



A BONDED FANTASY

WITHIN REASON

Mima

Within Reason

A Bonded Fantasy (8)

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Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Terri Schaefer

Cover Artist
April Martinez

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Blurb

Isabo once met a man who set her imagination alive with sexual fire. Confused by his male lover, she chose another. Now she's a lonely widow ready to dance in Trey's still-devoted flame, even if that means burning up the blankets with Niko, too. Or perhaps especially because of sweet Niko, too.

The two shapeshifting warriors understand Isabo is already Bonded, and they respect that. The men don't want to simply sizzle with Isabo, they want to melt their way into her heart, sweep out her grief, and forge her into part of their life.

Through blazingly sultry nights, Isabo takes their shattered dreams and twines them with her own. Living isn't easy, loving can be agony, and sometimes getting both right is a group effort.

Dedication

I think I can dance. You should, too.

What came before...

In the land of Vladaya, rimmed by mountains, deserts, and sea, live two intertwined races. The Truxet are shapeshifters divided into eleven Clans who roam the vast and often dangerous wilderness. Only males are born to them, developing a beastspirit at adolescence. Their three forms—human, animal, and battleform—are volatile and require a rigid code of honor to allow them to coexist. The Kingdom of Seven Cities is a Guild-run collection of Walled human societies, surrounded by despised and exiled wildlings, uneducated humans who have their own clan structure to survive their perpetual state of conflict.

The Royal family and the Council of Truxet have negotiated a pact: the stronger Trux mage-warriors patrol the Cities and bring justice to the wildlings in exchange for female volunteers who become adopted into the Clans. Adoption is a harrowing ceremony where a woman undergoes a sexual and spiritual Bond with a mate of her choice.

The pact has worked for millennia, with varying degrees of mutual resentment and contempt. War is approaching with a group of human darkmages, who have abandoned the Sacred Couple's way of the six elements for forbidden death magecraft. The Clans are tense and spread thin as they struggle to identify the location of the darkmages' hidden Fortress...

Chapter One

Two weeks since Flame Within

For the third time in his life Trey was struck mute by spiritual lightning. It was not a pleasant feeling. The soles of his feet throbbed like he'd run four mountains in a day. His eyes were as scratchy as if he'd been on guard duty for six unbroken nights, and his hands prickled like when he'd climbed the icy granite cliffs of the Snowcat's White Hollow.

He stood in the shadows of the pines and ignored the splashing, laughing children, focusing instead on the woman who stood over them. Isabo. She'd returned. In the psychic interior of his body, his watercoaster poised rigid in acute attention, craving her with a sharp strike of need. Her shapely legs were braced shoulder-width apart and calf deep in the Cove's cool waters.

Just a few bodylengths away on the same stretch of sandy beach, Niko roared with laughter, wrestling in vast sprays with his nephew, Brend. Brend had manifested his marten beastspirit the moon before, and Niko and Trey had been spending a lot of time with him. The sky was bell-flower blue, the reflection making the deep waters of his clanhome's lake appear greenish-black.

Hesitating to join his lover and the teen, Trey moved his gaze from the big man's slicked-back, dark hair over to Isabo. Looking more rested than he could remember, she wore her thick black hair drawn up in a foxtail today, revealing her pale nape. Both adults gave their attention entirely to their younger charges.

It was merely chance these two people stood within speaking distance on this late summer afternoon. But chance had brought him this heart-fluttering sensation twice before. He now knew destiny when he stared at it. He now knew that destiny was a bittersweet dance partner, giving tremendous joy while stabbing you deep in the back. It was an act of the Six Elements that put them together, out of all the beaches that rimmed their lake home.

His breath came in short bursts and he struggled to pull it in deeper, slow it down. Isabo wore a purple wrap skirt that cupped her round ass, and barely draped the tops of her knees. Her short-sleeved tunic was tan, painted with leaves around the waist. *She'd taken off the gray of mourning.* It still seemed impossible to him, that she was now without a Bonded. She wasn't exactly free, but she was available in a way that had twisted his guts while he waited, endlessly, for her to return from her duty in River Mountain. Oh yes, Isabo was home, and she'd emerged from the shadow of Jace's death.

Niko was nude, as warriors usually were in the lake. Trey's gaze poured over Niko's vast shoulders, his deep, muscled torso, sculpted hips and thighs flexing with strips of thick muscle. Brend shouted as Niko spun him under the water. Trey's glance skittered across the sand to Isabo, serene and elegant while the toddlers burbled in the shallows. And back to Niko.

Trey knew his idea was daring. It was painful, but also beautiful. No one would understand. Niko would argue, but he'd be intrigued, and Trey was sure it would be good for him. Isabo was more of an unknown. She knew about them. After all, they were the reason he'd lost her. Trey ached, like he'd just finished training in the cold depths with his

Alpha, Vos. But he finally swallowed past the egg lodged in his throat.

Destiny had brought him the double-edged blades of Niko and of Isabo. Trey was simply going to *put them together*. It was the right thing to do. The Six had slapped him with the vision of it. He listened.

Moving onto the sand, Trey hunkered near the waterline and called out to Brend. "Not his thigh. Jerk behind his knee!"

Brend took his advice, and Niko was soon sputtering, hopping on one foot while fighting to remain upright. Brend was bent in half, his shoulder set to Niko's hip, trying to drive him back into deeper water.

It took everything Trey had not to glance toward Isabo. He heard the three toddlers she watched arguing over an oyster shell they'd found.

His balls pulsed when he heard her throaty alto murmur, "Tekky had it first. After he's seen it, he'll share it. Take turns."

She could say anything, no matter how mundane, and he'd still get horny. Brend wore Niko down enough to force him in past his knees, but that just started a wrestling match. With Niko's upper body strength, skinny Brend was the one sputtering in a chokehold. Niko got his hand under Brend's thigh. With one grip on the boy's scrawny shoulders and the other grip on his leg, he pressed him up into the air, and then stood in a rush of strength. The boy screamed in delighted fear as he was held sideways above Niko's head.

Niko's body created a magnificent tableau. His arms bulged, his shoulders a wide slab tapering down to a high, tight ass. Trey's dick thickened, pinching in his squatting position. He held it anyway, knowing if he stood, he'd gain a full-blown erection. With a roar, Niko threw Brend into the water. The boy's spindly arms and legs flailed before he landed three entire bodylengths out in the lake.

Weakening, thinking it safe with that as a distraction, Trey glanced at Isabo. She had indeed fallen for the commotion and stared at Niko, who now stood with his arms crossed, thigh-deep. The look on her face was one Trey had seen many times on women's faces as they looked at Niko. Admiration. Lust. Awe. His erection unfurled in his pants, straining, aching, throbbing. Her profile was lit by water-shadows, bright swirls of light dancing across her tanned cheeks. Precious. She looked back at the children, and he looked back at Niko. He no longer had any doubt about his vision.

Niko turned, and caught Trey looking at Isabo. His face drained of the easy joy, his brown eyes warm in his swarthy face with dark lashes and brows. His fading grin held understanding and sadness. Niko knew how Isabo's presence had tormented Trey these last three years, and how her absence in the most recent year had cut even worse.

Giving in to the reality of his two loves so near, he stood, and his dick thickened, spearing against the lightweight cloth camp pants. Niko saw that, too. His smile was long gone as he strode toward Trey, lifting his knees high to push through the water. Trey's heart jumped at the roaring power in that hot dark gaze, and when Niko's long arms grabbed him close, his own hands took Niko's head in a tight grip. They kissed, and it was as confusing as always. So good, so comfortable, so shocking. Niko's lips moved and pressed hard, cooler and wet. Trey licked into Niko's mouth, his jaw straining to capture and meet, mate and stroke. Niko bit at Trey's lip, and Trey came back at him, bumping noses and chins, dragging his lips hard across Niko's.

"Uncle! Not now! You were going to take me for my first swim in our fur!" Brend's

frustrated voice came from the shallows behind Niko.

Niko licked across Trey's mouth and nuzzled his cheek with his nose. "So I did, and so we will. Just had to take a little break. You've got to let this old man catch his breath."

They looked into each other's eyes, promising heat, exchanging strength, sharing love.

Trey called out to Brend, "I came down to share the news. Tahi's mate has birthed his son. Vos has called a bonfire on the shared beach tonight in their honor."

Niko whooped, his huge smile back in place. Trey nodded to him, returning the joy. Niko turned and ran toward Brend, who threw himself up in a twirling jump.

"A new baby," the boy shouted.

"Dancing tonight!" Niko called.

Even though Vos, the Alpha Watercoaster, was the one holding the celebration, all of the martens would join in. The marten and watercoaster Clans had grown intertwined in their long sharing of the Cove.

"The paid woman Yun said she'd save a dance for me at the next bonfire!" Brend's voice got so tight with excitement he squeaked.

Niko snorted, wading into the water toward him. "You're not ready, Twiggy."

Brend's face flushed red in an instant. Alarm and dismay surged through Trey, but Niko scented Brend's anger and countered it. When Brend snarled viciously and leapt at Niko, he grabbed him in mid-leap, spun and smashed him into the water. He held the youngling below for a few counts, then heaved him up into his face, snarling back, "Control! At all times!"

Brend sagged, but jerked himself from Niko's hold. "I am a marten! If I'm ready for a beastspirit, I'm ready for a woman!"

Niko looked back at Trey and rolled his eyes. They both knew Brend's mother Kari was having a very hard time with her fifteen-year-old "baby" announcing adulthood. She'd been an emotional wreck since he'd been put in advanced warrior training, and when he'd shortly begun to express newfound interest in the paid women, she'd gone berserk.

Niko's brother Orson had promised his mate he'd keep their son virginal until he was at least sixteen, a whole endless eight months away. Trey knew they'd no doubt be assigned guard duty many a night for Kari's sake, keeping Brend's young dick safe.

"Let's work on your footwork before you graduate to bedwork. Dancing is an important skill with the ladies. I'll show you how it's done." Niko's ass sadly disappeared beneath the water.

Now it was Brend's turn to look at Trey and roll his eyes. "Gee, Uncle Niko, just what I always wanted. To learn how to dance like you." His voice was saturated with sarcastic eagerness.

The boy exchanged a grin with Trey, who shrugged. It was true that not many would care to learn about dance from his lover. Niko's idea of dance had more to do with energy than control. It mystified why Niko was so awkward with the drums when he had such outstanding rhythm in bed.

"Will you show me how to dance, tonight, Uncle Trey?"

Trey got the same little thrill he always did to be included in Niko's family. It never got old. This boy could very well be the best chance either of them had to satisfy the ghosting, the ever-burning ache to have a child. "I'd be proud to. Niko's right. There are

lots of grips to learn before you're able to catch a river wolf."

Brend wasn't listening to the proverb. He dove in and swam furiously to where Niko was treading water. Niko waved briefly and Trey waved back.

He turned away from the pair, deliberately giving his back to Isabo. He forged into the trees, knowing she was there by the happy chatter of the toddlers. His neck pinched with the effort of not looking at her. Over the years, he'd gotten very sick of her catching his mooning gaze and seeing the fucking pity on her face.

Tonight was a happy occasion. A new babe in the Twin Clans was not such a common thing, sadly. If he was lucky, he might get to hold him. He loved to dance, and it would be amusing to see Brend's style emerge. But most of all, it was the perfect setting to launch his daring, dangerous, painful, beautiful new plan. The perfect time for an amazing new dance with destiny. Niko and Isabo, together.

Chapter Two

Niko came out of his marten form after shaking off. He paused, catching his balance in his human body. Brend was still stroking hard through the shallows in his fur, ears high and whiskers forward. Their marten beastspirit didn't love water, preferring heights, but could swim naturally. Reflecting on the hour or so that had gone by, Niko decided the boy could stay in a bit longer. It was hard for younglings to switch forms quickly.

He looked over and saw Isabo sitting at the edge of the sandy beach, against the bushes, her knees tucked to the side. Scenting carefully, he noted two fathers and a mother had come for the toddlers recently. Trey's scent was fading. He hadn't returned.

Niko jogged up to her and knelt out of reach. "Now he knows."

She nodded, keeping her eyes on the small pine island out in the lake. "Our plan worked. Thanks for your help."

Her voice was like something out of a sex fantasy. He knew paid women who trained to develop a sultry way of speaking, and they had nothing on Isabo's purr. On her, it was just part of her natural sensuality.

He scrubbed sand off his thighs. "It was very kind of you to contact me. You're right. If he'd just discovered you were back during supper, everyone would have stared and gossiped. It was good to plan for him to see you back in the Cove privately."

The Clans were always interested to see how Trey reacted around the match who had refused him. He didn't help matters by consistently springing to attention at the merest whiff of her, and he seemed to be incapable of looking at anything but her when she was near. He blared his sorrow, desire, and interest in her with such intent, even after all this time, that it had become a bit of a joke. To the people who weren't living it.

"Now he knows you're here, he'll be able to marshal himself." *Maybe he'll be able to get off his ass and go after you now that you've taken off your mourning gray and come home again.*

For over a year he'd watched Trey stare at the sifting stone that jumped warriors to other locations, knowing he wanted to go to Isabo. At first Niko had been a tiny bit relieved that she'd moved to River Mountain several months after Jace, her Bonded, died in a corpux attack during a routine outer-border patrol. After all, months of watching Trey's haunting devotion to another man's Bonded didn't sit well with Niko. She'd changed their sex play. She'd been a silent presence during every training session between them, spurring Trey to increased aggression.

Trey's yearning and Niko's inability to fulfill it haunted them both. But having her gone had taught Niko it wasn't her presence that provided some stubborn distraction. Trey's heart had connected to her during their single meeting when she considered him as a choice. Her Bonding hadn't changed Trey's feelings for her any more than loving Niko did. How many dawns had Trey left their bed to stand on the shore this past year? Her absence hadn't soothed Trey. If anything, he was agitated in a way he hadn't been when he'd known what she did each day.

It wasn't right. Isabo had gone through so much to join Jace, and now she was alone, at thirty-eight, with no son for the Clan. Was it as bitter to her, knowing she chose the man who died? What a heartbreaking waste. It gave Niko the chills just thinking about it.

"Welcome home, Isabo." He ruffled his damp hair.

"It's good to be back at The Cove." Her words smelled genuine. "Just watching you swim has reminded me how much I love living here. The view is spectacular."

Niko blinked. Did Isabo just ... flirt? "You were away a long time." Trey had struggled to sleep when she left.

"I needed to immerse myself in my research." Isabo was a brilliant linguist who studied Truxet history. "It's been tremendous to study in the ancient library there. The text I've identified and am working on now is one which has never been translated from the old language. It mentions darkness, so I hope to reveal a new aspect to our—" She swung her head away, her foxtail drifting over her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I've been surrounded too long with academics."

He thought she'd been too long alone. He'd never heard her speak so much, not even when they'd met to plot Trey's private revelation. "Anything the ancients can reveal to help us find the darkmage Fortress will be welcomed by the Council, I'm sure. No clue is too small. I'm glad you've returned. It is work you can do here, and you're part of our Clan."

She took a deep breath. "I'm ready to make some changes. I'm able to look at my future now."

Niko's breath pinched at her quiet admission. To lose a Bonded ... he ached for her. "I hope you know you can always come to me if you need anything."

Her black gaze flashed to him briefly, before she focused on the island again.

Niko lifted his head and scented again. Yes. Isabo reeked of fear. "Isabo?"

He didn't know her very well. It was ironic. He was the lover of a man who was her spirit's match, a man she'd refused in her mate-choice. She'd taken Jace instead, a marten Niko had looked up to as one of the hunting instructors of the Clan. Jace's younger brother Auberon had been an irritating, bossy member of Niko's own youngling cohort. He had this web of connections around this woman, but they'd spoken only a handful of times.

"Isabo!"

Speak of a gnat and here it came. Auberon strode down the shoreline, shoulders high and stiff. Isabo's fear spiked. Niko studied her as she watched Auberon break into a run when he saw them. Her breath came faster, and her hands gripped her knees tighter, the skin on her knuckles flaring white.

Niko glanced between Auberon, who glared at him, and Isabo, now staring at the sand, panting. What the fuck?

She stood abruptly, and he stood as well. She pivoted and faced him with her back to Auberon. "I need help."

Niko stared at her, stunned. "Auberon?"

She nodded once. "I know I have no right to ask. I know you're exactly the wrong person. But you're the only person. Because of Trey."

Her words tumbled urgently and he didn't understand any of them, but he was ready. "Tell me."

She shook her head. "No time. Please. Don't go to Bry. We'll talk later. I'll be fine today."

Don't go to his Alpha? When a woman of their Clan was terrified of a man who should stand for her? Like Ash, he wouldn't. "Sure," he lied, knowing she couldn't smell

it.

"Niko." Auberon halted behind Isabo. She was just a bit tall for a human, and Auberon was short, like Jace had been, so they were near the same height. "For Water's sake, man, go put clothes on in front of a lady."

Niko raised one eyebrow. Nudity was common at the beach. "I think she can handle it." He hadn't seen Auberon for months. They were all stretched thin now that the war with the darkmages was heating up, their hunt tightening around the alleys of the Dark that had been unforgivably overlooked.

Auberon openly sneered at him. "Disrespectful prick. Don't you have a man to go find?" The scent of lust and suspicion swirled from him.

"No, not really. We find each other pretty easily every night." Oh, yeah. The last few times Auberon had passed him, he'd been one of *those*, the men who seemed to be angry instead of the usual default confused about the very unique relationship Niko and Trey had. After all, there was only one other pair of men who shared pleasure in all of the Clans. When you lived among beastspirits, there were no secrets.

"Auberon. That's enough." Anger overrode the scent of fear.

Both men looked at Isabo. Niko was impressed with the iron in her voice. Auberon appeared irritated.

"Thank you for your kind words, Niko." Isabo held her wrist up to him in a traditional woman's manner.

Niko gently took her tilted palm and put his nose to the lacing of blue veins on the underside of her wrist. She smelled mouthwatering, of sand and babies and vanilla cookies. "Again, welcome home." He dropped her wrist and nodded to her. Interesting. He didn't smell Jace's mate-bond at all. That meant she had said goodbye to him, and was a true widow.

Auberon's jaw jumped with the force of his grinding teeth.

Isabo stepped to the side before turning, so she would not be standing so close to Auberon when she faced him. "Hello, Auberon. You're looking well."

Auberon stared Niko down, clearly expecting him to leave now that Isabo had dismissed him.

Niko was about to cross his arms and settle in when Brend shouted, "That was awesome! I couldn't even feel the water against my skin!"

Niko looked at Isabo and she gave a minute nod. Her fear had faded to disgust and anger. Reluctantly, he turned and paced through the sand to where Brend had flopped down.

Auberon spoke low, but couldn't escape Niko's ears. "I can't believe you didn't tell me you were coming from River Mountain today. I would have brought you."

"It seemed silly to wait until mid-moon. Grent mentioned he was stopping by to give Bry a report, so I came with him."

"Have you thought about my offer any more? I know it would be so much more convenient for you, if you shared my roost."

Their voices moved away, and Niko threw a glance over to see Auberon's arm come around Isabo's stiff shoulders. She shrugged it off. If she didn't want his arm, Niko doubted she wanted his roost.

Niko couldn't believe it, but his skin crawled with intuition. Something was very wrong between them. "Brend."

"Yeah?"

"Do you know where Bry is this afternoon?"

"Uh, no. He was with the elders at the old oak when I left."

"Let's head back. I need to speak with him."

Brend bounced to his feet, chafing sand from himself. "Not about me?"

Niko ruffled the boy's thick, wavy brown hair, so like his own. Love and pride glowed for the fine young man he was becoming. "Not about you, Twiggy. If anything, I'll tell him we have a contender for the island race."

Brend's eyes grew huge with delight. "Yes! I'd love to compete! Do you think I'll be ready this year?"

"Of course not. But maybe next if you train hard." The thought occurred to him that if they did not have this war won against the darkmages within three years, Brend would be sent to battle when their hidden Fortress was uncovered. It was a warrior's duty. The Twin Clans who shared the Cove were teased by the other clans for their small mass, but in the end they were respected as fierce and worthy predators. The martens' speed and the river wolves' mastery of water made them valuable in any fight. But Niko fully intended to make sure the first and deadliest wave of attacks happened before Brend ever made it into the line.

Brend leapt into the air as Niko began to turn toward the sturdy tree roosts that housed their Clan among the pines to the north. "Yes! Yes!"

Niko congratulated himself on finding a focus besides paid women for the near term. The boy's shouts and questions followed them as they wound through the scrub of the northern shore's drylands into the pine forest.

After divesting himself of Brend, Niko eventually found Bry. His marten curled and bounced in delight to be so near their Alpha. Waiting until Bry had finished speaking to a set of warriors going out on duty patrolling the Royal grounds, Niko laced the vest he'd donned with leggings and short camp boots.

"Niko." Bry was aging. His face had picked up more lines than scars now and his muscle mass was that of their younglings. But none of the alphas serving the Council at River Mountain had returned to challenge him. Niko dreaded it, knowing it was only a few years from happening. What with the last two Clan Alpha exchanges in Groundbear and Snowcat ending in bloody death, he literally shivered every time he contemplated Bry issuing the call for change.

"Alpha." Niko bent his head before the man who held the respect and control of over one hundred and fifty martens. Then he lifted his gaze and delivered his message directly. "Isabo is afraid of Auberon."

Bry sighed. "Yes. I want to handle this delicately."

"I don't understand, Bry. If he's making her afraid, there's no gray area. He needs to back off, be given boundaries."

"He lost his father, mother, and older brother all within five years. He's been brought to mate-choice three times and not chosen. Auberon deserves some care. He's not our enemy, nor Isabo's, despite her fear."

Niko blinked at the Marten, who held the source of all their beastspirits. Women were a Clan's most precious resource. Since the Truxet had no daughters of their own, all their mates had to come from the human Cities. Women adopted into the Clans were promised respect, protection, and a mate of *their* choice from among warriors proven to

all be a match for them. Matches were found via a psychic souldance with a spiritmage.

The fact over half of the warriors never Bonded made the adopted women a universal focus. For it was generally only Bonded pairs who produced the sons that every single warrior craved to the marrow of his bones. A child was something all the single warriors could enjoy assisting with, a kind of magic which calmed and focused the wild energies that surged through the warriors' bodies.

Niko had never been to mate-choice. He thought that without his brother Orson's son, he would have gone mad years ago. But the thought of Kari, his brother's mate, fearing him mystified.

"But, there must be some reason for her to fear him."

"Auberon merely cares for her." Bry waved to some warriors up in a high platform. The pines were riddled with high roosts, leaving the lower forest floor for daily work and gathering space. "He sees it, rightfully, as his duty to stand for her in the Clan now her Bonded, his brother, is gone. I agreed to let her remove to River Mountain a year ago, when her grief was so new and she was so impatient with Auberon. Her duty studying the ancient texts took her there so often anyways."

Bry leaned on the carved walking stick he carried, the curl of the wood covered in delicately etched fish. "But now I've summoned her back. It's only about two moons until Autumnal. It's time she settled in with us before then, when women can feel so overwhelmed by the whirl of the gathering Clans. I want her and Auberon to find their way. Auberon knows he upset her before, and he'll adjust. But she needs to, as well. She's a marten. We think quicker. She'll get the hang of it."

Niko was well aware Bry still hadn't told him what Auberon had done to "upset" Isabo. He was about to ask when Bry held out his hand. Instantly and gratefully, Niko grasped Bry's arm. Marten rolled in delight when Bry gripped him in return, a warrior's recognition. Touch was such a necessity for his beastspirit.

Bry changed the subject, ending the conversation. "Did you hear a dance is called for tonight?"

"I did, Marten. Much joy for the watercoasters." The martens hadn't had a new birth now in over a year.

Bry tipped his head, studying Niko with a curiosity he'd grown to recognize. He kept his sigh inside and waited.

"You still carry that river wolf's scent."

"Yes. He still gives me great comfort." Thoughtful, golden Trey. Niko almost fidgeted remembering their last kiss on the beach, but held himself motionless under his Alpha's puzzled regard.

"Tonight, you'll take one of the paid women." Bry's order was mild, but firm. "I don't want you to forget the use nature gave your cock. After all, Kash had his son with a paid woman."

It was rare to get a paid woman pregnant, but the men could hope because it did sometimes happen, as in the case of Niko's friend Kash several years ago. How old was little Will now? Six?

"Yes, Alpha. As you say." Niko fought the defensive words that rose to his throat. *Didn't nature intend pleasure? Didn't many men share a bed when their souls grew dark? What harm was it to anyone that the sleep they'd shared in pain had grown to be more?*

Warriors weren't afraid to state their love for their Clan brothers. Touching certainly

wasn't forbidden, being one of their primary forms of communicating. Yet the kiss that had flowed so easily between them that first morning seemed such a bizarre concept to everyone else.

"Hmmp. Yes, you do well to keep those words back, Niko. You're a man, made to father a son for the martens."

Fucking Trey does not make me any less of a man. "I enjoy women immensely, Alpha. I always have and always will. I'll endeavor." A pair of black eyes with lush swirls of long lashes flaring from them jumped into his brain. Niko tossed his head once, firmly. Isabo's eyes had no business in this conversation.

"See that you do. I want you to be happy." Bry sighed, shook his head as if frustrated. "I can't understand you and that watercoaster together. As long as you occasionally play with women, just for luck's chance, I see no reason to halt your..."

"Relationship." Niko offered the word dryly.

Bry shrugged and clapped Niko on the back of the neck. "You're a damn fine warrior, Niko, and one of my martens."

Niko's chest grew tight. He nodded.

"And I look forward to your newest dance tonight."

Laughing, Niko shook hands with his Alpha. "I'll do my best." He couldn't help it if his terrific life was too big for his feet sometimes.

* * * *

Isabo wandered through Jace's roost. How odd. When she'd first stepped back in here after the psychic lifetime she'd been away, that had been her first thought. *Jace's roost.*

It had been her home, too, and she'd always felt welcome and protected here with him. She'd put up those curtains and chosen that blanket. There was her trunk full of mementos from her City life that no longer remotely mattered to her. Her knickknacks were sprinkled among Jace's on the shelves, patterned with tiny treasures they'd laughingly collected to represent their most important memories.

She fondled one of them, a rock with a dry bump of moss. The moss crumbled beneath her fingertips. *Jace's thick, compact body moving over hers, so hot. The cool damp moss at her back, strange texture.* Pinching the moss, she pressed her thumb and forefinger together until it burst into dust. Oh, it ached. The emptiness of this wonderful tree house, the bitter anger leading her to destroy the reminder.

She walked to the table mounded with her scrolls and reference books, her notes and lists. The precious find she now focused on, the words of water and darkness, hate and Clans, sat in a leather tube. She knew it by heart, and was so close to turning the elegant ancient sounds into meaning.

