elias felt himself tilting over the edge. "I can't...can't keep this up much longer. Can't hold off if you keep...keep touching me like that," he moaned.

"Like this, you mean?" Reaching into Elias's breeches, Thrain cupped his balls in his other hand. Then, starting at the bottom of his shaft, he began a long, slow slide upward until he reached the crown of Elias's cock, his thumb slipping over the aching head to capture the droplets of precum there and use them as further lubrication.

"Gods, too much!" Elias groaned, squeezing his eyes closed. He could feel the orgasm building deep inside and knew he was about to explode. He was so close...so close. Suddenly a firm pressure around the base of his cock stopped the feeling in its tracks. "What...?" Elias opened his eyes to see Thrain smiling in the mirror at him like a cat that had gotten the cream.

"Not yet. You won't come until I let you." Thrain's eyes were half-lidded with lust, and his cock was as hard as ever against Elias's back, but it was clear he was serious.

Elias watched in the mirror as his own eyes widened in disbelief. "You must be joking. This is torture!"

"I thought you didn't want to come," Thrain mocked in a low voice. "Are you more ready to accept the pleasure I give you now?"

"Please, I just... I don't know what I want." Elias was filled with frustration. "Why can't anything ever be simple with you?"

"You'd get bored." Thrain began to stroke him once more. "Again. Kill the candle. More gently this time, please."

Elias had no choice but to comply.

He had no idea how long it went on. Hours perhaps. Hours of Thrain touching him, teasing him. Bringing him right to the brink and then backing him off. And the entire time he was speaking in Elias's ear in that soft, deep voice. Praising him. Telling him how well he was doing, urging him to concentrate, to do more. And telling him how hard he was going to make him come when they were finished.

"Please," Elias begged at last. "Please, I've lit the candle and killed it perfectly the last three times in a row. I'm about to die, Thrain. I...I need to come."

"You admit it, do you?"

"I do." Elias was exhausted.

"Then ask for it." Thrain kissed the side of his neck and rolled his balls gently in one callous hand. "Ask me to make you come."

"Gods." Elias closed his eyes for a moment. There was something humiliating about what Thrain was asking him to do. But at the same time, he couldn't remember ever being hotter or more eager for a release. When he opened his eyes, Thrain was watching him silently, a look of hungry concentration on his sharp features. "You want to hear me beg?" he asked, meeting the other man's gaze in the mirror. "Fine, I'll beg. Please, Thrain. *Please* let me come."

"With pleasure, Elias. You've earned it." Thrain caressed his cock, this time in a much faster rhythm. "Keep looking at me," he murmured in Elias's ear. "I want to look into your eyes when you come for me. Want to watch you lose control."

"Gods!" With the faster pace Elias felt his pleasure building to a peak. Helplessly he bucked his hips up to meet Thrain's hand as their eyes remained locked in the mirror. "Thrain," he rasped, hardly recognizing his own voice. "Gods, Thrain."

"Come for me, Elias." Thrain's voice was soft and commanding in his ear. "Come hard. Now."

With a low cry, Elias did as he commanded. The orgasm pounded through him with a power he'd never imagined before. It was a living thing that took command of his body and wouldn't let go. And all the time Thrain was murmuring in his ear.

"That's right, Elias. Come hard. Give me all you've got."

Elias did, his cum fountaining over Thrain's fist in hot, hard spurts as he gave complete control of himself to the other man. *Gods, so good...so good*! Shame and anger alike were burned away in the white-hot heat of the pleasure Thrain gave him, and he felt the magic relax and go dormant inside him.

"Gods," he whispered in a shaky voice as the orgasm ebbed. "I've never felt like that before."

"You're fucking gorgeous when you come." Thrain nipped his earlobe lightly, his eyes still half-lidded in the mirror. "I shall certainly look forward to our future practice sessions."

"Future sessions?" Elias tried to stand up and stumbled instead. His legs were numb.

"Here, you're weak as a kitten." Thrain pulled him back into his arms and scooted them both toward the middle of the bed. He lay on his side and watched as Elias turned weakly to face him.

"About those future sessions," Elias said again. "Don't you think I've had enough practice?"

"If all you wanted to do was light candles, yes," Thrain said lightly. "However, it's going to take more than a candle flame to kill Baynor and my father."

"I don't know what you expect me to do to them," Elias said irritably. He was beyond exhausted and only wanted to sleep, though it was the middle of the day.

Thrain frowned. "I don't either, but never fear. The details will work themselves out soon enough. For now we've got to get your magic perfect, and we've got less than three weeks to do it. That means *a lot* of practice."

"How perfect are we talking about?" Elias demanded. He was aware that he was lying on the bed with his breeches still unfastened, but he was so tired he couldn't even make himself fasten them. It was as though the magic-assisted orgasm had taken as much energy as twenty regular ones. He felt like he could sleep for a week.

Thrain looked thoughtful. "When you can control the magic without my touch, then I shall consider you ready. Until then, practice makes perfect." Leaning over, he kissed Elias lightly on the mouth. "Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it." Elias looked away. *I did enjoy it—too much. That's what worries me.* But he wasn't about to say that to Thrain. Instead he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm just tired. Deadly tired," he murmured, and it was true.

"The magic has taken a lot out of you." Thrain stroked his hair away from his face with a gentle hand. "You did well for our first session. Sleep now for a time, Elias."

Elias was only too happy to do as he said. But as sleep claimed him, he heard the dragon's words once again and wondered what good controlling his magic would do if he could not solve the strange riddle it had posed him.

Chapter Twelve

The next couple of weeks flew by with a speed that astonished Elias. It seemed that all he did was practice his magic morning, noon, and night, and Thrain was with him each step of the way. Though he still resented the fact that he needed the other man to control his powers, in time it became second nature to him. Soon the feel of Thrain's hand on his shaft was as familiar as his own—much to Elias's shame.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd thought Thrain cared for him in some way, but the way he spoke constantly of revenge and Baynor's impending coronation made it clear he valued Elias only for his magic. Elias began to feel used, as though he was only a means to Thrain's end. And as such, the magic practice began to make him resentful and unhappy.

Despite Elias's growing disenchantment, Thrain was endlessly inventive. Sometimes he lay behind Elias and stroked him, and at other times he made Elias straddle his hips and look into his eyes while Elias concentrated on an object behind him that he couldn't see. It was both frustrating and tantalizing, but as Thrain pointed out, Elias might need to be hidden somewhere and unable to see his target. Or maybe Thrain just liked looking into his eyes when he made Elias come. That was entirely possible, as far as Elias was concerned. Thrain liked to be in control, liked having Elias in the palm of his hand, both literally and figuratively.

One thing Thrain never did, however, was come himself. He touched Elias in every conceivable way and position, but he never asked for relief for his own desire. After the first couple of weeks of practice, Elias reluctantly offered to ease his pain. They were sitting across from each other at the table, drinking bitter ale, but he'd spent the last hour and a half in bed with Thrain's cock branding his hip. Given his obvious need, Elias more than expected the other man to take him up on his offer. But Thrain only shook his head.

"This is for you—about you controlling your abilities, Elias. If I let you pleasure me as I pleasure you, I might lose sight of that. And we can't afford to take our eyes off the goal. Baynor will take the crown in a week's time, and we must be ready with your magic and a plan in place."

"That's all you ever talk about, you know. Your revenge and Baynor's coronation."

Thrain raised his eyebrows in obvious surprise. "I thought that was the whole point of this."

Elias looked down. "Maybe for you it is."

"Elias, what—"

"You promised to let me go after I helped you win your crown," Elias reminded him tightly, looking up.

"And so I shall, if you truly wish to leave so badly." Thrain's voice was quiet.

"I do." Elias looked away, not wanting to see the other man's eyes. It was true he no longer hated Thrain, and he could not deny that he found great pleasure in the other man's touch. But there was still something inside him, something unyielding that could not forgive completely. Not as long as he believed that Thrain was only using him to get his revenge. And he could not forget that, though he was a willing participant this time, Thrain was still mastering him sexually, just as he had during the assault. I'm not my own man anymore. I depend on him for everything—food, clothes, controlling the magic. He owns me in ways a man isn't meant to be owned by another. It is shameful, not right. All pretense aside, I really am his bed slave in every way but one. And just because he hasn't shoved his cock in me again doesn't make me any less his whore.

"What of the dragon's foretelling that we shall unite the realms? Am I not your Lorik as you are my Sandor?" Thrain asked, breaking his train of thought.

"The dragon may say what it wishes. My first duty is to my mother and my kingdom. I cannot...cannot stay here and be owned by you." Elias looked up at him, meeting the midnight blue eyes across the table. "Unless you plan to break your promise and keep me against my will, I must away."

"No, I will not do that." Thrain looked troubled. He downed the last of his ale and rose. "As soon as I get my revenge, you are free to go where you wish."

Elias looked down into his own ale mug as though the frothy white foam could tell him what to say. *Maybe if I thought that when you touched me it meant something more than vengeance, it would not be so hard to submit to your touch and I would not be so eager to leave.* But he couldn't say it aloud, though he wished to. The words died on his lips.

"You must have complete control of your magic before I let you go, though," Thrain said in a brisker tone. "I won't allow you to leave, only to hear you've exploded yourself and set all the best crop fields afire in the bargain."

"You don't have to worry about that." Elias frowned. "I'm getting better every day."

"Of course you are, as long as I'm here to touch you." Thrain put down his mug and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Out. I'll bring supper when I return. Be ready to practice again."

"Certainly, my lord." Elias put as much sarcasm into the words as he could muster.

Thrain frowned, his blue eyes flashing. "Have a care, Elias. Don't imagine that my regard for you means I will tolerate insolence."

"I've nothing to do *but* be insolent." Elias lifted his chin defiantly. "That, and practice my magic under your watchful eye—and *hand*."

Thrain sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "I am sorry you find our practice sessions so distasteful. But they are necessary until you can control the magic on your own. Try to get some rest while I'm gone. My brother will be king a week hence, and we still have no idea how to stop him."

"That's down to you." Elias took another swig of his ale, though he truly didn't want it. "You're the brains, and I'm the brawn, remember?"

Thrain barked out a laugh. "It seems our natural roles have reversed. Very well, Elias. I shall fulfill my end if you fulfill yours. But that means I must think and you must practice, whether you like it or not."

"Fine." Elias knew he was acting like a sulky child, but he was tired of feeling owned. Tired of being cooped up in Thrain's rooms with nothing to do but submit over and over to the shameful pleasure of the other man's hand on his shaft as he strove to control the power within him. Tired of knowing he was nothing more than a means to an end. He wanted out—away from Castle Black, away from Thrain, and away from the dragon's grandiose predictions. He rose restlessly and paced around the room.

Thrain watched him for a moment. "You are troubled, Elias. Speak your mind. Tell me what it is you want."

Elias rounded on him. "You really want to know what I want?"

"I asked, didn't I?" Thrain's voice was soft, his eyes watchful.

Elias couldn't hold it in anymore. "I want things to go back to the way they were before I ever met you. Before you took me away from my home and made me yours in every sense of the word. You may own my body, but you cannot own my mind or my heart."

Thrain's frown melted into something much less severe—something almost approaching despair. He opened his mouth as though to say something else and then closed it and shook his head. Without a word he left, shutting the door behind him and leaving Elias to his own devices.

For a moment Elias almost felt bad. Then he straightened his shoulders. *Why* should I care if the truth hurts him? He doesn't really care for me; he's just using me to get his revenge. He has sworn to let me go when all this is over, and I'm damn well going. Of course, Thrain had also said he wouldn't allow Elias to leave until he was certain he could control the magic by himself. With a sudden chill, Elias wondered if the other man would use Elias's own power as an excuse to keep him. He can't. He mustn't.

Trying not to think about it, he went over to the bookcase and began to peruse the shelves. He'd read almost everything by now, but there was nothing else to do—

nothing except practice his magic, and he couldn't do that without Thrain to help him.

Who says I can't? Elias put down the book he'd been looking at and frowned. It was the book on dragon lore, the one that had the back section torn out. If I truly have a dragon's magic, I should have its courage as well. He hadn't dared to call the magic to him without Thrain's help since that first night. It seemed too dangerous, too frightening. And yet how was he to ever prove to Thrain he could control his powers without help if he didn't at least try?

Forget it. It's a stupid idea. Elias picked up the book again and went to lie on the bed and read it. But though he tried to concentrate, the idea wouldn't leave his head. Just something simple. Something small. It'll be easy. The magic is so much tamer now, more controlled. And then when Thrain comes back, you can show him. Show him he doesn't own you, that you don't need him.

Elias got off the bed with sudden decision. Scanning the room for something to practice on, he lit on an uneaten apple left over from lunch. After grabbing the apple, he set it on the much-abused mantelpiece and stood back, staring at it. *I can do this. I know I can.*

After so much intensive practice, doing magic no longer tired him as it had at first. Thrain had likened the process to that of building a muscle and had predicted that the more Elias used his power, the easier it would become. Elias had found this to be true, and now, though Thrain had pushed him to the limit and made him come less than an hour before, he found no problem in calling the magic to him again.

It came at once, like a well-behaved dog—or a well-behaved dragon, in this case. For that was how Elias thought of it, as a fiery beast that lived within him and was barely chained by the strength of his will. Concentrating on the apple, he imagined holding it in his fist and squeezing with all his might. "Burst," he murmured in the Old Tongue.

Two things happened at once: the apple exploded, and the magic broke its chain.

"Gods!" Elias felt the familiar wave of heat as the power rushed through him. He tried to pull back, tried to control it as he was able to when Thrain touched him, but it was no use. His eyelids were burning hot, and he knew his eyes were like flames as the magic pushed to get out. *It was only pretending to be tamed. Only pretending to be well behaved.* It had fooled him completely—the traitor within, the dragon inside him. Only one man could save him now.

Thrain. Must find him. Elias staggered toward the door, but it was as though his limbs were unwieldy sticks. Nothing wanted to work right, and the magic growing inside him made him feel like his skin was too tight, as though he might burst like an overripe grape at any moment. He was horribly hot and getting hotter by the moment. Stumbling, he fell across the bed and lay there on his side, unable to get up.

His last conscious thought was that he was going to die for his stupidity, and he had no one to blame but himself.

* * *

As he left his rooms, Thrain descended into black despair. Elias's words wouldn't leave his head. "I just want things to go back to the way they were before I ever met you. You may own my body, but you cannot own my mind or my heart."

He hates me now. He was beginning to come round, but these practice sessions have made him resent and despise me. He thinks himself a bird in a gilded cage, and I am the jailor who holds the key and stands in the way of his freedom.

It was true, and Thrain knew it. What he didn't know was what to do about it. Or anything else, for that matter. They had only a week before the coronation, and though Elias was getting better at his magic, he still needed Thrain's touch to control it. There's no way I can stroke him off in front of the whole court in the great hall while he magics Baynor and Father. Even if I could, it wouldn't do any good; the both of them are always wearing their magic-null crowns. Father does not even sleep without his. How can I task Elias about not having his magic under control when I do not even know how I'm to get him a chance to use it?

It was the same problem that had been troubling his thoughts for the last two weeks—that, and the fact that Elias was growing steadily away from him. For a time after the lad had first forgiven him, it had seemed like Elias was beginning to regard him as almost a friend. And friendship may turn to love—or so Thrain had told himself. But the balance had shifted. Elias had as much as told him that he was only marking time until the business with Baynor and Ungor was finished, and then he couldn't wait to shake the dust of Castle Black off his boots.

Thrain wondered if there was anything he could do to change the younger man's mind. He even briefly considered holding the lad with him against his will, but that would mean breaking his word. I'm not willing to do that. Even if it means losing him. But gods, the idea of letting him go—it hurts. Hurts so badly.

It was both irritating and ironic that Thrain, who had never loved another, had finally learned how to feel. And the object of my affection wants nothing to do with me. If only...

"You must be sure they are polished and perfect. The king will have nothing less at the coronation of the crown prince."

Thrain stopped in his tracks, the words startling him out of his inner misery. Looking around, he realized that he'd walked nearly half the length of the castle and was in the vicinity of the treasury. It was a remote series of rooms usually barred by a heavy iron door. Today, however, the door was standing ajar, and voices were floating out from within the confines of the treasury.

"It shall be as you say, Lord Treasurer," a second voice answered. "You need not tell me how important it is that the crown jewels look resplendent. For all that King Ungor never wears it, he still expects the royal crown to be in perfect condition when he *does* deign to put on." "Indeed, and the rest of the court will see it as well, for he will be wearing it for the whole of the coronation," the head treasurer continued. "Or at least he will wear it until he transfers it to Prince Baynor's head."

"Will it fit, do you think?" the second man asked. "Baynor's a sight bigger than his father."

"Never you mind if it will fit. Leave that to me. Your job is to be sure that the gold shines like a mirror and every stone is cleaned and polished so that it gleams like the sun itself."

"Yes, my lord treasurer. Forgive my impertinence," the second man said humbly. His voice was louder now, and Thrain realized he must be moving toward the door. Quickly he dodged back into the shadows and slipped silently away. No one but his father and the men who worked there had any business near the king's riches, and he didn't want to give Baynor anything to use as ammunition against him.

But as his feet took him farther away, his mind was working quickly. The head treasurer's words had planted the seed of an idea. It was going to be risky, but he thought he knew how he was going to get to Baynor and Ungor. However, it all depended on Elias's being able to control his magic in public on his own.

Speaking of Elias, Thrain realized that he had been left alone for more than an hour. Though that was nothing out of the ordinary, for some reason he had a very bad feeling about it this time. In fact, he was feeling concerned about Elias in general. It wasn't right or rational, but he couldn't deny it. *Elias. There's something wrong with Elias. He's in danger*.

Telling himself he could get their dinner later, Thrain skipped a trip to the kitchens in favor of heading back toward his rooms. The closer he got, the more the feeling of unease and disquiet grew, until at last he was nearly running down the corridor where his apartments were quartered.

"Elias?" he shouted. "Elias? Are you well?"

Silence was his only answer, and now the feeling of wrongness had grown inside him until he could think of nothing else. *What if Baynor's got him? What if he's hurt himself somehow and can't speak? Why else would he not answer?*

Bursting into his rooms, he saw that his worst fears were true. Elias was lying on the bed, rigid and obviously immobile. His eyes were wide open and full of flames—dragon's eyes, as Thrain had begun to think of them—and he was gripping the fur coverlet, his knuckles gone white with pain.

"Elias!" Thrain was on the bed with him in a moment. He took Elias's face in his hands. The lad's skin felt like he was being burned alive from the inside out, and his eyes did not change when Thrain called his name.

The magic is consuming him, eating him alive. Must back it down! Thrain knew only one way to do that. Fumbling in his haste, he unfastened Elias's breeches and reached inside to grip his cock.

It was like gripping a bar of heated iron. Elias was as hard as a rock but still completely inert. He made no sign that he felt Thrain's hand on him at all. He only lay there, rigid with pain and frozen by the power of the magic that was overwhelming him.

"Elias, come back to me," Thrain begged, stroking him. He leaned down and kissed the soft lips desperately as he worked Elias as he had never worked him before. He felt as though his heart would burst. "Don't leave me," he whispered. "Gods, Elias, don't leave me."

Suddenly he heard the voice of the dragon in his head. "You will lose him that way, Thrain, son of Ungor. He is too far gone for the pleasure of your hand to bring him back."

"What am I to do, then?" Thrain shouted in frustration, knowing the dragon couldn't hear him. It probably wouldn't even know what was going on at all except for the bond of the magic it shared with Elias. The magic that was killing Elias even now while Thrain was powerless to stop it.

The dragon spoke again. "Pleasure tames the magic. The greater the magic grows, the more pleasure it takes to tame it. Tame the magic or watch him die."

"But how? How, damn it?" Thrain demanded. This time the dragon was silent. It was as though it had felt Elias's distress and said all it had to say on the subject. Looking down at Elias, Thrain pushed himself to think. *Pleasure tames the magic*. *But my hand is not enough*. *I must give more*.

Suddenly he knew what to do. Leaning over Elias, he pushed his breeches down and out of the way. Then he took the burning-hot shaft in his mouth and began to suck. Still Elias gave no sign that he felt anything. Thrain lapped desperately at the hot shaft, bathing Elias with his tongue, sucking the broad head, and exploring the slit with his tongue tip before taking him as deeply into his mouth as he could. But there was still nothing, though the droplets of precum that leaked down his throat were like lava.

Desperate to get a reaction, Thrain pulled away for a moment and fumbled for the healing ointment on the nightstand. He didn't want to think about what he might have to do to bring Elias back. If he took him again without permission—even to save his life—Thrain felt absolutely sure the other man would hate him for the rest of his life. And yet he *had* to bring him back somehow before the magic tore him apart. There was one thing he hadn't yet tried. Stimulating the spot within that he had shown Elias—the spot that gave all men pleasure. Thrain was determined to try that first and save fucking as a last resort.

After dipping into the pot of ointment, he slid his fingers between Elias's legs and stroked them over the tight rosebud. If Elias had been awake and aware and not in mortal danger, he might have spent a long time playing and stretching the tense entrance before he tried to breach it. But there was no time for such niceties now. Saying a silent prayer for forgiveness at his roughness, Thrain thrust two fingers past the ring of muscle guarding Elias's opening and reached deep for the pleasure spot. "Come back to me, Elias," he pleaded as he thrust deeply into the other man's body. "I can't lose you like this. Come back to me!"

Praying to all the gods that had ever been he was doing the right thing, he lowered his mouth to the other man's shaft again and sucked for all he was worth.

The magic held Elias tightly in its grip. The burning pain inside him made him want to writhe and gasp, but the dragon had gotten loose, and it was in control now. It held Elias rigidly still as it expanded, eating him up, burning him alive.

This must be what it's like to burn on the witch pyre. The agony. The heat upon heat you cannot escape no matter how hard you try.

Then the door to the room banged open, and he thought he heard a familiar voice calling his name. He felt the bed dip, and a dark shadow of someone he thought he knew flitted before his burning eyes. Someone stroked his brow anxiously, but Elias could barely feel the touch through the pain that consumed him. Then the person—Elias was sure he knew him, if only the flame that consumed him from within would let him think—was fumbling at his breeches. And then he was stroking Elias off.