Flicking the last set of notes from that morning, she sighed. For weeks, she hadn't been able to concentrate. The research wasn't holding her like it had in her grief. Her body was restless. It was full of rushing blood and expanding air, enshrouded with sensation and haunted by empty, damp folds. Ah, Earthmother. Empty. Ready. Needy. The old words didn't stand a chance. They were dried up moss-to-dust in the face of a probing finger. They were dreams of a pair of beautiful men in the face of the daily tormenting memories of happiness.

Isabo walked to the window and slid the shutter up. She looked through the swaying, softly hissing pines and her shoulders eased. The Cove. Jace's roost may not feel like hers

anymore, but she'd been so grateful to discover that stepping back through the paths here today had felt right. She belonged here more than she ever had in the stressful, jealous, scheming Guild where she'd been raised.

Auberon wouldn't drive her away again. She was going to stand against him. Niko would help. Her heart beat hard, heavy with an ominous thump. She'd told him today. His mother Dove had been so kind to her, one of the women who had really reached out after Jace's loss. But she didn't want to go to another woman now.

In the dark days where she'd first emerged from her grief and begun to resist Auberon, she'd been ashamed. It was confusing, to be drawn to and repelled by someone you both needed and resented. What an asshole. Bry was, too. Maybe he was just a blind asshole, but he'd failed her. Niko wouldn't. Niko, and Skyfather watch over her, through him Trey, would aid her if it went badly with her Bonded's brother.

It wasn't the kind of attention she wanted from them. First, she'd try to handle it on her own. Now that she was stronger, clearer, she'd attempt reason and stand her ground instead of running away. In the meantime, maybe delicious Niko would help her speak to Trey. A breeze blew up through the pines, cool in the shadows, but it wasn't why she shivered.

Trey. Lean and golden, tender and honorable. She'd spoken with him only one day years ago, but seen him nearly daily, his words kept alive by his piercing, pained gaze. *Niko, dark and splendid, striding through the waves. Trey grabbing his face and meeting him with intensity, his body a rigid, beautiful blade of passion.*

Isabo turned from the window and sat at the table. Her breasts throbbed from envisioning them on the beach, in the sun. Was she insane to want sensation again? Jace would hate her reacting to other men. His possessive nature had been sexy. She'd been cherished. Sliding the texture of a stiff writing quill between her fingers, she felt her nipples bead. There was no replacing Jace. But she thought it was time to talk to Trey again.

Chapter Three

Trey sat by the outermost fire, at the edge of the water. Six blazes stretched the length of the shared main beach, with one massive bonfire in the center. The flames slicked the black water with tongues of color, painting a jagged pattern down the shoreline from the row of fires.

Balancing on the cross section of branch serving as his stool, Trey's eyes kept drifting down the beach to the main dance fire, only to be drawn back by the spectacle that was Niko on the hunt. Niko was down to three possibilities. Currently he molded the redhead's delicate tits into lifted mouthfuls, while he tried to direct the woman to find the wolf constellation in the glittering sky.

While she looked up, dazed from his masterful touch, the blonde next to him pulled his face down for a voracious kiss. She was a bit drunk, so even though she had the best body, muscled and curvy, he doubted Niko would choose her. Even as Trey watched, Niko licked out of her mouth, and she immediately took another swallow of wine.

Niko's eyes followed the dark-skinned willowy woman dancing like living fire closer to Trey. She was the most exotic of the paid women gathered at this blaze, and Brend had been following her around like a puppy. There was no doubt that seeing her dark brown skin next to Niko's light brown body, their heights almost a match, would be a pleasure to watch.

Glancing at the main fire, Trey picked Isabo out. She sat with some of the other mates in the ring of people watching the dancers. Every fire had a few dancers, although the main fire indeed had the most, and usually the best, eager to be seen. Trey wanted to dance. For her. But if he got up there and began to move, he feared he would end up on his knees before her, begging.

Shifting back to Niko, he watched him enjoy the redhead's tiny nipples. It had been a few months since Niko had brought a woman to their bed. Trey enjoyed watching Niko, always, but Isabo had changed Trey, and he could not pretend otherwise. Once Niko's invites were for both of them. Not since Isabo. Niko still got sad when Trey declined to join him when he brought home a woman. He could remember when getting a woman into his bed was his whole world. It seemed ages ago.

They had begun as friends sharing an icy pallet in the White Mountains on a duty. The conversations they'd had on those long lonely nights sealed something between them. Trey knew the depth of their friendship wasn't normal to most, but he needed it. And that had led to a few wild nights in Second City, where the single bed they'd gotten used to had easily continued despite no longer being a necessity. Then one bed was deemed big enough even for the two women whose services they'd accepted. Soon, it no longer seemed exciting enough to fuck a woman alone. Only when Niko watched did Trey feel pure passion.

Eventually, just one woman had been required between them. That had been odd enough. But then came the morning where he'd woken to find Niko hovering over him in the sunlight, staring at his mouth. It had been so beautiful to see the slanting rays across his warm brown eyes. Almost as beautiful as the sensation of his friend's mouth on his, strong and right.

That was the first time destiny struck him. Niko's muscles flowed under his hands, his skin glided under his tongue, their bodies moved as one. He had known the line he crossed as they touched. His shoulders were as tight as if he'd had to cart two Bears, his throat as dry as if he'd had to deliver them across the burning sands of the Lizeed. But it had been so clear to him. So perfect.

Niko passed the redhead to another warrior and advanced on the swaying dusky beauty. Trey's gaze swept down the beach to Isabo's blue dress. His heart twisted when she wasn't where she'd been, but a quick check found her. She'd moved a bit farther into the shadows, talking to ... if he was not mistaken, Dove! What was Isabo speaking to Niko's mother about? Niko tried to dance with Yun, twitching and jerking around her. His shoulders went one way, his hips another, and his knees in yet another. She laughed and shoved him away.

Niko threw himself down on the sand next to Trey. "Well? Which catches your fancy?"

This too was sadly familiar. Ever since Trey had stood before Isabo, the match for his soul, and watched her choose another, no woman had interested him in the slightest. He felt not one spark of interest for any of them. Yet Niko still did. They'd worked out a compromise. Trey chose who he wanted to watch Niko with, whenever Niko got the itch for a woman's softness. Trey knew it wasn't as good for Niko as it had been when he'd participated, but it was the best he could do.

"Niko, are you sure you want me to choose your woman tonight?"

Niko's long legs stretched out before him as he braced himself back on his arms. "What do you mean?"

"I have an idea, but I want to make sure you don't already have your own choice made. If one of these women calls to you, then take her."

Niko rolled his head away from watching the beautiful bodies of willing women play with eager warriors. "Golden eyes, what's on your mind?" His dark gaze was patient, and Trey felt humble.

"I need a favor. A big favor."

Niko snorted. "Anything."

Trey shuddered. "I want to dance."

Niko tipped his head, considering. "For her."

Looking down the beach, he saw that she still spoke with Dove. It was a portent. She was already melding into Niko's life, as destiny had shown him today.

"Yes. But... I need to know you're with her when I do."

"How's that?"

"I want you to approach her as I dance. Welcome her back. Tell her I won't be a problem for her. Assure her I think of her, but I'm doing fine." By Steam, he didn't want her pity. He wasn't one of the shattered who had to be coddled upon a refusal. Only because he had Niko, but that was his business.

He'd made it a point to keep track of the other five men who had stood before her that day and gone unchosen. One was dead. One was on near constant duty with the Royal family. One had become a father with a paid woman, and the other two seemed to be doing fine, keeping busy with the increased need for duties. But most importantly, none of them were at the Cove. It had been his own special form of torture to have the ability to see her blossom into a satisfied mate. But now it was his own special

opportunity to have her so close as a healing, sexually available widow.

"I don't get you," Niko said doubtfully.

Trey stood up. He wasn't much to look at compared to Niko, but he knew how to move, and shadows were forgiving. Holding out a hand, he balanced Niko as he rose. He kept Niko's big, calloused palm, hot in the cool night air from the end of summer.

"I want you to touch her. Maybe on her shoulder, maybe her arm. I want you to be quiet, and gentle." That wasn't Niko's usual manner, but he could contain himself if he worked at it. "Stand close enough to feel her warmth." Trey had never touched her.

He gave Niko the secret to seducing the widow. It wouldn't seem like much, and Niko wouldn't know it was the start of something sexual, but it would lead to many delights. Trey knew her heart, even if he didn't know her. "As she watches me, ask her if she's been held lately."

"What!" Niko's grip tightened, his eyebrows lowering.

"And that's it. Just ask if she's been held lately, and let what happens next happen."

Niko ripped his hand from Trey's. "You're a stupid fuck."

"I have no idea what will happen at that point," he lied. "Give her my message, follow my directions, and ask her that question. I can trust you to do this for me, right?"

"You—"

"Right?" Trey hardened his voice, stepping into Niko's space. "You said you'd do anything."

They stood nose to nose, the energy so tight between them Trey's watercoaster snapped at his ribs.

"Please, Morning Light," Trey whispered. "She can take from you what she can't from me."

Niko reared back and the tension faded. "What do you sense? Did you hear anything?"

Trey shook his head, unwilling to share the vision he'd had that afternoon. He knew Isabo must be aching with need, having remained alone since her loss, and would accept Niko. Niko wanting a woman tonight was perfect. Trey wanted to match them now, before Isabo had anyone else move on her.

"I'm not asking you to flirt. Just be there, and see if she needs touch." He was absolutely sure Isabo would reach for handsome, friendly, trustworthy but not-too-familiar Niko.

"And if she does?" Niko folded his arms. "Will you watch?"

Watercoaster erupted on his internal plane, leaping and clawing and hissing with the need to claim her for themselves. Trey breathed into it. "No. The Six help me. I wouldn't be strong enough..." *to stay back. To keep my hands off. To just watch.* "If she does accept you," *she will*, "go alone."

Niko snorted. "Well. There goes my evening." He pushed past two wrestling warriors and stormed off down the beach toward the main fire.

Trey trotted after him. "What? What do you mean?"

Niko spun in the darkest shadows between the two fires and stabbed Trey with a sharp poke in the chest. "Do you actually expect me to do that without you?"

Trey stared at him. "I—didn't think—"

"No. You didn't. It's only you, Trey. Are you listening? For me, it's only you. The woman is just..." He waved his hand in a whirl, frustrated. "Adding a woman once in a

while is a way to play with you. Without you, there is nothing."

Trey swallowed, his dick hardening. "Niko, I love you so much."

Niko slung his hand around Trey's neck and hauled him in, kissing him hard, less urgently than that afternoon, but still so full of love, and heat. Their lips paused a breath away, as if they couldn't find the strength to separate.

"I won't fuck without you, Trey." Niko's words were so soft they were almost lost to the laughter around them. "I'll hold her, if she wants, if you need me to. But I won't seduce her if you're not part of us. To what purpose? What's going on inside that busy water brain of yours?"

"Nothing." Trey kissed him, softer, thrusting his tongue into Niko's heat, stroking him. "I just need to connect with her, since she's back. And if she's going to reach out for the companionship so many men offer on these celebration nights, I can't bear it to be with someone else."

It sounded good. It was all a lie, but it was plausible enough to smell true. What would Niko do if Trey told him the truth? *I need the two of you to be a unit, so I won't rip my soul in two and lose my honor and my mind.* He'd work on convincing Niko to take her to bed later. Just getting them together was the trickiest part. Passion would take care of the rest, later.

They held hands as they approached the main fire. Trey waved to a few men who called to him, and Niko did as well.

Brend galloped up to them. "Is she paired up yet? Did she choose anyone? Dad made me leave, but I've got to know!"

Trey leaned over and smacked Brend on the ear. "What would feel worse? Knowing she was still available down there but your dad won't let you go, or knowing she's gone to the shadows to enjoy another man's body?"

Brend stared at him, shocked. Stricken, he looked down toward the last bonfire, where the paid women gathered. "Well, crap!"

"Go dance with your friends, Twiggy, and get ready to take notes."

Brend's face lit up. "You're going to dance now, Uncle Trey?"

"I sure am. I got to hold the little bundle earlier," *soft precious power, just forming bonds with the Six Elements, the smell of pure skin and milk,* "and I feel the need to move."

"I'm deeply hurt you can't find it in you to appreciate many forms of movement, young man." Niko's solemn admonition was completely ignored as Brend romped away, laughing.

The two men stood and watched the shimmer of heat, the sweating bodies, their people caught in a joyful moment. It was rare to burn wood with real fire, and the usual clanhome signature of woods and water was thick with woodsmoke.

The drums began to seep into his blood now that he was closer. "So you'll do this for me?"

Niko crossed his arms. "I will, but it's really up to her."

Trey nodded. He moved up to the drummers, keenly aware when he crossed her line of sight. Whispering into Daiyu's ear, he asked his request and got a firm nod. Winding through to the inner ring of watchers, he waited until the beat switched, subtly slowing, layering in a counter rhythm. When the shell shakers added their rushing accent, Trey closed his eyes, and stepped forward. A spattering of applause went up around him, with

whistles and calls of encouragement.

The last time he'd really danced had been at Autumnal, almost a year ago. The fire was his partner. The heat centered him against the black and orange void he faded into. Trey worked his body slowly into the main arc he wanted to follow, rolling left and right, letting his limbs learn the boundaries of sand and sky. The crowd quieted, and the drums wound tighter.

Trey felt the moment when Niko slid into place behind Isabo. He could picture them in his mind. Niko, tall and broad, firelight bronzing him, his features blending with the shadows. Isabo, her hair and eyes flowing into the night with him, her skin a lighter gold, her curves...

Oh, her curves...

Trey's hips and shoulders caught the counter beat, while his arms and legs took the main rhythm. Sweat gathered on his face and arms. Spinning, he tore his vest off and flung it from the fire. Whistles and applause made him smile, but he was already lost in the drums again.

The top of her head would come to just below Niko's shoulder. He'd lean his head down, those sculpted, full lips so close to her tiny ear. Niko's breath was warm, and smelled of wine. Her human nose wouldn't scent Trey's flavor on his breath, but she might catch the scent of sweat around her. Good sweat, from family and Clan, not sour sweat of sorrow and nightmares.

Trey heard the hiss of sand hitting the fire from his stamping feet, let it drive him into a spinning leap. The crowd murmured and clapped, and the other dancers melted away around him. Silence lowered.

She'd be watching him now. Trey lunged and kicked, one motion, his arms flowing behind, and knew his leather pants and strong movements would hide his erection from most.

Niko's hand would hover over her shoulder, his heat both greater and softer than the flames that scorched Trey now. His body swam through the drums, as beautiful as the lake, and Trey roared his triumph, kick-spinning over the bonfire. Rolling into an arcing spin, Trey flung himself around and around and around, circling the fire, winding his forbidden lust for the quiet woman with the soul of iron into a tiny secret ball.

The people cheered for him as he came back around the water for a second time. The drums popped, accenting the end of the sequence, and Trey dove, rolling in the sand, thrusting into the air again as if he were a hawk. Niko would bend to her other ear, subtly drawing her into the shadows.

Trey landed, swaying and thrusting, weaving his body now like rain. *Has anyone thought to hold you lately, lovely Lady?* It was as if Niko whispered in Trey's own ears, the words came to him so clearly.

Trey reached for the stars, begging the Clouds. He arched backwards, feeling the weight of the Stone beneath him, and begged. He spun, arms up to embrace his beautiful flaming partner, and begged. Isabo would turn into the strong curve of Niko's arm, and Trey shouted, throwing his hands to cover his face as the drums echoed on a final unison beat.

The lake fountained into a wall behind the fire, a coda to the drums. An offering from Trey, of thanks. He stayed frozen, crouched, his face hidden from his dream but protected from the crowd of watchers. The water splattered into silence, the flames

crackling and hovering.

The crowd erupted into a mass roar of approval. Strong hands tossed him up into the air, balanced him on shoulders. Trey reminded himself he was a watercoaster warrior and needed to face the pain of the beautiful dream he dared.

He opened his eyes, got his bearings on the sea of people, the line of clapping drummers on their stage, and there, in the shadows, a tall set of wide shoulders led a black-haired woman away.

His chest burned, hollowing deeply. Everyone smiled up at him, pride and awe shining in their eyes. Trey felt a pinch of loss in the center of his chest while fear spiked in his throat. But then he tossed his head back to the stars and howled in triumph, again and again, until he had no breath left.

Chapter Four

Niko pulled the ladder up behind Isabo and set it against the wall. He closed the hatch, but the window was open. She looked around the roost's single room like she'd never seen it before. She hadn't of course, but she'd lived in one nearly identical to it with Jace. The sound of drums from the beach drifted on the still, late night air.

It was one thing to be an elemental mage, working the Six on spells of attack, defense, or productivity. It was another to be the freak of intuition that was Trey. Niko had waited until Trey had entered the ring of dancers before easing behind Isabo. She'd been standing alone, her arms tight around herself, the pretty blue dress too thin for the chill in the late summer air.

He'd whispered Trey's assurance that he wouldn't bother her. The urge to touch her had almost claimed him, but he'd held himself to coasting his hand above her shoulder, bared in the sleeveless dress. Trey had moved like sex in water, lit by flames, his lean muscles stark and shining, his body a sensual display that held hundreds of people in thrall. She'd swayed in time to him. A heartbeat from the end of Trey's impassioned gift, he'd leaned down and whispered, *Lovely Lady, do you need to be held?*

Going motionless, they'd watched the water flare high at Trey's call, and then she'd spun, burying her face into Niko's chest. Gently, he'd curled his arm around her, still afraid to touch her, shocked she'd turned to him. For so many years, he'd seen the need for this woman in Trey. They were the ones who belonged together, yet he'd sent Niko to her. And she accepted him. Bonded, after watching a match offer a passionate dance, she'd still responded to *him*.

The crowd screamed, converging on Trey, and she'd shuddered, moaning, "Please. Niko, take me away."

He hadn't known where to take her. She was no paid woman to be drawn into the cool sand. So he'd taken her to his roost. Now she stood looking at his books, at the pile of practice weapons he'd been using with Brend, at the table left with the remains of a game of element dice he and Trey had played before they'd gone to the feast.

Niko pulled out a chair and motioned her to sit. She shook her head.

Nonplussed, he propped his ass on his table. "Isabo?"

She looked at the bed, raised her chin in an adorably haughty way and stared him down with those bottomless black eyes. "You offered."

Since when had Trey's match gotten so flaringly sexy? She smelled of fear and lust, excitement and sadness. "I remember lying awake and hating you."

She blinked. "Really? I can promise, I'm not worth it."

A grin burst on Niko's face at her wit. "I don't doubt your worth, lovely Lady."

She shook her head solemnly. "Nothing is worth more than a sound, peaceful night's sleep."

Niko's grin faded with empathy. He knew what it was to yearn for peace in the night. "I can think of a few things worth the loss." He eyed her more critically than he had before. Soft thighs, softer hips, rounded belly, generous breasts a man could get lost in, strong shoulders, sharp chin. "Like a good, hard, long fuck."

She shuddered, and the scent of her arousal hit him harder. Well. That was a surprise.

Sweet, quiet, academic Isabo liked simplicity.

Sighing, he tried again. "Would you like something to drink? I have water, tea, and ale."

She shook her head once, crossed awkwardly to his bed and sat down.

Niko chewed his lips. "I was jealous. When Trey was summoned to your brightmoon ceremony. That he'd have a person who would match him, enhance him, better than me. Then he returned and said you'd given all the men one day each. His was the third day. He talked of nothing but how to woo you for forty-eight hours."

"I'm very tired. I'd rather not talk." She kicked off her shoes. Her feet were pretty, smooth with perfectly descending toes. Nothing like Trey's big hairy, bony things.

Niko stood and pushed the two chairs in tight to the table. "The day he spent with you, I took a run into the eastern mountains. I ran until I got a nosebleed. I healed that with bodycraft, and my blisters and pulled muscles, and then I ran until I collapsed. I didn't go home that night."

He picked up the element dice and put them on a shelf. "We had a furious fight when I got home. He told me I was an ass and he needed me to keep it together until he was chosen, and we'd work out how to go on after that."

Kicking Brend's gear into a tighter pile, he casually asked, "Am I the reason you didn't choose him?"

"Are you going to fuck me or not?" Isabo countered crossly.

"Not. What kind of man do you think I am?"

She looked at him, astonished, then burst into a peal of beautiful, pure laughter. It was a belly laugh, but light and delighted.

Niko beamed without meaning to. "You know what I mean. I can't do that to Trey, and I'm not even sure you're ready, either."

She kept chuckling, wiping at her eyes. "You *are* an ass. If I say I'm ready, I'm ready. It's my decision. And Trey could approach me if he wanted, but he hasn't got the balls."

Niko's lungs exploded. He blinked at her. Instantly, fury whipped through him. "Trey thinks of you every moment of every day. He's doing the best he can to live with honor in the same space as a woman who constantly pricks his beast."

"Oh, don't snarl so."

Niko stalked toward her. "This isn't some light flirtation for him. If he approaches you, he'll shatter. How would you like to find yourself attacked and shredded, with his throat cut in the next hour by his disgraced Alpha?"

Isabo sighed, shoulders sagging. "Trey would not break. I could lie naked in his bed, and he would merely bow and leave. The man has so much honor he unnerves me."

Niko paced to the hatch and back to the bed. He propped his hands on his hips. "I have lost complete control of this conversation. I don't even know what you're doing here."

"Come here, Niko." Lifting up the light cotton sheet he slept under in the summer, she slid in, plumping one of two small fur pillows. "Come lie with me. Hold me." She wiggled her ass, angled her shoulders and then her blue dress landed on the floor. Stark white ruffles framed the rise of her breasts, so feminine and dainty. The fabric was thin enough he could see her large, dark nipples, clear but not fully engorged. She twitched the sheet up to her shoulders and he blinked, spell broken.

Niko paced to the hatch again and returned. He stood at the side of the bed, staring at this woman in his bed. They'd have to stay at Trey's lodge among the southern oaks until her scent faded or neither of them would get any sleep. She reached up and worked the clasp out of her hair. It was waterfall straight, thick and shining.

"Please, Niko. I know we're not friends. You don't know me. But you love Trey, and he sent you to me. I'm so lonely, so tired."

He held her gaze. She wasn't anything like he'd expected. Sitting on the side of the bed, he stared at the hatch. He could drop to the forest floor, get Trey, fetch him back here in moments. A cool, small hand slid up inside the waist of his vest and traced his lower spine.

"I can't ... touch you like that, Isabo. It's not—"

"Shhhh. Hold me, Niko. Just sleep."

His head hung down. He thought of the redhead with the sweet little nipples with regret. If she was the one in bed with him, Trey would be here, yellow eyes glittering from the shadows, and his cock would have no problem.

Toeing off his short boots, he rolled into bed. She wasn't too small, as the redhead had been, and impossibly soft. She had a body a man knew he could enjoy without excessive care. Her woman's scent was so different from what he was used to, and the long cool silkiness of her hair intriguing. She was still and stiff beside him.

Breathing deep and hard, Niko shimmied farther into the bed, turning into her, gathering her up. He lifted her hair free, smoothed it to the side, and curled his arm around her. Her head rested on his shoulder, and one knee cautiously rested against his thigh. One small hand curled around his waistband, her fingers against his hip.

"Thank you, Niko." True gratitude dripped from her voice and he relaxed, finally able to offer the comfort Trey had known she needed. With a thought, he doused the low magelight hanging in the metal cradle from the center of the ceiling. She was warm and strange and wonderful in his arms. He closed his eyes and visions of a honed body twirling before flames filled his mind.

"Yes."

His eyes opened again. "What?"

"The answer to your question. You *were* the reason I did not choose Trey. Of course. I'd had one weak lover. I was facing a mating ceremony that seemed a barbaric ordeal. What human woman would have the courage to take a husband, bonding her soul to his, who stated clearly and proudly he had a prior lover, a male he wouldn't give up?"

Niko stared at the faint square of starlight that was his open window. Trey had never told him what the day he'd spent with Isabo had been like. Niko had never asked. He'd just held Trey for the long days and nights after her rejection, mourning his guilty relief as Trey had cried until his soul bruised. It had been nearly three months before Trey was able to make love to Niko again. Niko had chafed, struggling with his patience.

Isabo softened against him, her breath easing slower. Absently, Niko stroked the fine, soft skin of her upper arm where he clasped her. *Trey had told Isabo about Niko. And he'd said he wouldn't give him up.* Then when he'd gotten home, Niko hadn't been there, having run his pouting self into exhaustion in the outer reaches of the eastern wilderness. *Trey had lost Isabo because of him, and then remained with him anyway.*

The soft scrape of bark came, followed by the hush of swaying pine branches. A round shape blocked out the stars in the window. Niko called up the magelight, barely.

Trey's cheeks were flushed, and Niko could smell the ale from here, but his eyes were clear, a pure bright yellow that always fascinated. His gaze fixed on Isabo's sleek head.

Trey's nostrils flared, and Niko knew he'd smell nothing but their fading sorrow. Quietly, Trey eased through the window, lifted the chair from the table and set it by the bed. His hand rested on Niko's shoulder, heavy, thick-palmed. Niko closed his eyes and slept to the echo of drums.

* * * *

In the darkest hour of the night, before dawn even thought to lighten the black sky, she opened her eyes and caught him by surprise. He'd told himself he'd go at pre-light, when the sky edged to purple. In the meantime, he'd sat there and gotten drunk on the rhythm of his lost match breathing in time with his lover. They were so beautiful, sleeping wrapped in each other.

She stared at him, eyelids heavy, drowsily blinking. He stared back, his heart bouncing so hard his tumbling watercoaster could use it for a ball. His cock went from semi-interest to staff hard.

"Hello, Trey."

And then his heart tumbled into the tip of his cock, and wept.

"Hello, Isabo."

He watched her in the shadows that were dark even to his eyes. To hers, he'd be nothing but a shape, but she considered him carefully. Rarely had he been this close to her. She smelled of old leather, her scrolls, warm woman, and Niko. Seeing interest in her eyes only made his abs tighten even more.

"You sent your lover to me, but he wouldn't love me."

Trey's lips twitched. "Give him time. He's worth the wait."

She watched him some more, and he was content, despite the aching hard-on throbbing between his thighs, and his watercoaster's slashing demand he take her.

"Do you know what I remember most about the day I spent with you?"

Of course he didn't know. They'd never spoken since. For three years, he'd heard her voice, watched her happiness, and then her sorrow. From afar. He swallowed, afraid to find out.

"Well, I remember a lot, actually. Those eyes of yours. I've never seen anything like them before or since. Your kind gentleness. You were so patient, so polite. You were by far the most respectful and cautious of the men I met.

"But what really haunted me, when I caught glimpses of you at the Cove, was when you knelt on one knee before me, just before you took me back to the women's caves. Do you remember what you said, then?"

He did. Oh, yes, he did. It had been his pledge, and he'd writhed to know she'd rejected it. His hand tightened on Niko's shoulder. "I said, 'I need you to understand that it will be my sincere and deep pleasure to discover yours. If you choose me, I will offer myself up to your every need, and fulfill your every desire. Pleasure isn't just in the flesh. It's the peace and respect of friends living side by side every day. I've already experienced this, and I can guide you in it. You'll join us, and your happiness will be beyond understanding'."

Her lashes swept down, a great feathery curve on her cheek, her mouth parting on a trembling breath. "Oh, yes. Those words. The vision you painted was very potent." She

opened her eyes and they smiled at him.

His cock spurted a hot wash of wet heat. "Not potent enough."

Tilting her head on Niko's shoulder, she canted her gaze up at his sleeping face. He was well and truly in the thick of sleep. Trey loved this stage. He'd often wake him out of it with a soft, gentle blowjob. His gaze skittered to the narrow distance between Isabo's small pink lips and Niko's tan strong ones.

"Actually, Trey, it was too potent. I was scared of you. It boggled my mind you wanted me *with* Niko. It was too much. I wasn't woman enough then to handle what you offered."

One word leapt out at him from her words. *Then*. "You were. If you are my match, then you were strong enough for any pleasure we gave you."

Her arm moved beneath the covers. He watched the line of her hand twist slowly from the side of Niko to his center. Her mouth quirked. "His belly button is so soft. It's strange to lie here in the dark against him. He feels wonderful. Warm. Alive."

Trey's mouth went dry. "Isabo."

"After Jace died, I died. I truly did. I was walking dead for about four months." Isabo's hand drifted up Niko's body and appeared at the top of the cream blanket that covered them. "Then I slowly came back to life. And at the next Autumnal, I got to see you dance for the first time. When he was alive, Jace was always insanely jealous of you. He knew he didn't need to be, that we were Bonded. But he never let me watch you dance, always made sure we left the area if you happened to be near."

Isabo drew the blanket down Niko's body, resting it at his waist. His heart stopped. He'd seen her dress on the floor, but the vision of her ruffled shift seemed an intimate glimpse into her private self.

"When I saw you, I understood. When you move, you're every woman's dream of a male animal's power and grace. The night I watched you dance was the first time I was able to remember sex without disappearing into total rage and pain." Her hand went to the laces at the top of Niko's vest. Watching Isabo's golden, delicate fingers undo the knot was the most erotic thing he'd ever seen. "You helped heal me, Trey."

She was wonderful. "Thank you for sharing that. I'm so sorry about the death of your Bonded. I never wanted such pain for you."

She bit her lip, widening the pull of the stitches that held Niko's vest together. His chest hair became more visible, the thick pelt on his upper pecs narrowing into a trail below his hips. "I will always have him. He's a part of me. I know I'll keep living now, and that means I'll have his love, and the pain of his loss, forever." They were speaking quietly, and the emotion deepening her words made her voice husky.

To his shame, it made his balls twist in delight. Trey reached out and pulled the loosened laces free behind her. "I understand. I saw you on the beach today and you were so very alone. It made me ache to see you like that." He was going to change that. She was too lovely to be alone.

She smoothed the side of Niko's vest from his chest, exposing one thick slab of muscle, and a long ladder of ribs. "I don't want to be alone anymore, Trey."

Trey pulled Niko's vest wide as well. "You don't have to be. He is a good friend, a strong man. He can be there for you." His mouth watered at the perfection of Niko's deep chest, his shoulders wide and solid. "Niko isn't a gentle lover. I asked him to be soft with you, but he won't hold to it long. Just be ready."

Her hand set down in the center of Niko's body, at the top of his abs. "He's beautiful, Trey. But he's just a part of what I've been dreaming about." She petted his soft chest hair, and looked up at Trey. Her breath blew harder. "I want to discover my new desires and needs with *you*. That's part of why I left a year ago. I don't want some other warrior, a strange touch. I want the man who stood up for his truth and love the first time I met him. The man who got on his knees and lit up my fantasies without a touch."

She'd beaten him. He resorted to clasping his cock against his body through his leathers, pressing painfully hard, praying he wouldn't go off in his pants. "You were interested in me when you left for River Mountain?"

"I knew I wasn't ready. I was just horny. I was scared. I had to find my feet first. Auberon is an asshole."

Trey scowled, but she kept going.

"I had a job to do, and it was a good excuse to focus my mind on something besides the way you so boldly live your life with Niko, so unashamed despite their confusion and hostility." She lifted her hand to tenderly brush over Niko's nipple. She teased it into puckering in its nest of hair, then switched to the other.

"There's not that much hostility, actually." Trey was so proud of his warrior brothers, that they let him be who he was. Vos especially, with that first conversation, had set the tone when he'd declared Trey creative in finding a way to manage the frustration of the beastspirit.

"I know there is some." She licked her middle finger, and returned to petting Niko's nipple. It shriveled up tighter, darkening.

"And so you've chosen Niko? You trust him because of me?" Trey clenched his teeth on a moan as his own nipples throbbed. He hadn't put his vest back on after the dance, and he knew his larger nipples stabbed tall in sympathy, or jealousy, for Niko's.

She licked her finger again, and this time painted a path through the narrowing hair down the center of Niko's body, to his belly button. "No, silly. I've chosen you both." She paused, and propped herself up on one arm, her hair curtaining down behind her. The white frills of her shift made her skin glow.

Frowning, she asked seriously, "Is that all right with you?"

He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw against the shout that tangled in his throat. His orgasm rolled up the endless length of his cramped, tight cock. The heat burned and stung, and once again, Trey wondered at the bittersweet sting of destiny. Pleasure wracked his body, muscles pinching, sweat bursting in a wash over his prickling skin. Finally, it eased, and he blew his breath out roughly.

"Ah, Trey." A soft touch swept across the line of his jaw, and all the fine hairs on his body stood to rapt attention. "I'm so sorry. I don't understand your interest in me, but it makes me feel beautiful."

His hand was around her wrist before he could think. *Her wrist was in his hand.* Watercoaster shook and swirled inside. Her wrist wasn't as small as many women's, and he liked that. She was feminine, but strong. The skin was unearthly silk to him, reminding him of the foreskin on the tip of Niko's cock.

His thumb compulsively swept her pulse once before he let her go with a spasm of mastery over his body. "No apologies. But Isabo, I cannot be your lover. It would be ... gratifying ... if you and Niko could find a way to be together. But I would not survive joining with you."

She snorted. "Don't be melodramatic. If I can survive the loss of my Bonded, and you survived my choosing another, then we can somehow find a way to enjoy a connection we know is there." She lowered her hand to circle idly across Niko's chest, ruffling his thicker hair. Looking at him, she smiled fondly. "I like him. He's a great guy."

She licked her lips and whispered softer. "Trey, I've taken a really big step today, coming home with Niko. It was very bold of me. I think I deserve a reward, don't you?"

Trey got so hard so fast, he thought he might pass out. His pants were wet and sticky. "It isn't about bravery or earning a reward. Women deserve pleasure as a matter of course, just as men need it to stay focused. Isabo, ask for what you want." His palm was welded to Niko's shoulder, the beautiful link between him and his forbidden match.

"Ask for what I want?" Holding his gaze, she leaned down and licked Niko's nipple. One quick flick, and then another, slower, harder press. Trey saw Niko's breathing hitch, and knew he was moments from waking. She smiled and licked him even harder, leaving his nipple glistening. Her tongue came out and circled her lips. Trey sensed Niko wake up, although his breathing didn't change.

"Well, then, watercoaster, what I want is a hard, mindless fuck. I want passion and skin and heat. I want a man who can perform with no regrets. I don't want a gentle pity fuck for a widow, or a cautious polite fuck from a Clansman I've known socially for years. I want." She bent and swirled her tongue over the pebbled tab of flesh. "A thick, long, thrusting." Pulling her lips back, she closed her teeth around the nipple once and let go. "Cock." Her lips pursed and pressed a soft kiss to the poor nipple.

"So..." Trey couldn't believe how hard his heart beat. He'd thought it would have given out by now. "What you're really saying you want is ... Niko."

She wrinkled her nose at him, and his cock pulsed. "You're not listening. I want you both."

"You can't have me. I'm not as strong as you think I am. But I can help you have Niko."

"It's not the same. I watched you kiss him on the beach. I watched you kiss him, and I wanted to be here, in your bed. Niko belongs to you. I don't want to separate you."

By Stone and Cloud, now she sounded just like Niko. Tremors passed through his body, which fit, since he burned so hot his body probably thought he was dying of fever. "I can't. Isabo. I'm not being melodramatic. I *cannot* join you." He would break. He would shatter. He would fuck her and never stop. He'd rip into her skin and drink her blood down and still he'd never be able to own her, never be able to claim her, because she was forever out of reach, Bonded to a dead man. He'd get one taste of all he'd lost and he'd go mad, rutting in her body until his heart gave out or his Alpha ripped his throat out.

"Well, then, I guess I chose wrong." Her voice sounded so small, forlorn and disappointed.

Pain seized his whole body. He would do anything to change it. "No. Wait. I'll—I can't join you, but I can... I'll stay. I'll—no, I can't watch, but I'll listen. I'll be with you as much as I can be."

"As much as you can be..."

He looked at her petting Niko's calmly breathing chest. The thought of her with Niko filled him with a sort of ecstatic frenzy. His cock leaked again, and his breath sawed in his dry throat. He *needed* her to be with Niko. He needed it like he needed to never, ever

touch her again.

"Well, let's consider. There are six elements and six senses. All of them are ways for you to participate. Let's keep it simple and just focus on the senses this time."

The hint that there'd be another time made his ass clench.

"You are saying you are absolutely not able to touch me, or watch us. But you can listen. And you can smell."

The second she said it, he became aware of Isabo's lust saturating his lungs. Her cream was thick and sweet. His mouth filled with saliva.

"What about taste? Will you agree to taste me? Niko can decide how to serve it to you."

Trey sat on a hard wood chair, bent over at the waist, clutching his wet, aching cock through his pants. He breathed through tremors of pleasure-pain, and managed to nod. Yes, he thought he could hold onto his honor and sanity if he tasted Isabo's cream on Niko. It would be proof that the vision destiny had given him had come true.

Isabo sighed. "Then there's emotion. I have no doubt you'll share that. Ah, Trey. I'm disappointed, but I think we can build from this."

Trey ripped open his pants and got his fist around the base of his cock. "Niko. Is that enough for you?"

"I agree with the lady. Disappointing, but workable." The magelight in the room lit softly, turning Isabo's skin from night-silver to warm gold.

"Niko!" Her hand lifted in surprise from his chest. "How long have you been awake?" A warm blush filled her cheeks.

Trey stumbled from the chair, knocking it onto the wool rug with a thump. Turning from them, so beautiful together, he flung himself at the far wall. He braced his forearm against the wood planks, and laid his head against it, keeping a tight leash on his furiously beating cock. His grip so tight he knew he was bruising himself, he tightened his fist. "Try to be gentle. Get a safe word, Niko."

"My, my. I see someone has taken liberties with my clothing." Niko's voice was lazy, playful.

Trey shuddered, knowing what was coming.

"Well, Trey helped. What's a safe word?"

Isabo's lust twined with the sharper scent of Niko's.

"Jace never used one with you?" Niko asked, surprised.

"I guess not, since I don't know what one is," she piped back perkily.

"A safe word is something that will come to your mind when you have become so afraid you no longer feel pleasure. You say it and I stop. But I stop. It's not a pause, it's an end."

"All right. Do you make many of your lovers so afraid they ask you to end your bedplay?"

"Not many. Some."

He wasn't lying. There had been several women who had not been able to handle Niko in the throes of lust. It had been better when Trey was in the mix. He'd been able to take the edgier bite of Niko's needs, and soften him when he began to slip into a frenzy. But now that Trey was just a watcher, it was harder on the women. Trey imagined Isabo lost to Niko's full passion. And he knew his first instinct to protect her wouldn't be fulfilled, because Isabo's heat would meet Niko's, match for match.

"My safe word is 'beach'."

"Beach equals stop, Isabo."

Niko's voice was still mild, pleasant, but Trey recognized the shimmer that was already in place. He ground his wrist into the wood, seeking an anchor to keep him away from them.

"I understand. But our pleasure is your goal, yes? Not pain."

"I woke up when you were telling Trey what you really wanted."

"Ah. The bit about the long thrusting cock?"

"Yes. Sometimes pain can be pleasure. Like when little teeth set into swollen, delicate male flesh."

"Mmmm. Your nipples are so interesting in that nest. Jace didn't—"

She broke off, breath hitching in pain. As if drawn by her comparison, her Bonded's ghost manifested, heavy, with a hint of anger. Resounding silence filled the wooden room. Wind rustled the boughs outside. Slowly, his presence left.

"I'm sorry," her voice came so quietly. "I'll try not to do that again."

"Jace isn't here tonight, Isabo. I know he's in your heart, that's only natural, but if you want mindless and hot instead of awkward, then keep him out."

"What about Trey?"

Trey's hand jerked on his dick to hear his name on her lips.

"What about him?" Niko's voice lowered to a growl.

"Well, he's right over there, listening. We're fucking for him, really. Can I talk about him?"

"Isabo, if there's one thing that makes me completely hot in bed, it's a vocal woman. Women telling me what they're feeling and what they want make me feel powerful."

Trey had often brought Niko to climax with sex talk. Trey was usually the more silent, but when he set out to impress Niko with his words, it usually worked.

"Mmmm. All right. What about talking *to* him? Maybe we could check in with Trey once in awhile."

"Trey." Niko's voice demanded.

"Yeah, Niko." Trey tried to respond, but it came out as a croak.

"Tell the lady your status."

Trey pressed his forehead against his arm. They weren't even doing anything yet. He hadn't heard any further rustling of movement. "I'm about to come. I already did while you were asleep, but even though I've got my cock strangled, I'm about to blow just from pure excitement."

"Well, Isabo? Is that what you wanted to know?"

"I've lain in bed for so many nights, dreaming of you and Trey fucking. I'd remember the love on his face when he told me about you, and the passion on his face when he promised to learn to pleasure me. I'd seen him dance, and I'd seen you kiss."

"Oh, yeah? Where?" Finally, rustling covers came, and the faint creak of the leather cradle against the wooden frame.

"It was at Autumnal. There was a skit, something about a race between the Clans. You were both sitting on one of the benches in the audience, and I was standing at the back. Someone called out a joke, and one of the players called back. Trey laughed, and you reached over and kissed him."

"The guys around you were startled. They stared. But your mouths moved over each

other, perfectly matched, and then you smiled, and just kept watching the show."

More rustling, and the whisper of cloth hitting the floor. Trey thought Niko had just pulled her shift off. Then the slither of leather, and the louder slap of his pants landing.

"That kiss made you hot?"

"It made me ... curious. Surprised. Sad. Happy. And ... yes, it made me hot."

"You're very honest, Isabo. I'll be honest, too. Your breasts are some of the biggest I've ever seen. They're so big I can't hold all of one even using two of my hands."

"I know." Her voice came out small again, and Trey squeezed his eyes shut, praying Niko noticed.

"They're fucking amazing. You're like the image of the Earthmother the humans put up in the fall."

"The Harvest Mother?"

"Yeah."

"She has blonde hair."

"You have that kind of body. Ripe, giving, like some immense opportunity of discovery."

"I know I could lose some wei—"

Skin sounds, light and moist. Kissing. *Niko's mouth was joining with Isabo's.*

"None of that. Every woman in my bed is a work of art. No self-criticism allowed."

"Well, you were the one who used the word 'immense'." Again, the tart boldness in her surprised him, stunned him with a sharp twist of pleasure.

"I'll show you immense. How's this?" Trey recognized the dry rasp of Niko stroking himself.

"Umm. That's ... nice." She sounded dazed.

"So *immense* can be a good thing?"

"Yeah..."

"You choose, Isabo. Either you suck me off first, or I suck you."

"You suck me. I want it."

Niko chuckled, and Trey's mouth twisted in shared, pained humor at how fast she'd claimed her due.

"All right. But you've got to tell Trey everything. Describe what I'm doing with my tongue, how it feels when I use my teeth. If you do it right, we can make him go before I even get to swallow your first slide of cream."

Trey shouted, beating his fist against the wall, shaking, his back seizing with the force of the blast shooting out his cock. The cum hit the wall so hard it splattered back across his chest.

Niko chuckled. "Like that. Just like that."

Trey's cock jerked again, the tip aching.

"So, do I still need to talk?"

"Are we including Trey, or locking him out?"

"Oh, he's here. Don't you think he's very much here?"

"Yeah, I do." Niko's voice was thick.

Trey watched, dazed, as the last of his cream dripped down his hard shaft, coating his fingers.

"Join us anytime, Golden Eyes." Niko's voice was a perfect wine after a long run.

Tears welled up. "I'm with you, Niko."

"Golden Eyes. That's so beautiful. You'd be Sable Eyes but I can't be Black Eyes." She giggled. "It would be like I'd just got in a fight. Quit tickling my hip, Niko. I'm not ready to open my legs to you yet. Can't we douse the lights?"

"No. I want to see your immense beauty."

She laughed again, and Trey shivered as a last wave of pleasure from his orgasm danced with the sound of her happiness.

"Are you happy, Isabo? Here in our bed?"

Trey's knees trembled to hear Niko include him.

"I—I—wanted skin. I wanted pleasure. But you gave me sleep without nightmares, and now we've found a way for Trey to be part of it, all of us together. It's not happening the way I imagined it, but it's really good."

"Isabo." Trey knew that edge in Niko's voice. His passion was ramping up. He was tired of foreplay and wanted to move on.

"Yeah?"

"Open your fucking legs."

Trey shook.

"I will ... but I do it my way. Lie down on your back. Here in the middle, and then I'll—"

The bed gave a shifting creak when their bodies moved, and Niko's voice rasped, "Your breasts. Trey, you've got to see her. They're so full and heavy. They hang, but it's not sagging. It's just this incredible bounty."

Trey's knees gave out. He slid to the floor, his nails leaving pale scores down the wood. The tips throbbed from the burn but he welcomed it. Six lend him power. They hadn't even started yet.

"Ah, you want to kneel over me and ride my mouth. You think it's going to hide your face, but all it does is let your cream slide down my throat better."

"This headboard is pretty. I like how you left the bark on the branches. It's perfect for gripping." She tartly ignored his prodding.

Trey's fingers curled, knowing exactly where her hands were placed, and the feel of the wood against his palms, with the furs under his knees, and Niko sucking his balls, just the way he was going to suck her.

"Well, wrap those little tiny fingers around the branches, spread your thighs wider and come down here."

"Oh... Oh..." Her breaths ripped sharply in the silent room. "Tell me if I use too much pressure. Oh!"

"Mmmpfmm."

Wet sounds, thicker than a kiss, and the full scent of a woman, uneasy in her lust. Trey wrapped a hand carefully around each knee, bowing toward the floor. His mouth filled with the sensation of a woman's thick, tangy cream.

"Oh! Oh!" She sounded shocked. Her cries pinched higher. "Ah!"

A heavy breath and then Niko's muffled voice. "You're not telling him, Isabo. You have to share with Trey. You're a scholar. You know how to explain things clearly."

"Uh..." The tremor in Trey's gut was clear in her voice. "Niko is lying on the bed. I'm kneeling over him, facing the headboard. His arm is around my waist and one hand is on my thigh, pushing me wider, lower." She swallowed audibly, gasped.

"Keep going."

"Niko, it's so much. It's been so long, and you're so different, so new. It's hard to thiiiink!" Her voice escalated into a shriek.

"Keep going." Niko's voice sounded vicious.

"He's licking across me."

"No. Be precise. You know the terms for your body."

"He's l-licking over the mouth of my vagina. He was swirling his tongue inside, warm and soft."

"Good. That's real descriptive. Trey, she smoothed her skin. She's bare, and cream is just rolling out of her. I already know how I'm going to feed it to you."

Trey's throbbing cock began to lift up again, inflating with blood. His balls were so tight and hard they should clang.

"Now, Isabo, I don't expect you to keep up, but I do want that amazing voice of yours to continue. Keep talking, because I need Trey to share this."

Isabo's breath exploded on a raw gasp. Tension wound through her stilted words. "He thrust his tongue inside me. Again. Ohhh, he's rocking me, pulling me down..." Her voice thickened, and Trey knew she'd left her self-awareness behind, and was lost to Niko's touch. "I'm sitting on him. His mouth is so big, so wide against me. His teeth. His tongue, fluttering, stretching. I felt him swallow." The rhythmic grinding of her body on Niko's face became strong enough to bring a bounce into her voice. "My nipples ache. I'm holding one, petting it, but it's just a ghost to the sensation below. I'm so tight."

Ash on the Water, she was a poet. Sweat poured from him as he stared at his erection poking up toward his belly.

She groaned. "He's picked me up, moved me back, and now his mouth is on my clit. He's kissing me. Breath so hot. Tongue, harder. Yes."

Niko was being sloppy, slurping and sucking noisily, for his sake.

"Oh, there. Again. Sucking. Yes..." Her voice faded into jagged breaths, and Trey closed his eyes, straining to hear her release.

Her breath caught, and a low, thin moan seemed to be pulled from her depths. It went on and on with Niko's smacking sucks. Trey didn't know if Niko had clasped his own cock or not. It was the only part of the tableau missing from his mind's eye.

"Niko! Grab your cock!" Trey called out roughly, and practically shivered at the ghostly sensation of Niko's big rough hand grabbing his own aching shaft. He was losing his mind. All night he'd practically been inside Niko's skin. Was this what breaking felt like?

Wet rasping licks. Isabo's moan broke off, but her breath still spiked, shivered. He was finishing her off. For all that she talked through sex apparently naturally, she came quietly.

Trey wanted to see her. His shoulders hunched against the need to turn. Was her head tipped back? Did her hair brush her ass? Did the flush of her orgasm ride down onto the magnificent bare breasts he'd never seen? He already imagined them so clearly together, what would it mean to have the details confirmed?

His river wolf was flat to the ground, long muscular tail held rigid, fangs bared. He hungered. He hungered for a taste of the woman that would have given him a family again. She would have bound Niko to him, so much stronger. And maybe there would have been a child of their own.

"There you go. What a gorgeous cunt you've got. Lie down, now, there. Fuck, just

watching your breasts settle, it's so fucking hot." Niko was on the prowl now. "Your eyes are so black. Everything about you is soft and I want to fuck you so hard."

Isabo panted, dazed. "Yes, Niko. Please."

Niko hissed and Trey jerked at the rumbling rasp Isabo's voice had sunk to.

"Not yet. I'm going to blow any second. I need you to take the edge off first, so I can do you right. You wanted a man who could perform—"

"Shut up, Niko." Rustling, and then, "I don't have much strength right now. Come closer."

The room was so quiet, and it was only with his watercoaster senses that he made out the tiny wet licks she gave Niko's cock.

"Well, go on and tell him," she urged breathlessly.

"I thought I was supposed to shut up."

"I meant shut up about talking about it, so we could do it, and now it's your turn to share with Trey."

"She's licking me, about midshaft. Her tongue is hot, tiny."

"Set the scene for him."

"She's on her back, propped up on some pillows. Her face is red, her hair this shimmer behind her. That's it. I know what to call you."

"Isabo?" Her throaty voice teased.

"Black Cloud."

"That makes me sound angry."

"No. Dangerous. Full. Soft."

"Mmm. I don't know about that. I'm feeling pretty empty actually."

"Are you fucking listening, Trey?"

Trey jumped, his thighs leaping like they'd run to him. "I am, Niko."

"Her hand is on my hip. I'm kneeling by her side, pushing myself down to her mouth. She's circling one nipple with her middle finger. I'm opening her mouth up, pulling her jaw down. My cock is at her lips, and her eyes are snapping at me. I suppose she wanted to work up to this, but I'm going to spurt cum all over her if she waits."

"It's been so long, Trey. I miss your eyes on me. I don't like this. My shoulders itch, like I want to turn and see your yellow eyes glittering at me. Her mouth is so much smaller than yours. My cock fills it. Her teeth scraped my head, and her tongue is touching me, but I can tell she doesn't know what to do with it. My balls are sizzling."

"No, don't close your eyes. Black Cloud, tip your throat. Yeah, just there. Fuck, her mouth is too gentle. She's not sucking. I'm barely in, just the top of me, but I'm at the back of her throat. Don't you fucking come, Trey. You're gonna stay hard until I finish you. Her lashes fascinate me. I want to feel them in my mouth. I want to kiss her eyes later. Here it comes. Ahhhhh..."

Trey rocked, aching to touch Niko. He knew the way every muscle in Niko's gorgeous body would leap into relief.

"Uh-uh. Swallow me. I'll pull back a little. There. Yeah, swallow my cream. She's such a beautiful woman, Trey. Her brows are these perfect arches, and her skin is pure, flawless. I'm pushing a little puddle of jiz back into her mouth. My hand is on her throat, rubbing, helping her swallow. My cock is jumping, aching, so hard I'm going to split my skin."

Shifting on the bed, Niko crooned, "Tell him, Isabo."

"Uh... He's moving down, stretching out beside me. Your shoulders are very big, Niko." She sounded winded.

He heard her swallow, and the taste of Niko burst on his tongue.

"He's lying on top of me, settling his weight gently. He's—so hot, heavy!" She cried out the last word.

"Shhhh." Niko whispered.

"It's been so long! This is what I wanted! A man against me, holding me. Hard, alive."

Her voice thickened with tears, and Trey's watercoaster went insane. He grunted, slamming into the wall with the force of the creature's need to run, to go to her, to escape this impossible, beautiful torture he'd agreed to.

"She's like lying on a cloud, but she's solid enough I don't have to worry about crushing her. I'm giving her all my weight. Her breasts are soft lumps under my chest, and my cock dropped right into her cradle. It all makes sense, I guess. I mean, if she's a match for you, she's a match for me."

Isabo cried out softly, and Trey tapped his head against the wall. Once, twice. *Stay. They both want you here. Stay and hold to your honor.*

"Her nails are clawing up my back. Her arms are around my ribs, stronger than they look. I've got my tip in the mouth of her vagina, and it's just like her mouth, opening wide for me. It's so fucking different than pushing through your tight hole. The grip of you cinching on me is a focused strike of pleasure as I push into you. But she's this wide, soft, wet cavern."

Isabo moaned.

Trey focused on not running away.

"I'm in deep enough to feel her body pressing against me. Her walls are hot, and wet, and now the grip is there, like a clasp, like the most perfect, soft hands wrapping around every inch of my skin. I'm pushing now, knees set, and oh, Trey, I know she's yours, but she's perfect. She's tightening on me as I go deeper, and ... there, my hips are against hers. She's shaking under me, and—"Pause. Lick. "—her tears are gone." Pause. Lick. "All gone. No tears here anymore. I've got my cock shoved deep in Isabo's body, Trey. I'm gonna let her share now, and then I'm going to fuck her."

Silence. Hard breaths from Isabo.

"Isabo, share with Trey."

"I—can't. Think."

"Isabo, I'm not moving."

"Trey!"

Isabo called to him and Trey's body turned before he could stop, although he did manage to abort the full motion. All he saw were Niko's feet, braced against the footboard, ready.

"Trey!" Isabo called again.