Or trying to, anyway, because though Elias was as hard as stone, he could feel only the tiniest tendril of pleasure through the burning pain. He had an idea that the person touching him had done it many times before, because he seemed to know just what Elias liked. Unfortunately he couldn't like anything with the pain in the way.

There was a pause when the person touching him seemed to be having a oneway conversation with someone who wasn't even in the room. And then, suddenly, the hand that stroked his cock was replaced by a mouth.

Gods! This time Elias could feel more—much more. He still couldn't move, but the pleasure was coursing through him. He had a feeling that, given just a little more time, he would be able to throw off the shackles the magic had placed on his arms and legs and respond to the delicious sucking kiss between his legs.

Thrain! It's Thrain who's doing this to me. Who's sucking me. The name came to him on another wave of pleasure, and Elias knew it was right. Gods, who could have guessed that the Blackwater prince had such a talented tongue?

But just as he was about to overcome the magic and begin mastering the dragon within, a new sensation took over. Slick fingers were between his legs, probing. They were coated with something slippery and cool, making him tingle all over as they entered him.

If he hadn't already been completely rigid, Elias would have become so at the feel of Thrain entering him without permission. The sensation of the other man's fingers thrusting roughly into his body brought back the night at Castle Rowan with a vividness he couldn't escape. He desperately wanted to fight, to get away from the intimate and unwanted touch, but he could do nothing but lie there—just as he'd been able to do nothing when Thrain had taken him that night. And then he heard Thrain talking. "Come back to me, Elias. I can't lose you like this. Come back to me!" The pain and fear in his voice, his obvious concern for Elias, changed everything. As Thrain found the spot inside him that caused such pleasure, Elias was reminded not of the night at Castle Rowan, but of the time after Baynor's attack when Thrain had healed him so gently.

There was love in his voice—I know there was. Elias was certain now that Thrain's actions were born not of a desire to despoil, but of a desire to save. He was driven by desperation and fear that he would lose Elias to the magic that filled him. Could it be that he cared for Elias as more than just a way to get his revenge? And did Elias have it in him to return those feelings?

He might have pondered more deeply if Thrain's talented fingers weren't rubbing over the magical spot inside him, sending shocks of pleasure through his entire body. And then the other man lowered his head and sucked Elias's cock down to the root again, and all semblance of rational thought was lost. Elias could do nothing but feel, nothing but react to the intense pleasure of Thrain's hot mouth on his shaft and his long fingers stroking deep inside his body.

The pleasure drove back the magic, but Elias was still held firmly in place. Thrain was a heavy weight draped over his thighs as he continued to thrust into Elias's body and suck his shaft. It felt so incredible, he could scarce draw breath. For a moment, even though the magical paralysis had been broken, Elias couldn't move because of the pleasure. Then his body took over, his hips thrusting up to meet Thrain's heated mouth and grinding against his fingers as they rubbed that secret spot inside him over and over again.

Gods, so good. So good! Elias wished the pleasure would never end, but the double stimulation Thrain was subjecting him to was too much. He found that he was gripping the other man's dark golden hair as he pumped up into his mouth, urging Thrain on shamelessly. The pull of the pleasure was greater than the sense of embarrassment he might once have had, and Elias knew he was lost.

The orgasm rolled over him, pulling him under effortlessly like a riptide at sea, and he felt himself coming in hard, hot spurts that jetted from the tip of his cock like crossbow bolts. He half expected Thrain to pull off, but the other man stayed the course, swallowing Elias's cum and even sucking gently to get the last of it. Elias felt his throat close with tears at the overwhelming release. It was such a strange dichotomy. Thrain had forced him to come with the rough pleasure of his hand and mouth, but now that it was over, he was gentle—almost tender.

The mixture of emotions filled Elias with uncertainty. What did the other man feel for him, if anything? Was there true tenderness in his touch, or was Elias imagining it because he wished it to be so? Because he wished to be more than just an instrument of Thrain's revenge?

His confusion grew as the pleasure ebbed, and Thrain withdrew his fingers and released his shaft. Elias, for his part, unclenched his fingers from the other man's hair and let his arms fall limply to the bed. He stared up at the ceiling, feeling tears leak from the corners of his eyes, down the sides of his face. He did not wish to cry, but the intense orgasm seemed to have broken something inside him. He felt wrung out and weak, as though he'd been wrestling with one of the great black bears of the northern woods, the kind that could take a man's head off with one swipe of its massive paws.

"Elias?" Thrain was suddenly beside him on the bed, stroking his cheek. The look in his eyes was worried and uncertain. "Are you all right?" he asked, looking at his fingertips, which had come away wet, and then back to Elias.

"I think so." Elias rubbed an arm over his eyes, wiping roughly at the tears. He didn't like to appear weak in front of Thrain, especially after what had just happened.

"What happened?" Thrain asked softly. "How did you come to be in the state I found you in?"

"I..." For a moment Elias was at a loss for words, but the look in Thrain's eyes was so serious and upset, he found himself answering. "I was practicing my magic. That's all."

"Practicing? Without me?" Thrain raised an eyebrow in obvious disapproval.

"Yes." Elias was regaining a little of his strength. He sat up on the bed and began pulling up his breeches. "How else am I supposed to learn to master the magic without you always touching me?"

He knew the words had come out wrong the moment they left his lips, but it was too late to call them back. The gentle, concerned look in Thrain's eyes dissipated, leaving them as hard and cold as two sapphires.

"So that's what this is about. You want to master the magic so that you can leave."

"Why would you have me stay?" Elias demanded, put on the defensive by Thrain's angry tone.

"You know why." Thrain glared at him.

Elias felt his heart sink. "Yes, I do. You want me to stay because of my magic. All that talk about being each other's destiny, about the second coming of Lorik and Sandor—that's just what it is, just talk. Just a way to keep me by your side until you get what you want."

"Is that what you really believe?" Thrain's voice was extremely quiet and very dangerous. "You think no more of me than that?"

"What reason have you given me to think anything else?" Elias demanded. "You came to my home and killed my family, took me against my will, and made me your captive. And all because the dragon promised you I could help you get rid of the ones you hated and win the crown for yourself."

"I have never desired the crown." Thrain's eyes narrowed. "For years all I have wanted is vengeance. But once I found you—"

"You found the means to attain it," Elias cut him off ruthlessly. He was so angry he couldn't see straight. To think I believed that he cared for me, and almost imagined that I cared for him too. I cannot believe I allowed myself to feel so much for a man who ruined both me and my life. I have been blind. Blind and stupid.

Thrain took a deep breath. "I see I cannot change your mind. But no matter what you believe of me, you must not do magic on your own again. It's too dangerous."

"Why? Because I might kill myself and ruin your plans?"

"Elias..." Thrain's voice was very quiet and very angry. "When I came into the room, your eyes were filled with flames and your skin was as hot as an oven. You didn't even blink when I called your name. You nearly *died* from that damn magic you've got bottled up inside you."

"That 'damn magic,' as you put it, is what's going to get you your revenge," Elias spat.

"Not if you can't learn to control it," Thrain shot back. "Right now it controls you. It would have killed you if I hadn't stopped it."

"I wish you *had* let it kill me." Elias was so angry he was shaking. "Death would be better than living here under your thumb, submitting to your touch anytime you want me to 'practice.' That's the only reason you don't want me doing magic without you—you'd miss a chance to make me submit to you, and where would be the fun in that?"

"You don't have to worry about 'submitting' to me anymore." Thrain got off the bed and rose to his full height. "From now on I will not touch you unless you ask me to—this I vow. And if you get yourself in trouble with your magic again, don't expect me to get you out."

"Fine. It will be a welcome relief to call my skin my own again." Elias glared at the other man. He wasn't sure how the argument had gone from Thrain's allconsuming need for vengeance to his shame at being mastered, but it didn't seem to matter anymore. It was clear now that Thrain had never wanted him as anything more than a magical weapon and bed slave. He was probably incapable of feeling anything but lust for blood and carnal pleasure. Elias had been a fool to think anything else of him.

Thrain nodded shortly. "May you have the joy of it. I have no wish to take what is not offered freely anyway."

"I think you put the lie to that claim the night you took me across my own bed at Castle Rowan."

Thrain opened his mouth to respond, then shut it again and shook his head. "There is no reasoning with you. You're determined to hate me, no matter what."

The words, as much as the quiet tone they were spoken in, were sobering. Elias took a deep breath, trying to push back the tears of rage that wanted to come to his eyes. "I do not hate you, Thrain," he said in a choked voice. "But I...I do not love you either, and I never will. I will not be the Sandor to your Lorik. I will not be your destiny or have you for mine, no matter what the dragon says. I want only to call my life my own and be free again. Free of you and Castle Black. Do you understand?"

"You have made your feelings perfectly clear." Thrain's voice was hard and cold. "I will not keep you against your will any longer. This very night I will smuggle you across the moat. You shall have the fastest horse in the stable to carry you past the borders of my father's lands and into your own."

"No." Elias raised his chin. "I swore to stay and help you rid yourself of your father and brother. I will keep my word."

"I don't see how, since you cannot control the magic on your own, and I will no longer be helping you," Thrain pointed out.

"I don't see how either, but I will," Elias assured him. "I will."

Chapter Thirteen

Thrain was as good as his word. From the day of their fight, he didn't touch Elias in any way except to nudge his shoulder when had a bad dream. Because the dreams appeared to be back in full force. While they had been sleeping wrapped in each other's arms, Elias had scarcely even murmured in his sleep, but now he was thrashing and crying out half the night—an extremely worrying development as far as Thrain was concerned. He wondered if the dragon was sending Elias messages in his sleep or if the dreams were just normal nightmares.

Either way, he ached to take the lad in his arms and soothe and comfort him, ached to feel Elias's slim body against his own and run his hands through the unruly black curls as he kissed the younger man's forehead. But it was not to be, and he knew it. Elias had made it perfectly clear how he felt about Thrain touching him—how he loathed the feel of Thrain's hands on his body—and Thrain was not about to force the issue.

So they continued to live in the same rooms and share meals in silence. It reminded Thrain of the time when he had first brought Elias to Castle Black, when the lad was still so angry and hurt because of the way Thrain had taken him. But it was much, much worse now, because at that time at least, he had hoped that Elias might someday forgive him and that he might somehow win the lad's heart. Now he had no hope at all.

His plans for revenge had been spoiled as well, but Thrain found he cared little for that. For years he had plotted the bloody demise of his father and brother, and now, suddenly, his thirst for vengeance seemed to have left him. Everything seemed empty and meaningless now that he had lost Elias, and he found he could not make himself care that Baynor was about to be crowned king and would rule the kingdom with an iron fist.

About one thing he did care, however—Elias's safety. He was determined that he would not let the lad die or fall into Baynor's bloody grasp—which would amount to the same thing. Yet Elias was too proud to leave until after the coronation was complete—though what he thought he could do when he was unable to call the magic to him without risking his own life was still unclear. Privately Thrain decided to make arrangements for the lad's speedy escape from Castle Black should things go badly, as they almost certainly would. No matter what happened to Thrain, he wanted to know that Elias was safe and someplace he could be happy.

Because no matter what Elias thought of him, Thrain still cared for him. His heart still swelled when he looked into those golden eyes, and he still longed to kiss those lush lips. Part of him wished to take Elias in his arms and tell him how he felt, but every time he imagined it, he had no idea what he would say. How could he tell Elias that he wanted to be with him always, that he thought of him constantly, that he needed him like he needed his next breath? Such emotions and the words that went with them were foreign to his very nature. He had been raised with a heavy hand and shown no love by anyone but his long-dead milk nurse. How could he give what had never been given to him? Say what had never been said? He could not find the words within himself to utter, and so they continued on in silence.

Thrain supposed they would part in silence too. Though it would hurt him deeply to let Elias go, Thrain knew it must be done. Besides, the lad was there in body only. Thrain could tell by the way he refused to speak and looked away when their eyes chanced to meet that his spirit was already elsewhere. He was only marking time until he could leave Castle Black and his hated captor forever.

And, Thrain told himself, as long as Elias didn't attempt to practice magic on his own, he ought to be all right. In the week after their quarrel, he had shown no symptoms of the magical fire within him at all. Thrain suspected he was keeping a tight lid on it to avoid having to be "rescued" again in a manner that was obviously so repugnant to him. He worried about Elias no little amount, but he comforted himself that when the lad was free of Ungor's lands, he would be able to find his kin again, and they would know how to deal with his runaway magic.

So there was nothing to do but wait in silence, live like strangers in the same rooms, and regret that things had gone so very wrong between them. Thrain felt the pain of the shadow that had fallen between them sharply, but he was resigned to losing the younger man—nothing could turn Elias's heart toward him now. The wall between them would remain forever, no matter what the dragon had foretold.

* * *

The dreams were back—dreams of falling, of burning, of dying a hundred different ways. They tormented Elias every night in ceaseless succession and gave him no peace until he felt as though he were coming apart.

He couldn't help remembering that he had had no bad dreams when he'd slept in Thrain's arms. In the short time they had been practicing the control of his magic, it had become a habit to fall asleep with his cheek pillowed on the other man's broad shoulder. Their bodies had fit together like two pieces of a puzzle, and he had always found comfort in the large, chilly bed when they shared their body heat.

Now he was cold again. Cold and full of fear, since the dreams tormented him worse than they ever had before. If Thrain was becoming impatient with Elias for shouting and whimpering in his sleep, he never said so. In fact, he barely said anything at all. They passed their days in silence, and Elias found that he missed the sound of the other man's voice raised in laughter or speaking quietly in the dark when they had lain tangled in each other's arms. But now Thrain was silent and aloof—every inch a prince with nothing to say to his bed slave. Elias found himself following the other man with his gaze. They no longer undressed each other before bathing, but he couldn't help watching as Thrain shed his clothes, the candlelight gleaming off his golden skin and hair, his muscles flowing and shifting as he moved with careless grace. Gods, why did he have to be so beautiful? And why was Elias unable to forget the feel of Thrain's hands and mouth on his skin? He hated himself for missing it, hated himself for longing to feel Thrain's touch again, but he couldn't help it. And he couldn't help remembering the feel of Thrain's hand gripping his shaft as he leaned back against the other man and let Thrain master him.

Why he should miss submitting was a mystery to Elias—it was one of the things he had disliked most about the relationship that had developed between them. But he could not deny, even to himself, that when he remembered Thrain stroking him off and whispering softly in his ear about how hard he would make Elias come, he grew incredibly aroused. It made him angry that he could desire a man who so clearly didn't care anything for him, but he seemed helpless to stop it.

But besides his troubling dreams, his unwanted desires, and the fact that he still had no idea how he could keep his pledge to Thrain to assassinate Baynor and Ungor, Elias had yet more worries. For he could feel the magic building up again within him. When Thrain had been practicing with him three and four times a day, it had been kept well in check. Now he could feel it growing daily—hourly even. The dragon within wanted out, and now that he had no outlet for it, either sexual or magical, it was growing restless and impatient bottled up inside him.

Elias was too proud to ask Thrain for help, but he wasn't sure what else he could do. Had he been at home when his magic had finally come to him, he might have sought counsel from his mother or one of the court advisers, but there was no man or woman here at Castle Black who could or would help him. Not that Elias would dare ask—he had seen firsthand King Ungor's treatment of anyone even suspected of doing magic. If the king had any idea that a sorcerer of Elias's power was living right under his very nose, Elias would have been sent to the witch pyre before he could blink.

There was one other being in the castle, however, that knew about magic.

The dragon—the dragon can help me. The thought came to Elias on the day before the coronation. He was flipping idly through A Catalogue of Dragons, and a sentence caught his eye.

A great red beaste with scales as big as a man's hand and eyes like flame. The dragon's name I took great trouble to find, for it was wily and full of cunning. But when I found it out at last and called the beaste by it, we then became the best of friends. It was...

The next page was torn out of the book as well as the names of the rest of the dragons Brogan had identified, but the description made Elias think of Thrain's dragon, as he had begun to think of the huge fire lizard Ungor held captive beneath the castle. He had been so consumed with his other worries—and with fretting over Thrain—that it hadn't occurred to him before that he could seek the help of

someone who was not his captor. Once it did, however, he was anxious to get down to the dungeon and see the dragon.

But getting to see the dragon was not as easy as he might have hoped. He knew he could not ask Thrain to take him down to the dungeons. He would demand to know why, and Elias would have to admit that his magic was building up to a worrying degree. No, he must sneak out on his own. He knew he could simply call to it with his mind, but he felt certain he would get more direct answers from it if he went to see it face-to-face. But how was he to get away from Thrain, who was always there with him?

Luck was with him. After the evening bells had tolled, Thrain was obliged to attend the precoronation ceremony, where only he, Baynor, Ungor, and a carefully handpicked priest would be present. Elias saw the grim look on his face as he left, and despite his continued anger with the man, he still felt pity for what Thrain must endure. How he must hate the both of them! To be locked in the king's tiny private chapel for hours on end with the two he despised most on earth must be sheer torture. Still, he was certain that no one would know how Thrain felt—his face was as cold and impassive as stone as he left the room. A carved marble statue might show more than he did, despite the turmoil that must be churning inside him.

I cannot think of that now. I must get down to see the dragon and back again before he returns. Elias waited a good fifteen minutes, pacing up and down anxiously before the charred mantelpiece, before he finally dared slip out of Thrain's rooms. He had to be exceedingly cautious on his way to the dungeon. The castle was in a high state of readiness for the coronation, which was to happen at daybreak on the morrow. If he had not been gifted with the Trueheart grace, he would never have managed to get past all the guards posted all over Castle Black. As it was, he slipped silently from shadow to shadow with none of them the wiser, and at last found himself in front of the great black ironbound door, staring at the puzzle lock in a little over half an hour.

Elias had always been a quick study. Once shown something, he retained it quite well, even to the point of remembering whole pages of text from books or scrolls. Now he closed his eyes and summoned the image of Thrain's strong, swordcalloused hands working the puzzle lock. When he had the sequence in his head, he opened his eyes and bent to work. The lock snicked open in less time than it took to tell, and soon Elias found himself descending the winding spiral staircase for the second time.

"Elias, son of Alaina." The dragon greeted him in the Old Tongue within his mind, not bothering to speak aloud. When Elias saw it, he thought he knew why. The dragon looked ancient and tired on its great, dusty pedestal. Its great flaming eyes were closed, and the light that seeped from between its scales was so dull, Elias could look on it easily.

"Dragon," he said aloud, courteously. "I am come to ask—"

"I know what you are come to ask, Elias, but I cannot tell you more than I have." The dragon opened its eyes, and Elias saw that the flames in their depths were nothing more than dull embers. "All that I have within me, I gave to you. And thus far you have failed to do anything with it."

"What did you give me but a riddle in three parts? You told me I must give what had been taken, remember what was forgotten, and claim that which love would have me deny," Elias said, frowning. "It makes no sense. How can I give something that has already been taken from me?"

The dragon closed its eyes again. "And you are to be the second coming of Sandor? I think not. You have the power—power even greater than Brogan himself—but you have not the wit to use it."

Elias was stung by the dragon's slander but intrigued by its words. "You knew the great dragon master Brogan?" he asked, choosing to ignore the insult.

"Indeed. He had the soul of a dragon. I counseled him when he was writing his book about my kind."

"I have read it—it's most fascinating." Elias frowned, wondering if the dragon before him was the one Brogan had written of. It must be. But he had no time for such details. "I did not come here to speak of books. I need help with my magic," he told the dragon.

"You certainly do. I can feel it growing within you, pushing to get out. Why have you not asked Thrain, son of Ungor, to help you release it?"

Elias flushed and looked down at his boots. "I... Thrain and I are no longer speaking."

"What?" The dragon opened its eyes again, and if a thirty-feet-long fire lizard could be said to scowl, that was what it did. "How do you expect to fulfill your destiny if you do not speak to the one who is your other half?" it demanded.

"I *don't* expect to fulfill it." Elias raised his chin defiantly, though his heart was drumming against his ribs. When the dragon was quiet, it was easy to forget how very large and menacing it really was. Now that it was angry, or at the very least annoyed, he could see why Thrain had once told him that Ungor had thought it worth a king's ransom to forge the chain that held it prisoner. Still he met its gaze when he spoke. "Thrain seeks only vengeance against his father and brother and cares nothing for me. I cannot spend my life devoted to such a man, no matter what you may say."

"You little fool." The dragon lifted its head on a long, snaky neck and looked down at him. Its eyes were flaming again, casting a light so brilliant that Elias could see his own shadow on the stone floor. "Did he not claim you publicly before his father and the entire court?"

"He only did that to tie me to him, that he might use me for his revenge," Elias insisted.

The dragon shook its heavy head ponderously. "He would not speak the words of claiming if he did not feel for you, Elias. Thrain's heart is true, though his spirit is too proud to bend and tell you so."

Elias felt a sliver of doubt enter his mind. Could the dragon be right? Could Thrain actually care for him? Maybe even...*love* him? Then he remembered the other man's coldness to him in the past week, his aloof silence, and shook his head. "You're wrong. He only wants me for my magic."

"A magic that will tear you apart without his hand to temper it." The dragon still sounded angry. "You must go to him soon or risk certain death."

"But why?" Elias demanded. "Why is the magic so hard to control on my own? I have been raised around magic users all my life, and none of them needed another to help them keep it in check."

"Your magic is too big for you—too big for any mortal to bear alone. You need a focus, one who can help you shape it and hone it like a blade for battle. Especially since you are bent on using it for destruction."

"What else am I to use it for?" Elias felt bewildered. "I'm meant to kill Ungor and Baynor so Thrain can ascend the throne, aren't I?"

"So you believe," the dragon said obscurely. It rose suddenly and spread its wings—great leathery expanses of scaly skin as big as the largest sails of any boat Elias had ever seen. The movement caused a hot wind that stirred up choking clouds of dust and blew his hair back from his forehead. "Would that I could break this vile chain that binds me. I have enough hatred to crisp Ungor to ashes and burn this entire castle to melted slag. That is the power of destructive magic." It settled slowly back down and folded its wings. "But the power of healing magic is ever as strong. Did it ever occur to you, Elias, that you were given the gift you have not to slay and destroy, but to heal the realms you and Thrain will forge together?"

Elias thought of saying that he and Thrain would never forge a realm together, but one look in the dragon's burning eyes made him bite his tongue. "I...had not thought that, no," he admitted at last.

"There are many things you have not thought of, it seems." The dragon closed its eyes again. "Go now. I am tired. Your foolishness and pride wear on me. You are throwing away my life as well as your own over a lover's quarrel."

"We're not lovers!" Elias said hotly.

"And whose fault is that?" The dragon blew a puff of steam from its nostrils. "Now go."

"But—"

"Go."

"Tell me this at least," Elias said desperately. "Is it you sending me the dreams?"

The dragon opened one eye. "I have sent you dreams in the past, but not since I saw you last. What do you dream?"

Elias felt his chest grow tight. "I—it is hard to say in words. The images are so jumbled. Bloodshed, fire, death—all sorts of destruction. They...they frighten me."

"As well they should. You dream as a dragon does—of all possible futures. Right now there is no path forward that will not lead to what you see."

"What?" Elias put a hand to his chest. "But what...what can I do? There must be something I can do to change that."

"Does nothing stop the dreams?" The dragon wanted to know.

"I..." Elias looked down, embarrassed. "Being near Thrain helps. Touching him, I mean."

"That is because when he holds you in his arms, both of you are complete—two halves that make a whole. Only with Thrain by your side can you go forward into light instead of darkness and death."

"But—"

"Silence." The dragon closed its eye and seemed to shrink down into itself again. "You must freely give that which has already been taken from you. You must remember that which has been forgotten. You must claim that which love would have you deny," it said. "Think on it, Elias, and do not fail unless you wish all the magic in the realm to die with you when you face your own doom on the morrow."

It would say nothing further after that, though Elias asked it several more questions. At last, frustrated and confused, he climbed the spiral staircase and left it alone.

As he made his way back to Thrain's rooms, Elias had to admit he had more questions than answers. Although why he had expected more than riddles from the dragon was a mystery to him. It was well-known that dragons spoke only the truth, but in such a roundabout way that it was impossible to know what that truth might be. He hoped it was wrong about his dreams and their possible meaning, but he couldn't ignore the possibility that it was right. What would happen when Baynor was crowned king, and what could he do to stop it? Elias had no idea.

One thing was certain, however. The magic was building inside him to an alarming degree. His skin felt hot, and he fancied he could almost see little tongues of flame shooting from his fingertips if he moved them too rapidly—the magic was that close to the surface. If he didn't find some relief from it soon, he wouldn't have to wait for the morrow to face his doom; he would explode into a puddle of pure power tonight.

Could he bear to ask Thrain to help him? It rankled that he might have to beg for help from a man who had promised never to touch him again, but Elias couldn't see any other way out of the situation he found himself in. Maybe Thrain could simply hold his hand for a while and dissipate some of the magic that way. Or *maybe* he had so much surplus power inside him now that much more intimate touching would be necessary to cool his inner fire.

Elias's pride protested at the thought, but another part of him—a much deeper and more primal part—longed to touch Thrain again. To kiss him, taste him, to feel Thrain's hands and mouth against his body. I will have to ask him for help, for relief, he decided reluctantly. There is no other way. He may dislike me, but I do not think he will refuse me when he knows my life is on the line. He is an honorable man; he will assist me if I ask, though I may have to get on my knees and beg to satisfy his pride.

Distracted with his frustration and with the magic that filled him to overflowing, Elias was much less careful coming back from the dungeon than he had been in getting to it. He was almost to Thrain's rooms when a tall figure stepped in front of him and blocked his path.

"Going somewhere, little princeling?" Baynor rumbled, giving Elias an evil grin. "Or were you coming to see me and beg my clemency tomorrow when I am crowned king?"

Chapter Fourteen

With a sigh of relief, Thrain headed for the door of the private chapel his father reserved for special occasions. The small enclosed space with its single stained-glass window of a saint kneeling to pray was much too small for four men especially when one of them was his brother's size. Worse than the crowding, however, was the ceremony itself. Hearing Ungor's pet priest intoning words of blessing on Baynor's vile head had been almost more than he could bear, but Thrain had endured it somehow. After two hours, however, there was a sour taste in the back of his throat, and it felt as though his gut had been twisted into a knot. He couldn't wait to get away and was halfway to the door before the priest intoned the final "amen."

"Thrain?" His father's voice held him back, and Thrain turned reluctantly to face him.

"Yes, Father?"

"Come now, Thrain." Ungor put a hand on Thrain's arm as Baynor brushed past him and left the chapel. "I wish to speak with you a moment before you go."

Thrain watched enviously as his hated brother left, but he could not refuse to speak to his father, no matter how much he loathed the man. "Yes, Father?" he said again, hoping his words sounded properly respectful. "Of what do you wish to speak?"

"Of your intentions." Ungor frowned. "Your brother ascends the throne on the morrow, and though I know you have not always loved him as well as you should, I hope you will be respectful and support his reign."

"Have not loved him as well as I should?" Thrain felt bile rise in his throat and swallowed it back down with difficultly. "After the way he treated me when I was his squire, you expect me to love him?"

Ungor waved his hand negligently. "You must leave such things in the past. After all, boys will be boys. If your brother was a little rough on you, I am certain he meant nothing by it."

"A *little* rough?" Thrain knew he was parroting his father's words, but he couldn't help it. To think that his father could dismiss what Baynor had done to him so lightly made the pit of his stomach ache. Could it be possible that Ungor didn't really know what had transpired all those years ago? Had he misinterpreted Thrain's halting words when he had tried to tell him of the attacks? Had he chosen not to believe Thrain's milk nurse when she spoke to him? "Father," he said, his

voice trembling. "Baynor took me, forced me over and over from the time I was twelve until I was sixteen and strong enough to fight him off. You cannot expect me to love him after that."

Ungor scowled. "Such wild ideas. You were but a boy, Thrain. It was that witch, your milk nurse, who filled your head with such nonsense."

"Hartha was no witch, and she was not talking nonsense when she came to you." Thrain's throat was almost too dry to speak. He had kept these words bottled up inside him for years, and now, though he knew it was not wise, they were pouring out, gushing like wine from a broken cask. "She was telling you the truth, trying to protect me as a true mother would. And you...you had her burned for it."

"That is enough!" Ungor's voice cracked like a whip in the small chapel. "You will not profane your lady mother's memory by speaking of any other as your mother. She was of noble lineage, for all that your birth killed her."

"I am well aware you blame me for my mother's demise," Thrain said through tight lips. "But Hartha raised me as her own. She was all I had, and you took her from me and left me to Baynor's tender mercies. For that alone, I have little cause to love either one of you."

"Have a care, Thrain." Ungor's face grew grim. "The witch's death and whatever happened between you and Baynor are in the past. I am speaking of the future."

"And what a bright future it shall be for our kingdom," Thrain growled. "With a murderer and rapist on the throne."

"Thrain!" Ungor's voice was like thunder, and he glared at Thrain. "I have always been glad to have two sons, for I knew if something happened to your brother, I had a second son to carry on my line. But now that Baynor is to take the crown and the succession is secure, you are no longer needed. You *will* support your brother's reign, or I will have you removed in a most permanent fashion. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly clear, Father," Thrain said coldly. "I understand you better now than I ever have."

His father frowned. "Good. Then you may go."

Thrain turned on his heel, but before he could leave, his father called his name again.

"Yes?" He looked back unwillingly.

"Be certain to bring your bed slave with you to the coronation tomorrow." Ungor gave him a cold smile. "Baynor especially wants him there."

Thrain felt a cold shiver along his spine. There could be only one reason for Baynor to ask specifically for Elias—he meant to take the lad as his own as part of his ascension, public claiming or not, and old laws be damned. It was no more than what Thrain had expected, but for his brother to be so blatant about his intentions put everything in an even more serious light. He left the chapel in a hurry. *Must get Elias out of here tonight, before it's too late*! He didn't care what the younger man had said. Thrain intended on smuggling him out of Castle Black at once. He wanted Elias long gone and out of Baynor's reach before the coronation took place. Thrain intended to force the issue if necessary. He would drug Elias with a sleeping draft and throw him over the back of a horse if he had to. Anything to keep the man he loved safe—even if that man did not return his love.

Thrain ran to his rooms and threw open the doors. "Elias? Elias, where are you?" He was beginning to have that same bad, worried feeling he'd had before when Elias had nearly been consumed by his magic. He knew how to save the lad if he was in that kind of danger, but he had to find him first. For, though he searched his rooms from top to bottom and called and called, there was no answer to his cries.

Elias was gone.

* * *

Yet again Elias found himself confronted by Baynor the Beast, and this time Thrain was not there to save him. He took a deep breath, trying to still the pounding of his heart. Knowing what he did of Thrain's brother, he was certain his immediate future was not very bright. In fact, if he didn't get away and quickly, he was likely to find himself in an extremely uncomfortable position—skewered on Baynor's thick cock.

Lifting his chin, he looked the huge man in his small, greedy eyes. "Let me pass. I am going back to Thrain's rooms."

"And what were you doing out of those rooms in the first place, little princeling?" Baynor growled.

"I was down at the kitchens seeing to my lord's breakfast," Elias said glibly. "He wishes a special kind of honey for his porridge on the morrow. I was making sure they had it."

"And did they?" Baynor took a step closer, forcing Elias to take a step back.

"They did." *Must not allow him to corner me as he did down by the dungeon! If I can just stay out of his reach, I know I can outrun him.*

Baynor seemed to read his mind, for he took another step forward, deliberately pushing Elias back against the nearest wall. Leaning forward, he braced his hands on the rough stone on either side of Elias's head. "You know, little slave, every time I reach for you, you slip through my grasp. But it will not be so forever."

"I think my lord Thrain might have something to say about that." Elias tried to move sideways, but Baynor had him blocked in now, his thick arms the walls of Elias's prison.

"Not so fast, princeling," he rumbled. "I had thought to wait and claim you on the morrow at my coronation. But now I think I might enjoy celebrating early."

"You...you wouldn't dare," Elias whispered, knowing it wasn't true. "Thrain will kill you."

"He may try." Baynor laughed. "Actually, I would welcome an assassination attempt. It would give me an excuse to rid myself of him once and for all. And as you may know, the penalty for an attempt on the life of the king is the same as the penalty for sorcery—death by fire."

I could show you death by fire, if only I could control my magic. Elias could feel it inside him, roiling and hot like a nest of snakes eager to bite—or a dragon eager to burn. But he dared not let it loose lest it consume not only Baynor but Elias himself. Still, if it became a choice between being taken by Baynor or dying by his own magic, he knew which he would choose. I will not willingly go through that again, not if I can prevent it.

Baynor leaned closer, his breath blowing hot and rank in Elias's face and making him wince. "I shall enjoy this even more than wearing the crown, I think," he murmured, trailing his fingers down Elias's cheek. "I cannot wait to feel you writhing beneath me as I take by force what you have such pleasure in giving to my little brother for free."

He leaned even closer, the heavy bulge of his cock pressing against Elias's thigh. But though Elias wanted in the worst way to move, he felt frozen to the spot. It wasn't Baynor's actions that rendered him immobile, however; it was his words. Taking by force... He spoke of taking by force what I give to Thrain for free. Only I don't, but Baynor thinks I do. In his head, the dragon's riddle clanged like a claxon. "You must freely give that which was taken from you."

Gods! It's me the dragon was speaking of. My body—myself. I must give myself freely, but not to Baynor. I must give myself to he who took me against my will in the first place. To Thrain.

The realization was so strong that for a moment Elias felt dizzy. The answer to the first part of the dragon's riddle had been right before his eyes for weeks, but he had been too stupid, to willfully blind to see it. It made him wonder if the rest of the riddle was as simple. If he didn't get away from Baynor, he would never know.

"You might want to speak to my lord Thrain before you take me," he said, casting a pointed glance over Baynor's broad shoulder. "I think he and the dagger he holds at your back may disagree with you."

"What?" Baynor half turned to see, and Elias slipped under his meaty arm in a flash.

However, he had underestimated how quick Baynor could be for such a big man. He turned back to Elias and caught him by the throat in one beefy hand. If not for the fake magic-null collar that Thrain had painted black to match the enchanted black metal, Elias would have been choked to death almost at once. As it was, he could barely breathe.

"Not so fast, little prin—" Baynor pulled his hand away with a startled shout. "What in all the seven hells?" he demanded, looking at the hand that had held Elias. There was a dark red burn mark branded on his palm, as though he had laid it on a hot stove. "Why is your collar so hot?" he demanded. "Magic null is always ice-cold." Elias knew full well why it was hot—the magic inside him was nearing a boiling point. At any moment, he feared it would take him over, whether he called it or not. And if his eyes turned to flame with Baynor watching, there was no doubt that he would draw the obvious conclusion and denounce Elias as a sorcerer to Ungor at once. Elias's only consolation was that he would probably be consumed by the magic long before he could be thrown onto the witch pyre. But either way, he was going to burn if he didn't get away from Baynor, and quickly.

"It *is* always ice-cold unless there is an enchantment nearby," he said with sudden inspiration. "Mayhap there is someone who wishes you harm in this area, my lord Baynor. I thought I felt the heat of sorcery as I walked along the corridor, and now I am certain of it."

Baynor's eyes widened in obvious fear and then narrowed in suspicion. "How do I know it is not *you* working the enchantment against me?"

"I?" Elias gave him a look of wide-eyed innocence. "I am but a Null. But I was raised in the presence of magic, so I know the feel of it. Perhaps you should look to your own safety—clearly someone wishes you harm."

The huge man's meaty hand went to the dull black iron circlet at his temples. "Why do I not feel it myself, then? My magic null is still cold."

"I am more sensitive to it than you. Having been reared in a magical household has made me so. But you will feel the full effects of it soon, I am certain—if you are not careful." He looked around the stone hallway fearfully, as though wondering where the magic was coming from. Of course, if Elias had dared to use his magic on Baynor, the prince's circlet would have been red-hot, but he didn't.

To his great relief, his ruse worked. Baynor had clearly been raised to fear enchantment by his magic-hating father. He backed away from Elias, still holding his burned palm out in front of him and looking in every direction.

"Good night, my lord Baynor." Elias nodded courteously. His relief was so great he felt faint. *Now to make good my escape!*

"This isn't over, princeling. Not by half," the huge man growled. "You may have eluded me again, but on the morrow, you shall be mine." He gave Elias an evil grin. "How I shall enjoy hearing you scream as I fuck you."

Despite the heat of the magic within him, Elias shivered. "Thrain will never let that happen," he said, hoping he was right. Would Thrain still defend him against his brother now that they were no longer speaking?

"I will never let *what* happen?" As though speaking his name had brought him near, Thrain suddenly appeared beside him. "Elias, where have you been?" he asked, not waiting for an answer to his first question. He glared at Baynor, clearly suspicious.

"I have been to the kitchens as you requested, my lord." Elias bowed his head submissively. "You will be pleased to learn they have the gold-clover honey you desired with your porridge in the morning."

"They do, do they?" Thrain's gaze never left Baynor.

"They do indeed, Brother," Baynor growled, glaring back. "But were I you, I would make use of it *tonight*. It may be the last sweetness you taste for a long while. On the morrow, all will change, and not to your liking, I'll wager."

"We shall see about that." Thrain nodded at Elias. "Come. We must to bed."

"Yes, take your little princeling to bed and use him well." Baynor gave an ugly laugh. "Enjoy him while you can."

"I intend to," Thrain said coldly, deliberately ignoring the threat. "Good night, Brother." He turned and stalked away, leaving Elias to follow. But Baynor's next words stopped him in his tracks.

"Use him as I used you," he shouted, his grating voice echoing off the stone walls.

Thrain turned slowly. "What did you say?"

"You heard me." Baynor smirked, an expression that made his lumpish features even uglier. "Tell me, Thrain. Does he cry and beg when you fuck him? Or does he take it like a man the way you used to? So quiet and grim. After that first time in the stables, I was never able to make you cry again, more's the pity."

The look in Thrain's eyes was murderous. "You *dare* to speak to me of that now?" His long, curving dagger was suddenly in his hand, and Elias saw with alarm that he was gripping it so hard, his knuckles were white.

"Why should I not speak of it?" Baynor asked contemptuously. "I know you spoke to our father of it. You ran crying to him, and when that didn't work, you sent that witch Hartha to plead for you."

Thrain's eyes flashed. "Do not speak of her so if you wish to keep your tongue in your head. You're not fit to say her name."

"I will say whatever I wish, and you will listen," Baynor growled. "Do not forget that tomorrow I take the throne as your king. Then I'll have your princeling to do with as I wish."

"I'll see you dead before I give up Elias to you." Thrain's voice was cold and deadly.

"Have a care, little brother. Was that a threat against your future king?" Baynor raised a bushy black eyebrow mockingly.

"It is no threat, but a promise," Thrain said quietly. "If you dare lay a hand on Elias, I swear before all the gods that I will kill you in a most bloody and painful fashion."

"Is that so?" Baynor taunted, but Elias thought he looked somewhat uneasy. As well he should—Thrain's face was like stone, but rage radiated from him like heat from a blast furnace.

"I give you my oath," Thrain said in the same low voice. "You will beg for death before I am done, but I will not grant your wish until I have had my fill of vengeance. And believe me, Brother, my appetite for that dish will not be easily sated." "You will rue those words, Thrain." Baynor's words were menacing, but his eyes were still uneasy.

"We shall see," Thrain said shortly. He looked at Elias. "Come. There is nothing more to say here."

As Elias went, he threw a last glance over his shoulder. Baynor was standing there, scowling.

I hope I'm right about the first part of the riddle, he thought as he hurried after Thrain. If not, I'm going to be dead very soon—one way or the other. It wasn't only Baynor he feared. He could feel the magic inside him, pushing for release, filling him with need. A need that burned him from within like dragon fire—a fire that only Thrain could put out.

Chapter Fifteen

"What the hell are you playing at, roaming the castle without me?" Thrain demanded as soon as they were safely back in his rooms with the door shut and barred. "Do you have any idea what could have happened to you?"

"Of course I do. This isn't the first time your pig of a brother's threatened me," Elias snapped. Then he shook his head, clearly upset. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't speak so to you."

"You shouldn't be out without me either." Thrain ran a hand through his hair and let out a breath, trying to release his anger and worry. "When I saw you with Baynor, I thought... He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"I am unharmed."

"Good." Thrain felt a surge of relief before remembering that he had other worries. "He means to have you on the morrow."

"So I gathered," Elias said with a short, unhappy laugh.

"Which is why we must get you out of here tonight." Thrain began to pace as he thought out loud. "It won't be easy to get you past the portcullis, but I think it can be done. The guards stationed there are loyal to my father, not Baynor, so—"

"Stop." Elias came to stand in front of him. "I'm not going anywhere."

Thrain frowned in frustration. "Elias, your pride notwithstanding, I am not going to let you stay here and be taken by Baynor. He has made his intentions clear, and while I am willing to fight him to the death to keep you, I cannot take on the entire castle guard as well."

"It won't come to that," Elias said earnestly. "Please, Thrain, I'll explain everything, but first could you...? Would you...?" He seemed to be struggling to say something, his eyes wide and uncertain.

"Peace, Elias." Thrain gave him a worried look. "Speak your mind. What is it you need?"

"I need... I want... Please, will you touch me?" Elias burst out at last.

"What?" Thrain wasn't certain he'd heard him correctly. For the entire past week they'd been so cold and silent to each other, it was as if they'd forgotten how to talk. And now Elias wanted Thrain to touch him? "You said you hated my hands on you," he reminded Elias. "Or something like that, anyway."

"I know what I said—I was stupid, all right? Please..." Elias dropped suddenly to his knees and looked up at him, his golden eyes pleading. "Please, my lord," he said softly. "It's the magic. It has been building up for days. It burns me from within, and only your touch can slake its fire. Please..." He threw his arms around Thrain's waist and submissively rubbed his cheek against the linen breeches that covered Thrain's cock. "I will suck you if you wish," he murmured. "I will take your shaft in my mouth and suck you until you come, and I will swallow every drop. Anything you like, as long as you will touch me."

"Elias, that is not necessary." Thrain gritted his teeth against the surge of desire the boy's soft words and even-softer touch against his cock sent rushing through him. "You need not beg me," he said, raising Elias and cupping his cheek gently.

"Thank you, my lord." Elias leaned into the touch gratefully, reminding Thrain of a cat that longed to be stroked. The lad was practically purring under his hand.

"Why did you wait so long to ask?" Thrain demanded softly, looking into his flushed face. Elias's skin was hot, as though he were running a fever, but Thrain knew it was only the magic inside him pushing to get out. "You know I would do anything I could to keep you from pain."

Elias looked away. "I do not know any such thing. After the way we fought—"

"No matter what was said between us, I would not willingly let you suffer," Thrain said quietly. He stroked Elias's hair back from his heated forehead. "I will touch you as much as you like. Do you find yourself eased?"

"Somewhat," Elias admitted hesitantly. "But...the magic is too strong, I fear, for a few gentle touches of your hand to dissipate it completely."

"What else do you need of me, then? Ask and it is yours."

"Perhaps if you were to...to kiss me?" Elias looked up at him hopefully. "If you do not mind, that is."

"When have I ever minded kissing you?" Thrain bent his mouth to the boy's, eager to taste Elias's soft pink lips again.

Elias rose to his mouth hungrily, parting his lips at once and inviting Thrain in with obvious desire. Thrain threaded his fingers through the lad's black curls and deepened the kiss. *Gods, so sweet. And he's missed this as much as I have, I can tell. It isn't just that he needs my touch—he wants it too.* Thrain was sure he was right. Elias's long, slender shaft, rock hard and rubbing against his thigh, told him so.

"Gods!" Elias moaned when Thrain broke the kiss at last. "Thrain..."

Thrain laughed softly. "What happened to 'my lord'?"

Elias's pupils were dilated, his eyes drowning in black with only a thin ring of gold around them. "I will call you anything you wish, so long as you do not stop touching me. As long as you...as you take me."

"Don't tempt me," Thrain growled, bending to kiss him again. "Already I'm so hard for you, I ache."