He jerked, his cock leaking, but this time his eyes closed. If he saw them, he'd rip Niko from her body, and go rogue with the need to possess her.

"Trey..." Niko's jaw was locked.

"I need!" Isabo wailed.

"Tell him, Black Cloud. Tell me what you need."

"It's too much!" Her voice spiked with panic. "I'm remembering! Move, by

Skyfather, move!"

"Fuck her!" Trey roared, his heart twisting.

Niko hissed in irritation, a marten's deep-throated snap, and then the sound of a body slapping down onto another speared the room.

"Ahhh..."

Isabo's relief rolled through Trey.

Niko's initial rhythm was heavy, steady, with a slight pause at the bottom of every strike. Trey collapsed, misjudged where the wall was, and slid to the floor on his back. The wool of the carpet was rough against his shoulders and smelled musty, but not strong enough to hide their lust. He'd stared at the ceiling of Niko's home many a night, lost in pleasure. Every time Niko thrust into Isabo, pushing a small cry from her, Trey's cock leapt, smacking his stomach. He didn't dare give himself the solace of even his own touch. Trey put one hand behind his head, but his other crept out, reaching toward the bed.

Niko began to grunt with every pump, and Trey knew he was lost in the pleasure now, too. There would be no more reports meant to drive him mad while at the same time binding him to their bed.

"Trey... Thank you. Ah, thank you." Isabo's whispered words finished it.

Trey had no idea how he would continue after this. Had he even bothered to think past getting them together? Had he thought it would be a moment of shared pleasure, and done? But they'd gone around him, outflanked him, caught him between them, and included him. This wasn't something he could ache over from afar. His whole world was right here in this room, fucking together so beautifully. The man he couldn't claim in any way his beastspirit could understand, and the woman he'd already lost.

Ever so slowly, Trey rolled his head to the side. His eyes slid across the wood mosaic ceiling gleaming in the magelight. The hand under his head closed into a fist, but the fingers of his outstretched arm stayed rigid, reaching. He was far enough away that he could see them on the low bed. They were so beautiful, both a creamy gold, dark haired. Exactly the opposite of what he'd feared happened. Instead of lunging forward at the sight of them, watercoaster finally settled, trilling with satisfaction.

Niko was braced on his forearms, his hips drawing up and back, then pistoning down with a flexing brutality. Isabo sprawled beneath him, arms and legs spread and lax, her jaw loose, eyes staring at the ceiling. Her body rocked under the pressure of Niko's strike, and her lashes fluttered. Her neck arched faintly with the pleasure. Trey knew what it was to feel Niko's strength pound into his body, a kind of burning joy.

Niko grabbed up her hips, and lifted, pushing the leg nearest Trey high against her bulging chest. Now Trey had a clear view down the line of Niko's waist and flank. His ass was a work of art, hollowing and tightening as he lost himself in her.

In a few moments, Niko shifted again, raising both her legs over his shoulders, which pulled her ass up off the bed. Niko's thighs spread wide and his back arched as he straightened his arms and increased his rhythm. Trey sighed, his heart settling into a matching, punishing beat with Niko's hips. Niko wasn't close to finishing, but Isabo grabbed at Niko's arms, thrashing her head, her jaw open on a silent scream.

"Yes, fuck yes, you beautiful cunt, fuck me." Niko's snarl was gentle and Trey's own dampness trickled over his tip.

Niko fucked her through it until her shivers stopped, and then he pulled out, rolled

her, spread her ass, and rammed into her pussy from his knees. Trey moaned, imagining that Niko had taken her ass instead, that her shriek was one of bright, glorious pain.

Her breasts were so heavy they didn't even have room to swing, hanging down to the bed where she braced on her forearms. Her hair covered her face, so the shimmying globes held his attention.

After long, steady minutes of deep, rocking thrusts, Niko pulled out, cock darkened and wet. He stood, walked to the headboard, and sat, easing his legs under Isabo's shivering body. Trey saw her head strain toward Niko's shining cock, but he grabbed her hair and pulled her away. Growling, Niko hauled her against him, knocked her knees wider, and jerked her down to straddle his lap. The position meant Niko was a stronger force inside her now.

"Oh! Oh!" Her head swung wildly to and fro, her hair flaring before settling onto the smooth line of her spine.

Niko reached around her, twined the gleaming mass in his fist, and slowly pulled, drawing her chin up. His teeth unclenched and then he was on her throat, his mouth wide and hard.

Pain stabbed Trey, and his watercoaster writhed. The image burned into his soul. Niko sitting up against the headboard, Isabo speared on his body, her arms framing him as she gripped the branches behind him, his mouth devouring her most vulnerable point.

"Mark her," Trey breathed.

Niko licked and bit across her throat, settled on the side, and sealed his mouth there. His arm bunched around her hips, and she jerked as he pulled her down tighter. Her body rocked, grinding and swaying as Niko's abs stood stark with each curling thrust of his body. Her eyes were closed, and steady, increasingly pained moans fell from her glowing lips with every swallow of Niko's throat.

She came with a raw, tortured rasp. Niko relaxed his hold on her hair and she curled forward, slumping into him. His arms came completely around her, and he held her cradled to him while she trembled and sighed.

Trey waited. Niko rested his cheek against her hair, and glanced his way. He froze, meeting Trey's eyes with disbelief, and then searing victory. When she settled, he pulled her gently off his chest, and kissed her. It was a thorough, patient kiss, one of soothing instead of stoking.

When they pulled apart, Niko whispered against her lips. "Look."

Trey's body seized so hard his hips left the ground. Isabo turned her head. Both of his lovers, wrapped in each other's arms, bodies still united, their faces side by side, fiery brown eyes and black satisfied ones, lips glowing.

"Oh," she breathed, such a happy sound of relief.

Niko rolled forward onto his knees, easing Isabo off his cock and back down onto the bed, where she pooled in a flow of feminine curves. He stood, caught a chair as he passed the table, and walked to Trey.

Trey looked up at his lover, unsure and dazed. Niko set the chair by Trey's legs, and sat in it. He held out his hands, and Trey took a minute to focus on putting his own forward. Lightning bit into Trey's skin at Niko's hot touch. He pulled Trey into a sitting position.

There were no teasing words, no flippant taunts. Niko sat back in the chair, twining his fingers hard around Trey's. Swallowing, he looked at his cock, drawing Trey's eyes

there, too.

Niko was lovely, straight and thick. Roped in veins and gleaming with swirls of thick, white juices pulled from the heart of Isabo's body.

Using Niko's grip as a brace, Trey drew himself up onto his knees. He took one breath to roll the scent of her around in his mouth, loving the perfection of it blending with Niko's sweat and skin, and then Trey opened his mouth and rammed half of Niko's cock down his throat.

Her taste burst on his tongue, surprising in its sweetness, and the thick texture. He'd thought he'd gotten past the danger when he'd been able to look at them. He should have known better.

His control slipped away like a leaf on a stream. Watercoaster would not be denied. The battleform rolled through Trey, popping his joints, stretching his muscles, making his erection a thing of agonizing sensitivity. Strength poured into him, and his dagger teeth caught the tight flesh in his mouth.

Niko moaned. At the same time, the larger body size he now inhabited let all of Niko's cock slide down Trey's throat. Trey closed, and swallowed. Trey turned his shoulders, thinking the fight to go to Isabo would be so much worse now that watercoaster was strengthened in this shared form. Instead, watercoaster hunkered over Niko's cock like it was a prime salmon, and roared with possessive pleasure.

Isabo's taste was perfect, a joy. He smelled it now, the faint echo of Jace, the one who'd imprinted on her spirit. When he was alive, she'd never smelled this succulent, saturated. But Jace was gone. She was still his, but now she was free, as well. Trey's tongue flowed along the hot flesh in his mouth. He stretched his jaw wide to keep his teeth from Niko, but small bursts of blood tingled on his taste buds. It was the perfect accent for Isabo's cream.

Niko thrust, grunting, "So beautiful." Then he burst. His flavor overwhelmed Isabo's, although hers still echoed through the storm of sensation pouring down Trey's throat. Niko groaned, and Trey sucked, his battleform's clawed hands dwarfing Niko's. He struggled to remember his greater strength, and eased his grip, but hollowed his cheeks with the force of the pull he drew from Niko's cock.

Niko roared, and the warrior in Trey smiled, glorying in the power he had over his lover. Trey sucked again, and got just a tiny burst of bitter-tart cum. Growling, he licked along the softening dick and lifted his head.

Through his battleform eyes, Niko wasn't as beautiful. He noted the strength of the jaw, the power in the chest. He assessed the man before him and recognized the threat, even as he sprawled, furred chest heaving in aftermath.

Trey rose up higher on his knees, and pulled Niko down to his face. Niko met him and they kissed, blood flowing into both their mouths. Battleforms weren't built for kissing. Niko's mouth worked against his muzzle, the square human teeth, the agile, hot tongue, and Trey found the strength to stand, pull away from his lover's breath, let his gripping hands go.

He turned toward the bed, where the woman huddled, clutching a fur to her nudity. His erection was so thick it couldn't stand up under its own weight and pointed straight at her. His watercoaster seethed, twining in furious curls and twists.

Everything crystallized. *This woman was Bonded.* She was in their bed, smelling like his lover, but his battleform senses didn't read her as the mate match she'd been years

before when he'd spent the day with her. *She was beloved but unavailable.* Even though she was their match, she was already Bonded. Even though the beastspirit was present and ready to meet her, ready to taste her magescape and give her theirs, it was too late.

Finally, Trey understood, and *let it go*. Now that watercoaster was faced with the irrefutable proof, as they stood in their shared form and faced the stamp of another warrior's claim, Trey accepted in a way he had never been able to before. This woman would never be his Bonded. But she could be his lover, his friend, his helpmate in all other ways. Like Niko was.

Watercoaster sank, mourning, nose tucking into his belly as he curled up tight. Skin rippled and muscles jumped, transforming. The air felt cold after the heat of the battleform. Trey shivered, more from his fading erection's sting than the chill. Niko came up behind him, one hand on his shoulder, and pressed his nose behind Trey's ear, breathing deep.

There were no words any of them could say. Thanks would be absurd. Clearly, none of them were "all right." They'd birthed something tonight that Trey would fight for. He walked to the bed, gently but firmly pulled the fur from her white grip.

She stared up at him with huge eyes, lashes like stark feathers on her brows and cheeks.

"Lie down, Isabo." His voice was quiet, promising her safety.

She breathed, and relaxed. Easing onto her back, her hands resting on her belly, she looked up at him. He took a moment to enjoy what he'd been afraid to view before. She was the most womanly woman he'd ever seen. Her proportions were perfect. The only thing he regretted was her lack of a silky muff. Swinging onto the bed, Trey lay beside her, scooping under her head and pulling her in tight. Her breasts against his ribs sent a shimmer of fascinated pleasure through him, and her thigh eased over his with smooth heat. With his other arm, he gestured for Niko to come to him.

Niko shifted his weight, looking from Isabo to Trey's peaceful face. "What happened?"

"Tomorrow. Come rest."

Irritation flicked for a moment. Niko didn't have Trey's patience. But he eased in on Trey's other side, making Isabo seem dainty against him. Niko arranged the blankets over them, breathed deeply, and relaxed. His lovers slowly drifted into sleep as dawn's rays brightened, birds sang and voices began to call from the forest floor below.

Trey doused the magelight, and held them, planning breakfast.

Chapter Five

Niko had never been so confused in all his life, not even after the first time he'd woken up from a wet dream of fucking Trey. He watched Trey smile at Isabo while she told them about a scroll she was translating. Trey's lean runner's build was loose and composed. Niko sat on the edge of the bed, while they were in the chairs over the remains of breakfast Trey had fetched as Niko and Isabo washed.

"I know I'm odd, but I get this thrill when I touch something so old. I can almost feel the presence of generations, like they're handing it to me, and willing me to remember."

"It's not odd, it's respectful," Trey replied. He wiped crumbs off the table into his hand and sprinkled them on the plate.

All morning, he'd seen the easy way Trey held his body, and just now he'd finally put his finger on what was bothering him. He hadn't seen Trey this at home in himself since before Isabo. Niko's head was on backward. The whole world had flipped, leaving him floundering. He looked at the woman who had taken Niko's raw passion last night, and gloried in it. Apparently, she could accept such a momentous, shattering fuck as an enjoyable evening, but he was still reeling from it. The way she'd drawn Trey into the sharing had forged a connection between them he wasn't used to.

"This scroll isn't the oldest thing I've translated, but I'm sure it's the most important. I think it's going to help lead us to the lost clanhome the darkmages have claimed as their Fortress."

"How do you translate when you don't know the language?" Trey stacked the empty mugs into a leaning tower.

Three. Three mugs this morning. Niko kept flashing back to the moment he'd lodged deep in Isabo's body, and poured out words to share it with Trey, his own description making it even more real, and unbelievable. But then there was that moment where he'd looked over at Trey and met his molten gaze. And why was no one mentioning the fact Trey had slid into his battleform while sucking Isabo off Niko's cock?

She gave an irritated sigh. "Well, it depends on many things, of course. My watercraft opens up to me as I read. It creates a flow, like puzzle pieces clicking. Eventually, I get a word, and from there, it becomes more physical. There's the condition of the ink, any gaps in the text, if the text, like this one, is written in vernacular."

"And how long per project?"

"Oh, that varies widely. Sometimes over a year, sometimes a month. I would have finished this two months ago if I'd just been able to concentrate."

Trey eased his long legs out before him, one arm hanging over the back of the chair. "What's been bothering you?"

The men had fought in their battleforms, together and against each other. But never before had their beastspirits surfaced during sex. Niko was quite sure it was because beastspirits were irrevocably fixated on women, and didn't see men as interesting bed partners in the least. It had made sense to him, until he'd fallen in love with Trey, and pleasure ceased to exist unless he was part of it. It didn't make any sense now that Trey's beastspirit had so clearly participated in loving Niko. He'd been claimed, last night. Niko had been fucking claimed, and he'd fallen in love with Trey's woman, and they were just

sitting there, all relaxed like this was normal.

Isabo's cheeks turned rosy. "You have to ask? I thought I'd made it rather clear."

"Ah. You were horny." Trey grinned at her.

His face was triangular, which always fit him in Niko's mind. His sharp chin and bladed nose matched the predator's face of his beastspirit, the long, undulating body of the powerful watercoaster. Trey's hair was a dark blond, shining with true gold streaks from the summer heat. He'd cut it down to the scalp, but it had grown out to a tight cap.

His form was more slender than Niko's, and just a finger shorter. But he was solid muscle, his body sculpted with it. Watercoasters had the highest metabolism of any of the Clans, and that was saying something. They were nearly all painfully lean despite eating voraciously. Trey could out-eat Niko two meals to one despite having a smaller mass.

Niko likened his own form to that of a heavy hand slathering thick slabs of muscle, but Trey's had been poured with a delicate flow, stitched for grace and speed. Women told Niko he was the more handsome. Niko didn't know about that. He only knew Trey was steady, honest, brave and daring, a vicious, cunning fighter, and a loyal friend. He admired how the man had overcome a childhood of abandonment among the humans and his crappy father. Trey loved him, which was common among brother warriors in the Clans. But for some reason their love had grown bigger than a peaceful campfire, stronger than shared sleep, and brighter than a morning kiss.

He wondered if he could possibly have fallen in lust with another warrior who wasn't a marten. It didn't seem likely. The Twin Clans were powerful allies sharing similar beastspirit forms. Both were long, sleek, fast and deadly despite their small mass. Martens had a bushy tail and watercoasters had a longer, muscular tail. The martens had claws that could unsheathe like the cats, and the watercoasters had jaws and fangs that were just slightly less powerful than groundbears. Their ability to work both forest and water made them a powerful, perfectly matched team. Isabo would appreciate their differences, in bed and out.

Isabo reached and clasped Trey's leg. "Yes. But more, Trey, I was lonely. And those words of yours, they called to me."

"I'm so very glad, Isabo. You can always come to us." Trey held her gaze and she looked sharply at Niko. She questioned Trey's joint offer.

He nodded in return, his gut twisting at the thought of watching her leave, of going to bed tonight without her laughter, wit, and spice. She smiled at him, and Niko had to shift to unbind his erection.

When Trey had towered over him in his battleform and turned toward Isabo on the bed, Niko had a moment's fear at what they'd started. Because Niko knew Trey was the better warrior, and he didn't think he'd be able to stop him if Trey's fears came true and he lost himself to rut on Isabo. But then Trey's watercoaster had just faded away. The muzzle, the claws, the fangs, they all withdrew. And he'd been a new Trey, a settled Trey.

Trey was an earthmage to Niko's skymage. Had Trey somehow passed some essence to Niko, divesting himself of the restless ache he'd carried since he'd stood before this woman as her match? Is that why Niko had this terrible focus for Isabo?

"Well, the day is growing late. I'm expected to meet with a team in a bit to go over our next attack on the alleys outside Second City." Trey stood up, gathering the dishes.

What the fuck? Was Trey dismissing her?

"Isabo, you can stay here as long as you like. I'm free today." Niko flashed to the

sensation of pounding against her cushioning ass, so different from fucking Trey. Scouring Sand, would she think he wanted to fuck her again? He stood. *Didn't he? Without Trey?*

"Thanks, Niko, but I have to go, too. I work on the scroll daily, as long as my eyes can take it. And I can just feel that this will be a good day. I'll gain some movement on it."

She came at him, her curves all hidden by that light blue dress, and held her arms up. He closed around her automatically, but when she was against him, he couldn't stop himself from pressing his cock into her belly. He dipped his nose into her hair, holding her tight. She melted against him, and his fingers convulsed in her soft flesh.

"Don't we have to discuss that other matter?" he asked, concerned for her. "The one from the beach yesterday morning?"

She extricated herself from him, head down. "Not after last night. I think I finished it, and I'm so glad."

Niko was, too. He didn't feel used in the least, if sex with him would give Auberon an attitude adjustment. "I could deliver the message."

"No." She looked at him and her eyes meant it. "I want to."

He had to make sure she understood. "Isabo. Come back. We have so much more to discover."

Her breath caught. She ducked a shy look at him under her lashes. "Do you mean that?" It was the uncertain voice she'd had last night when he'd first looked at her nudity.

His gaze slid from her trembling lashes to her parted lips, over her round chin to the massive black bruise marking the side of her throat. His mark. "Yes." *Please*. He barely held himself back from begging.

She turned toward Trey, and he couldn't help himself. He had to touch her. He stepped up against her back, surrounding her from behind.

"But ... you need time together." She was still uncertain.

Trey put the dishes on the table with neat precision. He took one step and fell to one knee before her. He pushed up her skirt, and Niko couldn't see, but he felt her jolt and shudder, and smelled the sharp scent of her lust.

Niko was shocked. He thrust his erection into the groove of Isabo's spine. He loved it when Trey surprised him with unexpected passion. Isabo's body rocked against him, and Niko understood Trey's hand was fucking her.

"How many fingers?" he groaned, needing to know.

"Two. She's probably sore." Trey thrust and Isabo sagged against Niko. "Isabo, you're wearing Niko's mark on your throat. You reek of us, despite your wash. Last night we made you our lover. Even though I was weak with fear, your generosity included me. I don't say things I don't mean. So hear me well. You can *always* come to us." He thrust into her, and she moaned.

Niko cupped the heat of her breast, squeezing her through the soft cloth.

"But I'm not going to hunt you. I can't. It's not my role, and it wouldn't reflect well on me. Come to us if you want our touch. You're part of our 'together' now. You don't have to fuck us, but you'll always, always, be welcome."

She jerked again and this time Niko heard the wet slurp of her juices. Trey's gaze moved up and caught Niko's where he'd hung his chin on her shoulder. "Won't she, Niko?"

Niko nodded, fingering her hard nipple firmly. "Isabo, you understand us. You don't judge. You share, so beautifully. Please, come back." Niko didn't think he'd be able to sleep until he'd experienced her between him and Trey, where she belonged.

"So let's be clear now," Trey said gently, standing, smoothing her dress to her knees. He licked his fingers thoroughly, clearly savoring each swallow, the shithead.

Reaching out to sweep one finger along the curve of her cheek, Trey smiled, and the sight of his sparkling, hammered-gold eyes looking at her so peacefully brought a pulse of precum to Niko's tip, scalding him.

"Are we clear?" Trey asked softly.

Isabo threw herself into Trey's arms, ripping from Niko's surprised hold. She buried her face in his throat, standing on tiptoe to wrap both arms around his neck. Trey closed his arms around her slowly, staring at Niko. His eyes against the black of Isabo's brushed hair brought all the fine hairs up on the back of Niko's neck. After three years of Trey mourning this woman as a lost Bonded, she was finally in his arms.

"Trey." Niko's hoarse breath warned him he was about to lose it. He was riding the edge of doing just what Trey had feared last night, flinging her to the ground and fucking her without care.

Isabo pulled back from Trey, laughing up at him shakily. "I will. I am. I'll be nervous, but yes, I'll return to you."

Trey cupped the side of her face, thumbed her temple, and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "You are welcome here."

She hiccupped, then nodded her head. She stepped away and glanced at Niko, who locked his feet to the floor to keep from throwing her on the bed. "All right. Yes. I'll ... see you later."

She went to the hatch, and expertly twisted the ladder from the wall to the opening, letting the spines sift through her grip as she controlled the descent.

"Isabo. Do you want me to heal your throat?" Trey waved his hand, reminding her of Niko's mark. Niko wanted to jump on him and stuff a sock in his mouth.

She touched it, probed, breathed out shakily. Then she lifted her chin. Which only showed it off more. "No. I can be as brave as both of you, to be who I really am, and not hide."

Trey took one step toward her. "Isabo, that mark shows you were Niko's lover. Not a tumble, not a fuck, but his lover. Is that who you really are?"

Flashing a small smile at Niko, she stepped onto the ladder, modestly tucking her dress between her legs. "Well, Trey, it seems like a good fit to me. We'll have to see how it feels over time. Bye."

"Stop." Niko spoke at the same time as Trey, their voices thrumming with command. She froze against the ladder. "What is it?"

Trey smiled. "We're not going to let you walk home alone."

Niko knew it couldn't be him, not with his marten dancing through his guts in a fury.

"Oh." Isabo smiled sweetly, something entirely too rare, and leaned against the upper rungs. "I know my way, sillies."

"We'll walk with you. This will just take a moment. Stay there." Trey came at Niko in a blur of movement, his hands shoving Niko up against the wall where Trey had shuddered and hid from them last night.

Trey tore off his shirt as Niko fumbled his pants open. Their mouths met, and Niko

hissed, feeling how close he was. Kissing Trey again after Isabo was fucking hot. Niko sank his hands deep into the muscle of Trey's shoulders and spun him so Niko was on the outside. Trey got his own pants open, and both men gave low grunts at the sheer intoxication of their cocks rubbing together. Trey's hands wrestled Niko's pants down over his hips, and then his hands set hard in Niko's ass, pulling him in tight.

Niko used all his greater weight to pin Trey to the wall, loving his heat, his hardness, the sting of their tangling, chafing cocks. The men thrust together, aching, pressing, pulling, and Niko shouted as the hard lips of their hoods caught and smeared over each other. Trey's mouth ate at his, his hands straining to open Niko's clamped cheeks, and their tongues wound in a frenzy, more agile than their cocks.

Niko rubbed into Trey's rock-hard, ridged stomach, thrusting wildly against his rigid, silky erection. The orgasm hit him, showering out of his tip with such seizing sweetness. He slanted his mouth across Trey's to a new angle, and kissed him slower, harder, trapping his jerking cock between them. Trey went at the extra pressure, and their bellies grew slippery in the cream that coated them. The heat and silkiness took both of them as they stroked through the pleasure, hissing and gasping into each other's breath.

Niko's hands softened to rub at Trey's neck, and Trey's petted over his bruised ass, stroking the high curve in long sweeps.

Finally, Niko caught his breath, kissed across Trey's jaw and nipped his earlobe. "I love you."

Trey pressed a kiss to Niko's throat, and it did not escape his attention that it was the same spot Niko had marked Isabo.

"What happened to us last night?" Niko asked, loving how Trey continued to thrust gently in the thickening damp between them.

"I've been such an asshole. Niko, I'm so sorry."

Trey sounded tired, and Niko pulled back to look at him. "What?"

Trey looked over at Isabo balanced to leave, at the top of their ladder. Her face wore a dark blush and her eyes were huge. "All those years, dreaming over her, fixated on another's Bonded. Intellectually, I knew she was gone, but I still thought of her as a match. It's a wonder you didn't tie me down in the desert and walk away."

Niko clasped Trey's head. He held Trey's bitter gaze. "What are you saying? She wasn't a match?" He was stunned Trey could even doubt it, after last night's magic.

"I'm saying she *was*. Past tense. Isabo will never be my mate. Watercoaster was a bit thick-headed about it, but finally gets it that she's taken."

Isabo sucked in a hard breath.

Niko's hands drifted down Trey's neck, toyed in the hollows of his collarbone, and settled over his smooth, hairless chest. His nipples were pebbled, and Niko thumbed them absently. "So, all that business about not joining us in bed. How you were so afraid to approach her, because you might lose it..."

Trey nodded, resting his head back against the wall. His eyelids were at half-mast as the satisfaction began to set in. "I thought it would be a matched, un-Bonded warrior's song, that I'd ride the edge of losing control to a beastspirit who only understood the call to mate. But it wasn't like that. It was just passion. Skin rippling, mind blowing lust, to have the two of you together."

Isabo moaned. "Ohhh..."

Niko kissed Trey, nuzzled him, and spoke against his lips. "So next time you're

going to be in bed with us?"

Trey hesitated. Nodded. Wrapped Niko up in a rib-crushing hold and stormed his mouth. Long, hot moments passed before Niko staggered into a chair.

Trey grabbed one of the damp washcloths and cleaned off his chest and stomach. He stuffed himself into his pants and put on his shirt. "I'll be back in a bit."

He nodded to a rather flushed Isabo and her shining head disappeared down the ladder. Niko's marten chattered, but when Trey followed her, flopped back down, relieved.

Niko sat there, empty, mind churning until Trey's footsteps returned. He sprang up the ladder in two bounds, pulled it up and closed the hatch again. "She's back in Jace's roost. I left some pawpaws with her." He gave Niko a buss on the lips and pulled off his clothes.

"Did she say anything about seeing us come together?"

"She said she was looking forward to tonight, and thanked me, and said she knew what an asshole was and I wasn't one." Trey called water up the chute with a pulse of the elemental power all Truxet commanded with ease. "You want to talk to me about that message business on the beach? Does she need help?"

"Yeah, that's something weird, but under control. I'll tell you about it later." Niko didn't want to get Trey distracted as he went to train. Niko didn't want him worrying about Auberon and Isabo while he went into the dirty, fucked-up alleys of his childhood. But it was time to clear the air about something else from yesterday. "I need to share something."

"What?" His cheeks clenched as he washed himself, hollowing so deep Niko could use them for a berry bowl.