"Then sheathe yourself within me, and let me see if I can ease your pain," Elias murmured against his lips.

Thrain drew back and studied the lad's face intently. "You're serious," he said at last. "Why would you ask such a thing of me, Elias? You know I swore never to take you again that way."

"You swore never to take me again *against my will*," Elias protested. "And I vow to you, Thrain, I am not unwilling."

"Are you not?" Thrain stroked Elias's smooth cheek and then took one of his hands. "You're trembling. And despite the fact that the rest of you is burning up, your hands are ice-cold."

"I..." Elias looked down, biting his lush lower lip.

"Look at me." Thrain raised his chin so that they were eye to eye. "Is it just that you fear nothing else will master the magic? We can try other things first, Elias. I can stroke you or suck you—"

"That is not the only reason," Elias insisted. "Although I do like that idea. Except, maybe..." He looked at Thrain shyly. "Maybe I could suck *you*. To begin with, at least. And then...then you could finish inside me."

"Gods," Thrain growled roughly. He didn't like to admit it, but Elias's words were inflaming him almost beyond reason. "Are you certain this is what you want?"

Elias kissed him again—a sweet, lingering kiss that sent another surge of desire straight to his cock. "I am becoming more certain of it every moment," he murmured at last, pulling back. "I want you inside me, Thrain. Now, tonight."

Thrain took a deep breath. "All right, then," he said at last, hoping he was doing the right thing. "I'll take you if that is what you really want. But we must go slowly, and if you wish me to stop at any time, you must tell me." He cupped Elias's cheek and looked into his drowning-deep eyes. "I would rather die than hurt you again."

Elias's breath seemed to catch in his throat. "You are very kind."

No, I'm just desperately in love with you. But Thrain could not bring himself to say the words aloud. Instead he kissed Elias gently on the lips and murmured, "Come. Let's go to the bed."

Elias couldn't believe he was doing this. But as they undressed each other and piece after piece of clothing came off and fell on the stone floor in a messy heap, it began to seem more and more real.

At last they were naked and kneeling across from each other in the middle of the bed. Thrain was looking at Elias with that intense, hawklike gaze that made him feel like he couldn't get a deep enough breath, and Elias was doing his best to meet the other man's eyes.

He was burning for Thrain's touch—and it wasn't just the magic inside him either. It was the way Thrain looked at him, the way he kissed Elias's lips so gently. The way he gazed into Elias's eyes as he pumped his cock in a slow, steady rhythm that seemed designed to drive him wild. "Gods!" Elias's breath caught in his throat as Thrain touched him, his swordcalloused hand fisting Elias's cock expertly. "Please," he begged, pulling away from Thrain's fingers. "I...I want to touch you now." He didn't know how to explain that he needed to be the one doing the touching—at least at first. That he needed to feel as though he was in charge.

Despite all they had done together, the idea of lying on his stomach and allowing Thrain to enter him again was still deeply frightening. Elias believed the other man wouldn't hurt him, but he was still afraid—afraid that having Thrain's cock inside him would bring back that night at Castle Rowan. But I have to do this. I have no choice. We have no chance at all of getting out of here alive if I don't fulfill the dragon's prophecy.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed lightly at Thrain's broad shoulders, urging the other man to lie back against the pillows. "Let me touch you for a while. Let me...let me taste you. May I?"

Thrain gave a hoarse laugh. "You have to ask?"

"I thought it polite." Elias kissed his lips and then placed another soft kiss against the strongly corded throat. When Thrain threw back his head and groaned, Elias grew bolder and began kissing his way down the broad chest and heavily muscled abdomen. "You have the build of a warrior," he murmured, looking up at Thrain as he lapped a ticklish trail around his navel. "Not like me. I'm too slight."

"You're perfect." Thrain reached down to cup his cheek, and Elias rubbed against his hand. "So elegant and slender with those big golden eyes. You remind me of a cat that wants to be stroked."

Elias laughed breathlessly. "I want more than that." Capturing Thrain's thick shaft in one hand, he looked up, meeting the other man's gaze. "Much more than that tonight."

"And you shall have it," Thrain growled softly. "As much as you want and more."

That's what I'm afraid of! But Elias didn't speak the words aloud. Instead he bent his head and placed a soft kiss on the flared head of Thrain's cock.

He had never held another man's shaft before, let alone kissed one, so it was an entirely new experience for him—but not an unpleasant one, he found. Not at all.

Thrain's cock felt right in his hand—so heavy and solid and hot, it might have come straight from the fires of the forge. But the skin over it was as silky as rose petals, and Thrain's dark, secret spice was strong here, an intoxicating scent that seemed to fill Elias's senses and leave him almost dizzy with desire.

Going slowly, he leaned down to kiss the broad, plum-shaped head again. It was shiny with precum, and suddenly Elias wanted to taste it. Darting out his tongue, he lapped delicately at the clear pearls of liquid leaking from the small slit at the top. The taste was salty, slightly bitter, and completely delicious as far as Elias was concerned. A low groan from Thrain interrupted his exploration, and he looked up to see the other man propped up on his elbows and watching him, his midnight blue eyes half-lidded with lust. "Gods, Elias, are you trying to torture me to death?" he asked, his deep voice hoarse.

"Just taking my time," Elias explained. "I've not, um, done this before. I want to make sure I get it right."

"You can't go far wrong with a mouth like that." Thrain cupped his cheek and rubbed his thumb over Elias's bottom lip. "Just kiss me, Elias," he murmured. "You need not suck if it discomforts you."

"I am not discomforted," Elias said softly. "Not a bit." To prove his point, he leaned down and took the broad head in his mouth. Sucking gently, he swirled his tongue around the hot, silky shaft, tasting Thrain, breathing in his essence.

Thrain groaned again, and Elias felt one strong hand in his hair—not to force, but to gently urge him to take more. To his surprise, he didn't mind following Thrain's unspoken request. Although he never would have believed it possible in the past, he found he *liked* the feel and taste of Thrain's cock in his mouth. Liked the way it stretched his jaw open to the limit as he took it deeper and deeper down his throat, liked the heated, satiny skin rubbing against his lips and tongue, and the salty river of precum that flowed from its flared tip.

Gods, I was born for this. Born to take him deep in my mouth and suck his cock. The realization hit him like a blow as he took Thrain deeper yet. The taste, the feel of the other man's shaft in his mouth—it all seemed incredibly right, as though he were completing a connection that had always been there and had only been waiting to be awakened by his willingness to give himself.

Will it be this way when I open myself to him? Will it feel right this time to have him sheathed within me? Good instead of frightening and wrong? Elias could only hope it would. He had to confess that the act of sucking Thrain's thick cock had his own shaft achingly hard. He only hoped he could hold on to his desire when he submitted to having Thrain's cock in his ass instead of his mouth. In the meantime, he intended to enjoy the unexpected pleasure he derived from feeling the thick, silky shaft glide between his lips as Thrain fucked his mouth gently but urgently.

But just as he felt Thrain growing even thicker and harder between his lips, the fingers twined in his hair pulled him carefully away. Elias let the heated shaft go reluctantly and looked up at Thrain. "Why...why did you stop me?" He found he was panting a little, and his lips felt tender and swollen from sucking for so long.

Thrain stroked his cheek. "I cannot allow you to keep sucking me if you truly want me inside you. I am too close, and your mouth is too hot and sweet around me."

"Oh." Elias looked down at the fur coverlet uncertainly. "I see."

"Do you?" Thrain lifted his chin, forcing Elias to meet his gaze. "Do you truly wish this, Elias? We can do it a different way if you like. I can suck you, or...or you can take me instead." Thrain's voice was tight, and Elias could see how much it cost him to make the offer. Remembering Baynor's evil words about how he'd cornered Thrain in the stables as a boy made Elias shiver. For all that this will be hard for me, it would be a thousand times harder for him.

"No," he said gently, kneeling up to kiss Thrain's mouth again. "It has to be this way between us. I need—I *want* you inside me. Want to give myself to you. Please, will you take me now?"

"With pleasure. But I must prepare you first." Thrain urged him onto his stomach and propped a pillow under his midsection. "Try to relax."

"All right." The words tasted like sawdust in Elias's mouth. For all that he knew he had to do this, and as gentle as Thrain was, being in this position, on his stomach with the other man behind him, was bringing back the attack at Castle Rowan strongly. *I must do this. I must give what was taken.* But suddenly it seemed a lot harder than it had a moment before when he had been sucking Thrain's cock, not preparing to take it inside him.

He felt Thrain spreading his thighs, his large hands capable and sure, and tried not to tense up. At least I know it will fit. He's thick and long, but he's been in me before without tearing me. I can do this. I must do this.

Just as he had worked himself up to a fever pitch of nervous anticipation and was waiting to feel Thrain's fingers stretching him open, something he didn't expect happened. Instead of cool, slippery digits coated with oil or salve, something hot and wet touched his vulnerable entrance instead.

"What...?" Half turning, Elias looked over his shoulder to see Thrain lying between his thighs. "What are you doing?" he asked, finding his voice at last.

"Preparing you." Thrain's voice was thick with desire as he bent his head again and placed another hot, wet kiss against Elias's tight entrance.

Elias gasped as a hot shiver went through him. It had never occurred to him that Thrain might want to kiss him *there*, so he hadn't even imagined how good it would feel. The sensitive skin where Thrain placed his lips seemed to tingle with heated pleasure, and he could feel his cock, which had gone limp with fearful anticipation earlier, hardening against the soft furs that covered the bed.

"You...you don't have to do that," he protested weakly, still unable to believe what he was seeing—what he was feeling.

"But I want to." Thrain did it again, and this time Elias swore he could feel the tip of the other man's tongue, hot and wet, pierce his rosebud briefly.

"Gods!" he gasped and bucked up involuntarily to meet Thrain's mouth.

Thrain worked with the motion, taking advantage of Elias's eagerness to drill his tongue deeper into Elias's tight entrance. The motion sent a bolt of pleasure straight to Elias's cock, which was harder than stone now and throbbing hotly against his belly. Never had he imagined such an erotic sensation—it was strange and frightening and completely wonderful all at the same time. It made him forget his vulnerable position and his fears completely. It even managed to eradicate most of the past; how could he remember what Thrain had done to him at Castle Rowan when he was doing *this* now?

It seemed to go on forever, Thrain's exploring with his mouth and tongue. He would pierce Elias with its wet tip occasionally to make him writhe and moan, and then go back to gentle nibbling and kissing until Elias felt like he might die from the pleasure. But as good as it felt, it wasn't *quite* enough to make him come. *I could come if he were inside me. If he were rubbing over that spot, the one he showed me. I know I could.* The thought made Elias feel hot and cold all over. Suddenly he was eager to feel Thrain inside him—*more* than eager.

"Thrain... Gods, please," he moaned as the other man thrust the tip of his tongue past the tight ring of muscle that guarded his entrance once more. "Please, I need you."

"Need you too, Elias." Thrain's voice was hoarse with lust as he sat up between Elias's thighs. But instead of thrusting his hard and obviously ready cock into Elias's entrance, he turned him over onto his back.

"What...?" Elias looked up at him, confused.

"I won't take you that way," Thrain said, soft and intense. "Not this time. I want to look into your eyes when I enter you, want to watch you and be sure I'm not hurting you."

"All...all right," Elias whispered as Thrain spread his legs yet again. Now he felt the cool sting of the healing ointment as the other man liberally rubbed his entrance with it. Then, gently, Thrain slipped his fingers inside.

"How does that feel?" he asked, scissoring carefully to stretch Elias open.

"Good. A little overwhelming, but good," Elias admitted. He took a deep breath, trying to open himself for the invading fingers and not fight the sensation.

"I understand." Thrain's eyes were intense. "We still don't have to do this if you're feeling unsure."

"Please don't stop." Elias was surprised to find that he meant what he said. Far from dreading Thrain's entrance, now he was anticipating it. Looking forward to feeling that thick shaft breaching his rosebud and slipping deep into his body. Gods, who could have guessed he could ever *want* Thrain to do this to him? To fuck him? And yet he did—so much he could barely breathe. "Please," he murmured. "Please, Thrain."

"Very well." Leaning forward, Thrain took his shaft in one hand and guided it to Elias's slick entrance. When the broad head brushed against his tight rosebud, Elias drew in a deep breath, and Thrain froze. "Elias?"

"Go on." Elias nodded at him. "I'm all right now. I just... It surprised me a little. But go on, please."

"Tell me at any time if you want me to stop." Thrain spoke through gritted teeth. It was obvious that the effort to hold back and go slow was wearing on him, but he seemed nothing but eager to be sure Elias wasn't being hurt.

"I don't want to stop," he whispered back. "Please, Thrain. Take me."

His words seemed to release something inside Thrain, because he stopped being stiff and began to press his shaft into Elias's body.

Elias moaned softly when the broad head breached the ring of muscle that guarded his entrance. And then he felt Thrain's thick shaft following. *Gods, I forgot how big he was, how thick.* It was true—either he'd forgotten or blocked it out, and he wished he hadn't thought of it now. He didn't want to remember that first, awful encounter at Castle Rowan. He just wanted to see Thrain as he was now—a gentle, careful lover who was infinitely patient as he thrust slowly deeper and deeper into Elias's body.

Thrain seemed to sense his inner turmoil, because he cupped Elias's cheek. "Look at me, Elias," he said urgently. "Look into my eyes, concentrate on my face, and know that I care for you and would never hurt you. I'll stop right now if you like."

He was already more than halfway buried inside Elias's body, so Elias could imagine how hard it was for Thrain to make that offer. His heart swelled as he realized the truth of Thrain's words—he *did* care for Elias, and he wanted to make this experience as positive as the other had been negative.

He gripped Thrain's forearms. "Don't you dare stop. I want you all the way inside me," he murmured breathlessly. "Want...want to feel you filling me completely."

"And I want to be in you," Thrain assured him. "Gods, you're so beautiful when you open yourself to me." He stroked Elias's cheek. "Very well. Hold on tight. I'm going to fill you up." Pressing forward, he entered Elias completely with one long, smooth thrust.

Elias bit his lower lip and moaned softly at the slight stretching pain as the rest of Thrain's shaft pierced him. When at last he felt the other man's pelvis flush against his spread thighs, he knew they were completely joined. He expected Thrain to start thrusting at once, but the other man held still, looking down at Elias.

"I'm in you now, all the way inside you. Are you well?"

"Well enough." Elias tried not to wince. "It's a bit of a tight fit."

Thrain stroked the damp curls off Elias's forehead. "It's meant to be."

Elias frowned. "Does it feel all right to you?"

"Elias, you have no idea how good you feel around me." Thrain's eyes were half-lidded with lust, his voice husky as he spoke. "But just by touching you, I can tell the magic has dissipated quite a bit. I don't understand why you're so keen to let me do this, so eager to give yourself this way."

Elias thought of telling him his theory about solving the first part of the dragon's riddle but decided it would take too long—especially considering the position they were currently in. He felt stretched to the limit, and it was clear that Thrain was using every ounce of self-control he possessed not to fuck him senseless immediately. "Can't it be just because I want you?" he asked, giving Thrain a heated look. "Because I want to feel you in me?"

"If you're certain..." Thrain still looked doubtful, but he allowed Elias to draw him down and kiss his cheek. "And if you're really all right," he added, giving Elias a long, searching look.

"I'd be better if you moved in me—if you *fucked* me." Elias wiggled his hips, deliberately teasing. He was a little shocked by his own words, but there was no denying they were true; he actually wanted Thrain to take him—to fuck him. Earlier he had been uncertain and a little fearful. But with Thrain looking down into his face, his midnight blue eyes shining with caring and maybe something else, all he could feel was joy. Joy and the same deep-seated connection he had felt earlier while sucking Thrain's cock. *This is right. This is true. This is what I need*—*what we both need. I have to open myself to him, to give him all I have. It's the only way.*

The words in his head felt true, and they were echoed by the fact that the magic had receded almost completely. No longer was his skin on fire—Thrain's touch had reduced the dangerous, roaring blaze to embers, as it always did. *He has tamed me and the magic at the same time*. Elias thrust up again. "Please, Thrain," he whispered, staring into the other man's eyes. "Please, I need you."

Thrain groaned. "As I need you. But I shall go slow at first."

"You needn't treat me like I'm made of glass," Elias said breathlessly. "I trust you not to hurt me."

"Gods, to hear you say that...say you trust me..." Thrain's eyes were filled with emotion.

"I do," Elias insisted and knew it to be the truth.

Thrain kissed him softly on the mouth and then raised his head to capture Elias's gaze with his own. "Let this time be our first in your memory, if you can. Let me erase the harm I did you by giving you pleasure now." Suiting actions to his words, he reached between them and took Elias's throbbing shaft in his hand. "Feels good?" He gave Elias's cock a long, slow stroke.

"Yes. Gods yes!" Elias moaned and thrust up into Thrain's hand. He couldn't believe the pleasure he felt as he was pierced from below and stroked from above. And all the while Thrain was staring intently down into his face, an expression of tender intensity on his hawklike features as he worked Elias slowly and deliberately with both his cock and his hand.

"Elias," he murmured, the name like a prayer on his lips. "Elias, speak to me. Tell me what you're feeling."

"I feel you inside me," Elias whispered. "Filling me, taking me. And...and I have never felt anything so right before in my life."

"I feel it too," Thrain admitted in a low voice. "It is like a rope binding us together. Mayhap the dragon was right when he spoke of our destinies being entwined." "Perhaps he was. Gods!" The exclamation was drawn from Elias's lips as Thrain shifted, changing his angle so that the heavy head of his cock rubbed over that special spot inside, shooting deep, tingling pleasure throughout Elias's entire body.

"Felt that, did you?" Thrain growled, leaning down to nip Elias's throat possessively.

"Gods yes. Do it again."

"With pleasure." Thrain pulled out and thrust in again, harder this time. At the same time he stroked Elias's cock in rhythm to his thrusts, working him until Elias felt he was going to explode.

"Harder," he gasped, writhing shamelessly under Thrain's heavy, muscular body. "I can take it, Thrain. Use me harder."

"Are you sure?" Uncertainty and need warred in Thrain's face.

"Positive," Elias assured him. "Give me more. *Fuck* me!" He couldn't believe the words leaving his mouth, but he couldn't deny them either. He wanted Thrain, wanted him more than any lover he'd ever had. And it wasn't just the pleasure of making love; it was the pleasure of being taken. Of being helpless and open beneath a lover bigger and stronger than he was. All the things that had made the encounter at Castle Rowan bad and frightening were reversed as the connection between them intensified. Elias no longer feared submitting; now he reveled in it. *Take me, open me, use me. Make me yours always. Brand me with your love.* He could not say the words aloud, but he felt them to the roots of his soul.

Thrain must have felt them too. With a low roar, he gripped Elias tighter and began pounding into him, thrusting hard and fast and rubbing the secret spot inside Elias's body over and over, until Elias thought he would scream with the intensity of it. Suddenly the pleasure, which had been slowly building higher and higher, reached a peak, and he was right at the edge of the abyss.

"Gods, Thrain. Too much, too *good*," he gasped, bucking shamelessly against the other man's hand as his eyes squeezed shut at the powerful feeling. "Think I'm going to..."

"Come for me, Elias." Thrain's voice was low and commanding. "But open your eyes first. I want to look at you while you come. Want to look in your eyes while I fill you with my cum."

Elias opened his eyes and looked up, meeting the other man's gaze. He could feel the rope Thrain had spoken of, a shining, invisible line that bound them together. It's like our hearts are connected somehow. The dragon was right. Thrain does care for me. He needs me as I need him—together, we are whole. The thought filled him with wonder even as the pleasure overtook him.

"Thrain!" he called, giving himself up completely, shamelessly to the pleasure his lover was giving him. "Thrain—gods—in me so deep!"

"And I'll go deeper still before I fill you," Thrain growled. He was thrusting with increasing intensity and speed now, much harder than he ever had at Castle Rowan, but that was fine with Elias. He arched up to meet the other man's pounding, punishing thrusts as Thrain worked within him. It was as though he was reaching for Elias's heart every time he drove his cock into his body, as though he wanted to make the connection between them permanent and binding by the power of his love and the sheer force of his will.

Elias found himself tilting over the edge. With a low moan, he began to come, fountaining over Thrain's hand helplessly as the pleasure took him and swept him over the edge of reason and beyond. "Thrain," he moaned, getting lost in the depths of the other man's midnight blue eyes. "Gods, Thrain, *yes*."

"Elias." Thrain's voice was a deep rasp. "So tight, so sweet. Gods, I can feel you coming all around me. Need to fill you up."

"Fill me, then. Come inside me." Elias had lost all shame now, all reason. He only knew he wanted the connection between them to be complete. And the only way to do that was to have Thrain's seed deep within him, filling him, marking him as Thrain's.

With a low roar, Thrain did as he asked. He pulled back, then thrust home inside Elias, filling him to the hilt. For a moment Elias felt him grow even thicker, if that were possible, and then Thrain was coming, spurting hotly inside him, filling him with his seed, and sealing the connection between them irrevocably.

* * *

For a time he felt like he was floating. The sharp peak he'd reached had diminished, only to be replaced by the warm comfort of Thrain's strong arms around him. The fire had burned low, and the candles were unlit, so they were cocooned in the darkness together. Elias sighed contentedly and pillowed his head on the other man's chest as he had the nights they had slept wrapped around each other, before that stupid fight they'd had. *Stupid. Never going to fight again. Much better when we're getting along. So much warmer... Safer... Nice.*

"Nice" wasn't the word for it. "Perfect" might be more like it. Elias could still feel the connection humming between them in the dark, even though Thrain had withdrawn from Elias's body carefully before gathering him into his arms. He didn't know if they really were destined to be together for the rest of their lives, as the dragon seemed to think. But he *did* know he felt blissfully contented just now, and he never wanted the feeling to end. Unfortunately Thrain didn't seem to share his sentiments.

"Elias," he murmured, his voice a deep rumble under Elias's ear. "This is nice, but we need to get moving if we're going to get you out of here."

Elias frowned. "I told you, I'm not going anywhere."

"You have to," Thrain insisted. "You have to be gone long before the coronation. If Baynor gets his hands on you—"

"Baynor can kiss my rosy red arse," Elias grumbled. He was feeling entirely too sleepy and contented to move. Thrain let out a surprised bark of laughter. Then he sighed. "Elias, please. I must see you away and safe. Do not force me to suffer the pain of losing you a second time." His voice was serious in the darkness.

"You never really lost me," Elias pointed out sleepily. "I was here all along."

"Here, but hating me. You might as well have been at the other end of the realm." Thrain's voice was dry, but there was a layer of hurt in it that made Elias feel terrible. He really had misjudged the other man, and he hadn't exactly been eager to give Thrain the benefit of the doubt when he had tried to explain himself.

"I never really hated you. I just...disliked you a lot," he said in a small voice. "I didn't know—I *still* don't know exactly how you feel about me."

"Do you not?" Thrain asked softly. "Can you really have any doubt after what we've just finished doing?"

"I..." Elias bit his lower lip, not sure how to continue. He knew that he felt a connection between them and that what he'd just done with Thrain was the most amazing and fulfilling act of lovemaking he'd ever had. But impossibly great sex didn't necessarily equate to love. Especially stay-together-the-rest-of-our-lives-and-build-a-kingdom-together love.

Thrain sighed. "We have no time for this now. We must away. Come." He shifted, his chest moving under Elias's cheek. "Let's pack a few things and leave. We'll be hours gone before Baynor thinks to look for us."

"We? Us?" Elias lifted his head. "What about your revenge?"

In the dim light of the dying embers, he could see Thrain shake his head. "I don't care about it so much anymore. If I have to choose between seeing my father and brother dead or living with you... Well, I choose you, Elias."

Elias sat up in bed. "You're serious? But I thought—"

"That vengeance against those that hurt me was more important to me than anything else?" Thrain asked quietly.

"Yes," Elias said simply and nodded.

"That used to be true. But that was before."

"Before what?"

"Before...before I knew I loved you." Thrain's voice was slightly strained, and Elias wondered what it had cost him to make that confession. Thrain, the hardened warrior, professing his love. Had he ever said those words to another living soul before?

"Thrain," he murmured. He wanted to stroke the other man's cheek as Thrain was always stroking his, but he wasn't sure if he should. So he sat perfectly still, not touching the other man.

"Elias," Thrain whispered, leaning toward him.

It seemed to Elias that Thrain wished to touch him but wasn't sure of himself. He wished it weren't quite so dim in the room. He wanted to look into Thrain's eyes and know what was going through his mind. Without thinking, he cast a glance over his shoulder toward the nearest candle. "Burn," he whispered in the Old Tongue. The candle flickered to life with a warm glow. *That's better*. *Now maybe we can figure out what we're doing*. He turned back to Thrain, only to see the other man staring at him in astonishment.

"Elias, did you...did you see what you just did?"

"What?" Elias frowned.

"The candle—you lit it perfectly. And we weren't even touching." Thrain closed the distance between them in a rush, his hands hovering uncertainly over Elias's bare skin. "Are you all right? Is the magic too much for you?"

"No, it's fine. Perfectly fine." Finally Elias realized what had happened—what he had just done. "Oh gods, it really is. It's *perfectly fine*." He turned toward the fireplace and leveled his gaze at the dull red embers. "Burn."

A cheerful little fire burst to life, crackling merrily on the hearth and looking as neat and perfect as possible. And though Thrain was hovering anxiously near Elias, he still wasn't touching him.

"I did it." Elias couldn't believe the wonder in his own voice. "I did it by myself—without even touching you." Elation shot through him, and he turned to Thrain. "I did it. I was right!"

"Right about what?" Thrain gave him a look that was cautiously confused.

"The riddle—the damn riddle the dragon gave me. He said I had to give what was taken from me, but it was only when Baynor was threatening me in the hallway that I understood. In order to take control of my magic, I had to give myself to you, to give you what you already took that night at Castle Rowan."

"Really." Thrain's voice was flat. "So *that* was why you were so eager to give yourself to me."

"It's not like that," Elias protested.

"Oh, then what is it like, Elias?" Thrain frowned at him. "Gods, I can't believe I was so *stupid*. I thought you'd finally forgiven me, that you wanted me as I wanted you."

"I did want you. I mean, I was a little frightened at first—"

"Your hands were ice-cold, and you were trembling, you feared my taking you so much. But anything—*anything* to free yourself of me. To have control of the magic yourself. Isn't that right?" Thrain demanded.

"Of course I want control of my own magic. It's *my* magic, isn't it? It's inside of *me*. So *I'm* the one who had to worry about being singed to a crisp from the inside out if I so much as dared to summon it without you," Elias shouted, feeling frustrated.

"You need never have such fear again, it seems." Thrain's voice was cold, and there was a closed look to his sharp blue eyes.

"Thrain, please." Elias took a deep breath, trying to quiet his inner turmoil. "It doesn't matter why I gave myself to you. What matters is the result. You realize that now we can get your revenge after all? That is, if we can find a moment when your brother and father aren't wearing their magic-null crowns."

Thrain sighed unhappily. "As a matter of fact, neither of them will be wearing their circlets on the morrow. During the coronation, they must use the traditional crown jewels, which have been handed down from father to son for generations. I was planning to tell you about it earlier, before we fought."

Which time? Elias wanted to ask. "Well then, that's perfect," he said instead, a little too heartily. "I do not need to be touching them or be anywhere near them to do what needs to be done." He pictured the way he'd blown up the apple he was practicing on the day the magic had almost claimed him. "I shall stand in the crowd wearing my fake collar and looking innocent, and no one will know what happened. You won't be touching either one of them, and you'll be wearing your own magic null, so no one will suspect you have anything to do with it either. And of course, you'll be the only heir left—You shall probably be crowned on the spot."

"You seem to have it all worked out," Thrain said softly.

Elias shrugged. "Doesn't take much working out, really."

"And what about after?" Thrain pinned him with that intense, hawklike look. "After my revenge is complete and the crown is on my head? Will you stay by my side and fulfill the destiny the dragon foretold for us?"

"There might be more to fulfilling our destiny than just staying by your side," Elias pointed out. "There are still two more parts to the riddle it gave me, and I haven't a clue how to solve them. I must remember that which was forgotten and claim that which love would have me deny."

Thrain frowned. "What do you think that means?"

"Maybe...maybe I'm supposed to remember my mother and go claim my kingdom. Which, of course, I would be denying if I stayed at Castle Black for love of you."

"Maybe you just want to leave." Thrain's face was impassive, but his voice held a depth of sorrow that squeezed Elias's heart.

He looked down at his hands. "I told you once that I could not stay here and be owned by you, Thrain. I shall need some time to sort my life out."

"Of course you will," Thrain said briskly, looking away.

Elias touched his shoulder hesitantly. "It doesn't mean that what we've done means nothing to me, you know. I just... I know what the dragon said about our destinies, but..." He trailed off, not certain how he could put his feelings into words.

"But you don't really care to spend the rest of your life with me," Thrain said softly.

Elias threw up his hands. "I don't understand why we must declare ourselves tonight. Can we not take things one step at a time? It isn't as though we've made any vows before God and man." "I did. I claimed you before all the gods and my father's court." Thrain's voice was quiet and sad. "I would not have done so if I didn't believe that we were meant to be together."

"Mayhap we are," Elias said. "But I have to see to my own life first. I have to find my mother, rebuild the kingdom your father tore down, and tend to my people. And you must do the same here. That is the responsibility of the nobility. We cannot put our personal desires above duty."

The words sounded fine and noble, but he was aware that he was using them as a shield. He still felt the connection between himself and Thrain, but now that the heat of passion had cooled, the idea of making a lifetime commitment, of binding himself irrevocably to the other man, was a frightening one. Far better to put a little distance between them for a time and then see how they felt—or so he told himself. And besides, he really *did* have to do all the things he'd spoken of. He couldn't throw everything that was important to him to one side just to spend his days at Thrain's side and his nights in his bed. No matter how sweet their lovemaking had been, he had to be practical and think of the future and his duty to his country. Didn't he?

"You are right, I suppose. I will, of course, respect your wishes. You are free to go at any time." Thrain's face was stony, and his voice was coldly polite, making it impossible to guess what he was really thinking.

"Thank you," Elias said unhappily. He opened his mouth to say more and then closed it again. What more was there to say?

"I'm tired, and tomorrow will be a long day." Thrain lay back in the bed and turned on his side, facing away from Elias. "Kill the candle, will you? We need to get some sleep."

"Out," Elias whispered in the Old Tongue, and the candle doused with a faint hiss, as though a pair of invisible fingers had pinched it out. The fire he'd restarted magically had already mostly burned down again—there wasn't enough fuel on the hearth to keep it going—so he had nothing more to do than to lie down beside Thrain in the darkness. He wished he could cuddle close to the other man, to feel Thrain's warm, strong arms holding him near, but that no longer seemed possible.

Elias shivered, cold and lonely in his half of the vast bed. So much for my idea of never fighting again. It's my own fault, I suppose, for refusing to declare my love. But how can I declare what I am not sure I feel? How can I make a promise to stay with him forever when we can't seem to stop fighting for two hours together?

Feeling miserable and tired, he turned over and burrowed under the covers. Wishing again for the warmth and comfort of Thrain's arms, he fell asleep at last.

Chapter Sixteen

I am a fool. Thrain lay in the darkness, listening to the start of Elias's nightmares and wishing he could call back the words he had spoken. Why did I tell him I love him? Why did I allow myself to believe he cared for me as I care for him? He couldn't forget the look on Elias's face when he'd asked if Elias would stay once Baynor and Ungor were gone. The reluctance, the fear and uncertainty. Elias had no wish to tie himself forever to a man like Thrain, no matter what the dragon had said, and Thrain, for one, couldn't blame him.

My past has twisted me. I am not fit company for anyone. He remembered with shame that Elias knew what Baynor had done to him and how their father had practically condoned it. Who could blame him if he didn't wish to align himself with a man from such a family? Not to mention that Thrain knew he wasn't the easiest or lightest person to be around. His whole life had been built around training for combat and plotting revenge. Such pursuits were not very conducive to a light and easy personality.

He still couldn't understand, though, how Elias could turn his back completely on the connection that had been forged between them. Their lovemaking had been utterly amazing—unlike anything Thrain had ever felt before. And he didn't think Elias had been faking his reactions either. How could he leave after they had experienced each other so intimately? Why could he not admit that the dragon was right? That they belonged together. That they were a hundred times better together than they were apart.

I love him to distraction, but gods, how I wish I did not. Even more, he wished he hadn't told Elias. At the time it had seemed important to make the other man understand how he felt—that it was his heart and not just his body that was engaged. Now he felt like... Well, like a fool. Which led him back to where he'd started.

Elias's first nightmare was reaching a fever pitch. Thrain put a hand on his shoulder and hushed him, almost by force of habit. Elias quieted at once as soon as they touched, but Thrain knew another evil dream would be along presently to trouble the lad's sleep. As for his own nightmare, Thrain was afraid it was going to become reality. On the morrow he would finally have revenge against his evil brother and heartless father.

And then he would have a kingdom to rule on his own—with no one by his side to help him rule it.

* * *

"Stand just here. No matter what happens, do not leave this spot." Thrain pointed firmly to the space just to the left of a huge tapestry depicting a gory battle with twelve brave knights and what appeared to be a manticore.

"Yes, *sire*," Elias answered with just a touch of irritation. Thrain had been allbusiness from the moment they'd woken up. He wasn't as cold and silent as he had been the preceding week, but it was clear his heart—which he'd been wearing on his sleeve the night before—was firmly under wraps again and not likely to be touched by anything Elias said or did. "Why is it so important that I stand just here, anyway?" he asked, frowning. "It doesn't appear to give me a better vantage of the dais where the throne stands."

"This is why." Thrain looked around the rapidly filling great hall to make sure no one was watching and then quickly lifted the thick edge of the tapestry. He took Elias's hand and slid it along the chilly stone wall until they came to a short wooden lever. "Feel that?"

What Elias mostly felt was the warmth of the other man's hand on his, but he only nodded. "What does it do?"

"Pull it, and part of the wall behind the tapestry will move aside, revealing a hidden passage. You can slip in and get away quickly if something happens."

"What's going to happen? We have this all planned out, don't we?" They had gone over the plan—which was fairly simple—three or four times at breakfast. It was basically what Elias had outlined the night before, with a few minor tweaks from Thrain. "We'll be fine."

"I hope you're right, but I doubt things will be as simple as all that." Thrain looked troubled. "At any rate, I want you someplace safe in case things don't go to plan. I shall be on the dais with Baynor and my father. If I nod at you, I want you gone."

Elias was stung. "So if things go wrong, I'm supposed to pull the lever and leave you stranded?"

"That's exactly what you're to do." Thrain gave him a stern look. "This is my battle, Elias. I never should have pulled you into it in the first place. If I nod at you, don't even nod back. Just go."

"But I—"

"No, listen," Thrain said, an intense look in his sharp blue eyes. "The passage leads to the outer wall of the castle. You can follow it around to the stables and hopefully steal a horse. You're dressed like a visiting prince." He nodded at the rich, fur-lined cape and the black sateen breeches he'd had Elias put on that morning. "Just keep your head high and act imperious. Hopefully the guards will let you pass. Tell them you're on an errand for me, if they give you any trouble. Here." He slipped off the broad band of silver he always wore on his left forefinger, and pressed it into Elias's hand. "This should get you past them if nothing else does." "I'm not just going to leave you if things go bad!" Elias protested in a low voice, gripping the silver ring tightly. "I gave you my word that I would help you win your revenge. I am no oath-breaker."

"Better an oath-breaker than dead," Thrain snapped. Then he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Elias"—he cupped Elias's cheek and tilted his chin until they were eye to eye—"please promise me this. Swear that you will go if I give the signal. I...I could not bear it if you came to harm because of me."

Elias swallowed hard. He seemed to be drowning in the midnight blue depths of Thrain's eyes, but his spirit still rebelled at what was being asked of him. "I know what I said last night about my duty to go and rebuild my kingdom, but now it comes to it, I...I don't wish to leave you."

"I do not wish you to leave either," Thrain murmured, and Elias knew he was talking about more than just the possibility that their plot might fail. Thrain leaned forward and brushed his lips against Elias's cheek. "But promise me you will anyway," he whispered. "Let my heart be at ease on that point at least. Please, Elias."

Elias still didn't like it, but curious gazes were beginning to turn in their direction, and the heralds were assembled to blow the fanfare. The coronation was about to start, and he would have to time everything perfectly if he wanted to assassinate both Ungor and Baynor. Reluctantly he nodded. "All right. It will be as you say. Though I still don't like it."

"Good." Thrain pressed his lips to Elias's in one last, lingering kiss. Pulling back, he looked into Elias's eyes. "Do not forget me." And then he was gone, making his way through the crowd to the raised dais where the great stone throne of Castle Black sat.

Raising his chin, he climbed the steps in two bounds and placed himself to the left of the throne. Baynor was already positioned to the right, in the place of honor, and Elias saw him make some kind of remark—no doubt a taunt—as Thrain stood at attention. Thrain kept his eyes forward, ignoring his brother as the fanfare rang out from the heralds' silver trumpets.

As the fanfare played and all eyes turned toward the far end of the great hall, Elias thought that Thrain looked far more stately in his simple black doublet slashed with scarlet than Baynor did in his ridiculously rich cloth-of-gold outfit. The stiff material bunched awkwardly and pulled across Baynor's prodigious belly, making him look lumpish rather than regal. However, Elias knew the power hidden in that huge body and the malice Baynor had to match it, so he wasn't tempted to smile, even a little bit. On Baynor's temples sat the familiar black iron magic-null circlet, but Elias wasn't worried. He knew that the crown prince would have to take it off when Ungor transferred the real crown from his own head to his son's. *And that will be my chance to get them both*.

He waited impatiently as King Ungor, flanked by his private squadron of guards, paraded slowly down the rich crimson carpet that led to the dais and the throne. Of course, he could have reached out to the king and killed him as he walked, but that would have alerted Baynor, and he never would have removed his circlet. No, the deed had to be done just as Ungor was transferring the crown, which currently sat like a great golden bejeweled bird's nest on his brow, from his head to his son's.

At last the king reached the dais and climbed the steps leading to the throne. Turning, he faced the assembled lords and ladies. Everyone was dressed in their very best, and the rustle of silks and satins and other rich materials filled the vast hall. All assembled seemed to be holding their breath—including Elias, who wished the king would get on with it already. The one good thing was that the ceremony wasn't likely to last long, at least according to Thrain. He claimed that his father didn't care for long, drawn-out affairs of state, preferring to conduct business quickly, and hopefully this would be no exception.

Come on. Let's get started so we can get this over with. Elias had a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach as he waited for the right moment to strike. He had only just gained control of his magic, and now he was going to use it to kill someone—two someones, in fact. And no matter how richly Baynor and Ungor deserved death, the fact that they would die by his hand—or his magic, anyway—still made him uncomfortable.

At last Ungor began to speak. "Lords and ladies, the time has come for me to pass my crown to my older son. I know that Baynor will be a good and just king..."

As Ungor blathered on and on about virtues Baynor was blatantly lacking, Elias felt a tickle in the back of his mind. And then, suddenly, the dragon's voice filled his head. "Have a care, Elias. If you make your first great act of magic one of hatred and death, you cast your life in a mold that will be difficult if not impossible to break."

"What?" Elias nearly said it out loud, but he stopped himself just in time. He thought hard at the dragon instead. *"What do you mean by that?"* His magic allowed him to speak to the dragon across great distances, but he still wished he could see its face to understand its true meaning.

"You heard me." The dragon sighed in his head. "The steel of your magic is but newly forged. Do you really wish to temper it in blood?"

"I have no choice," Elias shot back, keeping his gaze firmly on the dais where Ungor was still talking. "This is my destiny, remember? To help Thrain. You told me so yourself."

"I said you were to help him unite the realms and heal the land, not murder his enemies." The dragon sounded disapproving.

"You're one to talk," Elias thought fiercely. "I hear Ungor caught you using a virgin sacrifice. You can't tell me what's right and wrong when you eat innocents for dinner."

"There is that," the dragon admitted. "But I do not seek to rule with a just hand. My kind is all appetite and fire, and that is what you must guard against, Elias. The magic inside you will give you a dragon's cravings. If you sate them, you will become a monster as surely as I am one."

" $I \, don't$ —"Elias broke off abruptly because they were coming to the part of the coronation ceremony that he had been waiting for. At last Ungor was transferring the huge golden crown to Baynor.

"With this crown, I proclaim you to be rightwise king of all our lands, the liege lord and commander of Castle Black, and my true and just heir," he intoned as he lifted the large ugly crown from his head. "Kneel, that I might crown you so."

Baynor got clumsily to his knees and reached up to remove the black iron circlet of magic null from his temples. A page who was standing to one side took it from him and scampered to one side of the dais, leaving him completely unprotected.

Now's my chance. Baynor first—he's the biggest threat and did Thrain the most wrong. Elias concentrated on the crown prince, calling the magic to him. It came as naturally and easily as a well-trained dog, and this time he knew he really was in control of it. Narrowing his eyes, he pictured Baynor's heart beating in his chest. "Burst," he whispered fiercely in the Old Tongue.

Baynor's hand suddenly went to his chest, and a frown crossed his face. But to Elias's chagrin, he didn't suddenly topple over and die. Instead his frown deepened, and he scanned the crowd. He was still, apparently, perfectly healthy.

"Burst," Elias whispered again desperately. He sent an enormous wave of power in Baynor's direction, still picturing his heart. The plan had been to kill both Baynor and his father invisibly from the inside out. Mainly because Thrain had thought that anything more obvious—such as setting them alight or exploding their skulls—would cause too much confusion and fear among the audience. But though Elias was bringing every ounce of his not-inconsiderable magical talent to bear on the crown prince, nothing happened except that Baynor frowned and rubbed his chest harder. It's like my magic is slipping off him, like water off a duck's back. What's happening?

Ungor. What about Ungor? Elias turned his concentration to the king and tried again. He saw Ungor falter for a moment as he set the crown on Baynor's head, but again, nothing of consequence happened. However, Ungor and Baynor did exchange a significant look, and then Baynor rose, wearing the crown, and scanned the crowd more thoroughly.

"As my first act as king of this land, let Goderich, the witch finder, come forward."

"I am here, Your Majesty." The tall, thin man Elias remembered from his last day in court came forward, moving through the crowd so smoothly, he reminded Elias of a snake slithering.

"There is a sorcerer here who wishes to cause me harm," Baynor intoned, his deep voice echoing accusingly from the great hall's stone walls. "Be so kind as to point him out to me, Goderich." "With pleasure, sire." The witch finder made a great show of stalking off the dais and slithering among the crowd.

Elias felt frozen to the spot. *How does he know? What's going on? Can the witch finder really sense the source of true magic, or is this a plot Baynor set up beforehand?* Elias had no answers. He happened to look up at the dais again and saw Thrain watching him with anxious eyes. The moment he caught Elias's gaze, he nodded firmly. The signal was clear: *get out now, while you still can.*

But Elias couldn't move. And suddenly Goderich was right in front of him, staring him in the face. Elias felt like a bird caught by a snake's eyes. *Should kill him now and get away through the secret passage*. But it wouldn't be very secret if everyone saw him slip behind the tapestry and enter it. Also, the witch finder was wearing a thick black chain of magic null around his neck, ensuring that Elias's magic was useless.

"This is the one, Your Majesty." The witch finder turned and pointed at him with one long, bony finger.

"Well, well. What a surprise." Baynor rubbed his hands together in gleeful anticipation. "Bring him forward, Goderich. What are you waiting for?"

"This is ridiculous. Elias is a Null!" Thrain roared.

"No, wait. My lord is right. I was shunned at my own court for lack of magic," Elias protested as the witch finder wrapped his fingers around his upper arm and dragged him back to the dais where Baynor and Ungor were standing side by side, glaring.

"So we have been told, little princeling." Baynor frowned at him. "But my medallion says otherwise." Opening the rich cloth of gold doublet he wore, he revealed a thick, ugly black pendant. "It was burning just now as you tried to assassinate me, as was my father's, I'll warrant." He nodded at Ungor, who nodded back and revealed his own magic-null necklace.