He smiled, imagining it. Licked his lips.

"Niko." Trey smiled, exasperated.

Shaking his head, he inhaled hard and long. "Isabo and I planned for you to see her on the beach. She didn't want to walk into the Cove and have everyone giggling about you. She thought you should come to terms with her return privately."

Trey stopped his brisk rubbing. The water stopped flowing, a sign of how shocked he was, since pulling a stream was nearly as easy as breathing to a watercoaster.

Niko lifted his hands out to Trey, palms up. "Think of last night. Don't fuss about this now."

Trey's face rippled with remembered passion. He turned his back. "It was still fate." He tossed hard words over his shoulder. "Manage me like a youngling again and I'll insist on training with blades. I don't need protecting."

"You were beautiful last night, at the fire." Niko mused, idly drawing swirls in the aftermath on his stomach.

"I danced for you." Trey dunked his head beneath the sluice.

"You were trying to seduce me into seducing her."

Trey tossed him a pleased grin, rinsed, and closed the floor grid.

"Yeah, yeah, so it worked. But then she seduced you. Your battleform ... your watercoaster accepted me." This was big. Niko's marten had been very interested in Isabo. And intently focused on Trey. When Trey had gone to battleform, no answering dominance had risen to clash. Niko had sat in the chair, clung to Trey's massive, clawed hands, and gloried in his lover's watercoaster joining their pleasure.

Trey shook himself in a wave from head to knees, flinging water. "He did. There was definitely some ownership in there. I feel like I could rip the darkmage Fortress apart all by myself. The freedom I feel..." He stared at Niko moodily. "We need to talk later, about how to handle her if she comes to us tonight."

"Agreed." Niko watched Trey. He was like his own personal pet knife. Glittering, deadly.

"Last night, it was fine to keep it about flesh. But now I want to push into her mind more, make her understand who she's taking as lovers." Trey dressed. "It's not the same sort of craving I had before. But I still want her, Niko. Even more, but different. She's incredible, and perfect for us."

"Agreed." Propping his elbow on the table, Niko set his chin in his hand and stared out the window to the swaying pine boughs. He thought back over the night before, letting the cascade of stunningly erotic images pass back and forth in his mind. Something important in there niggled at him. He needed to meditate. "I'm going to go for a swim today."

"Sounds good. I might not be back for dinner if the guys want to train after planning." Trey laced up his boots.

Niko grunted. Trey was part of a team prepping to go into the underground of Second City's Dark, the outer tangle of streets beyond the City Wall. It was a crazy dangerous duty, and one that was necessary. They were now sure there was a hidden darkmage sifting stone at each of the Cities, just as the Truxet had. They'd only found three, and the Council was foaming at the mouth to find and seal off the other four. Their noose was tightening now that the Mage Guild was cooperating. It just wasn't tightening fast enough.

Trey bent over Niko. "You smell fantastic. See you later. Don't fret about her. She's strong and brave. She will come to us tonight."

Niko held up his hand. They clasped goodbye, and he watched Trey leap out the hatch without bothering with the ladder.

* * * *

Niko got some assessing looks that morning, but wasn't concerned. Isabo was a free woman, well past her dictated mourning period. He glanced once at her roost, Jace's roost. Was she up there, translating her ancient scroll? He could go up and make her tea. Grimacing, he walked past.

He went to the marten-held beach and began to undress when he felt the rage pushing toward him. He spun, astonished at the aggression pouring off Auberon. The shorter warrior strode up to him.

"You unnatural, pretty-boy pervert. I can't believe you laid one fucking finger on her."

Sending his senses out, Niko saw that they were basically alone. He held himself ready, and silent.

Auberon stopped just out of reach, stocky body dense and quivering with hate. "How dare you. She wasn't home one night. How *dare* you."

Niko watched Auberon's hands, one curled tight, the other held in a stiff claw. He balanced on the balls of his feet, knees flexed, ready for the imminent attack.

"Say something, you stupid cock!" Auberon roared.

Niko sensed warriors moving in their direction, which was good. He so didn't want to fight a Clansmen. He did not want to be wrapped up in the drama of such an investigation.

"You're a fucking traitor to the Clan, forgetting the purpose your cock was meant for and wasting it on a man's body. You're a disgusting freak and I can't believe you took her! She's mine, you arrogant shit. She's mine now!" Auberon spat on Niko's chest. It was hot and sticky, clinging to his chest hair. "Don't ever come near her again."

Outrage stung through him and his marten wanted to gnaw on Auberon's eyes, but he held himself silent, ready. Niko thought about Bry telling him how much care Auberon needed. He thought of the fear that had rolled off Isabo when she'd seen her mate's brother coming. He thought of how she'd sent him a letter asking to meet, all so she could arrange a private moment for Trey to see her back in the clanhome. And he remembered Trey's glittering, determined face as he asked Niko to give solace to the lonely woman he wanted more than anything in the world. This man was unbalanced, losing his grip on his honor in ways that made Trey's fear ridiculous. The year Isabo had spent at River Mountain now seemed deeply suspicious.

"Are you listening, betrayer? Isabo is mine to protect, and I will."

The men were running toward them now, almost within sight, but Auberon leapt into the trees, took to his beastspirit, and skittered into the shadows.

Three older marten warriors burst into the clearing. "What was that?" The stench of Auberon's uncontrolled anger reeked.

Niko straightened. "Auberon taking issue with Isabo's choice of bed partner, which is entirely wrong."

They shifted uneasily, avoiding his eyes. Niko wiped the spittle from his chest and flung it into the bushes. "He came dangerously close to losing control. He should be watched, if not rebuked."

"Just stay clear of him, Niko. Way clear, if you get my meaning."

Niko narrowed his eyes and cracked his neck. "Isabo's. Choice."

Again the men avoided his gaze. They stepped back. "Well, all's quiet here now." They turned back toward center.

Niko stared in disbelief at their retreating backs. It was a law punishable by death or exile to attack a brother Trux outside of training. The shame wasn't just born by the guilty, but by the whole Clan. The Clan, including Bry, was deluded if they didn't see Auberon was far closer to breaking than Trey had ever been. He needed to talk to Isabo, and find out what Auberon had done to make her fear him. It was something bad enough for Bry to separate them for a year, sending Isabo to River Mountain.

Scowling, he finished undressing and plowed into the cold waters of the lake. The lake was almost a two-day run in circumference. The next nearest clanhome, the Owls' Nest, was a two-day run to the southwest. He knew every inch of land, every path through the trees, but he still got the shivers when he swam over the black depths of the Cove's water to get to the rocky island.

He set out for the long swim in human form, but when he'd made it into the area of deepest black, he let himself sink into his marten. The marten didn't fear the depths, didn't imagine the monstrous eels the watercoasters delighted in tending. With his neat pads striding hard, he held his pointed, whiskered face above the water, and made the island. Marten wanted to explore, so he romped over the rocks, fluffing out his long tail, and

relearned the paths of how the branches had grown since the last time he'd been there. He and marten caught a beetle and munched happily, and then washed their creamy belly carefully.

When he wore his human body, he settled on a smooth stone perch, and gave quiet gratitude that he had the island to himself for the moment. Niko closed his eyes, steadied his heart, and let himself drift through last night. He tasted Trey's honor, strong despite his self-doubt. He tasted Isabo's honor, including Trey when it was hard for her to be with Niko at first, using that husky voice of hers to share.

There. That was it. Something in that thought was what dragged at Niko. *Her thighs, pillowy around his hips, her tummy giving beneath his, her breasts cradling him, all contrasting with her nails gouging fire down his shoulders.* He looked through the moment, hearing him push her for a reaction, her voice thick with tears. The heat sucking at the tip of his cock, Trey's need pulsing off to the side...

"It's too much!" Her voice spiked with panic. "I'm remembering! Move, by Skyfather, move!"

Trey's urgent command, "Fuck her!"

Niko let his mind drift, scenting the water, glorying in a rare moment of solitude. Isabo. Tonight. They would have her again. The soft patter of the old beech's leaves falling into the water. Fall was beginning. He opened his eyes, but stayed sitting there, admiring the distant shore, until he heard a laughing pack of watercoaster youths come panting through the water in human form.

After exchanging an easy greeting and making sure none had developed cramps, he dove back in, swimming hard for home. The swim was mindless, and he tried to plan the conversation he would have with Trey.

Isabo needed the closure and healing Trey had found the night before. She needed to face the fact she had taken two new lovers who demanded the whole woman. There'd been a time when she'd mentioned her mate, before he'd begun to fuck her, when they were just drawing Trey into their scene. Then Niko had gone and told her mentioning Jace would make the sex awkward. They'd been the words of a casual partner who didn't want to deal with emotions. They were well past that, now.

It would be brutal, and Niko knew he wasn't strong enough. It would have to be Trey. Tonight wasn't going to be the triad he'd fantasized about as they rose that morning. Tonight, there would be four in bed instead of three. It was going to be as painfully beautiful as the previous night. Good thing Niko liked a little sting mixed with his ecstasy.

Chapter Six

Isabo caught the furtive glimpses of the men near the main circle. They whispered, and looked at her neck. Her shoulders strained under the weight of her heavy breasts, her nipples sharp with awareness. Carrying her day's trash to the collection pit, she kept her steps steady, when she really wanted to scuttle back to her scrolls.

But she wasn't going to let men direct her actions any more. So what if every step reminded her of the way her body had felt after she and Jace used each other hard? Jace was gone, and she was not. Ah, the pain was sharp and hard, and as she had when she'd looked at their old bed after Trey dropped her off, she wrenched her mind away. *Don't think about my Bonded.* Not now, with the echo of Niko's so-different hands on her. Jace wasn't here. He wasn't part of this. But it had felt so different ... and she would *stop* thinking of him.

Throwing herself into her research had worked this morning. Whole sentences were coalescing now, and she was positive several of the hints they'd found in the other scrolls from the same era would be clarified here. It was a little daunting to realize she, the one who'd been deemed mousy and unskilled enough for the Guild to throw away to the Beasts, was going to contribute a major clue in the war against the darkmages. Their foul creatures had been attacking the Cities over the last few weeks. Before she'd returned to the Cove, she'd even heard that one of the princesses had witnessed darkmage activity right on the Royal grounds, but had been pardoned herself, being found innocent of collusion.

Isabo tossed her trash away, and turned toward home, wondering what to wear that evening. She was going to go back. Despite Auberon appearing at her shoulder when she'd gone for lunch, despite his snarling accusations, Isabo wanted to be part of the straining sexuality, the dangerous strength of two Trux shapeshifters in their prime. Despite the way her dead heart wrenched into quivering attention when she thought of them, when all she wanted was pretty pleasure, she was going to go back.

Watching them burst into passion with each other had melted her. It hadn't been embarrassing because there was nothing unnatural about it. It was two lovers in an intimate heated moment. She'd gotten weepy with the trust they'd given her. Trey had spoken of the pain and growth she'd pushed on him, and she'd clung to the ladder to stay out of their moment. The whole night had felt right, watching Trey with Niko at her shoulder, sleeping beside a man again, talking with Trey, sharing Niko with him... It had been very new, very bold. Very alive. Oh, Jace...

She put out a hand onto the ladder at Jace's roost, then saw Estin leaning against the trunk of the pine. She froze. He was one of Auberon's cronies. He watched her, arms folded. It infuriated her, how the moment held, her stomach rebelling, her neck tight.

"Why would you do that to Auberon?" the man finally asked, disgust thick in his voice. "It's bad enough you've turned from him when you know he loves you, but to bed the two he hates the most on your first night back is just an insult."

Should she call for help? Should she climb the ladder, ignoring him? What about walking away to Niko's roost right at this moment? Better yet, maybe she should run for the gap between clans, to the southern shore and the sub-earthen lodges of the

watercoasters, and stay with Trey. Auberon would be so much more uncertain there.

Estin shook his head and walked away. "Stupid cunt. You're afraid of a man who lives for you, who'd worship you for the rest of your days."

Isabo stood, one hand still frozen on a cool wooden ladder rung, the other fisted in her dress. Her heart panged in her throat so hard she felt Niko's bruise there, and nausea churned. She knew what love was, and wanted no part of the twisted thing Auberon kept trying to convince her of. She'd known a perfection few women could understand in the Cities. She'd witnessed it between bold partners this morning, and craved belonging to them enough to reach out.

Climbing the ladder with still-shaky knees, she released a breath of relief to see Auberon hadn't violated the roost with his presence. In a temper, she slammed the hatch down. She pressed a shaking hand to her eyes. Alone. Oh, Jace. She didn't want to be alone anymore. And she certainly didn't want to be afraid of Jace's brother. On stiff legs, she walked to the bed, still made with *two* pillows, and stared at it. She wanted to throw up.

Turning her back, she went to the clothes trunk, empty now of all Jace's things, and rummaged for a dress to wear tonight. Niko and Trey would help her, hold her, let her sleep and fuck and live. Jace would have hated the idea. He'd been so possessive, so proud she was his. But her heart, the smaller, wounded version of her heart, had imagined a new path. It was just for awhile, to feel again, to think of something besides the past.

Now she dared to reach for Trey, the man who knew many ways to pleasure, including the essential daily respect of companionship. The taste of life she'd gotten last night had been stunning. She'd been so grateful for Niko's passion, for sliding into lust so easily.

She wanted him with the craving of one who'd touched death personally, and now saw life differently. Oh, yes, Isabo wanted them both. Auberon was an asshole, but she wasn't going to cringe at his demands or take his touch anymore. She'd known that nearly a year ago, and when her refusals had threatened to erupt into a violent confrontation, Bry had stepped in and sent her to River Mountain.

The time away hadn't helped Auberon see his behavior any more clearly, and only served to make Isabo even harder toward him. He'd been Jace's brother, but he'd killed any shared affection that connection had gifted him.

Bry was going to have to face the fact Isabo was not going to roll over and give up her own brain for Auberon's sake. Perhaps she should make an issue of it now, instead of constantly reacting to Auberon's instability. She could march right up to Bry and show him the love bruise on her neck and say she was taken.

The mark hadn't bothered everyone. Niko's mark on her throat had made Molly smile. Molly was a friend, the mother of one of the toddlers Isabo had watched yesterday. As they'd washed some of the lunch dishes, Molly had winked and said, "Go for it. Or should I say, Go for *them*. Rowr." It was wild and daring and nothing like the sedate, simple girl Isabo had been when she'd chosen Jace.

Isabo picked up the dress she'd wear for her new lovers tonight. She was tired of worrying about Auberon and Bry. Tired of missing Jace and being so deeply alone. Smiling, she pulled her hair into a foxtail and put her shoulders back. She wanted to touch and forget, to feel and enjoy. She trusted these men, wanted to explore them.

This didn't have anything to do with the abyss in her soul, or the way she'd always

belong to Jace. It was just flesh and a burning moment beyond the tears. Look out boys. Isabo wanted to play.

* * * *

Niko's dick was hard as a spike, despite the fact Isabo was crying enormous fat tears. What kind of sicko did that make him? He was even turned on by her sorrow.

He'd picked up a chair for her today, one with delicate spindle legs and a lower seat, rather than the plain, chunky old things he'd just kept when he'd been assigned this roost. She sat at one side of the scarred plank table, and he sat to her left, holding her hand and rubbing her knuckles. Trey was on her right, holding her other hand in both of his.

Trey had gotten home late, but Isabo hadn't come to them until well into the evening, so they'd had time to discuss Niko's revelation that Isabo needed to deal with Jace during sex. Trey had agreed with Niko's assessment, but had refused to spring it on her in bed, in the heat of passion. Niko disagreed. If it was him, he'd use every tool to convince her to let go, and if that meant being sneaky by waiting until he was lodged in her body, then so be it. Trey and his rigid honor.

"But you don't understand," her lower lip trembled as she stared at Trey in the magelight. "If I start to think of him, I c-can't stop crying. For days. Please, don't do this Trey."

Her pleading broke Niko's fucking heart.

"He's part of you, Isabo. And if you're going to be part of us, we all need to make peace with the fact that he's here. He's as much a ghost in the room as I was last night."

A tremor took her so hard the table shook. Niko eased from her tight grip and got up to close the window. It had passed from cool to cold tonight, although he didn't want to turn on the mageheat because as soon as they went to bed, they'd have plenty of warmth. She probably wasn't shivering because of the cold, but he'd do what he could.

"No. I don't want him here. I want to be free, to disappear in pleasure. Trey, I'm finally ready, when I've *needed* so long. I can't do this, because it will s-stop everything."

Niko slid back into place, sighing at the thump in his cock as tears dripped off her chin.

"You're afraid that if you remember him, it will douse your passion. That what you had won't let you enjoy what you're building now."

"Yes! Oh, Sacred Couple, yes. Trey, there's nothing, nothing in the world, that can compare to being loved by him."

Niko locked his jaw against a snarl. He stood and strode to his shelves. He rummaged and brought her a hand scarf. She blinked up at him, smiled shakily, and blew her nose. He sat down again.

"I'm not afraid of him. Isabo, you will find pleasure with us, even remembering him. When you're our lover, you can grieve for him, and we'll help hold you together. We'll honor your memories of him, even in bed."

She sobbed, grabbing Niko's hand again. The light purple dress she wore had a v-neck that would have been modest on anyone else, but on her revealed a deep wedge of cleavage. He was a hound for even noticing.

"It wasn't pleasure. It was belonging. He was *mine*. He walked in my magescape."

Trey looked over at Niko and nodded, their signal to begin her seduction. Niko's dick throbbed. Trey in warrior mode was so fucking hot. He rubbed Isabo's knuckles gently as

she shook with sobs. He reminded himself firmly that this was going to help her.

Trey eased out of his chair and knelt by Isabo's side. His free hand came up and smoothed her hair, caught in a foxtail at her nape. "Shhh. Breathe, Black Cloud. There."

"I didn't want this. I just want you."

"Why me, Isabo. Because I'm a match? Because you hope to catch an echo of what you had with Jace?"

Her chin sank to her chest, and she sobbed.

Trey's hand settled on the back of her nape, and his thumb swept the now purple oval on her throat. "It won't happen. Only one Bonding per lifetime. You're not going to reach that kind of connection with me. But I can give you a different peace."

Niko's chest burned. Trey was one cold, brave man. Niko thought he got it from his father. They could lose her tonight. Both had agreed it was a possibility. But Trey didn't skirt the pain. He struck at it, head on. He was a vicious fighter from having grown up in the human Dark, scrabbling to survive.

"I don't know what it's like, Isabo. I can only marvel at your courage. But I do know I love you. Niko loves you. We want you with us. Discover a new kind of bond. Let us help you."

Niko loves you? Niko stared at Trey, agog. Trey narrowed his eyes and tipped his head. Niko slid off his chair, kneeling in place.

"You d-don't love me. You don't know me."

"We know enough. We'll learn more. Your every desire, your every need, remember?"

She shuddered. There was something in those words, something between them that Trey hadn't told him. Niko squashed his flare of jealousy.

"Not like this," she muttered thickly. She took her hand from Trey's and blew her nose again.

"What are you afraid of? A few tears? They shouldn't hold any power over you by now. You know they pass. Niko, stand up and show Isabo what we think of tears."

Niko clenched his jaw. This was the problem with working with Trey. The man was a master of flowing with the action, making it very hard to follow a plan. But he'd agreed to follow Trey's lead tonight, in exchange for making Trey take the darker job of opening up Isabo's ghosts. He stood, and unlaced his leathers. His erection popped out, bobbing.

Isabo laughed, and sobbed, and shook her head. "Oh, Niko."

He knelt beside her again, leaving his erection to tighten in the cool air of the room. "Isabo, we both want this. We want you for more than bedplay, for more than a few nights. All of you. Even him."

Trey lifted her dress up over her knees, pushing it high on her thighs. Isabo moaned, shoving his hand away as she wiped at her tears. "Stop it. Both of you. Just stop pushing."

"I haven't heard your safe word yet, Isabo, but I promise if you use it tonight, this conversation isn't going away." Niko helped pull her dress up behind her from under her ass.

She gasped at the cool chair, and he saw she wasn't wearing panties.

He smiled. "Someone planned on cock tonight."

"Now, I'll ask you again. Tell me about the last time he made love to you." Trey's voice was calm, nearly empty.

She worried the handkerchief with both hands. She sniffled.

Niko held his breath. Either she would end this for tonight, or she'd trust them enough to share, but the time for protests was done. Trey's hand kept up a gentle massage on her neck. Niko wrapped his hand around her calf, loving the ridge of muscle there. The men were quiet, letting her decide.

She blew her nose, swallowed, and said, "The morning he left. He was to be gone five nights."

Niko's cock leapt for joy. Brave Isabo, ready to build a new bond, even though she carried such grief. Niko thought he was the luckiest man in Vladaya.

Trey put his free hand on her ankle and squeezed gently. "Yes."

"He held me from behind, and kissed my neck. He had a pillow, a special bolster made for my hips, round and long and hard. It was green. I burned it to ash." She stopped, and started to cry again, softer.

Niko put his other hand on her knee, smoothing both hands over the curve of her. Trey dragged his hand down from her neck, pulling her dress over one shoulder. Niko was hypnotized by Trey's big hand gripping her there. Her collarbone was stark, outlined from the weight of her breasts pulling on her shoulder.

"It was high enough to hold me when I was lying face down, because my breasts make it uncomfortable. He pushed it between my legs, and rolled me so that I straddled it. I wrapped my arms around my pillow and spread my legs."

Trey slid his hand up her ankle, covering her other knee. Meeting Niko's eyes, he pulled gently, so Niko did, too. They widened her legs, fanning them open.

"Were you still sleepy?" Trey asked.

"Yes. I was and I didn't want to wake up, because I was hiding from saying goodbye. Jace slid his hands under my breasts, cupping the nipples, and laid down on me. His weight ... he was smaller than both of you, but thick-chested. I loved his weight."

Trey's fingers made rhythmic sweeps on the inside of her knee. Niko copied him, and shivered at how his fingers glided over her.

"He covered me, and slid inside. He wasn't as big as Niko. He always flowed into me so easily, like he was born to be there."

"He was, Isabo."

She sobbed.

Trey's fingers moved a small distance farther from her knee, climbing up her thigh. "Shhh. How did it feel?"

"Delicious. I loved being pressed down, taken so easily."

Niko clamped his throat on a groan. Her legs were open enough now he could smell her clearly. Lust and sorrow. Yes, delicious.

"He stroked me just a bit, and then he pulled out, took his hands from under me. I knew what he wanted. He always wanted me that way when he was leaving on a duty that took him overnight."

"He wanted your anus, because it's the deepest submission a body can offer." Niko spoke thickly, and prayed to his beloved element Air that he'd hang onto his control. Tonight had to be about Isabo.

"Yes, I guess." She sniffed. "Trey, Oh, Skyfather. I can remember. I remember we had just laid out the summer blanket, and I missed the furs on my nipples. I remember..."

"Tell me, Isabo, how beautiful it was." Trey's voice was losing his neutrality.

"I arched my back, got up on my knees. I reached down along my sides and opened my cheeks. He moaned, and pushed his tip inside. I loved it, and cried out. I can remember biting my lip, not wanting to be loud, because I could hear people moving around in the forest below our roost."

Niko thought he would explode with the image she painted. He rested his head against her bare thigh, struggling to keep his hand a steady flow along her soft inner skin, and not reach for the wet heat he wanted.

Her hand landed on his head and clenched in his hair. "He worked himself in. A few times, he had to finger me, and spread more liquid around himself. Eventually, he thrust."

"Did it hurt?" Trey blew softly into her folds, and Niko swallowed on the scent.

"No, it never hurt. It burned, especially in the first few strokes. But I never minded. He had my hips in his hands, and when I started to push back on him, he let loose, and began to smash against me." She paused, and the scent of her anger combined with lust. "So strong. How did he die? He was so, so strong." She buried her face in the scarf, sobbing again.

Trey's finger stroked the taut skin between her groin and thigh. "Jace was strong. He was a good man. He needed a better sense of humor, but he was good."

Isabo choked on a laughing cry. Niko propped his chin on her thigh and watched Trey's fingers, mesmerized. He inhaled, swallowing on the delight of her, so close.

"So Jace knelt behind you in bed. You held your own ass wide, submitting to him so sweetly. Was your hair this long then? I thought you kept it shorter."

"Yes, to my shoulders. Jace liked to see my spine." She cried for achingly long minutes. "This is awful."

"This is a gift. Your precious memory to us. Tell me how you both came."

She cried harder. "No. I don't want this. It's not right, me talking about it, now, like this."

"The memory hurts but we can handle pain in pleasure. Let it out, Isabo."

"You're a damned patronizing ass and I hate you."

"Who came first?" Trey's prompting had become a demand.

"No," she sputtered into the handkerchief. "Oh, Jace."

When Trey's finger eased into Isabo's heat, his sharp face was etched in stone.

"No!" Isabo shouted, slamming back against the chair, rigid.

Niko remembered the sweet pleasure of feeling her cunt grip and ripple. He stared at Trey's buried finger, feeling her heat on his own fingertips. He added his urging to Trey's. "That's not your safe word, Isabo. Tell us who came first."

"B-b-b-"

Niko's heart twisted, and his erection sagged in horror. They'd driven her to her safe word. They were such—

"Bastards!" she spat. And then her hips tucked up, offering Trey a better angle.

He immediately took it, sliding two fingers in with a twist. "He held your hips in both hands. He fucked his cock in your burning ass."

Niko gasped for breath at the close call.

Isabo rocked her hips against Trey, her hands now gripping the table. Her low voice came faster, thicker, and was just as effective as her sex talk the night before. Lust began to overpower grief, confusion, and anger. "He pushed me down, back onto the bolster. My legs were spread, and he ground me down on it. He started the little huffing sound he

made when he was close, and I came. My hands fell from behind me, and I twisted the sheets. I can remember seeing those marks, the sharp folds where I'd twisted them so hard, in the next few days, as I lay there, without him."

"How did he finish?" Trey's thumb lifted, delved into the cave above where he pumped with a faster pace. Trey was an expert at working two pleasure points at once. He'd practiced on Niko. Watching him thumb her clit, grinding it to match her words, Niko's own thumb rotated in a tight hard press on her thigh.

"He picked me up, changed my angle, and started rubbing me on the bolster. I was still coming, so sensitive it was like fire licking between my legs. My ass ached, without him stroking through the sensation, and I begged."

She tried to close her thighs as her need ratcheted up, but Niko set his strength against her. He wasn't about to lose the lovely view. Her breath came shallower.

"How did you beg? What did you say?" Trey's voice was urgent.

"I said, 'Please, Spark, please let me finish.' Isabo collapsed forward onto the table, her face buried in her arms. 'And he did. He came, and wrapped around me, and let me ride the flames, and I finished.' Her voice was muffled, her words falling over themselves. 'And then he kissed my neck, and my nose, and took his pack, and smiled at me from the hatch. Then he *left*. Jace left. Jace left.'"