"This is madness." Thrain came to stand between Elias and his brother. "Elias has no magic, and even if he did, he could not harm you, Baynor. Just look at his collar." He gestured at the dull black collar he had painted to look like magic null, which Elias still wore prominently around his neck.

"Yes, let us *look* at his collar, shall we?" Reaching forward, Baynor then snapped open the locking mechanism and yanked the fake collar from Elias's neck. Scraping his thumbnail over the dull black surface, he revealed the silvery shine of the true iron underneath. "Just as I thought." He glared at Elias. "This is no magic null. *This*, however, *is*." After throwing the fake collar to one side with a dull *clink*, he then produced a thick black collar from the folds of his cloak. Before Elias could say or do anything, Baynor had snapped it around his throat.

"No!" Thrain lunged forward, but it was too late. Elias could feel the fire inside him dying, being dammed up like a great river transformed into a tiny trickle. "Take it off him right now!" Thrain reached for his neck, but Baynor shoved him away. "What's the matter, little brother? Afraid your pet sorcerer won't be able to save you now that his magic is nulled?"

Suddenly Thrain's sword was in his hand. "Take it off right now or suffer the consequences," he growled.

"How dare you draw your sword against your king?" Baynor demanded.

"You are not my king," Thrain spat. "You're nothing but a filthy swine that's able to walk and talk. Take your collar and your hands off Elias. I have claimed him publicly before this very court. He is mine."

"No more, he's not." Baynor gave him a frightening grin filled with brownish teeth. "Guards! This man has threatened my life. Seize him," he said, never taking his eyes from Thrain's.

Suddenly they were surrounded. Thrain swung his sword in an arch, slashing one man across the chest and slicing another's shoulder open so that blood gushed and bone showed, but then ten more were at his back. Before Elias could even blink, they had him pinned, and his sword was in Baynor's hands.

"You bastard." Thrain was breathing hard, but his voice was icy. "I'll see you dead if you harm him."

"Oho, another threat." Baynor laughed and turned to his father. "Did you hear that, sire? Not five minutes have passed since you've handed me the crown, and already we have an attempted assassination and two threats against my life."

"Truly, it is a new record." Ungor chuckled. "I had been on the throne at least a day before the first attempt on my life came. Already you are besting me, my son."

"Very true. I would kill you both if I could." Thrain glared at Baynor and then flicked his gaze at Elias.

Elias could read the gesture as clearly as if Thrain had written it down for him. Baynor, in his gloating, had taken his hands off Elias and allowed him to slip behind him. Most of the guards in the room were clustered around Thrain, leaving Elias a clear way off the dais and straight to the tapestry where the secret passage was concealed. *Run*! Thrain's eyes begged him. *Run, get away—go*!

Slowly Elias shook his head. No. He would not leave Thrain to face the brunt of his brother's anger without him. *I will not abandon both honor and love for the sake of my own life. I will not leave you.*

Thrain's eyes grew desperate and then hard and angry as he understood that Elias was refusing to make an attempt at escape. "Do you hear me, Father?" he growled, switching his attention to the former king. "I said I would kill you both, and I will. But I alone will do it. Elias has nothing to do with any of this. He is nothing but my bed slave."

"And so he shall be again—but *my* bed slave this time." Baynor spoke before Ungor could answer. Turning, he gave Elias an ugly grin and grabbed him by the arm to drag him forward. "We shall see how you like servicing a real man and a king," he snarled.

Elias tried to back away, but Baynor's thick fingers were digging into the meat of his upper arm, and there was no getting loose. Giving it up as a bad job, he stopped struggling and stood up straight. "You may be king, but you will never be the man your brother is," he said loudly, staring Baynor in the eyes. "I do not fear you."

"Elias, no!" Thrain shook his head, but Baynor was already nearly purple with rage.

"You do not fear me, eh? Well, you should, little princeling—you should. I will *teach* you to fear." He turned away. "Goderich! Where are you? I want you."

"Here, Your Majesty." The witch finder appeared from behind the guards who were holding Thrain. "I was making sure your brother had no weapons of magic about him."

"He has nothing but this little sorcerer; I am certain of that." Baynor shook Elias. "Tell me, Goderich, is the witch pyre ready to receive one accused of magic?"

Goderich's narrow eyes gleamed. "It is always ready for that, sire."

"Excellent." Baynor smiled. "Then we shall have a burning."

"It shall be as you say, sire." Goderich's thin lips twitched up into a cold smirk, and he took Elias's other arm, the one Baynor wasn't holding. Elias felt sick. "If you will give me leave, I shall take the sorcerer to the pyre at once."

"Oh, not this one, Goderich. Not yet." Baynor shook his head. "This fire is for my little brother."

"What?" Elias felt as though someone had punched him in the gut. Why the idea of Thrain dying was so much more upsetting than the idea of his own death, he could not say, but so it was. "But he wasn't using magic against you," he protested. "Thrain has no magic at all. It was me—all me."

"Ah, so at last you admit your crimes." Baynor smiled at him. "And you shall be punished for them in due time. I promise you that. But until then, Thrain must pay. And since he intended to use you as a magical weapon, he is no less guilty of practicing magic than you are, little princeling."

Elias felt himself start to shake. Why had he not taken Thrain's suggestion and left with him last night when they might have had a chance of escaping? Why had he allowed his foolish pride to keep him here? Everything had gone horribly, terribly wrong, and now Thrain would die for his pride. He turned to Ungor. "Please, Your Majesty. You cannot let your own son be burned at the stake! Surely you will not allow it," he begged.

"Baynor is king here now, not I." Ungor folded his hands piously. "He must do as he thinks best."

"So you will stand by and let one son kill another?" Elias looked at him incredulously. "How do you dare to call yourself a father? How—"

There was a blur in the corner of his vision, and a sudden, sharp pain across his face stopped the flow of his words. He looked up to see Baynor drawing back for another blow. "Mind your tongue, boy, else I'll cut it out," he growled. "I would do it now, but I want to hear your screams when you watch your lover burn."

"You—" Elias began, but Thrain shook his head.

"Peace, Elias. I will die with dignity." His voice softened. "I am only sorry to leave you here like this. Nothing else matters."

"Never fear, Brother. Your little princeling will share your fate as soon as I have had my fill of him." Baynor gestured to the guards. "Take him to the witch pyre and have it ready to light in fifteen minutes, but do not put a torch to the wood until I come." His eyes gleamed as he smiled at Thrain. "I shall want to put the fire to him myself."

Chapter Seventeen

It was both the longest and shortest fifteen minutes of Thrain's life. He didn't try to struggle as the guards led him outside, did not even put up a fight when they tied him to the blackened metal pole in the center of the pyre. There was no point now in trying to get away, and he knew it. Besides, he was afraid if he made too much of a ruckus, it would anger Baynor further, and he would change his mind and decide to have Elias burned as well. Thrain hoped that the man he loved might still escape his fate, though being Baynor's bed slave was scarcely better than being burned alive, as he well knew.

The witch pyre was set in the largest of Castle Black's courtyards, and the sun was already high overhead. It was a beautiful day, slightly chilly but bathed in sunshine—the kind of day Thrain would have picked for a hunt or a feast. Or to be burned alive, as it happens, he thought wryly. Around his feet, the mound of wooden staves grew as the guards piled more and more against the pole to which he was tied. They seemed intent on making sure there was enough fuel to do the job. When they finally stopped, there was firewood enough to burn ten sorcerers, by Thrain's estimation.

He watched with dry eyes as the rest of the lords and ladies of the court came to fill the stands around the pyre. A witch burning was considered almost as good a sport as a tourney and often drew a bigger crowd. Though the sight of some poor soul writhing in the flames had always turned Thrain's stomach, others of the nobility did not seem to share his disgust. Or maybe they were too afraid to show it if they did. At any rate, they eyed him with much curiosity and little sympathy as they sat and waited for the royal party to appear. Thrain stared back dispassionately. I am just another one of the accused to them. The fire will burn no brighter because of my royal blood.

It was only when he saw Elias come out, led by a leather leash attached to the new magic-null collar, that his heart gave a painful thump in his chest. Baynor and Ungor walked before him, Baynor holding the leash and yanking it every once in a while just to make Elias stumble.

Thrain's heart swelled with tenderness and hurt. *Elias, I have failed you. Why did you not leave when you had the chance? Why did you break your promise and stay?* He had so many questions, but there was no time anymore to ask them, and it wasn't as if Baynor would allow him a last word to the man he loved. The best thing he could do was die with dignity and hope to see Elias sometime in the hereafter.

Baynor handed the leash to one of the guards and pointed to the royal box, which directly faced the pyre. "Give my new bed slave a good view. Be sure he watches."

The guard bowed. "It shall be as you say, Your Majesty."

"See that it is. And then someone bring me a torch." Baynor frowned imperiously. Then he and Ungor strolled over to the metal pole where Thrain was tied. There was a serious look on Ungor's face, but Baynor was grinning broadly. "Well, little brother." He took the lit torch from a guard who hurried to bring it to him, and hefted it in his hand. The slight, chilly breeze made it crackle and snap, and already Thrain could smell the hot scent of burning.

"Baynor." He would not dignify his brother with the title of king, for all that he wore the crown. "Father." He looked at Ungor, who still only appeared slightly regretful.

"I am sorry it had to come to this." Ungor sighed. "I warned you as best I could, Thrain. Now I fear you must pay for your crimes."

"My only crime was in seeking revenge." Thrain lifted his chin and glared at the two men he hated most in the world. "You"—he glared at Ungor—"killed the woman I looked on as a mother. And you"—he looked at Baynor—"stole my innocence in a most foul fashion and brutalized me for years. I think anyone in my place would have sought the same. I will not apologize for wanting to see you both dead at my feet."

Baynor shook his head. "Tsk. Unrepentant till the end. What a shame." He thrust the flaming torch at Thrain's face, laughing.

Thrain refused to flinch. "The only shame is that a man like you will sit upon the throne and pretend to rule," he said sharply. "I pity the people even more, though Father wasn't exactly kind. You will tax and starve them to death."

"I don't think it is the people you ought to be most worried about, Brother." Baynor gave him an evil grin. "It is your little princeling you ought to fear for. Pray to all the gods that he is as good in bed as he is pretty. For if he does not perform well, I swear he will be in your spot this time tomorrow."

"You are an animal." Thrain tried to keep the grief from his voice, but he couldn't. "You feast on the pain of others as surely as the dragon Father keeps below the castle feasts on flesh."

Baynor gave an ugly laugh. "I quite like that idea—feasting on the pain of others. Then what a banquet your death will be for me. I think I shall enjoy putting the torch to your funeral pyre as much as I will enjoy bedding your sweet Elias."

Thrain swallowed hard. He wanted to shout and rail and beg his brother to leave Elias alone. But every word he spoke would only add fuel to the fire of Baynor's passion to despoil, and convince him to be that much rougher when he took Elias to his bed. "I hate you," he said quietly, including Ungor in his words as well. "You have me now, and there is nothing I can do about it. But I swear by all the gods, if the spirits of the dead can roam the land, I shall come back and do all I can to make your life a hell on earth."

For a moment Baynor paled—He was deeply superstitious, as Thrain well knew. But then he laughed and shook his head. "Dramatic to the last, little brother. Let us hope your death is as entertaining as your life. Come, Father." He looked at Ungor and held out the torch. "Place your hand with mine. We shall set the traitor alight together."

"Do as you wish." Thrain looked straight ahead, his gaze fixed on Elias in the royal box. There were tears in the big golden eyes he had come to love so much, and he felt as though a mailed fist had squeezed his heart. *Farewell, Elias. Forgive me. I shall love you till kingdom come.* He wished he could shout the words aloud, but he found he had no voice. He contented himself with taking a last longing look, knowing that Elias's face would be the last thing he saw before the fire took his sight.

Elias felt like he was going to die. It wasn't just the ice-cold burn of the magicnull collar bottling up his magic, or the tight hold the guard had on the leash attached to it, making certain he couldn't get away. It was the dead look in Thrain's eyes as he stood stoically against the charred metal pole, the defiant way he lifted his chin and refused to cry out or beg, even when Baynor thrust the torch in his face.

I cannot watch him burn. I cannot. But Elias knew he would have no choice, though he would far rather be in the fire himself. He remembered that Thrain had been through the same thing when he had been forced to watch his milk nurse burn. What kind of a savage father would do that to the only woman his son could call "Mother"? Then again, what kind of father would allow his son to be burned alive? It was unthinkable, horrible—and all too real.

If only I had my magic, I could do something for him. Blow something up, bring down the castle around us, bend that blasted pole they have him tied to. Something. But his searching fingers found that the locking mechanism on this collar was much more complicated than the one Thrain had put on him originally. Probably only Baynor knew how to open it. He was trapped. His hands were tied as surely as Thrain's were as he stood bound to the blackened post and waited for death.

Elias watched, helpless to stop the tears that welled up in his eyes, as Baynor and his father wielded the torch together, setting fire to the bundles of wood at Thrain's feet. Thrain's gaze was on his, and Elias strove not to look away, trying to offer what strength and support he could silently, even as the flames began to lick hungrily at the kindling. *How could this happen? I did as the dragon said. I gave what was taken.*

"There were three parts to the riddle, Elias." The dragon's voice suddenly filled his head again. *"To fulfill your destiny, all three must be solved."*

Elias felt a surge of hope. "The second part. Remember... I must remember that which was forgotten," he murmured to himself. But what was that? What could save them now? Or at the very least, how could he gain vengeance for Thrain's imminent death?

My magic is gone—bottled up, useless to me. There is only one other creature with the magic to stop this or at least see it to its final conclusion. Elias's eyes widened in realization. The dragon! It is the key.

Inside his head, the dragon roared, "Free me, Elias! Remember that which was forgotten, and I shall wreak such vengeance as will make Ungor's puny witch pyre seem like a candle flame in the night."

Suddenly, before his mind's eye, Elias saw the page from Brogan's A Catalogue of Dragons. A great red beaste with scales as big as a man's hand and eyes like flame. The dragon's name I took great trouble to find, for it was wily and full of cunning. But when I found it out at last and called the beaste by it, we then became the best of friends. It was...

The next page had been ripped out of the copy he had found in Thrain's bookshelf. But as a child, he had studied the complete book and spent hours poring over the strange and wonderful-sounding names of the dragons. That which has been forgotten—the dragon's name. Of course! With its name, it is strong enough to break even the mightiest chain, magic null or no.

In his head, the dragon's voice tolled like a bell. "Yes, yes, give me my name my true name, Elias. Name me and set me free!"

Elias stared at the scene before him. Around Thrain's feet and legs, the flames licked higher and higher. The heat had to be scorching him fiercely by now, but his face was set and impassive, showing none of the agony he must be feeling. To one side of the pyre stood Baynor and Ungor, watching without pity as he burned. Filling the stands like stupid sheep, the nobles looked on with avid, greedy eyes to see the fire leap higher and consume their former prince.

Suddenly Elias felt a great swell of hatred for all of them. It was probably too late to save Thrain, and he no longer cared about his own life. The dragon had no interest in playing the savior anyway. Its only desire was vengeance—to kill and maim and destroy and wreak havoc to pay for its long years of imprisonment. And that was perfectly fine with him.

If Thrain must burn, then let us all burn together! Closing his eyes, he clearly saw the missing page from A Catalogue of Dragons and let the name come to his lips.

"Ysairin Bloodbringer, I give you your name," he shouted in the Old Tongue as the flames licked hungrily around Thrain's knees and thighs. "I give you your name that you might give me my vengeance! Break your bonds and come to me now!"

From the foundations of the castle, a mighty roar tore the air. It sounded to Elias like a hundred thousand trumpets all playing in discord at once—both musical and terrible. All around him he saw the nobles and guards clapping their hands to their ears and looking around in confusion and panic.

And then the gray stone walls of Castle Black, which had stood for hundreds of years, erupted in a shower of rubble and fire, and the dragon was upon them.

It flew with a speed that belied its size, its great red body shining like a tongue of flame in the golden sunshine. It dived first at the nobles in the stands, who ducked and cowered. The screams of the ladies were only slightly shriller than the howls of their lords as the dragon spewed fire like poisonous rain upon them. Most were untouched, but a few here and there fell to the ground, writhing and wreathed in dragon fire.

The dragon's fire was like glue, Elias knew from his studies. Once it took hold, there was no dampening it or putting it out. It spread and spread, white-hot and sticky as honey, until whatever it took hold of was nothing but blackened ash. He watched with grim satisfaction as the guard who had handed Baynor his torch went up like one himself. His hatred of everyone at Castle Black was bitter, but he found that his revenge upon them was sweet.

And now, as though it had decided it was done toying with the nobles and guards, the dragon turned its attention to its own vengeance. It singled out Baynor first, who was trying to run, holding a shield he had grabbed from a nearby guard over his head. With a flick of its tail, the dragon knocked Baynor's protection contemptuously aside and landed in front of him. The earth trembled as its huge bulk settled, and one of the stands collapsed, taking a row of shrieking lords and ladies with it.

"No...no!" Baynor backed away, the ridiculous golden crown askew on his head. "It was not me who enslaved you. Him—you want *him*." He pointed a shaking finger at his father, who was standing ashen faced and frozen beside the witch pyre.

The dragon didn't answer in words, but Elias heard it laughing inside his head—a deep, horribly amused chuckle that would make any man turn cold with fear. Lowering its head, it snapped at Baynor. It was almost a playful gesture, and Elias was reminded of the way a cat would play with a mouse. But when the dragon raised its snout and breathed another plume of flame into the sky, he saw there was much less of Baynor to hate now. In fact, only his legs and pelvis lay kicking on floor of the courtyard, spurting deep crimson onto the green grass.

The grisly sight seemed to galvanize Ungor. "Baynor—my son—no!" He stumbled toward Baynor, his back to the witch pyre, where Thrain still burned. Elias thought, in a detached way he knew would soon turn into overwhelming grief, that Thrain was probably dead by now. He prayed that Thrain might have succumbed to the thick black smoke that obscured Elias's view of him. Certainly it would have been a kinder death than the flames.

Meanwhile the dragon was advancing on Ungor, and Elias heard it greet him, speaking aloud to be sure he understood. "Ungor, son of Uthrain, at last your hour of reckoning has come round."

"You murderous beast!" Ungor screamed. "How could you take my son? $My \ son."$

"You have another son if you would but look to him, Ungor. He may yet be saved."

The dragon's words caused Elias's heart to leap. He hadn't thought it possible, but could Thrain still be alive behind the curtain of thick black smoke? And could it be that he might still be saved? The guard who had been holding the leash to his collar had fled when Baynor got bitten in half. Elias was free! Leaping over the high wooden side of the royal box, he ran toward the witch pyre. But before he took two steps, he tripped and got tangled in the long leather leash as it twisted around his ankles.

"Gods no. Get off, *get off*." He moaned as he yanked at the tough leather. Every second counted if he wanted to save Thrain. And now that he knew it was possible, that was all he wanted in the world. "Please," he muttered. "Please, gods, if anyone can hear. I must get to him. Please!" Somewhere he could hear a trumpet blowing, high and sweet and silvery. He supposed it was the captain of the guard rallying the soldiers under his command to defend against the dragon. He knew that soon there would be knights on horseback galloping in, and the sky would bristle with arrows loosed from crossbows at a safe distance, but he didn't care. All he cared about was freeing Thrain.

As Elias struggled to get untangled from the leather leash, Ungor and the dragon still spoke.

"If you speak of Thrain, he is no son of mine anymore," the former king spat. "Better you should have burned him than taken Baynor."

"You seem to be doing a fairly good job of burning him yourself." The dragon's eyes narrowed. "But very well. If that is the way you wish it." It took a deep breath, seeming to suck all the air out of the space around the witch pyre at once. There was a long, breathless instant when Elias could see exactly what was going to happen and knew he was helpless to stop it.

And then the dragon let loose a sheet of golden white flame that made it seem the whole world was on fire. It coated Ungor from head to toe, a second skin composed entirely of flame. It set his hair afire at once, crowning him with a brilliance he had never known before, and Elias heard the sizzle and pop as his eyeballs burst to jelly in their sockets from the punishing heat. He wanted to look away from the gruesome sight, but he could not—it was as though his own eyes were frozen open. He saw Ungor open his mouth to scream, but then the dragon's fire ran down his throat and into his gullet like blazing wine, silencing him. At last, flailing jerkily like a broken thing, the former king sank to his knees. The dragon's vengeance was complete.

But Elias didn't give a damn about that. What horrified him was the fact that since Ungor had been standing directly in front of it, the dragon's white-gold flames had engulfed the witch pyre as well. They mixed with the more ordinary fire from the wooden staves and created a strange hybrid of blue and purple flames that leaped twenty feet in the air and were impossible to see into. Not that Elias needed to see to know what had happened.

Thrain was gone. Finally and irrevocably gone.

"Why?" He looked up at the dragon, the tears streaming down his face. The heat from its fire was so intense, they turned to steam as they reached his cheeks, but he didn't care. "Why did you burn Thrain?" he demanded. "You said he could be saved, and then you killed him. Why?"

The dragon closed its glowing eyes briefly. "Have you finally discovered that you care for your Lorik after all, little Sandor?"

"We aren't Lorik and Sandor," Elias screamed. "We're just Elias and Thrain, and yes, I cared for him. You said it was our destiny to be together. Why did you take him from me?"

He had finally gotten loose from the hateful leather leash. In a fit of suicidal rage and grief, he ran at the dragon with nothing but his bare hands and beat at its great red-hot side. It was like beating against the side of a furnace. His hands were scorching, and he didn't care. "Why? Why? Why?" he sobbed.

The dragon bent its head and nosed him away almost gently. It spoke inside Elias's head in the Old Tongue. *"I told you that in order to win your destiny with Thrain you had to do three things."*

"And I *did* them," Elias shouted, tears of rage filling his eyes until the dragon looked like a great red glowing blur. "I *gave* what was taken. I *remembered* what was forgotten."

"But you have not yet claimed what love would have you deny. Until you do, you cannot win free to the destiny that awaits you."

"Why should I care about any destiny now? Thrain is gone. He's *gone*. You took him from me." He raised his fists to beat at it again, but the dragon stood to its full height and spread its wings.