Trey's wrist swirled, and Niko watched carefully as Trey flickered his thumb harder, faster against Isabo's jerking hips. She screamed into the table, going rigid as she came. Niko captured one of her reaching hands, brought it to his lips. She shook, sobbing. Trey stood and scooped her into his arms, then sat with her in his lap.

He put his cheek against her hair, and stared at Niko with desolate eyes. Niko swallowed. So much raw pain. She had a spiritmage to help her, all the adopted women were assigned one. Why was she still in so much pain?

"Anytime you need to remember him, and the pain hurts so bad, come to us. We'll carry you through it, just like that."

"Fuck you." She mumbled into Trey's neck. Her shoulders twitched, but her tears seemed to slow.

Niko relaxed, and relief bled through Trey's shining yellow eyes. He blinked his tears away.

Trey kissed the top of her head. "Why haven't you visited that since you lost him, Isabo?"

She shrugged, a pouting, rebellious gesture.

"Your spiritmage will be having a long talk with me," Niko growled. He'd been with the woman a handful of hours and known she needed to mourn the loss of her sex life, as well as her mate. What had the nut head been doing, letting her bury that pain?

"My spiritmage died, too."

Both men stared at each other.

"When?" Niko asked.

"Just after I moved to River Mountain. About a year ago."

"And you weren't assigned another?" Niko asked in disbelief.

"You know what?" Her voice was as pissy as he'd ever heard it, and the erection that had shimmered to life during her orgasm came to stark point again. "I'm getting that you two have a hard time understanding this, but lovers and spiritmages aren't just interchangeable."

Trey rocked her. "You were a woman in crisis, alone. This war is no excuse. You should have a spiritmage."

"They offered. I didn't want one. I missed Crandall." She sat slumped against Trey, and Niko held to her slack hand like a lifeline. "You made me come. You made me remember."

"Yes." Trey was matter-of-factly unapologetic.

"And this is what you want from me tonight? To fuck me while I remember Jace? While I compare you to him, when you can't hope to compare?" Her posture was limp, but her voice was scathing.

Niko thought he might be ill.

"Yes." Trey's eyes were hard, holding Niko to their plan.

She tipped her head against him, looking up into Trey's face. He leaned back and looked down at her.

Now her voice softened. "This is honestly what you want. To try to heal me, when his loss is this open, bottomless, impossible wound."

Trey's gaze remained committed as he stared at her. "Yes."

Niko shivered. He was so fucking proud of him.

"Why? Why would you do that to yourselves? It's too much to ask anyone."

"Show her, Niko."

Fucking ass. Niko stood, not surprised to find his knees a bit shaky, and not from the long crouch on the floor. His pants were still open, and his dick stood tall. She peeked at him, blinking spiked, wet lashes, and he flexed his abs to make it bow to her. He was proud that it was bigger than Jace's. That was something she wouldn't find lacking. She buried her face back in Trey's neck.

"We want you, Isabo. As Niko so ably said, we want all of you. Even your pain is beautiful to us. You're our woman. We won't ever have you like Jace did, but we're the ones you've got now."

The spittle-spraying madness in Auberon's blue eyes while he shouted *She's mine!* shivered through Niko. *Fuck.* Were they any better, marking her as property to be claimed? Ignoring her rebuttals of their pleasure? Niko sank into the chair beside them, confused.

"You know what, Trey?" She sounded surprised, but thoughtful. "I *am* your woman. I've been your woman for a long time. Over a year now, you've haunted my dreams. And Niko, too, of course."

Niko jerked his head up to meet Trey's satisfied eyes. He smiled with a hunter's pleasure, a closed-lip spread of triumph. Niko shook his head in disbelief.

"I think it was the fantasy you'd left behind that I was too inexperienced to take. But when I was so lost, it grew, like some goal to reach for, to focus on, something."

"Something to live for?" Trey asked quietly.

She shrugged.

"Blow your nose, Black Cloud."

She blew.

"Have some tea."

It was cool, but Niko brought her a cup, holding it as she drank.

"Tell us what he called you in bed."

"He called me Feather."

"And you called him Spark."

She nodded, sniffing.

"Cry if you need to, but you understand now that this is a night for pleasure. We're not going to stop for tears."

"I have a safe word." There was such confidence in her voice, Niko was humbled by her trust.

"You do. You always have control." Trey nodded to the bed, and Niko went to pull the thicker wool blanket down, and then the smooth cotton one, revealing one layer of furs.

Trey stood and balanced her. Niko pulled her dress off. Smooth bare curves, nude woman. Trey walked her to the bed, and laid Isabo down. He took the tie from her hair, and smoothed the silk of it over one shoulder.

Niko stood at Trey's side, his heart knocking on his ribs, his marten leaping after it as if racing through the forest. Trey's fingers brushed his hip, and Niko folded his hand tight around them.

"Isabo, we're going to fuck you tonight, and Jace is going to be right here through all of it."

They were the same brutal words he'd started with, after they'd sat her down at the table. The words had wiped her nervous, excited smile away.

This time, they brought a very slight tilt to one corner of her sweet lips, the upper lip slightly fuller than the lower. "You're both crazy."

"I love you, Isabo." The words were as easy as a kiss in morning light. Niko didn't regret them in the least, as he'd never regretted giving them to Trey. Wise Trey, to know what she was to Niko before he even did.

She covered her eyes with one hand and sighed heavily. "Earthmother's fat ass, you're impossible."

"Your ass is better." Niko smiled down at her. "*Immensely* better."

She slapped her palm down on the bed and glared at him.

He winked.

She bit her lip, and her eyes sparkled with tears again. "I don't know if I can do this."

Niko sat on the side of the bed. He traced one finger down her forearm. "Do you see that you need to?"

She shook her head, but didn't voice the lie. She knew. She had a right to be scared. Niko couldn't imagine what it would be like, forced to relive all the beauty of Trey with some future lover who poked at the psychic scar.

"You said we didn't know you, before. And Trey said we knew enough. Here's what I know." He put his hand on her belly, clenching his fingers compulsively in the give of her. "I know you're kind. That's the best thing about you. You're brilliant, and witty. You stand up for yourself, and you're loyal. You are brave, and bold, and so fucking hot in bed I've been hard all day remembering. You're both generous and aggressive, right as you need to be, and you've got a body made for worship. Your spirit is strong, and you're sad, but rebellious. How can you say I don't know enough to love you?"

She bit her lip, and laid her hand over his. "That's so beautiful, Niko."

Trey sat on the bed, his knees angling in toward Niko's.

"Trey? Why do I trust you so much?"

"I can't answer that, love. I'll never be in your mind that deep. But I can tell you that

I won't let you down. We'll take you to places you've never been. I'll be right here for you."

"I-I-" She licked her lips, her gaze flicking between him and Trey. "He—once he hit me."

Niko felt the top of his head lift off in absolute shock. He couldn't control it. His eyes popped out at her. "Jace?"

She nodded. "During sex. We were rolling together, and it was so hot. I felt absolutely drunk on him. We kissed so wildly, and his hands were everywhere. I grabbed him, scraped him with my nails, and his hand came down on my ass. It stung, shocking me still. And he growled, like he did when he was really turned on. He smacked me again, and again, and I cried out, pulling from him."

She sucked in a shaky breath, her eyes on the ceiling. "But he held me. He was so strong, and he hit me again, and I yelled no. 'No, please, stop, Jace!' I said, and he froze. I was shaking, my ass aching, my skin on fire, but ice inside. He let me go, very slowly, and I scrambled out of bed, rushing for my dress. I started to cry. He got up and left."

"That was the worst. That was the only time it was ever bad between us. He didn't come back to our roost for a week, and when he finally did, he just sat and watched me night after night. I didn't know what to say, so we were quiet. When I finally asked him to come to bed, he did, and held me when I cried. He never talked about it."

If Jace was still alive, Niko would rip his face off. Trey put a warning hand on his knee. Niko forced his thighs to relax.

Trey said, "A lot of people like a spike of pain in sex, Isabo, either the giving or receiving or both. What Jace did wasn't bad. The issue was that he kept giving pain to you after he should have noticed it wasn't pleasure. He must have been wracked with guilt."

She reached for the cotton blanket and drew it up over herself. Folding the edge across her breasts, she peeked at Niko under her lashes. "You like that. That's why you gave me a safe word."

"Yeah, I like that. Not all the time. But sometimes. I'll never ask that of you, Isabo."

She licked her lips, a quick swipe. "But I wanted it with you, Niko."

He froze, his mind racing over the previous night. Had he hit her and forgotten about it?

"When you fucked me from below, and bit my throat, and sucked so hard. It hurt. Quite a lot, actually. But I was riding you, and it was so perfect I didn't want to stop, and then the hurt was part of it." She lifted her hand and brushed the bruise on her throat.

Niko almost passed out from the throbbing blood pouring into his cock.

"What about you, Trey? Do you do that? Both?"

"Yes. Like Niko, sometimes I'm in the mood to give pain, or to take it. But we know each other very well. We're warriors, and there are ... frustrations we share. I wouldn't dream of subjecting you to that. If I ever saw an interest in you for it, I'd talk to you about it, set boundaries."

Niko shuddered at the thought of Isabo taking him when he was in the throes of angry sex. It didn't interest him. Using her body hard and using Trey's body hard were two different concepts.

Her voice got very small. "I said no to you earlier, and you didn't stop. My safe word is 'beach'."

Trey's voice thickened as he said, "I remember, my Lady. I swear on my honor to heed your wishes."

Niko cleared his throat, knowing he'd crack if Trey broke down. "What other kinks did you share with Jace? If that was the only time it was bad, then share some of the hotter memories." He stood and stripped off his boots, pants, and vest.

"Kinks? You mean, like times our muscles were sore?"

Niko paused in the middle of dropping his vest on the chair. He looked at Trey. Was it possible for a Trux warrior to be so scarred by abusing his Bonded in a fit of passion that he never explored with her again?

Trey stood and took off his shirt. "When did the bad time with the spanking happen?"

She was clearly distracted by Niko's nudity. He flexed for her, popping his pecs. He was glad he hadn't shaved, and a heavy scruff covered his jaw. He thought it would be good to explore how sensitive her breasts were.

"Isabo? Was it shortly after you were Bonded?" Niko prodded.

She licked her lips and nodded. "A few months."

Niko exchanged a grim glance with Trey. They'd only been together, what, a year and a half before Jace died. But enough time had passed to explain, explore. Her fear had really messed up Jace's head. Trey tossed his chin in the direction of the bed.

Niko eagerly slid in next to her, remembering her passion. She held her arms out, and pulled her legs open. He settled into the most perfect hug he'd ever known. She wrapped her legs around his hips, but her hands didn't quite meet across his shoulders. With a contented sigh, she melted beneath him. His marten curled, eyes squinted.

Trey took off his shoes but stayed on the edge of the bed. "I wasn't talking about a kink in your muscle. I forget you were a good, studious Guild daughter, protected in the University of Royal City. A sex kink is something people do in bed that's not in the typical actions most lovers share every night."

Niko kissed the bruise on her neck. "Like pain."

Isabo dropped little kisses across Niko's jaw. He wrinkled his nose and squirmed as little streaks of pleasure pinwheeled through him. Squirming with Isabo beneath him further heated his blood.

"Well, I only had one lover before I was sent to the Clans. He wasn't even worth remembering compared to Jace. I'm not sure I know what's beyond normal. I can say that Jace never left a bruise like this on me." She kissed across his throat, each warm press of her mouth and occasional flick of her tongue unfurling heat in his gut.

"Did he ever tie you up? That's a common kink."

She stopped kissing him to stare at Trey. "What for?" Her voice held so much puzzlement both men chuckled.

"To hold you still, to increase your pleasure, and as a game of dominance."

"Oh. No."

Niko took advantage of her turned head to kiss her ear. He nibbled along the edge and licked the hidden skin behind it.

She moaned. How lovely that it was a hot spot for her. Niko adored ears.

"You've mentioned a few times how you like a man's weight on you. You like being pinned down by a larger body. I think it's something for us to remember, Trey. Later."

"Yes. But for tonight I think we have to get into a more innocent frame of mind,

Niko."

"She wasn't very good at sucking cock." She stilled beneath him, and he fucked his tongue into her ear. On a breath, he whispered against her, "Don't doubt for a moment I didn't love it. You know I did." She shuddered, and he set his teeth gently in her lobe before thrusting into the delicate hole again.

"Did you suck Jace's cock for him?" Trey asked.

"Not often. He'd get growly. But he loved it when I fucked his face, and sometimes, well..." She tossed her head, trying to escape Niko's breath, but he wrapped one hand around the top of her head and held her still.

Her body softened under his, and he let his weight fully settle onto her. Oh, yeah, she might not be into pain unless the situation was perfect, but his little Black Cloud really liked to submit. That was probably why Jace had taken her ass so much. It was a safe way to dominate her. Niko shifted his hips and let his cock notch in her. He was supposed to wait for Trey's signal, but she was so fucking amazing he couldn't help himself.

"Sometimes what?" Trey prodded. He reached out and pinched Niko's hip.

Niko batted him away.

"What?" she breathed, dazed.

"What did he do sometimes, something naughty, like letting you ride his face?"

"Oh, he'd fuck my chest. I'd hold them together, and he'd slide between them."

Niko sank his cock into her, and groaned at the blessed heat. She squeezed him to a stop when he was only half in, and his thighs trembled with anticipation.

"Did you like that, Isabo?" Trey asked.

"Yes. I liked everything about Jace touching me. I just didn't like it when he hit me. And you called it spanking earlier, but it wasn't. It was much, much harder."

No more dwelling on bad memories. Niko looked over at Trey, met those beautiful eyes, and thrust into Isabo. Last night he hadn't been able to share the moment with such a connection. It pierced him, to see true passion on Trey's face as they prepared to share a woman again. It had been so long. And now that woman was Isabo. She was worth the wait.

Niko withdrew, and used more force this time, so deep he could feel the end of her pinch his tip. Her cream spread against his hips. Trey's eyes dilated, and he stood up, finally taking his pants off.

"Yes. Trey, yes," Niko breathed.

"Trey?" Isabo focused on Trey, and her walls clamped hard on him when she looked at Trey's cock. "You're not going to slide into battleform tonight?"

"No, Isabo. I promise."

Niko heard the sadness in Trey's voice, faint. For the thousandth time he wondered at the strength it would take to keep living when the woman you matched was out there with someone else. Niko tongue-fucked her ear again, lost in the pleasure of the folds while resting in her heat.

Trey lay on his side next to them, his hips by their faces. The smell of his lust was so familiar, but mingling with Isabo's, it was new. Her neck was already turned to face him.

Niko lapped at her ear, shivering at the moment. "Tell me what your favorite position was with Jace."

"This one. Him on top, heavy, rocking on me."

Niko turned his face and engulfed the tip of Trey's cock. Trey had a steeply angled

head, with a shallower lip than Niko's. His cock wasn't as thick, and when he was very hard, as he was now, he tended to curve to the right.

Isabo cried out underneath him. Her vagina rippled and swirled like it was trying to dance. Niko grunted and thrust into her, making sure his hips pinned her down.

"I want him, too!" She begged prettily.

Niko slowly drew off the tip of him, slurping him clean, but kept the side of him against his lips, where he nibbled on the silky-tight skin there idly. He stared Isabo down, daring her.

Her black eyes flared and she surged forward, her mouth opening to catch Trey between their lips. Niko pressed down, reaching to kiss her around Trey's tip. Her tongue flicked up from below, lashing his lower lip. Niko twisted his head, capturing Trey's tip from her smaller mouth, thrusting forward to take most of Trey's length inside his throat.

Easing slowly back, he was surprised when her little fist closed tight on the hair in the back of his head and pulled. She took Trey from him as his mouth came away. Her lips swirled over the tip of Trey before his head popped into her mouth. She turned her face more fully toward Trey's hips. Niko watched her lips stretch thin as she shoved Trey into her mouth, so greedy in her pleasure.

"You like sucking cock, don't you?" Niko purred.

She nodded, bobbing her head a bit on Trey, who held silent and rigid next to them.

"Didn't Jace ever tell you how to move?"

She shook her head. Licking up the flat ramp of him, she grabbed Trey by the base and held him from her face to glare at Niko. "Jace told me my every touch was rapture."

Niko chuckled. "Well, maybe we don't have the luxury of the perfect Bond you had. Maybe we enjoy a little technique to go with all that heat."

"Tell me." She demanded, and Niko fell a little bit deeper in love with her.

"Always studying. Why don't you reflect on what you learned last night? What worked for me?"

She blinked at him, licked the side of Trey thoughtfully, then said, "Sucking. When Trey finished you, he sucked you so hard, it looked like it..."

"Yeah, little Black. Tell me."

"It looked like it hurt."

"It didn't."

"He cut you with his battleform teeth. You were bleeding."

"I healed it in a moment. It was fucking raw, pure power, even more than usual, because of you."

She considered him, kissing Trey's cock softly. "I don't like pain. I don't want to give it, but I want to please him."

She was asking for help, and Niko smiled at her. "Let's play a game."

"Now?" She sounded irritated.

Trey's voice was tight where he curled near the headboard. "Didn't Jace ever play games with you in bed?"

Her lashes fluttered, and her eyes filled with tears. She nodded, silver trails painting over her face. "We would laugh together. He said I could make him laugh more than anyone. We had a system of points and rules, and whenever we scored eleven, we got to choose our reward."

Niko felt a pinch of jealousy again, and squashed it. He thrust into her gently,

making sure he held her arousal through her sorrow. "That sounds like fun." She lay beneath him, Trey curled around her head, his rigid cock in one fist waiting beside her cheek. Kissing her softly, Niko took the taste of Trey from her. "Did you have fun?"

She nodded. A sob escaped but she swallowed and kept talking. "It was. But we called it our race, not a game. That was our private code. Whenever he'd find me at some gathering in the Clan, he said, "Race ya" and I'd know he wanted me to get to the roost to make love."

Niko noticed Trey wasn't quite as long as he had been and sucked him into his mouth for a quick swirl of tongue. "Did you ever summon him that way?"

She sniffed. "Yes. In the beginning, I was almost insane for him. I couldn't keep my hands off him if he was in sight."

Jealousy for a dead man really wasn't very kind. Niko pulled out of her in one long rush, and she gasped. He rolled Trey onto his back, pulling him down the bed until he was even with Isabo, and almost drooled at the way his belly hollowed, leaving his ribs stark. He knocked Trey's legs wide and knelt between them. Trey's eyes glittered in the magelight.

Isabo sat up, wiping her face with the backs of her hands. "What are you doing?"

"We're playing one of my favorite games. I call it 'Dolly'." Niko winked at Trey, who bared his teeth at him.

"Dolly?" Isabo got to her knees beside them, and Niko swallowed at how she didn't even consider her nudity.

"I'm the dolly. Now you are, too. We belong to Trey. He's playing with us."

"I thought we were playing all together?"

Trey spoke, his voice low. "Didn't you ever pretend to be someone else for Jace?"

She reared back, insulted. "Jace loved me. He desired only me."

"Together. As a kink. Didn't you ever act out a role?" Trey petted her thigh, soothing her.

Since she was clearly mystified, Niko thought not. She glanced at him, her hair cascading over her chest to the tips of her pink nipples.

Niko swallowed on the need to work her breasts. "It's a game, a way to play with different movements and rules."

She looked at Trey, spread nude before her for the first time. She took her time about it, torturing them all. Her gaze returned again and again to their cocks, both hard and stiff, so close. "All right. I can be a dolly."

"What do you want to be, hands or mouth?" Niko asked.

She licked her lips. "Hands." Grinning at Niko she said, "I get two. You only get one."

The tremor of pure lust for her shook him to the soles of his feet. "Here's the rules. We're toys. We do what Trey tells us to, nothing else." He glanced over at Trey, whose steady stare promised retribution. His cock throbbed. "This time, my only body part is a mouth, and you've got only hands. The only area we can touch is between his hips. Ready?"

"So, like Follow the Lark?" she named a common children's game where quick obedience was required.

"Yeah. Only better."

"How do we start?"

"We don't. We wait for our owner to direct us. No more talking now. Game on."

Chapter Seven

She pouted, and he saw that she must have another question, but he turned his attention to Trey's cock, and focused on trying to summon patience. Usually, Trey made him wait, sometimes even masturbating before he gave his first direction.

"Dolly Isabo, put your palm against the tip of my cock."

Then again, Isabo was a new adventure for Trey, too, and patience was overrated.

Watching Trey watch Isabo unknotted something inside Niko. Finally. Finally. Not only was his lover healing, but they'd been blessed with a woman they could fully share, who wanted both of them.

"Now mark the spot on my dick where the lip that circles the tip has a gap."

She tilted her head, and nodded when she saw it. Her hair cascaded down onto where Trey's fist rested by his hip, and he jerked his arm away, crossing them both tight over his chest, gripping his elbows.

"That's the sweet spot, Dolly. Remember it."

Niko sighed, fully relaxing now that he knew Trey understood why Niko had brought this game up. Together, they were going to teach Isabo how to handle cock.

"Start in the sweet spot. Trace your finger along my rim."

She started out and jumped when Trey barked at her. "Slower!"

She concentrated, leaning forward slightly, her other hand bracing on the bed by his hip.

"Again. Touch me under the rim this time. Slowly."

Niko felt the haunting whisper of her touch on his own cock as he watched her finger trace Trey.

"Put your palm against my sweet spot. Yes. Now wrap your fingers around me. Tighter. Hold."

Her grip pulled his hole open at the top. Niko licked his lips.

"Dolly Niko, come lick my cock below Dolly Isabo's hand."

Niko bent, feeling his cock brush his own abs, and licked from the top of Trey's balls up to Isabo's fingers, which looked so little and cute against Trey's darkening cock compared to his own. He licked again, up the side, and then the other side. Then he zigzagged down.

"Turn your head, Dolly Niko. Open your mouth and fit me to your lips, sideways."

Niko shifted between Trey's legs so it wouldn't be such a twist, and set his mouth gently over the curve of Trey's cock.

"Dolly Isabo, press your thumb to the top of my hole without shifting your grip. Dolly Niko, suck me."

Niko sucked, slow, gentle.

"Dolly Isabo, take your other hand, and slide it under my balls. Cup them, but don't grip."

Trey jerked as she did so, and Niko kept the suction light.

"Niko, move your mouth up. There. Now set your teeth in me, and suck hard, you fucking doll."

He closed his eyes and followed directions. The smell of Trey was always sand and

water, oak and sun. He could feel the beating of a vein beneath his tongue.

"Dolly Isabo, take your hand off my tip, and grip my base, below Dolly Niko's mouth. Tighter. Tighter. You're not hurting me, so use your grip, pretty dolly."

Trey shuddered, and Niko wondered why *he'd* offered to be the dolly.

"Dolly Niko, lick me. Dolly Isabo, lift me up with your grip, hold me tall for Niko."

Isabo's breath fanned across Niko's shoulders as she leaned in. She was excited, and heat poured off her body. Niko licked Trey with all the love and awe he had. Slowly, he pressed long, hard, flat licks up one side, then flickered tiny back-and-forth stings with just his tip up the other. Always, when he got to the rim, he'd sink back down, leaving the tip dry.

"Dolly Isabo, hold my balls a bit tighter. Rub them with your thumb. Ahhhh. Fuck! Fuck you, Niko!"

Trey started to lose it, and Niko wondered if this was the right game to play after all.

"Dolly Isabo, soften your grip on my cock. Stroke me, use his spit. Dolly Niko, work my rim. Lick it, nip it."

Trey's hips were helplessly thrusting now, rising as his ass clenched beneath. Isabo's hand slid awkwardly up and down Trey, despite the spit Niko leaked out. She didn't quite get how to work the moisture beneath her grip, how to slide without catching. Trey put a shaking hand on hers, and showed her the flowing movement that had no end. It was all in the wrist, and she soon caught on. He took his hand away, and she moved over him like the watermage she was. Trey's hips swung urgently.

"Don't stop, Dolly Isabo. Niko, suck my cock. Just the top. Give her room to work."

Trey's cock had never seemed so long as it did in the next hypnotic moments. Niko sucked, again too gently, his tongue pressed to the long side of Trey's tip, and watched as Isabo milked his length. Her fingers rolled his bare balls firmly, stroking and rubbing them.

"Stop, both of you." Trey's voice growled. "Dolly Isabo, put both your hands on Dolly Niko's head. Work your fingers into his thick, soft hair."

What was this?

"Tighten your grip. Dolly Niko, relax your neck. Dolly Isabo, I want you to fuck me with Niko's mouth. You control his head. He can take all of me, don't worry about that. Push on his head, yeah, like that. Now pull him back up. Ah! Not too far! Again, push him down. You're stroking me with his mouth. Dolly Niko, you can suck better than that."

Niko fisted his hands on his knees, aching to shaft himself, but he was supposed to be nothing but Trey's toy mouth. Isabo's hands were firm on his head, not hesitating at all. She pushed and pulled him up and down Trey's cock with the same fluid movement he'd taught her. Niko slurped at the sting of Trey's first taste.

"Dolly Isabo, you've done so well. You please me greatly. I'll give you a reward." The purr of danger in Trey's voice made Niko close his eyes. "You can have a choice, new dolly of mine. You can finish fucking me with Niko, or you can stop."

Trey's hips were leaving the bed now, rising to meet Niko's hot mouth beneath every press of Isabo's bossy fingers. "If you stop, we'll all lie down together, and we'll touch. It will be very good. If you don't stop, I'm going to need a hard fuck. Harder than I'm willing to give to you, so Niko will have to take it."

She shoved Niko down farther onto Trey this time, and Niko swallowed around

Trey's tip in his throat. Trey groaned, hips trembling. "Isabo, be sure. Because if you finish fucking me with Niko, I'll use him to fuck you."

Niko's eyes almost crossed when Isabo's hands jerked in his hair, the sting going straight down his spine to his balls. She pulled Niko up just a short ways, and then shoved him down almost to Trey's base. Despite Trey's boast that Niko could take his full length, there was skill involved, and Niko focused on timing his breaths, shifting on his knees to align his throat.

Isabo's breaths came harder, hotter on the back of Niko's neck. Her breasts brushed the side of his face as she swung his head up and down. Sometimes she'd lift him up a fingerlength, and other times she'd barely move him enough to shift his lips.

"Dolly. Isabo." Trey gritted out, his back bowing up, arms still locked across his chest. "Dolly. You're fucking me. He's sucking me so perfect."

Isabo cried out and shoved Niko down onto Trey, lodging him deep in his throat. Niko moaned around Trey's gorgeous pole, his head stinging, but aching with joy at her use.

Then she hauled up on him, just as the pulse of final heat rolled up Trey's root.

He slurped loudly, surprised when she pulled him right off Trey and shoved him aside, swooping down to engulf Trey's tip herself.

Niko held Trey's base, pressing on his hips to remind him not to shaft Isabo's inexperienced throat. "Wrap your lips tight under his lip, set your tongue to his sweet spot."

Her lashes curled up, and her black gaze glowed bright, dazed as she jerked with the first pulse of Trey's come.

"Swallow, little Cloud. Just like you did for me. Swallow before you choke."

She did, and he saw her gaze go unfocused as she lost herself to the taste of him.

"Suck him. Hard now. Nothing you can do at this point will hurt him. Pull deep, yeah, use your cheeks like that."

Trey's balls were rolling, seething, and she moaned. A dribble of white escaped the corner of her mouth and snaked down Trey's skin.

"Swallow. Softer now, suck softer, and use that tongue against his sweet spot."

Trey roared, jerking hard, but Niko held him to the bed.

"Swirl your tongue over his head. Wipe up all the extra. Flick his hole."

Trey shouted again, twitching, falling slack.

"Now he's coming down, so you have to be gentle. Mouth him with your lips. Lap with the flat of your tongue. Hold him in your warm mouth until he's ready."

Whispering advice to Isabo about how to master Trey was the hottest thing he'd ever done in his life, and that included last night, which he'd thought couldn't be topped. Niko envisioned a series of mind-blowing nights of passion, where his boundaries and expectations were shattered again and again.

He crawled, shaking, up next to Trey, and lay down at his side. Trey's arms flashed out and grabbed him close. Niko held him, aware of the little mewls of excitement Isabo still gave as she polished Trey's cock.

"I think she's going to be fine," Niko whispered. "She loves taking direction. If she ever gets lost in sadness, all we have to do is dominate her, and she'll come back to us. She trusts us, and she's absolutely crazy in lust for you. We're going to be all right, Trey. You did it."

Shudders ran in a continuous wave through Trey. "Niko." It came out as two syllables.

"I'm right here."

"We haven't finished. She needs to be fucked, properly fucked, and walked through exactly how we aren't like Jace."

Trey's voice was so tight, so low, barely a breath. Isabo's slurping licks and eager humming easily covered their words.

"I'm scared, Niko." Trey jerked in his arms from some innocent ministrations of Isabo's. "I don't want to fuck this up. I need her so much."

"I'll do it."

"But—"

"It was the first part that gave me chills. I can take her through this last bit. I'll be fine. We'll do it together."

Trey hissed, shuddering. "I'm almost hard again. Get started."

"You? Some of us didn't get to come."

Trey kissed him, desperate, and Niko gave him the sharp blast of lips and teeth that always thrilled him. Their tongues tangled, his so sensitive from working Trey's cock, and Trey's lips lingered, sucking lightly.

Niko came out of the kiss to quiet. Trey looked down, and Niko saw her there, staring slack jawed, her chin gleaming, tears welling up in her pretty obsidian eyes.

"Did Jace kiss you like that?" Trey asked hoarsely.

She nodded. "He'd suck my tongue, and shift his mouth over mine, just like that."

"How would it start, when you fell into bed together?" Trey's eyes shot over to Niko's as he sat up, silently passing the job of stitching her wound closed to him.

"We'd kiss so deep. He'd rub my breasts, in little circles, around my nipple, until I begged him to touch me there."

"That's not how I shafted you last night. We barely kissed, and I hardly touched your tits." Niko coarsened his language, making his words rough.

She stared at him, blinking. "No. Last night was very different."

"I have a hairy chest." He rasped a hand over his jaw. "I need a shave." Normally, a simple daily spell could keep a body bare of hair if a person wished. But Niko had been preoccupied the last few days by a little Black Cloud.

Trey crawled behind her. He took her shoulders, soothing over her skin when she jumped at his touch. He led her to lie on her back in the center of the bed. She watched him carefully.

"Thank you for your beautiful kisses, Isabo," Trey said. "Did you enjoy that game?" She nodded.

Niko eased down so he was beside her, propped on his elbow. Trey mirrored him, propping his head up on his hand.

After they'd both had time to admire the fact she was even more primed, Niko announced with relish, "We're going to fuck you now. It's not going to be anything like when Jace would take you."

She frowned at him. "Well, since you're not Jace, I expect not."

Triumph swirled through him. "That's right. We're not Jace. And we're going to fuck you. Over and over. We're your lovers now. Not Jace."

Her eyebrows pinched in confusion. "What are you saying, Niko?"

"I'm saying last night I fucked into your body, and then I turned you over onto your knees and fucked you from behind. We talked to Trey, telling him all the juicy details through the whole thing. Then I put you on my lap and fucked you from below. You came apart in my arms, and it wasn't Jace's name you called."

She pulled away from him, and Trey put his hand over her mound. She jumped, looking between them.

"You're quiet when you come. Just a little moan. Your breath stops. Trey's a screamer, in case you didn't notice. Me, I can go either way."

Her breath came faster, and he could smell Trey in her mouth.

"What did you do when Jace made you come? Did you scream for him?"

She twitched, grabbing at Trey's wrist to stop his soft pets. Niko took her hand off him, and put it on his cock. "Let him touch you. Hold this if you need something. Answer my question."

She seemed dazed, either from him or from Trey's sexy fingers. "No. I didn't scream. I'd talk sometimes, through my orgasm. I'd tell him what it felt like. Nonsense. He'd growl. He liked it."

"I like it, too. A lot. Trey invented the Dolly game to please me, because it really lights me up to hear him talk sex."

"Why do you seem so angry?"

"I'm not angry, Black Cloud. I'm completely, thoroughly drowning in love for you. And now Trey has a promise to keep. We're going to fuck you, and I want you to know it's fine to say anything at all about Jace that you want. You can tell me how he moved differently, how he held you differently. But I'm not going to copy him. I'm not Jace."

Niko rolled into position on top of her, and bit his tongue at the glorious give of her warm body. She moaned. Trey knelt behind him, pushing her legs wide so Niko could spread his.

"When Jace played with your tits, did he ever suck them hard enough to make them burn? Did you ever make milk for him?"

"I—I—"

"I'm not wet enough anymore, Niko." Trey crawled up by their faces again, and Niko opened his mouth. Trey fed him his cock, and Niko sighed to taste her on him.

He pulled away. "Open up, Isabo. Time to help with my lube."

She never hesitated, lifting her face like a baby bird and closing to suckle like a kitten. She was a master now, working Trey's cock with strong pulls.

"He's going to fuck me." Niko couldn't help gliding against her folds, easing the ache on his tight balls. "He's going to push that long, hot cock in my ass, and when he pushes down on me, he'll drive me into you. I'm not going to pump you, and you won't be able to move with the weight of both of us holding you down."

Her eyes rolled back in her head.

"Did Jace ever use any of the wolf lube on you? They've got this oil that reacts to air. It feels like you've been coated in fire."

Trey pulled out of her mouth. "Answer him."

She had trouble focusing. "Yes. He used the lube on me sometimes. It's fantastic."

"Did he put it in your ass?"

She nodded. "But mostly on my chest. When he fucked my breasts."

Niko was in awe. "Fine. Maybe I spoke too soon about not copying him. Because

that is fucking inspired, is what that is."

Trey jabbed him in the ribs and he grunted.

"One more lick, lover." Trey asked, and she delivered, artfully swirling her tongue, working his tip confidently.

Trey walked on his knees back down between their legs.

Niko shivered, clenching his ass. "So, talk to me about how Jace used your tits. Did he ever drink from you?" He set his thumbs in the hollow behind her ear, and stirred the skin there with his nail. His tip kissed into the hollow of her vagina, waiting.

"I don't know. Sometimes he could make me come, just from kissing and touching me there. He said he swore he tasted me sometimes, but I don't know if I believe him." She angled her head, arching into the gentle scrapes he gave her in the secret pressure spot.

Trey drifted a touch down Niko's crack and he concentrated very hard on relaxing.

"Oh, you should. If women's breasts are stimulated enough, they can produce a tiny bit of milk without a baby." He captured her earlobes and rolled them in his fingers, pulling gently. Trey spread his cheeks, and put his hot, wet cock to Niko's ass.

She bit her lip. "I'm glad. I'm so glad I was able to give him that."

"I'm taking you now, Isabo." Trey said.

"What?" Her eyes flared wide as she finally experienced the dynamic of bodies they'd told her about. "Oh!" Her hands wrapped around Niko's biceps where he supported himself on either side of her.

Trey didn't hold anything back. His ass sizzled as Trey bored through it, shoving into his body.

"Did he ever just throw you down and suck you off, like Niko did last night?" Trey growled.

"No. He'd always kiss me first. He was gentle." She jerked as Trey's weight slammed into Niko's ass, driving a few inches of Niko's leaking cock into her.

"We're not gentle, are we, Isabo?" Niko grinned at her, but was afraid it came out as more of a grimace.

"Sometimes you are. When I need you to be."

Trey grunted, pulling back to his rim, hands slapping from Niko's cheeks to his hips. "Get down on her, Niko."

Niko took his weight off his elbows and knees, laying out on Isabo. She sighed, her throat tipping up in a way that his marten really adored. He nuzzled her, and her hands clasped the back of his nape, petting him.

"What did you love most about making love to Jace?" Niko asked, licking at her jaw.

"That he knew who I was, and didn't want to change me. He wasn't irritated by me." Her hands stilled, clenching tighter on the back of his neck. "This is beautiful! I remember him, and it's beautiful!"

Trey drilled in, and the sting was so good. A bit more of his cock lodged inside Isabo.

Her breath caught, but he wasn't sure if it was from sensation or her memories. "He didn't mock me, or belittle me, or control me. He admired me and my body." She turned her face to the side, her gaze going distant. "You're not Jace, but I want you."

Trey fucked relentlessly into Niko, pushing him almost completely into Isabo. Trey's body was hard, tight behind him, and Isabo so soft beneath him. There was no urge to

thrust for himself. He was content to be between them, to take Trey's hard edges and soften them for her. It was like flying.

"What else?" Niko asked, hanging on to his orgasm by a thread.

"He cared about me. Jace loved me," she whispered.

"You can miss him when you're with us. Isabo, I know." Trey trembled behind him, and a hot, wet drop fell on Niko's neck.

Niko bucked between his lovers as best he could, impatient with the sorrow, wanting more of their passion, and they both moaned.

Trey really began to move then, with deep exaggerated lunges, pulling Niko with him as he drew back, pushing him down before his inward press. Niko was going to lose his mind. Trey's heat at his back, the shimmering behind his balls, and Isabo's heat along his front, the wet suction on his cock. He wasn't sure, because he couldn't focus long enough between the twin pleasures, but he thought both his lovers were crying. This was a fucking stupid idea.

Niko kissed the bruise at Isabo's neck, more out of reflex than anything, but her arms wrapped completely around his head, clutching him. Then Trey's hand reached past him and cupped the side of her face. Trey laid full across Niko's back now. His breath scalded Niko's shoulders, since his position lodged in his ass put him lower against him. Isabo tightened beneath their combined weight, a long gathering of her silky-soft body's muscles.

Opening his mouth, Niko covered his bruise from last night, where he'd marked her because Trey wasn't able to, and sucked gently, as lightly as he'd taken Trey's cock earlier.

"Jace isn't here, Isabo," Trey panted past Niko's ear. His body slammed lightning fast, back-then-deep, rocking Niko into the undulating clamp of her cunt. "But we are."

Niko came in her, the way he'd denied himself last night. He hadn't earned her last night, and somehow she'd still been Trey's. But not anymore. She was his now, too. He clenched his ass to hold onto Trey, to increase the bite, and moaned into Isabo's pulse, sucking as best he could while every beautiful element danced through his cock. Earth, Air, Fire, Water, Flesh and Spirit.

Trey came, his hoarse cries jerking in time with the hot pulses of his cock. "Niko!" His shout barked into the cabin, slamming a bit more fire through Niko's balls.

Isabo panted, stiff and sweaty beneath them, and began to babble. "Yes. Yes, Trey. Oh, fuck me. Niko, so good." Her words were faint, almost lost between Trey's noise and the pounding revelation of the orgasm, but Niko pressed harder into her throat and struggled to hear. "Jace. Oh, Jace. So good."

Licking across her throat, Niko struggled under the load of Trey's dead weight, and got his hands up to clasp her face. Trey got a clue and lifted from him, still moaning. Blinking furiously—*focus by Ash*—Niko stared into the slack, blissful, empty eyes of his woman. Tears painted silver tracks over her golden skin, flaring from her temple down her cheeks, angling out to the sides of her face. Like battle paint.

He kissed her. He took her mouth hard, and kissed her lips open. She couldn't breathe and he didn't care. He'd provide enough. Licking over her teeth, he stroked down the length of her tongue and jerked when her nails set in his scalp. She followed him back into his mouth, and he sucked her, and kissed their lips flat, then soft.

He breathed into her as she gasped, and Trey's hands smoothed the pebbled flesh on

his back in long, steady strokes. He kissed her until he knew the height of her palate, the ridge below her tongue, the limit of her stretched lips, and her taste for the rest of his life.

"Who am I?" he asked, barely able to breathe himself. He kissed her small lips again, suckled the plump top one, rolled his teeth over it.

"Niko..." she breathed out dreamily.

"Who fucked us both?" He probed at the corner of her lips, and she opened, turned, nipped his tongue.

"Trey did."

"Who's your dead mate that's always welcome in our bed?"

She pulled back into the pillow, and he let her, rising from her steamy mouth. Trey's hands stilled, wide across his ribs. Her eyes were truly black, so there was no pupil to gauge. Emotion tumbled in their bottomless depths. A tear trembled like a diamond on the end of her lower lashes. He leaned down and caught it on his tongue, where it burst like a seed of life. He nibbled her lashes and they swept closed, feathering his mouth. He pressed a snow-gentle kiss to her eyelid, the arch of her brow, the outer corner.

"Jace."

It was only because he was a Trux that he could hear that word ease from her throat. He wasn't sure Trey could hear it from an armlength beyond, so he eased up from her.

She took a compulsive deep breath. "Jace will always go wherever I go. You accept that. You'll let me love him, even though you love me, too."

Niko nodded. He finally let himself take a deep breath of achievement. They hadn't lost her, and had done much to heal her, as well as bind her to them with only the poor tools of emotion and body.

Trey's hands curled into fists on Niko's back. "Yes, Isabo."

Then Isabo yawned, and Trey chuckled. Niko took his hips from hers, and sat on the other side of her. The air was positively icy compared to her heat. Trey passed him a cloth and they both set to wiping the sweat from her.

"I think it's because you already know a different kind of love."

"Hmmm?" Niko asked, mesmerized by the weight of her breast as he smoothed underneath it.

"You're both so willing to give him to me. You understand. I didn't think anyone would ever understand, and I'd be so alone." She bit her lip as Niko polished her nipple with the soft cloth. "I think it's because your love is so different."

Niko noticed Trey had gone still. He looked up, and came to attention. "Trey. It's been a big night," he warned the blank-faced man.

Trey stood up and threw the cloth on the table. Niko winced.

Isabo sat up. "Trey?"

Scrubbing over his short hair roughly, Trey paced to the tea set and drank a glass, then poured two and took them to the bed. His face was absolutely bland.

Niko tossed his back right away, but Isabo held hers. "What did I say?"

Trey stared at her a moment with seething golden eyes, then shook his head and turned to the wash bucket. The water burbled as he pulled it up the chute with his magecraft and began to wash himself.

Isabo looked at him, worried. "Niko?"

"Yeah, Isabo. Trey needs some time. We'll talk about it tomorrow. It's very late." And they'd already dragged her through an emotional storm. Niko felt good about it. At

the very least, she had a scab, if not a healed scar, over the wound left by Jace's loss. Trey's stung pride over Isabo's innocent words could go take a long deep swim. "Do you want to wash up before bed?"

She looked down at herself and her nose twitched. "Pfew. We're strong."

Niko tapped her nose. "We are. We also smell delicious. But perhaps we're a tad sticky."

Trey dumped the soapy water he'd used through the floor grid and summoned a fresh bucket. "All set over here."

Niko stood and helped Isabo up. She wavered, but managed. At the bucket, Niko and Isabo bathed, while Trey changed the tangle of sweaty blankets. His shoulders were still tight, and when he reached for his pants, Niko motioned to him with warrior's hand signals, *No. Stay.*

Trey sighed, and nodded.

Once again, they put Isabo against the wall. Trey slid in beside her first, and Niko slid in against the outer edge. Trey lay on his back holding Isabo to him, and Niko eased onto his stomach, his arms pillowing his head.

Trey looked over at him and said, "Thank you."

Niko rolled his eyes and said, "Good night."

"Good night," Isabo mumbled.

Trey doused the magelight, and his eyes flashed, almost echoing the light before the room faded black.

Chapter Eight

Trey glared at Fip. "No, you're not sharing my waterskin. Go get your own fucking skin. It's a five-minute walk. Or better yet, come prepared."

The older warrior looked at him in disbelief and Trey knew he'd snapped, but his words were fair so he stood by them and stared the man down.

Fip looked over at Niahdlu and shrugged.

The older warrior sighed. "You can share mine, Fip. Fuck, Trey, you're in a foul mood. I don't need to scope hostile territory with a hostile at my side."

Trey gave Niahdlu an "oh, please" look and continued to harness his gear. "Shel's late."

It wasn't remotely close to the real reason Trey was seething. He'd woken to Isabo's sleepy kisses, her drowsy eyes and her soft whisper, "Please fuck me, Trey."

Instead he'd gotten out of bed and watched Niko suck her off, his big hands all over those magnificent tits. They'd fed her and confirmed they'd join her for dinner before he walked her to Jace's roose so she could work on her scroll. Then Niko had lit into him.

"You're afraid to fuck her! Is that it?" Niko had sat at the table with his arms crossed, brown eyes dark with irritation.

"I'm not going to take her while I have a drop of anger in me. I'm really upset about her 'different love' crack last night. You managed to enjoy her just fine, and it was good for me, too."

"Oh, don't take yourself so seriously! It's just semantics, Trey!"

Niko was wrong. "It isn't. It's a basic concept and it hurts that she sees us that way."

"She's barely been with us. Shit, Trey, she didn't even know the word *kink*."

"She knows the word love. She knows we've given ours, and accepted hers, and she still puts our bond in some other category." *I think it's because you already know a different kind of love.* Her words had been a face full of ice after their exquisite night.

"I'm not doing this with you now. I only saw Brend at dinner last night. I'm going to spend the day with him. Orson caught him kissing a paid woman and had to put the word out that he's off limits until his birthday, and now Brend isn't speaking to him."

"Which one?"

"That little redhead."

"Mmm. Good taste. I think she's the one you would have chosen at Tahi's celebration."

"Fuck you, Trey."

His attempt to tease Niko out of his disgruntlement fell flat. Well, just because Isabo needed a lecture, he didn't intend to take it out on Niko. "I'm on recon today."

"Yeah, well, come back alive and I still say 'Fuck you.' You need to cut Isabo some slack. Not many women would have taken what we've done with her the last two nights so well."

"That's why she needs to not disrespect *our* love. That's why we love her."

Niko had stomped over to the hatch and pointed at him. "It would be nice if you could remember that." He'd slid down the ladder, leaving before Trey could get in the last word, which rankled.

Now Shel was late and Fip wasn't geared up properly and he was ready to rip a darkmage apart with his bare hands.

"Hey, guys. I'm in for Shel and ready to go."

Trey looked at the man moving toward them through the open pine forest with disbelief. Could this day get any better?

"Auberon!" Fip put his hands on his hips. "Where's Shel?"

"Sick. Bowels so knotted he can't stand up and needed a bodymage. Don't worry, I'm thoroughly debriefed."

Trey's summer cut was short, and just barely growing in. So the prickle running up his neck and over his scalp could be the steady breeze blowing across the Cove today, or it could be his instincts roaring at him.

Auberon and Shel were friends. It made sense that Shel would talk to him about this duty, and that he'd ask him to be his replacement. But Auberon had never been remotely polite toward Trey since he'd taken Niko as his lover. And Auberon was Isabo's Bonded's brother. He had no reason for his watercoaster to draw his whiskers back, baring their fangs, but that's what was happening.

"How'd he manage to debrief you if he was so sick?" Fip asked doubtfully.

"I said he can't walk, not that he can't talk."

Fip sighed, sitting down on the root of the maple they stood by. "Well, let's go back over it again then."

"I said I'm ready." Auberon's voice was tight.

Niahdlu shook his head. "Was there something in the water today that we missed, Fip?"

"I guess so. Now listen to me, marten, I'm team leader and I'm not going in with a team member I haven't fully quizzed myself. It's bad enough you haven't trained with us, but it's just a look-see so if you know the information, we'll go."

Auberon stared stonily at the maple.

"I'm serious. Sit down, and listen."

He sat.

"Niahdlu, we have time for you to go get an extra waterskin for me. Thanks." He pointed at Trey. "Map, please."

"Where's yours?" Trey asked testily.

"In my head. I just know you're fussy enough to bring yours anyway. Now give it."

"Fussy. Now there's a word for it. Maybe pretty soon he'll wear a necklace when he pretends to be a cunt."

The ice of battle flowed through his torso. He bent his knees.

"That's out of line, Auberon," Fip snapped. "You're here on a duty. That's your focus."

Auberon stared at Trey and the last of his suspicion solidified into knowledge that Auberon was here because of him. Trey stared back, both men unwilling to look away first.

"Auberon, if you can't show me right now that you're putting this mission first, we're done." Fip's voice dripped with disgust.

Auberon turned his head toward Fip, only dragging his gaze from Trey's at the last moment. "Ready. Sir."

Trey listened as Auberon gave all the right answers. The final clue that proved he

was up to something was how well he knew the map. Only careful review gave that kind of background. He'd prepared for this.

Niahdlu returned and threw in a few questions and agreed that Auberon could fill in. They all stood, shifting their belts.

"Acceptable, Trey?" Fip asked.

"Sure," Trey said easily.

"Then let's go. Niahdlu, you're on point behind Trey now. Auberon's with me."

Auberon spun to Fip, who raised one gnarly brow. "What? You think I don't know you have a hard-on for Trey's pretty eyes? Fuck you, Auberon. Mission first. You're with me."

Auberon ground his teeth so hard, they all heard it. Trey stayed ready, but then the shorter man breathed deep, and his shoulders eased. "Yes, Sir."

"Lead out, Niahdlu," Fip waved his hand.

Niahdlu headed toward the Cove's sifting stone just over the rise, and Auberon sneered at Trey before falling in behind him. Trey jumped when Fip put a hand on his shoulder.

With his other hand, Fip signed, *Beware. Back.*

Trey nodded, and followed after the older watercoaster. What was going on? Auberon had gone to some trouble to arrange to be alone with Trey in hostile territory. All the warriors were grouped in four-to-six year cohorts for training. Since the two Clans were among the smaller groups and shared a clanhome as well, they mingled their youth. Trey was seven years older than Niko, and had known Jace. He didn't know Auberon very well, but knew Niko had gone through his youngling years with him. Tonight, he'd have to ask Niko for more information about Auberon.

* * * *

Trey laid on the sand and let the warm afternoon sun soak into his tired bones. The water lapped lightly, and a hawk, just a beast, cried out from overhead. It was good to be home. Every time he went among the humans, he was struck by overwhelming gratitude that he'd gotten out and found his Clan. Stretching, he relaxed into the beach. He'd been shorted on sleep lately. He smiled. It had been worth it. Breathing deeply, he cleared his mind, and waited for his lovers.

Niko's scent rode the air, wearing his fur, and he heard her laughter at the same moment. They were early. He propped himself on his elbows and watched as Niko ran in vast leaping bounds, his brown fur glistening with vitality.

Niko landed halfway up a red pine so hard the tree swayed. He chattered at Trey in greeting.

"Hey," Trey said.

Isabo came panting up, spraying sand with each step. "Did you see him? I lost him. But I was supposed to follow him to you, and he kept spinning me around in the forest."

Trey caught his breath. She wore pants today instead of the loose, robe-like dresses she favored. The green top stopped at her hips, and the blue pants were a light weave. Her breasts were clear, round globes, and her waist was defined, the pants skimming her thighs and ending at her knees. His erection was instant, and painful in his leathers.

"Well, you found me so I guess he did his job."

She braced her hands on her thighs, bending over to catch her breath. Her hair was in

a braid instead of a foxtail, and it fell to one side. Immediately, several sexual uses for that braid sprang to mind. Trey blinked. He was used to the instant erection whenever he saw Isabo. But the fact that he could now act on it, and be accepted, was still astonishing. Humbling. Thrilling.

Niko chattered and bounded around her knees, rubbing against her and curving away before she could catch him. She laughed. Shit, she had a beautiful laugh. It was just like her, open and delicate and glowing.

It always depressed him to remember his years in the stinking alleys, among the exiled humans. His mother had been a paid woman, quickly forgotten by his father. But she'd done her best, and after she'd died when he was just ten, he'd gone on the journey to discover his father. Not that the man had been the stuff of dreams. But he'd gotten out, and now he lived for the Clan. Running these recent missions into the Cities' Dark alleys stirred his anger toward his father. It had been hard today, focusing on the mission, keeping one eye out for Auberon, and closing off his past. Watching his lovers cleansed the last of the ugly life he'd witnessed today away.

She dropped the backpack from her shoulders, and to his astonishment, flung off her top in one movement. She wore a halter under it, an undyed cream. He knew she wore it to ease the weight of her breasts, but it also lifted them, plumping them together to gift-like proportions.

"What a glorious day! Trey, I'm so glad you're home safe. I came as soon as I heard there was fighting. Niko told me you were relaxing on the beach, and assured me you were fine, but I insisted on checking with you. Let me see those bruises." She moved toward him, her joy fading with concern. She never reached him.

Trey flowed up and around onto his feet before his brain even registered the scent. *Auberon*. Niko shimmered into human form, crouching, one hand braced on the beach.

"What is it?" she asked, turning to face the forest as they did. All the City women grew to accept the forest, trusting the warriors who kept constant patrols to clear the more dangerous mage-beasts away, but they never lost their wariness. Trey approved. Let her respect the Wild. However, it wasn't nature that was the concern right now.

Trey moved until he was in front of her. He'd gathered information that afternoon. He'd known that Auberon watched over her after Jace's death, but he hadn't known she was so bad he'd had to feed her. He'd moved into Jace's roost and slept with her for months. Everyone thought well of him for that.

It had been harder to find someone who told him there were eventually arguments, after Isabo grew healthier. One woman told him Auberon had cut Isabo's hair as she slept. Another told him he chose all her clothes. Trey wasn't a marten, so he'd have to send Niko to find more. He was sure there was more, and he was livid with Bry. The Alpha had chosen the warrior over the woman, and when it had gotten bad enough, her spiritmage had intervened. Bry had been forced to let her move to River Mountain to escape Auberon's bullying.

Auberon came out of the forest, standing even with the red pine. He was dressed like Trey, in boots and leathers but no top. Fip and Auberon had missed most of the action, and Auberon only had some bruised ribs. He noted the man hadn't been to a bodymage though. He flaunted the black bruising like a badge.

"Auberon!" Isabo snapped.

Clearly his ploy for sympathy fell on blind eyes. Fear poured off of her in waves, and

Niko crept a bodylength closer to the man. His thick, shaggy brown hair swirled in the breeze, but Trey could easily imagine it moved with the same rippling anger he had.