"Claim what love would have you deny and use your magic to heal instead of using it to kill, and you may yet find what you seek. Farewell, Elias, son of Alaina. Your kin are here to claim you."

Elias had a split second to wonder what in the seven hells it was talking about, and then three things happened at once. The dragon took flight, its great leathery wings causing a mighty wind that blew him flat on his back. The high, silvery trumpet sounded again, this time so loud he felt he was going to be deafened. And his head hit the ground and bounced against a piece of the castle walls the dragon had reduced to rubble.

After that, a fourth thing happened—everything went black.

Chapter Eighteen

Elias could feel the dragon's flames. White-gold and hotter than a forge, they burned all around him, but he was not worried about himself. Just ahead of him he could see Thrain running—running right into the heart of the fire.

"Thrain, no! No, don't!" he begged, trying to catch the other man. But his feet were bound in the long leather leash, and he couldn't move.

Thrain threw a glance over his shoulder, his midnight blue eyes unreadable before he disappeared into the flames. As he passed through them, they turned blue and purple and closed behind him like a deadly curtain, blocking him from Elias's sight.

"Thrain! Thrain!" Elias screamed for him to come back. But it was too late—the flames had consumed him. Suddenly he heard the dragon speaking in the Old Tongue.

"Heal him. Heal him with your magic."

"How can I heal him? He's gone," Elias protested, tears pouring from his eyes. "Nothing can bring back that which is consumed by dragon fire."

"All things are possible if your love is true." The dragon sighed, its voice fading in his head. "Heal him, Elias. And do not forget that you must claim what love would have you deny."

"But I can't... I can't...Thrain! Thrain..."

"Elias? Elias, my darling, wake. It's time to wake now."

The voice speaking in his ear was soft and familiar. It took Elias back to childhood, when his mother had come to get him in the morning for early lessons with her before she began her queenly responsibilities.

"Elias?" the voice said again, and it sounded so much like her.

Elias's eyes flew open. "Mother? Is it truly you?"

She was bending over him, her face wreathed in smiles, her deep green eyes that proclaimed her a Trueheart shining with love for him. "Yes, it's me, my darling."

"Mother!" He sat up and hugged her, squeezing until she laughed breathlessly and protested.

"Elias, let your poor mother breathe!"

He stopped squeezing so hard, but he couldn't quite let her go—not yet. "I thought you dead," he said softly. "And I thought all this destroyed." He looked around in wonder. He was sitting on the bed in his old room at Castle Rowan.

"It has been rebuilt by the same ones who rescued you." His mother kissed him on the forehead, her eyes still shining. "As we speak, they are reinforcing our borders. No one shall take us by surprise again." She looked grim.

"But what...? Who...? How...?" He had so many questions, he didn't know which to ask first, but his mother seemed to understand.

"You know that we have Fairy blood in our veins," she said, tapping his shoulder. "But what you do not know is how close it lies to the surface. My own father, your grandfather, was a prince of the Fay. When I got away from the castle on that dreadful night, I sought him out." She shivered, clearly remembering the attack. "It took me a long time to find the willow door that leads to the Fairy realm and even longer to convince them to help me. They do not often leave their own lands, and they fear and mistrust nonmagical beings. But at last I prevailed upon them to help me rescue you." She pressed Elias's hand. "I am so sorry it took me so long, my love. When I think what you must have endured—"

"It wasn't too bad...until the end." Elias choked on the last word because everything was suddenly coming back to him. *Oh gods, Thrain—he's dead. Dead.* He blinked back tears and looked at his mother. "Thank you for coming for me."

"As if I would ever do anything else. As if I would leave you there with those savage beasts who took you!" She shook her head angrily. "I saw to it the collar they fitted you with was destroyed. Ugly, evil metal. Although I don't see why they felt the need to put you in magic null to control you."

Elias reflected that it was a good thing he had learned to control his magic, or removing the collar without Thrain would have meant his death. But that only made him remember the first night after he had met with the dragon and how Thrain had touched him and held him and made him come to control the magic. The memory brought more tears to his eyes, and he pulled away from his mother and blotted them quickly on his sleeve. Gods, I've been such a fool. I told myself I didn't love him, treated the connection we shared like it was nothing—less than nothing. Why did I push him away? Why did I not return his love while I had the chance? Now I must live the rest of my life without him. I suppose it is a fitting punishment, but gods, how it hurts!

"Elias?" His mother put a hand on his arm, her green eyes worried. "My darling, are you all right?"

"Fine... I'm fine." He straightened up and squared his shoulders. "The collar was just for show at first," he said, trying to get back to what they had been talking of before. "But then... Mother, my magic came. It filled me to overflowing, and I have it still. See?" Turning to the fireplace, which was laid for a fire but unlit, he called the magic to him and whispered, "Burn." A neat, crackling little fire sprang up in the grate at once. "Oh, Elias! That's *wonderful.*" His mother's eyes were shining with pride. "I knew it would happen someday. You just needed something to bring it out in you."

"Something or someone," Elias murmured.

His mother frowned. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Thrain." Elias's voice trembled when he spoke his lover's name. "Thrain, the younger Blackwater prince, the one I danced the Spider's Web with." Gods, it seems so many years ago that we were dancing and taunting each other in the ballroom of Castle Rowan. And it's been only a few months—not much time, but long enough by far to change my life forever.

"You mean the one who attacked you? What of him?" The look in his mother's eyes was fierce, and Elias blushed, wondering how much she knew of what had really happened that night.

"Yes, him," he said shortly. "He... It was he who was responsible for freeing my magic."

She gave him a disbelieving look. "I don't see how. The Blackwaters are such savages—evil to their bones. How could such wickedness bring out any good in you?"

"They were not *all* evil," Elias protested. "Thrain was..." He shook his head. "Well, it doesn't matter what he was anymore. He's dead."

"Oh no, he's not," his mother said unexpectedly.

Elias's eyes widened, and his heart began to pound. "What? Are you certain? Where is he?"

"Right here in the castle, under lock and key." She frowned. "Your grandfather rescued him from the flames, thinking he was an innocent victim the Blackwaters were burning. Better he should have let him die after what he did to you."

"But he's alive? He's all right?" Elias still couldn't quite get it through his head.

His mother misunderstood his wild expression and stroked his forehead in a soothing gesture. "I know it's a horrible shock, darling, after thinking all those who tormented you were dead and gone. And I know how he haunts your dreams—you have called his name in your sleep more than once. But I swear to you that he will never touch you again. Indeed you need never see him at all."

"But I want to see him! I must see him at once!" Elias jumped up from the bed and then sat down again heavily as a wave of dizziness hit him.

"Careful, Elias!" She put a restraining hand on his arm. "You've only just woken from the healing trance your grandfather put you in. You had some terrible burns on your hands and face, and your neck was chafed where that horrible collar had rubbed you. You've been out an entire week and never woke once, even when we bathed and changed you." She smiled and nodded at the soft blue linen shirt and black breeches he wore. "I wanted you to be clean and comfortable and completely whole when you woke." Elias put a hand to his head, willing the room to stop spinning around him. "Never mind all that. What of Thrain? Has he been healed too?"

His mother made a face. "Yes, though I didn't want to at first. It would have served him well to suffer the agony of his burns after the pain he inflicted on you."

"Mother—"

"No, do not tell me of it. I...I cannot bear to hear it from your lips." For a moment her mouth trembled, and then she took a deep breath and straightened her slim shoulders. "I shall hate him forever for what he did to you. However, we are not savages. He has woken only once, and I informed him that I have allowed him to be healed only that he might stand trial before the council for his crimes."

"A trial? Truly?" Elias frowned, but his mother nodded decisively.

"Indeed. He is being tried even as we speak. He shall be tried and judged like any other criminal, though I fear the council is not in the most lenient mood. The penalty for his actions will probably be death."

"Death?" Elias cried, jumping up again. "No, Mother! I must see him. Take me to him at once!"

"I understand, darling." His mother rose and took his hands. "You wish to kill him yourself, do you not? And I promise you, I want to kill him too. In fact, I have absented myself from his trial because I hate him so much, I fear I could not be just. But he must sentenced before he is executed. It is the civilized way. No matter how you hate the filthy brute, you must not allow yourself to be dragged down to his level of evil."

It was more than Elias could stand. "Thrain is not a brute. I love you, Mother, but do not speak of him so."

His mother's eyes widened in surprise. "What?"

Elias made a gesture of frustration. "I have no time to explain to you now, not if Thrain is being sentenced as we speak, but he is not the monster you have made him out to be."

The queen shook her head and gave him a worried frown. "Do not excite yourself so, my darling. Your brain has been affected by that evil collar you wore for so long. Lie back down, and I will send for a sleeping draft to help you rest."

"No! I do not wish to rest. I must go to Thrain *now*." He was already out of the bed and dragging on the black leather boots he found waiting for him at the foot of it. Whether she gave him permission or not, he was going. There was no way he would allow Thrain to stand trial without someone to speak for him.

The queen gave him a long, measuring glance. "Very well. I shall go with you, then. The council should be ready to pronounce judgment by now, and I should be there for the sentencing at least."

"Then let us go, and hurry!" Elias ran for the door. Once the high council pronounced judgment, it could not be changed or retracted. He *had* to get to the trial before they sentenced Thrain to death.

Chapter Nineteen

The gray stone corridors of Castle Rowan had never seemed longer, but at last they reached the council chambers, where Queen Alaina and her advisers ruled on the weighty matters of the kingdom. Elias remembered the many mornings she had had him accompany her, believing it was important for him to understand what his future would be like.

All those years of learning how to rule wisely. I always imagined sitting at the head of the table and making judgments. I never dreamed I'd be rushing here to try to stop one. But Elias didn't have much time for reflection. He burst into the council chambers and saw Thrain standing with his hands shackled before him at the far end of a long, oaken table. The other end was empty—the seat of power was reserved for the queen. Along the two sides sat the queen's eight most trusted advisers, and one of them—Lord Helm—was standing and reading from a scroll of parchment.

"Therefore, for the crimes you have committed against both our queen and our country, it is the ruling of this council that you shall be sentenced to d—"

"Stop!" Elias put up a hand and ran forward to stand at Thrain's side.

"My lord prince." Lord Helm looked startled. "I am surprised to see you up and about."

"Yes, yes, I am quite well as you see," Elias said impatiently. "But I am not here to discuss my health, Lord Helm. I am here to put an end to these proceedings."

There were angry murmurs and shocked looks all around the long table. "My lord," Helm cleared his throat. "Perhaps you do not understand. We are about to pass judgment on this foul snake who attacked our lands and took you hostage these three months past."

"That was Baynor's doing. Thrain's brother, the other Blackwater prince," Elias said quickly.

Lord Helm frowned. "Truly, does it matter? One Blackwater is much like another, and besides, though he may not have led the charge, this man still participated. He still deserves to die."

"He deserves no such thing." Elias stepped in front of Thrain protectively. "I will not permit you to kill him."

"Elias, what are you doing?" Thrain murmured.

Elias cast a glance over his shoulder. "Saving you. Now be quiet."

But Thrain would not. "Maybe I don't deserve to be saved." His dark blue eyes were brooding, the set of his mouth grim.

"What are you going on about?" Elias frowned. "If you think I'll stand by and let them—"

"He speaks only the truth. Thrain Blackwater knows his guilt. He and I have talked of it before." The words rang out from behind him, and Elias turned to see his mother standing there. Her head held high and her eyes blazing, she looked every inch a queen—a very *angry* queen, he could not help noticing. "Elias, what are you doing?" she demanded, sweeping past him to go sit at the head of the table in the seat of power. "Surely you are not *defending* this man."

"That is exactly what I am doing." Elias tried to keep his voice level and even. He must make his mother see that he was serious—deadly serious.

"But...but after the way he treated you..." She shook her head, clearly bewildered.

"He treated me well. He protected me in his father's castle," Elias protested. "He took me as his...as his manservant, so he could keep me with him always, out of harm's way."

Her Trueheart green eyes narrowed. "I know how you served him. I have not been spared the details of your captivity. Your grandfather had a scrying glass that I used to be certain you were not dead."

Elias felt his cheeks flame. "Very well, so you know what he did."

She nodded. "I do. I am sorry for your shame, my son, but how can you defend such a man?"

"Because I love him." The words burst from him before he could stop them. Elias could tell from the look on his mother's face and the councillors' wide eyes that it was the wrong thing to say, but it couldn't be helped. "I love him," he repeated firmly. "I have not the time to tell you now how that love grew or what a fine and noble man he truly is, but you must believe me when I say I care more for him than for my own life."

"Elias, this is madness!" His mother stood and pounded one small fist on the oaken table. "As you love me, I demand that you deny Thrain Blackwater and denounce him as the enemy that he is."

Elias felt almost wild. How could he possibly explain that the dragon had told Thrain they were each other's destiny? That they belonged together. That they... Wait a minute, the dragon...the riddle. You must claim what love would have you deny. And whom do I love more than Mother? No one but Thrain.

Now that he knew what he had to do, Elias felt quite calm. Taking a deep breath, he spoke the same words Thrain had spoken for him at the court of Castle Black. "I, Elias Trueheart, son of Alaina Trueheart, rightful queen of Castle Rowan and the surrounding lands, do here, now, and forevermore, take Thrain Blackwater of Castle Black as my own," he said formally. "I will bind my life to his and never cede him to another. I claim him"—he took a deep breath—"I claim him till kingdom come and beyond."

"Elias...surely you do not mean this. Please tell me you did not just claim this...this monster publicly." His mother's face was blank with shock.

"That I did and would do so again." Elias remained firmly in front of Thrain, making it clear the other man was under his protection.

"But, well...he must have *some* penalty for his crimes." Lord Helm sounded as bewildered as the queen. "Though he wronged you most grievously, my lord prince, you are not the only one who came to harm by his hand."

Elias had a sudden inspiration. "Very well. Then let him serve me as I served him, and for the same amount of time. For three months he shall be my manservant and...and bed slave." His cheeks were hot as he spoke the words, but they had to be said. Let his mother think he was taking *some* vengeance, no matter how crude, and maybe her anger with Thrain would be at least a little appeased.

Queen Alaina frowned at him, the look in her eyes troubled. "Elias, you have come into your magic now, and it is your right to help decide the fate of the one who attacked you. But if you do this, if you impose such a light sentence on a man who has wronged you so, you must do so without my approval. Indeed I am against it with all that is in me."

Elias's throat felt tight. He didn't want to hurt his mother, but to bow to her wishes would mean death for Thrain. You must claim what love would have you deny, he reminded himself sternly. Raising his chin, he looked her in the eyes. "I am sorry if it pains you, Mother, but I will not rescind my pledge."

"Very well, then." Queen Alaina looked truly troubled. "It shall be as you say, Elias." She motioned at the doorway. "Guard," she called, and at once one of the men-at-arms came running, his chain-mail hauberk jingling.

"Yes, my queen?" he said, bowing low.

Alaina nodded at him regally. "Unchain the prisoner and take him and the prince to the prince's rooms. See that no harm comes to either of them." She gave Elias a long look. "I do not know the dark corners of your heart, my son. I cannot understand why you are doing this."

Elias shook his head. "Someday I hope you will. For now I will take my leave of you." Turning away from the pain in her eyes, he and Thrain followed the guard out of the council chambers.

* * *

The trip to his rooms seemed to take even longer than his mad dash to the council chambers. It wasn't helped by the fact that Thrain was strangely silent, withdrawn into a brooding shell that all of Elias's imploring looks could not penetrate. When at last they arrived, he thought he had never been so glad to get within his own apartments.

Thrain went at once to stand by the stained-glass window—the same one that had been shattered by Elias's magical lightning storm on the night he and Baynor had attacked. It had been completely repaired, and the new picture was one of a unicorn walking under a full moon—quite beautiful if Elias had cared to admire it. He didn't, though. He just wanted to find out what was wrong with Thrain.

"Thrain," he began and was about to go to him when a mailed hand on his arm stopped him.

"Begging your pardon, sire, but your lady mother instructed that I should make sure neither of you came to harm." It was the burly guard who had accompanied them.

Elias gave the man a look of pure annoyance. "I assure you I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. You may leave us at once."

"But your mother said—"

"I don't care what she said. I am a man grown, and I can take care of myself." Whispering a word in the Old Tongue, he made a gesture in the guard's direction. Suddenly a small gray rain cloud, complete with tiny bolts of lightning, appeared directly over the man's head. With a miniature peal of thunder, the cloud began to storm, pelting the unsuspecting man with rain and winds of surprising force.

"Please, sire," the man sputtered as the water poured down over his head and shoulders. "Make it stop!"

"It will stop when you leave me in peace as I requested," Elias said sharply.

"But...but what am I to tell your mother, the queen?" the man protested.

"You need not tell her anything. Although I suspect you will have to answer to your captain for appearing on duty soaking wet." He nodded at the man's chainmail hauberk. "You'd best get that dried out before it rusts, don't you think?"

"Yes, sire," the guard said miserably.

"And shut the door as you go," Elias called. When the door finally clanged shut behind the hapless guard, he turned to Thrain. "Well, *that* was a bit of a close shave."

Thrain nodded warily and crossed his arms over his broad chest. "So it was."

Elias frowned. He'd been planning to gather the other man into a warm embrace. After all, he'd thought Thrain dead, and Thrain had thought him worse than dead—enslaved to his sadistic brother, Baynor. And now, not only were they both alive, Thrain had been saved from certain death a second time. It seemed like *some* celebration was in order. So why was he acting so cold?

"I am glad to see you are well," he ventured, taking a step forward.

"And I you." Was there a flash of warmth in Thrain's eyes? If so, it was there and gone so fast, Elias wondered if he had imagined it.

"My mother said I've been in the healing sleep for a week," he said, in case Thrain was wondering why he hadn't come to him before. "I barely woke up in time to get to you." Thrain frowned. "Yes. I heard you were having nightmares again—about me this time."

"What? Who said—"

"Your lady mother." Thrain began to pace back and forth, his gaze on the floor. "She told me how you begged me not to...not to hurt you in your sleep."

Elias tried to remember what he had dreamed, but it was just a mishmash of flames and terror and the dragon talking in riddles. "I never... At least I don't think I—"

"Why did you save me?" Thrain snapped, coming to a halt in front of him. "Why did you interrupt the trial? I would gladly have submitted to any punishment your council saw fit to bestow—even death. It would be better than knowing how you truly feel about me now."

"What do you mean?" Elias asked, bewildered. What exactly had his mother said to Thrain?

"You know what I mean." Thrain sighed and ran a hand through his hair, turning it into a dark gold halo around his face. "It's natural enough, I suppose. You can let yourself feel what you've been holding back for so long now that you're in safe territory."

"What are you talking about?" Elias was aghast, but Thrain only shrugged.

"Only that you have the upper hand here as I did in Castle Black. I am at your mercy now."

"That isn't what I wanted. Did you not hear me claim you before the council and call you my love?" Elias demanded.

Thrain's face was like stone. "I understand that you did what you had to in order to keep me from death, and for that I am most grateful. But the fact remains that I belong to you now—I am your servant and bed slave as you were mine." In one smooth motion he was on his knees before Elias. "I will submit in any way you want me to, Elias—my lord. I will give myself in whatever fashion you deem acceptable."

"Thrain..." Elias put a hand on the broad shoulder, urging the other man to rise, but Thrain stubbornly remained kneeling. "You don't have to do this," he said at last, feeling frustrated.

"I do, though," Thrain said solemnly. "I must make right what is wrong between us, Elias."

"By doing what—offering to act as my servant? That's foolishness, Thrain." Since Thrain refused to rise, Elias knelt down in front of him, joining him on the cold flagstones of the floor.

"Not just by acting as your servant. I would... I need to do something more, I think."

Elias clasped his hands. "What? Whatever it is, if it will make you feel better and stop acting like this, then by all means, please..."

"You must take me as I took you." Thrain's face was set and white, but it was clear he was deadly serious.

"What? Now?" Elias was confused.

"Yes, here and now." Thrain stood in one fluid motion, then stripped off his clothing and toed off his boots. Then, completely naked, he went to the bed—the same bed where he had taken Elias the first time. "Come, Elias. Do what must be done." Slowly, never taking his gaze from Elias's face, he leaned over the bed until his chest was on the mattress, his feet still planted on the floor. Then he spread his legs.

Elias's breath caught in his throat. He's in exactly the same position he put me in that night he and Baynor attacked. The night he took me.

"Thrain..." he murmured, coming to stand behind the other man. Thrain naked was a beautiful sight, all strong, clean lines and hard angles. But as Elias ran one hand slowly up the broad, tan expanse of his back, he felt a fine trembling all through the large, muscular frame.

"Do it, Elias." Thrain looked back at him, his face set as if to endure something terrible but necessary. "Take me. Do it as hard as you like. Don't hold back and don't be gentle. Just take me."

Elias shook his head. How could he do such a thing? True, Thrain had done it to him, but Elias had forgiven him for the attack that horrible night. Also, as much as he had suffered at Thrain's hands, how much more had Thrain suffered at Baynor's? Years of being taken against his will when he was younger. Years of running, hiding, trying to get away and not always being able to. Baynor's evil lusts have twisted whatever pleasure Thrain might have felt in giving himself and made it pain.

"I cannot do this to you," he said softly. "I will not."

"You must." Thrain gave him a grim look. "It is the only way to cleanse the way between us. If you don't, there will always be a shadow hanging over both our lives, and I will not have that."

"Thrain—"

"Please, Elias." Thrain's voice was hoarse. "Do it. But as you say you love me, do it quickly. I do not know how much longer I can stand this waiting."

"It is because I love you that I must deny your request," Elias said softly, still stroking the broad, trembling back. "I cannot claim you as my own in this way when you are so clearly..." He trailed off, frowning as his own words. *Claim what love* would have me deny. I already did that, didn't I? I claimed Thrain before the council and denied my own mother's request to do so. And yet...

And yet nothing had changed. When he had fulfilled the first part of the riddle, he had gained control of his magic. When he had fulfilled the second part, he had freed the dragon and gotten Thrain's revenge—although they had both nearly died in the process. But even after he had claimed Thrain publicly, despite his mother's begging him not to, there was still this pain, this shame between them. A shadow, as Thrain had said, one that would hang over them all their lives if he did not find some way to dispel it.

But how can this be the answer? Elias touched Thrain again and watched him twitch nervously. If he had been a horse, the whites of his eyes would have been showing with fear. Look at him. He is a strong man—a warrior with courage like none I have ever seen before. And yet when it comes to this one thing, he is broken, weaker than a child. How can I help him? How can I do what he asks when I care for him so? When my love for him would have me deny the right to claim him as he has claimed me?

The answer came in the dragon's voice, a whisper from his dreams. "Heal him. Heal him with your magic."

But was that even possible? The dragon had told him more than once that he should use his magic to heal and not to kill, but as yet Elias had practiced no healing magic. He had spent hours learning to control fire and other elements with his mind, had learned to put immense pressure on objects outside his grasp to rend and tear and burst. But he had never so much as tried to mend a broken clasp or heal a wounded bird. Should he make Thrain his first subject?

Is there a way to heal him as I take him? To give him surcease from the pain of his past and make him whole? There was only one way to find out.

"Come." Elias stroked Thrain's back again, soothingly. "I will do as you ask, but not this way."

"What way would you have me, then?" Thrain was still stiff and uncertain, but Elias managed to coax him onto the bed.

"I would have you with love. I would look into your eyes as I take you, as you looked into mine the night I gave myself to you." Elias took his time disrobing, letting Thrain calm down a little as he waited.

"Truly I do not think drawing things out will make it any easier," he protested when Elias settled beside him. "I would just as soon—"

"Hush." Elias drew the other man into a warm embrace. Wrapping his arms around Thrain, he rested his head on the other man's broad shoulder and breathed deeply, inhaling the dark, spicy scent that was uniquely Thrain. "Slowly," Elias whispered as the big body in his arms began to relax by degrees. "Gently."

Thrain shifted restlessly in his arms. "Can we not get it over with?"

"No." Elias smiled up at him. "I want to savor my time with you. I thought you were dead, do you know that? I thought the dragon's fire had consumed you and I would never see you again. Never get to hold you like this, to feel you close to me..."

"Elias..." Thrain's voice was full of yearning and doubt. "I thought the same, that I would never hold you again, except perhaps in the hereafter. But I didn't know...didn't know that you cared so."

"I didn't either," Elias murmured. "Or else I didn't want to admit it to myself. I was a fool to want to leave you, to be so eager to abandon what we have." There was a soft rumble of laughter in Thrain's deep chest. "And what do we have, my love?"

"This." Elias leaned up and kissed him, taking Thrain's mouth gently but firmly, letting him know what he wanted. Thrain moaned softly and parted his lips, opening himself, allowing Elias to take the lead, though he had always been the aggressor before.

It's my turn now. This time I'm in charge, and I want to make it good for him. As good as he made it for me.

Slowly he rolled them over until Thrain was under him and he was between the other man's thighs. Thrain stiffened at once but made no verbal protest, though Elias could see the uncertainty and fear swimming in his deep blue eyes.

"It's all right," he murmured, holding the other man's gaze. "I won't do anything until you're ready."

Thrain gave a harsh laugh. "Then we shall be here all night, for I fear I shall never be quite ready for this."

"Leave that to me." Elias kissed him again and settled more firmly between Thrain's thighs until his cock was flush against Thrain's. As he began to pump his hips, Thrain moaned and wrapped his arms around Elias's waist to hold him more firmly in place. The friction was so deliciously heated that for a moment Elias wished they could just do this—just rub off against each other as they had the first night Thrain had helped him tame his magic. It was sweet and hot, and no one had to be penetrated and claimed. But somehow he knew that if he truly wanted to fulfill the third part of the dragon's riddle, this wasn't enough. *I must take him. But I must heal him as I take him.*

Elias still had no idea how he was going to do that, but he knew he had to get started soon. The friction of Thrain's rigid shaft rubbing against his own was rapidly making him lose control. Much more of this, and he would baptize his lover's flat belly with his cum instead of filling Thrain with it as he needed to. *Need to be inside him. But I must find something to ease the way.*

There was a low chest of drawers by the side of his bed, where he had always kept small sundries. Elias reached into the middle drawer and found what he was looking for. He withdrew it carefully and broke his kiss with Thrain to sit up between the other man's thighs.

"Elias? Are you ready?" Thrain's voice was tight with uncertainty as he watched Elias unstopper the tiny flagon of oil he kept for muscle aches.

"I told you, I won't be ready until you are." Elias drizzled the oil liberally over both their shafts.

"I am as ready as I can be. Truly, you can do as you wish."

"Is that so?" Elias murmured. Watching the desire and fear war in Thrain's midnight blue eyes nearly broke his heart. *This is so hard for him. I must find a way to make it easier*. Scooting closer, he lined up his shaft with Thrain's and then grasped both of their stiff cocks in his hands. Earlier the friction had nearly made

him lose control, but now he felt he and Thrain both needed a little extra stimulation before they went on.

"Gods, Elias," Thrain hissed as he pumped them slowly, sliding his hands over both slick shafts in one long, slow caress. "What in the seven hells do you think you're doing to me?"

"Making you ready." Elias gave him a heated smile and watched with delight as Thrain's eyes lost some of their anxious uncertainty and became hooded with desire. "Come, Thrain," he murmured. "Move with me. Let me feel your shaft thrusting against mine."

"With pleasure." Thrain's voice was hoarse for a different reason now, and he worked his muscular hips, thrusting hot and hard into Elias's cupped hands as though he had been born to do it.

And maybe he was. Maybe we both were. I wonder if Lorik and Sandor ever did this. Did they ever really love each other as Thrain and I do? Elias decided he didn't care. All he cared about right now was pleasuring Thrain so deeply that he would be completely relaxed when it was time for Elias to take him.

Gritting his teeth against the overwhelming pleasure, he quickened the rhythm. He knew instinctively that he needed Thrain hot—hot enough not to care what was being done to him. At first, anyway. He tried to judge the other man's readiness by the rhythm of his hips and the strength and urgency of his cries, and just as Thrain was about to come, he squeezed the base of his shaft, cutting him off from the wave of pleasure that threatened to take him, just as he had done to Elias when they were practicing magic.

"You bastard!" Thrain growled. "What are you doing now? I was so damn $\mathit{close."}$

"Close enough to enjoy this?" Carefully and slowly, Elias let one oil-slicked hand drift down to the vulnerable place beneath Thrain's balls. Gently, delicately, he began to circle the other man's tightly guarded entrance with one slippery finger.

Thrain stiffened at first, but Elias whispered his name. "Thrain...look at me," he commanded as he continued to circle Thrain's rosebud. "Look in my eyes and know how much I love you, how much I want you. This is me, Thrain—Elias. I'm the one touching you, stroking you, taking you."

"Elias, gods, yes," Thrain gasped harshly. When he seemed to relax a little, Elias pressed gently inward, breaching his entrance with one finger only.

Thrain stiffened and then relaxed as Elias entered him. His breathing was still harsh, however, his broad chest working like a bellows as he forced himself to be still under Elias's gentle assault.

"It's all right," Elias soothed him. With his other hand, the one not currently stretching Thrain open, he still gripped the other man's cock. Now, as he added another finger to Thrain's rosebud, he began to pump his shaft.

"Gods!" Thrain groaned, writhing under him.

"You like that, do you?" Elias murmured. "Well, how about this?" Crooking his fingers, he found the special pleasure spot Thrain had shown him and rubbed over it firmly.

"Elias! Gods, Elias!" Thrain's voice was rough, his face twisted with need and fear. It was clear he was still caught between the pain of his past and the pleasure of the present, but Elias wanted to change that—wanted to bring him all the way into the here and now. When he added a third finger and Thrain didn't protest, he knew it was time.

"Now I'm ready," he whispered, leaning down to claim Thrain's mouth once more. "Ready to claim you and make you mine as you made me yours, my love. Are you ready as well?"

"Yes." Thrain's eyes were filled with need, his body trembling under Elias's with desire. "Yes, take me, my love," he murmured hoarsely. "Claim my body as you long ago claimed my heart. I want you to."

"Very well." Elias gave his lover's shaft another long, slow stroke. Then, reaching between them, he fit the head of his cock against the other man's entrance and began to push.

Thrain went completely stiff beneath him, his muscles turning to iron as Elias entered him. It was clear he was struggling to hold still and endure what was being done to him instead of bucking Elias off and out of him at once.

"Elias," he gasped, his eyes wide and uncertain. "Gods, I know what I said, but...I don't know if I can...can do this."

"You can," Elias assured him, stroking his cock once more as he slid another inch deeper into Thrain's tight rosebud. "Just relax and let me take you."

But Thrain seemed incapable of relaxing. Even his shaft, so hard and proud a moment before, had wilted in Elias's hand. *Gods, I'm losing him. The old bad memories are too strong to overcome.* Then the voice of the dragon whispered in his ear again, *"Heal him with your magic,"* and Elias knew what he had to do.

Ever so gently, being careful not to overwhelm the other man, Elias called the magic to him and let just a tendril of it flow between himself and Thrain. He felt the fires within him blaze hot for a moment, but he damped them down. He didn't want to set anything on fire or burst or break anything—he wanted to heal. Slowly, tenderly, the magic left him and entered his lover. As smooth and sweet as warm honey, it stretched between them, flowing from the tip of Elias's cock deep into the other man's body. And then, so gradually that he wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't been hoping for it so anxiously, Elias felt Thrain begin to relax.

"Thrain," he murmured, looking into the other man's eyes to see what he was feeling. "Are you all right?"

"I am... I really think I am." Thrain sounded completely amazed. "I am not afraid anymore," he said, smiling in wonderment. "I no longer fear to open myself to you, to let you take me."

Elias felt a surge of triumph mixed with tenderness. "Then give yourself to me completely and let me fuck you." He was all the way inside Thrain now, and he punctuated his words with a short, hard thrust that was pure pleasure.

"Gods yes." Thrain groaned, writhing under him. "Take me, Elias... Fuck me!"

Groaning, Elias gave in to the urge he'd been feeling from the moment he first entered his lover—the driving urge to thrust and claim and take. After pulling almost all the way out of Thrain's body, he surged forward again, ramming his cock in hard and deep and drawing a low cry of pleasure from Thrain's throat.

"Elias... Gods!" Thrain was gripping the coverlet with both hands, his eyes half closed with pleasure as he gave himself without fear. Elias thought he had never seen a more beautiful sight, and the feel of the other man around him was incredible. Thrain's body gripped him like a tight, velvet fist, milking him with each thrust, almost begging Elias to fill him with his seed.

It was a request Elias knew he couldn't deny for long. The long, slow buildup of desire between them had taken its toll on his self-control. He needed to come. More than that, he needed to come inside Thrain, to shoot deep in the other man's body and claim him completely. It wasn't just that he wanted the release of letting go, there was another reason—a small voice inside his head telling him that Thrain's healing would be complete only after they both fully succumbed to the pleasure they were giving each other.

"Thrain," he murmured, beginning to stroke the other man's cock again. "Do you feel it? The connection between us?" It was the same thing he'd felt the first time they had made love, when he had given himself to Thrain. A shining line stretching between them, a golden rope that bound them together, their destinies and hearts entwined.

"Yes." Thrain seemed to know exactly what he meant. His dark blue eyes blazed up into Elias's. "Gods yes, I feel it. This was meant to be. I was meant to give myself to you as you gave yourself to me. Take me, Elias... Come inside me. Take me all the way."

"Gods!" The hot, sweet words and the intensity in Thrain's hawklike features were too much for Elias. "Coming, Thrain," he moaned as he felt his cock swell inside his lover. "Coming, and I need you to come with me."

He stroked Thrain's shaft as he spoke and watched as Thrain bucked up against him, giving himself wholly to the pleasure, surrendering without fear or pain for the first time in his life. The sight was too much for Elias. It tipped him over the edge, and he felt himself finally release deep in his lover's body. As Thrain came too, his hot cum spurting between Elias's fingers, Elias knew that their connection to each other was finally complete. That they would spend the rest of their lives together, uniting and healing the land and fulfilling the dragon's prophecy with the strength of their love.

The pleasure seemed to last forever, strengthened and extended by their connection, lifting them higher and higher until with a final gentle wave, Elias felt

himself coming down. "Gods," he whispered, collapsing on top of Thrain. "That was-"

"Like nothing I've ever felt before." Thrain held him close and pushed damp curls from his face to kiss his forehead. "How did you do that, Elias? You made me forget everything bad about being taken. All I could think of was how much I wanted you, how I wanted to belong to you and have you belong to me."

"I used magic." Elias looked at him shyly. "I hope you don't mind. It was something the dragon said. It told me I ought to be using my power to heal instead of kill. So I thought..." He was relieved when Thrain smiled at him.

"You thought right apparently." He stretched languidly and grinned. "Well, if this is what being your bed slave is like, I'm all for it."

"It's only for three months," Elias reminded him. "Then you can do as you wish. I mean, if you want to leave..." He trailed off, his heart in his mouth.

"If you think I'm leaving you after that, you're mad." Thrain kissed him playfully. "Besides, what have I got to go back to? The dragon left most of Castle Black in ruins."

"You'll have your people to go back to," Elias said seriously. "Without a hand to guide them, they'll be lost and vulnerable. If you don't go back and claim the crown, someone else is sure to—and it will probably be someone like Baynor."

Thrain frowned. "Yes, I can see your point. But I still don't want to leave you."

"I'll come with you," Elias offered. "We can unite the kingdoms. After all, according to the dragon, we're meant to bring all the lands together in peace and prosperity, so putting our two lands together is as good a start as any."

Thrain looked doubtful. "And what will your lady mother think of that? She hates me, or hadn't you noticed? I doubt she'll be too eager to join her lands to mine."

"She hates you because she doesn't know you," Elias said quietly. "She only knows what she heard the night you and Baynor attacked and what she saw in the scrying glass."

Thrain groaned. "If she heard all that, she'll *never* accept me as your love."

"Maybe not," Elias said. "But she'll have to accept you as my husband and consort."

"What?" Thrain's eyes widened. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

Elias gave him an innocent, wide-eyed look. "Ought I to have gotten down onto one knee, my lord? Or does the idea offend you?" he asked on a more serious note.

"No. Gods no. I think it's a wonderful idea." Thrain kissed him hard. "It's just...rather sudden, don't you think?"

"Didn't I tell you my mother was looking for some poor soul to marry me off to?" Elias asked, half laughing. "Of course, I'm certain her selection process didn't involve having my prospective mate come to kidnap me in the middle of the night, but still..." "Don't joke about that," Thrain said earnestly, cupping Elias's cheek in his palm. "I shall always regret that we started so."

"It matters not how we started, love." Elias kissed him gently on the lips. "But how we shall end. I love you, Thrain Blackwater. I claim you as my own forever."

"And I claim you." Thrain pulled him close and returned the kiss. "You are mine, and I am yours, till kingdom come, Elias."

"Indeed," Elias agreed and nestled happily against Thrain's broad chest. "Till kingdom come...and beyond.

Epilogue

The sun had set in a ball of fire, and the moon was riding high as Thrain walked through the new garden that had been planted on the border between his lands and Elias's. The garden surrounded the foundations of what was to be their new home—Castle Peace—when the builders were done with it. It was a square strip of land planted with all manner of fruiting and flowering trees and plants. It was tended with care by the residents of both lands. He and Elias joked that, surrounding the foundations as it did, the garden was their moat—the only protection the new castle would ever need, for their lands were enemies no longer. And together they were strong enough to withstand any outside force.

The night was fine and dry, much like the one on which he and Baynor had sacked Castle Rowan, though Thrain did not like to remember it. He much preferred to breathe in the heavy, slightly spicy fragrance of the moonflowers, so named because they only opened after moonrise each night. They were said to have magical healing properties, and by planting them in this spot, which symbolized the healing of the two ravaged lands, Thrain had hoped to dispel once and for all the ban on magic his father had so long imposed. No one was burned at the stake anymore, and there was no witch finder resident in the newly rebuilt Castle Black. He had even undertaken to hire a court magician, though Elias had laughed at that and called it overkill.

Thrain shook his head and smiled when he thought of his spouse's warm laughter. Elias was visiting his mother at Castle Rowan, for she still refused to warm to Thrain, no matter how he wooed her goodwill. Thrain supposed he couldn't blame her—no mother who truly loved her son could allow herself to feel anything but enmity for one who had attacked him. Still, he and Elias both hoped that she would be won over in the future. Thrain knew that every time Elias visited his home to help govern for a while, he worked on her, playing up Thrain's good points and telling her how happy they were together.

I'd be happier if this damn castle were done, so we could be together always. All this traveling back and forth and the time spent apart are wearing on my nerves. He sighed. Well, their new home would be done in another half a year—faster if Elias could learn a little more about using his magic to build. He could already use it to lift stones bigger than ten men could manage and had laid much of the foundation himself.

In the meantime Thrain knew it was best he spend a good portion of his time at Castle Black. The dragon's fury had decimated the ruling class, and fearful stories of its wrath had spread to the peasants as well. Aside from the fear of the great fire lizard, the people had been demoralized by years of his father's iron fist crushing the life from them. Thrain had his hands full reassuring his people that they were safe now that the brutal reign of Ungor was ended and that the dragon wasn't coming back.

Suddenly, as though his brooding thoughts had called it, he saw a great red and gold form cross the shining white face of the moon. Then, with a surprisingly quiet rustle of its huge, sail-like wings, the dragon landed before him.

"Dragon." Thrain inclined his head courteously, though his heart was pounding. He knew the dragon's true name now—Elias had told it to him. But he was no dragon master like his true love, and he had sense enough not to try and use it on the great creature.

"Thrain, son of Ungor, who is no more." The dragon inclined its huge head. It seemed bigger, somehow, than Thrain remembered. Bigger and brighter—the light shining between its crimson scales made it almost too brilliant to look at, and its eyes were like the sun at midday.

"What brings you to our lands?" Thrain asked, deciding to ask rather than wait for the dragon to get around to announcing itself.

"Our lands, eh?" The dragon chuckled. "I take it you mean yours and Elias's."

Thrain nodded. "I do. We took our vows publically on this very spot. He belongs to me now, as I do to him."

"*I am sorry I was not there to witness the ceremony.*" Was there a twinkle in the dragon's eyes? It was hard to tell when they were already so bright.

"Forgive us for not inviting you, but we're trying to unite the peoples of our two lands, not frighten them to death," Thrain said, smiling.

"A point well taken." The dragon made a strange rumbling sound that Thrain decided must be laughter. "Well, I shall have to be content to watch you from afar, I suppose. Will you give my regards to your Sandor for me, my Lorik? And tell him that I am much obliged for my freedom and my name. I had never thought to regain either."

"I'll tell him," Thrain promised. "But we're no Lorik and Sandor, you know. We're just two men trying to make right what went wrong. To heal the hurts caused by years of mistrust."

"And what do you think Lorik and Sandor were doing?" The twinkle was back in the dragon's flame-bright eyes—this time Thrain was sure of it. "They thought as you do and wound up uniting the entire realm. Mark my words—you and Elias shall do the same. It may take a few years, but the time will come when this garden and the home you are building in it will be the center of all the lands from here to the Great Silver Sea. Now that is a ceremony I will take care not to miss." Thrain laughed and shook his head. "Who am I to deny you? If such an event comes to pass, you may consider yourself invited as the guest of honor—providing you promise not to roast any of the other attendees."

"My wrath has long been spent." The dragon's tone was serious. "I am the last of my kind and nearing the end of my long life, but there is magic in the world again, and that is thanks to you and Elias. You need never fear me."

"Many thanks," Thrain said gravely.

"You are welcome. And now I must fly." The dragon spread its wings. "Do tell Elias that I asked about him. After I am gone, he must carry the burden of magic himself for all the realm."

"Can he do that?" Thrain frowned, worried. "I thought that once the last dragon was gone, all the magic in the land would disappear with it."

"Ah, but I am not the last—not truly. For your love has the soul of a dragon, as I told him before. He will carry on quite well without me."

And what of me? Thrain wanted to ask. Will Elias go on without me after our mortal lifetimes are over? Are we not to be joined in the hereafter as well?

The dragon seemed to read his thoughts. "Do not fear, Thrain, son of Ungor, who is no more. Do you not know? Dragons mate for life, and their span of years is determined by their love, not their age. If you and Elias wish to be, you will be together until the mountains crumble into the sea."

"Truly, that is what I wish." Thrain felt a great rush of joy and hope fill him at the thought. No wonder the dragon had prophesied that they would be able to unite all the lands in the realm. It was a huge job and would take years upon years, but it was time that he and Elias apparently had. To be with him always, to never be apart—that is what I want, what I truly wish for with all my heart.

"May your wish be granted. And now, fare you well wherever you fare." The dragon beat its wings, the great, leathery sails raising a wind that bent the flowers on their stems and rushed through the leaves of the trees like a mighty storm.

Thrain shielded his eyes against the wind and watched as the great fire lizard rose into the night sky. He stood looking for long moments, even after the dragon had long disappeared from view. How much he had to tell Elias when he came back!

"Beloved!" The familiar voice and the soft clopping of hooves were welcome sounds.

"Elias!" Thrain ran to meet him and caught his horse by the bridle, then held it so that Elias could swing down from the saddle into his arms. "You're early. I didn't expect you for another fortnight," he said after a long, breathless kiss.

"I've missed you too much to stay away any longer. Mother doesn't need me to run our part of the kingdom, and besides, she got tired of hearing how wonderful you are."

Thrain grinned. "Wearing her down, are you?"

"Little by little." Elias grinned back. "Anyway, she finally just said to me, 'I can tell it's killing you to be apart from him. Why don't you just go back early?""

"I'm glad." Thrain kissed him again. "Because I have such news to tell you. You'll never guess who came to visit while you were gone..."

THE END C

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The Switch (featuring characters from Dangerous Cravings)

Fireworks I'll Be Hot for Christmas (featuring characters from The Assignment)

Evangeline Anderson

Evangeline Anderson is a registered MRI tech who would rather be writing. And yes, she is nerdy enough to have a bumper sticker that reads "I'd rather be writing." Honk if you see her! She is thirty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son, and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try and get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and Sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.