A new scent was faint, but the day was too windy for them to really stay hidden. Two warriors, Shel and Estin, both martens, were creeping in from each side of the isolated crescent beach. Trey was furious his sensual afternoon idyll had just gone through the grid, like soapy water to the forest floor.

"What are you doing here?" Isabo demanded.

She crossed her arms, and seeing her protect her body from Auberon made Trey shake. Had he assaulted her? Surely, it was impossible that Bry would let it go that far. Trey swayed, growling.

"You." Isabo turned her head so fast her braid flared. She pinned him with a cold gaze over her shoulder. "Stay out of this. I've got it." She looked back at Auberon and snapped, "Niko. Stay right there."

Niko had crept half the expanse again closer to him and was within leaping distance. The muscles in his back rippled down the curve of his ass and flank as he readied.

"Isabo, what are you doing with these perverts?"

She gasped. Ah, such an innocent. "None of your business! You're not welcome here, Auberon."

The man's head snapped back as if she'd struck him. "I told you I was sorry. Don't be angry. These aren't the proper men to scratch an itch with."

"You're always sorry." Isabo put her hands on her hips. "Go away."

"Isabo, I will not. Please, Feather. You know I love you. I've shown you how much. Jace wouldn't want this. Don't you remember how he hated Trey?"

Trey felt nauseous. He could almost taste the manipulation in the air, the words were so calculated.

"Trey is my friend. My lover. And Jace isn't here." She bit the words at Auberon, and the man paled, his auburn hair stark around his white face. She turned and stomped over to her shirt.

Auberon's lips lifted as he snarled. "How *dare* you! Jace gave his life for you! Only a few months ago, I held you, willing you to live. I fed and bathed you, talked to you until my voice was gone."

Trey knew Auberon's friends were in position on either end of the beach. He prayed Niko wasn't so focused on Auberon that he didn't notice. What was going on here? The instincts that had saved him growing up among human wildlings had helped him survive the ambush today in the alleys. And once again, those instincts were spitting and hissing that this was very wrong.

Isabo beat the sand from her shirt and put it on. She sighed, irritably. But fear still rode the air. "I know you did, Auberon. And it was almost two years ago. But then you told me what to eat. What to wear. When to sleep and who to talk to. You touched me when I didn't want it, and wouldn't leave my bed. Crandall said—"

"Crandall was a fool! Are you saying some spiritmage you'd met a handful of times knows you better than your own family?"

"You can't choose your family, Dad always said." Isabo spoke with irony. "Well, Jace was my family. And the day you got on your knees and begged me to let you—"

"I apologized for that! A thousand times!" He beat his fist against the tree, and the bark shattered.

Isabo clenched her fists down by her sides. "Auberon, you don't control me! You have *no right*." She stepped forward, shouting at him, and Trey held himself rigid to keep from hauling her back.

"Jace was my brother! Your Bond passes to me! How can you let these Clan traitors put their foul hands on you?!" Auberon stepped forward onto the sand.

Isabo's fear scent exploded, and Niko lunged, looming over the shorter, thicker warrior with his bulk. "Go," he said softly, standing chest to chest with him.

Auberon spun away from him, rushing off into the woods, and Niko followed.

"Shit! Niko!" Trey stepped up and met Shel's rush.

Shel stopped just short of impact, as Niko had. He grinned tauntingly, jerking as if to run left, then right.

"Trey!" Isabo screamed.

Trey whirled to see Estin trying to herd Isabo away, using outspread rigid arms and his body to move her. They were all following the letter of the law. Not a hand was being laid on her or them.

Trey tried to rush forward, but Shel was there, swaying, grinning, always darting marten-quick in front of him. Unless Trey was willing to slam his body against Shel and shove him, he couldn't move forward.

"Go ahead. Hit me." Shel wanted him to be the aggressor, taking the bulk of a very serious punishment.

Control. Honor. "This is wrong. A woman's will above our own."

Shel kept grinning like an idiot.

"Get away from me!" Isabo shoved Estin, planting her feet.

A woman had struck out at a warrior in anger. Now he had reason to "calm" her. Estin touched her arm, and the bodymage spell to sleep rocked Isabo's neck back.

At the same moment, Niko vaulted out of the trees, changing forms from marten to human in mid summersault. He grabbed her, and threw her with a spinning rush. She rolled in the air, her body slack, a solid ten bodylengths out in the lake.

If she'd been awake, it was sound tactics, removing her from the fight. But Niko had missed Estin's attack, coming in from behind. *He'd just thrown their spelled-unconscious Isabo into the water.*

"No!" Trey flashed to beastspirit form, moving before she landed.

Shel did, too, in a flurry of martin-red fur. The ground swirled as Trey's orientation lowered to the ground, his reflexes faster, his senses empowered. His watercoaster despised the being in front of him, but remained focus on their prey in the lake. Leaping and bounding, they wrestled without using claws or fangs, using their weight to keep pushing at the other. In a matter of heartbeats, Trey plowed over the top of him and made it to the wet sand. No marten could beat a watercoaster in the water. Nothing could.

Flexing his body, he rushed forward into the shallows with leaping bounds. Pain slammed into him, and he flew through the air. Before he landed, he knew his tail was broken. The wind knocked out of him when he hit the beach. He crawled toward Isabo despite the fact he couldn't breathe, and even more urgently, wanted to rip their enemies' faces off. But he held down the aggressive predator's instinct, held to Isabo. He had to get to his woman.

"Enough!" the bellow was adamant, and Trey whipped to see Bry striding out of the trees. The four other men locked in a tableau. Niko was held to the sand, bleeding from

the mouth. Auberon's massive fist was raised up in mid-blow, and Estin's cheek was gone, gushing blood around the stark view of his teeth.

Oh, good. Niko had done the ripping off of the face. His watercoaster was thoroughly pleased at the damage the men showed. It was a good beginning, but they needed to die. The Alpha's command twitched over Trey's skin. But *he* wasn't a marten. He gasped a breath through his stunned lungs, and scrabbled into the water. His tail spiked with pain, but he didn't spare a moment to heal.

He twisted, spiraling to where Isabo drifted just below the water's surface. Her eyes were closed. Trey refused to think. The possibility of her death was banished, and he summoned a waterspell to lift her high. The river wolf faded in a coughing bite of pain as the broken tail was healed through the brute force of his change into human form.

Wrapping his arms around her, he felt for her heart. There. Turning her over, propping her forehead on his shoulder, he called the water from her lungs. His power faltered. The battle outside the City earlier today had been short and furious, and he was drained.

He focused, reached for his lesser bodymage talents, and commanded her body to *Breathe*. Her lungs rasped with a ghastly wet sound, and he was off. Stroking hard for the watercoasters' shore, he ignored Bry's order for him to return. Fuck that.

Sending out a command, he grabbed an eel, and summoned it toward them. The eels were the cattle of a watercoaster. They were food, friend, toy, and beast of burden. The one who came first was too young, and he cursed as he kept pulling hard in a deep side-stroke. Human forms were so *slow* in the water.

Another came, and Trey shouted with triumph. "Thank you! Come on!" This one was old, so the skin was rougher, but he gathered the girth between his legs and drew Isabo up into the cradle of both arms. The eel flowed through the water fast enough to leave a wake, undulating along the surface. He had to drop her legs a few times to steady himself, but he held them upright. Balanced on the spine of the eel as it skimmed them across the water, Trey bent over Isabo and willed heat into her.

When he came in sight of his clanhome he cried out, "Bodymage!"

He knew how to clear a person's lungs of water and start them again, but he was tired, and terrified, and wanted the best. How long had it taken to get her to safety? Ten minutes? How long had it taken to get her out of the water? Two? Warriors splashed into the water toward them, and he threw his leg over the eel's back the second they made the shallows, passing her to his friend Karl.

"She's spelled asleep, and was thrown in the water."

Karl nodded, striding hard for the beach. Trey fell onto his ass in the water, passing a hand over the disappearing tail of the eel in thanks. The old ones didn't like to come to the surface. Another warrior offered his hand, and Trey took it, gaining his feet.

He managed to get to shore, never taking his eyes off the crowd that gathered around Isabo on the beach. Collapsing to his knees, he let Oksanna work over her, but couldn't keep from reaching to put his hand on her thigh. She was cold and he clenched his jaw on a roar of rage.

When she took her first clear, easier breath, Trey whispered, "Thank the Six." He meant it, sending his energy out into the air and earth in gratitude.

Oksanna looked over at him, concerned. "This is a very strong sleep spell. I'd rather let her ease out of it. Let's get her warm and dry."

"My lodge."

There was a beat of silence as everyone looked at him, but Oksanna nodded. Trey's arm gave an involuntary shudder, of muscles held tight too long.

"Karl, will you take her for me?"

"Of course." Karl bent and stood, holding her carefully. He rolled her until her head flopped onto his shoulder.

"Thank you, Oksanna." He put his heart into it and she nodded, gray eyes wide.

"Will you check on her later?"

She nodded again.

Trey led the way, staggering several times. It had been too long since he'd ridden an eel, and he certainly hadn't done it clear across the Cove without hands. He ducked through the round door and clattered down the stairs into the hollow beneath a hickory. The roots speared through the ceiling. Many were polished and dangled little trinkets from his childhood, items that had once meant wealth. The green glass window high in the eaves tinted the room the color of water. Isabo liked cool colors. She'd wake up in his bed, and know she was safe.

Trey pulled the blankets back and Karl laid her on the bare bed. Turning to his trunk, he pulled out a winter robe from the bottom. It was fluffy. Niko's mother had given it to him a few years ago on his birthday. He shoved the robe at Karl, pulled Isabo into his lap on the edge of the bed, and peeled off her wet clothes. This was not how he'd imagined taking her halter off, just a short time ago.

"What happened, Trey? Isn't this a marten widow?" Karl held her steady while Trey put her arms into the robe.

"It's a mess, Karl. A hot fucking mess. She's our lover, and her Bonded's brother attacked us. She's afraid of him, yet Bry has been letting Auberon have access to her."

Karl helped swing her around onto the bed. "You're saying this brother was what, hunting her? Right here in the Cove? And Bry knew?"

Trey covered her gently, tucking the covers around her. "He knew. I left Niko in a bad situation. I've got to talk to Vos."

"Vos? Are you going to call for censure?"

He gathered up Isabo's clothes and wrung them out over the drain, hanging them on the pegs. His spine ached from the echo of his beastspirit's broken tail. Thinking over Karl's words, he realized the only path he had. His instinct had been to bring her here, but she couldn't stay. This was still part of the Cove. He felt chilled with horror. He was going to have to stand against Bry, the Marten, the Clan Alpha.

Turning to Karl, he met the man's steady brown eyes. They were darker than Niko's, lighter than Isabo's. "Karl, can you get her to your lodge without being seen?"

Karl nodded. "You think the Marten will come for her?"

"He's lost that right. If I had my way, she'd never step foot on their shore again. You're sure? You'll stand against Bry?"

"Well, I don't know about that. I'll put her in my room and become scarce when everyone starts to ask where she is. How's that?" Karl held out his arm.

Trey grasped his forearm with a surge of relief. "That sounds good." He looked around. He'd wanted her to wake here, but it was the first place they'd look. "She'll be frightened when she wakes up."

"Want me to get my mom to sit with her?"

Trey shook his head and headed up the steps. "The fewer people risking rebuke for me the better. Get ready. Here comes your distraction."

He strode out into the forest floor roaring "Vos! Watercoaster! Vos!" He didn't have to act at all, just let loose the fury he'd buried to get Isabo to safety.

A small crowd was still gathered at the shore, and others hovered near his door. He moved toward the center beech, letting his fury build. A group trailed after him, calling questions, calling for calm.

When he got to the huge old tree where his Alpha usually held meetings, Vos strode in from the south. "What is it? I hear you've pulled a woman out of the lake?"

Trey shuddered at the sense of safety Vos wrapped around him. He fell to his knees, and offered his throat, a formal pledge Vos had never asked for except from newly confirmed young warriors.

Vos brushed his fingers over the pulse of Trey's heart, claiming him, and Trey dropped his head forward, blood pounding with grief and confusion.

Chapter Nine

Vos crouched, resting one hand on Trey's clammy shoulder. "What is it?"

"I defied Bry. He'll come for my lover. He's been letting one of his warriors psychologically abuse her, possibly more. We were attacked by them, and they may claim we attacked first. It's true she's a marten widow, but I won't send her back, Vos. I won't."

Vos drew in a breath, hearing the promise to go into exile over Isabo. He stood up, drawing Trey with him. Energy flowed through him like water, and he was able to draw a clean, smooth breath. Vos sat on one of the polished trunks carved into benches, and Trey sat too, blatantly accepting his support, leaning into him.

Vos' first question made Trey love him even more. "Is Niko safe?"

"I don't know."

"The woman? She's well?"

"She's still under a sleep spell they forced on her, but Oksanna has healed her."

Vos sucked in a breath. "They put her to sleep then threw her in the lake!"

The warriors gathered around muttered and shifted in outrage.

Trey sighed. "No. They were trying to get her away from us, to taunt us into an attack. She hit Estin, and he spelled her. But Niko came in from behind at the same moment. He threw her in the lake to get her clear, but he didn't know about the spell. It took me several minutes to get past Shel. I was attacked from behind, my tail broken, probably an earthspell."

Vos pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fuck."

Pretty much.

"I'm glad she's well now. Were you harmed in any other way?"

He'd had ten years taken off his life, did that count? "Niko was held to the ground and beaten. Estin was wounded, too. I don't know who threw the first punch."

Niko. What did you do in the woods when you followed Auberon? Did you throw us away in a fit of anger? Niko had always been the more volatile of them. Trey's rough childhood had taught him a measure of control that didn't come in any other way except survival. Trey pressed a hand to his chest in fear. If Niko was banished, he'd go, too. But oh, it would take the heart from him, to leave Vos, leave the Clan.

"And then Bry showed up, I take it?"

"Yes. He ordered a halt, but I went for Isabo. He called me to shore but I brought her here." He never wanted her anywhere near Auberon again.

"You have the most fascinating lovers, you know that?"

Trey threw his Alpha a dark look.

Vos shook his head. "Swear to me you gave them no aggression."

Trey hesitated, unable to lie to his Alpha.

"Sand and Ash, Trey!" Vos cursed.

"When I'd gone to my fur, and Shel was trying to keep me out of the water, I got rough. But no claws, no teeth. Isabo was—" *Isabo, drowned. Her lashes dark against her skin, her braid floating above her while she sank toward the dark bottom.*

Trey burst to his feet. "It was a planned assault. They tracked us, and then boxed us

in. They taunted us into separating, and Estin used his body to push her away from us. He'll say he never laid a hand on her, but it was force. I stand by my right to use force in return when her life was in danger."

Vos stood. "All right. Let's go see what's happening with Bry." He waved to a warrior standing silent at the edge of the gathering. "Tell my Domina she has charge of the camp." He caught the eyes of his Shield, his second-in-command and the only other alpha warrior allowed to live in the clanhome. "Zeru, with me. You've got charge of Trey while I speak to Bry."

Zeru's hand fell heavy on the back of Trey's neck.

"If I didn't attack when my lovers were dying and bloody, I won't attack now, Father." Trey shrugged from the man's grip.

"Emotions are like foam on the waves for you, as natural and impossible to catch."

Trey sighed. His father never believed Trey had proper self-control, and highly disapproved of Niko's temperament. Trey had been a new youngling when his father became Shield, just Brend's age and recently among the Clan, and it was his opinion that passing those trials broke something in his father, making him into empty stone. He'd laid that relationship to rest a long time ago. They had dinner twice a year, on his father's birthday and at some point during Autumnal. For the rest, he was Vos' Shield.

As Vos led them away, dispersing the crowd, Trey fought not to look at Karl's lodge. Karl would watch over her. Trey had been on many duties with him, difficult ones, and he trusted him. *Was she awake? Was she crying? Was she mad at him?*

Walking the wide path through the forest that served as a loose barrier between the Clans, pounded flat by generations of Truxet, Trey marveled at how much his life had changed, all because he'd seen Niko and Isabo on the same beach. Because of their care for his feelings, he'd had that powerful revelation. Because he'd dared to ask Niko to go to her, and because he'd read her right, and she'd agreed to solace, he'd been able to see them sleeping together. Because she was so sensual and lonely, she'd admitted to a fantasy and let Niko satisfy her. Because she was so generous, she'd talked him into being included.

Niko had been there for him, leading him through the storm and shadows left from her brightmoon ceremony. Trey had stood in a line of men, and watched her smile at another. But he finally let go of that pain, shedding it as naturally as the orange leaves fluttering through the forest.

Because Niko had seen her pure spirit and fallen for her too, both men were able to ride her pain and shape it into something healthier, something she could use as a strength, instead of a wound. He'd been so shockingly proud of her as she'd faced Auberon and claimed him in the same breath with Jace.

He and Niko had a friendship based on passion and respect, and Isabo slid right in with them. Not a wedge, not a cure, but a wonderful third. Three passions, three friends. Trey caressed the smooth spot on the old pine, where everyone gripped it to cross the brook. *If he and Niko went into exile for attacking a brother warrior, would Isabo go with them? Should they take her if she was willing?*

"Heads up." His father angled wider on the path, and Trey knew it was so he had a clear line of attack to get in front of Vos.

Bry strode toward them. To Trey's surprise, he was alone. It was a great breach of protocol for the Alpha to leave his territory without a guard.

"Does she live?" Bry asked.

"Yes." Trey and Vos spoke at the same time. Vos gave him a look and his father jabbed him in the side.

Vos held out his arm for greeting, but Bry stepped right up to him. Zeru surged forward, hovering at Vos' shoulder, but Bry merely closed his arms around Vos, and Vos returned the hug.

"I'm old, Vos. I will not hold the Clan at this Autumnal."

Trey sucked in a breath in time with his father. Passing the mantle of Alpha was momentous.

Bry set both of them with an icy stare. "Which will of course be for me to announce in my own time."

Vos held his arm as he stepped away. "This sounds like bad business, Bry, but do not take it to heart. We didn't lose anyone. Tell me."

Bry turned and walked toward the marten land, and Vos fell into step. Zeru continued to hover just behind them. Trey had never been privy to such a meeting, and didn't know whether or not to fall back or keep up. In the end, he moved forward.

Bry sighed. "I *did* lose a warrior over this, but I should have lost him long ago. I will put the rogue down at sunset, when my warriors who are scattered to duties have had a chance to return."

Fierce satisfaction raged through Trey. He wanted Auberon's blood.

"Rogue? He truly attacked?"

"No. It was much worse. He systematically and subtly attacked Isabo, and her friends, and wore on her. I called the Clan together and asked for those to step forward who felt they had witnessed a breach of honor from Auberon, toward Isabo or anyone else, and fully half the Clan moved forward."

The air blurred, and four slashes glared white in a shivering tree. That fast, Bry's claws came and went with his alpha ability to partially shift. Not for the first time did Trey wish he could do that.

"Half my Clan knew I was willfully blind to a warrior lacking in honor! And two more warriors were willing to help him!"

What about Niko?

"And was there provocation? Is there anything I should know about my own warrior's involvement?"

Trey held his breath, waiting for Bry to damn him with Shel's account.

"Of course not. Trey and Niko showed excellent restraint, and were protecting Isabo." Bry stopped and turned on the trail, eyeing Trey coldly.

Trey noticed for the first time how heavily lined his face was, how loose the skin under his chin.

"But there was provocation of a sort. I asked you before and you shrugged it off. What are we to do with their unnatural bedplay?"

Trey couldn't control the skin beside his nose as it twitched in the beginning of a snarl. Watercoaster crouched, hissing at the thought of being separated from Niko.

Vos turned and looked Trey up and down.

Watercoaster rolled, begging his Alpha from within Trey.

"It is certainly not typical, but it is far from unknown. Such partnerships are rare but have a long history. As long as the men hold to their honor and duty, I see no reason to

view them as a provocation."

For a breathless moment, Trey was filled with relief.

Then Vos turned to Trey's father. "What do you think, Zeru?"

Trey knew exactly what his father would say because his father had told him four years ago that he thought it would be better for the Clan if he and Niko slept alone.

"They agitate the other warriors, and are the focus of much speculation and night whispers beyond the Twin Clans. But both of them have brought us honor in their performance of their duties. I can see benefit in separating them, but there is no doubt they will see it as a punishment. They're both emotional people. I don't know if their abilities will suffer or not, out of spite or in truth."

Trey faced his father more squarely. "I would never shirk my duty to my Clan just because I disagreed with my Alpha."

Zeru narrowed his eyes. "Really? Can you deny that you would abandon this Clan if Niko was banished? Is that not shirking your duty?"

"We would both still perform missions for the Clan, no matter where we lived or what our status. How about the fact a father forgot his son in the name of duty? Would you rather I live like the stone you are?"

Zeru didn't even hesitate. "Yes."

Vos put a hand on his arm. "Shield."

Zeru pivoted and gave a head bow to Vos.

Vos eyed Trey. "What is going on with Isabo? You were a match. I remember this, Trey, and it is a great part of why I have tolerated Niko. But Isabo is Bonded. Frankly, I'm shocked she's with you. Or is she with Niko?"

Trey couldn't believe this was happening. "I thought the reason we are standing here is because a marten tried to force his will on a woman."

"Answer your Alpha!" Zeru barked.

Trey looked over at Bry, who was now leaning against a tree. He stared like Trey was some sort of curious new bug.

"Isabo is with both of us. I don't give a fuzzy's fart that some warriors are 'agitated' or 'shocked' about us." Trey stared directly at his Alpha, and it was the hardest thing he'd ever done. "Who I love has no bearing on whether or not I can track darkmages, repel a wildling attack in an alley, or defend the clanhome from glindingshans." All things he'd done in the past week.

Trey switched his furious stare to Bry. "Where does it stop, Marten?"

Zeru hissed at this blatant disrespect, stepping forward, but Vos held out his arm and Trey kept going.

"Whose private decisions will you delve into next? What about Orson? He ties Kari up and uses her for hours. What about Max? He visits four paid women a night."

Bry spoke coldly. "Those are men and women, boy. Don't sass me."

"Well, I don't like Max. He doesn't even worry about their pleasure. I think he's dangerous and crazy. I don't want to eat near him. I get up and leave if he comes to my stretch of beach. How about you do something about this discontent of mine, instead of making Niko and me the focus because we bother *you*?"

The words hung, a blatant challenge in the crisp air. A leaf fluttered between them, but Trey kept his gaze on Bry.

Bry held the stare impossibly long, his heartbeat steady, Trey's furiously hard.

"Trey." Vos rebuked him and Trey blinked, staring at the ground.

"Let me ask you a hypothetical question," Vos said quietly. "You went to one brightmoon ceremony and lost a woman because you wouldn't give up Niko. If you were summoned to another, were a match to another adopted woman, would you risk that pain again, or would you end your attachment to Niko?"

Trey tilted his head, letting his gaze travel up a young hickory growing where one had fallen. The sky was cloudy, and a stiff breeze still ruffled the treetops. Likely rain tonight.

He lowered his gaze and stared at his father's empty brown eyes. He remembered all those hungry, vicious years defending his mother. She wouldn't go, and he wouldn't leave her. If she hadn't died, he would have lost himself there, apart from the Truxet. "I will never turn my back on someone who loves me, because it would kill my spirit. I would not give up Niko or Isabo.

"And if by some chance she did choose me, she would see that my heart is big enough to hold many. I would love a Bond-mate with all of me, and she would see that I am more capable of love, because all of me includes Niko and Isabo, too."

Zeru sneered. "No woman would choose such a bizarre arrangement. Your willfulness would cost the Clan a chance at breeding pair."

Trey looked at his father with pity. There was nothing to say because he so completely didn't understand. Was it becoming a Shield and having to submit to both the Alpha and his Domina? Or was it just because his father was a selfish bastard, scared and alone?

"Shield," Vos cautioned softly. "We love our mates for more than their wombs."

If the Watercoaster Domina had heard Zeru's comment, Trey had no doubt she would have ripped his face off. She was magnificent in her assertion of a woman's right to leadership among the Truxet. Trey adored her.

Zeru blinked at Vos. "I meant no disrespect."

Vos nodded to Bry. "I will not order Trey to keep from Niko. Do as you will for your martens. Now, let's discuss Isabo."

Trey was so tired of being yanked from triumph to terror.

"Niko has been healed, and has stepped forward to formally request she be placed in his roost."

Trey couldn't even process all the emotions that knotted his throat.

"I wasn't interested in her sleeping arrangements. I'm interested in your debt. You owe her balance."

"I will settle that with her."

"I think not. The river wolves healed her on our shores, Marten. There will be a public accounting."

Bry snarled, his face springing to a battleform muzzle bristling with two layers of dagger teeth and back to human again. "So be it. Tonight." He tossed his head back toward Trey without bothering to look at him. "And I'll decide about them, as well. We'll part here. Go with the Six." The Marten spun and went back toward his own shore, but the irritated stalking of a humbled Alpha was ruined by the fact he needed to use his walking stick.

Trey wandered back toward home behind Zeru's chatter about the beechnut harvest in a daze. Slowing, he let the men go ahead while he struggled with his thoughts.

Niko was alive. *He wasn't being exiled.* Isabo would have choices. If she didn't want to be with Trey, she could go to Niko. But the thought of her living among the martens while Shel and Estin were still possibly free didn't sit well with him. But Niko... Bry wanted to order Niko apart from Trey. It was unbelievable, that his Alpha would care how Niko spent his nights. That anyone would.

"Trey! Trey!" Isabo flew down the path in a too-big tunic and baggy leathers. "Trey! Where's Niko!"

Her hair was as wild as her eyes. Running to meet her, he knew she'd never been more beautiful. She threw herself into him and he caught her, spinning to keep his feet.

"He's all right! He's all right!" She begged.

"Yes, he's all right!" Trey assured her, holding her tight. She was warm, and smelled of Karl and the lake, and faintly, eels.

Karl trotted up behind her. "She made me." But he grinned. "I'm glad Niko is well."

"Thanks." Trey meant for everything, and Karl nodded.

"All set?" he asked.

"Yeah," Trey said huskily.

Karl turned and headed toward the shore, cutting through the forest.

"Where is he?" Isabo pulled out of his arms. "Are you hurt? Sweet Earthmother, you've been in two battles in one day!"

His heart was so full of her, worried for them when she'd almost died. "I'll be fine." He stroked down her still-damp mussed braid. "How do you feel?"

"My chest aches." She blushed. "My lungs, I mean."

Trey concentrated. He didn't have much left, but he sent her what healing he could.

She took a deeper breath. "Thank you." She pointed down the trail. "I passed the Watercoaster. Karl said you'd gone with them to find out about the battle, that you'd taken me away when Bry came up on them fighting." She put her hands on her hips, outraged. "Niko threw me in the lake!"

Trey bit his lip. "He didn't know—"

"That big ass Estin spelled me asleep! I'll knock his balls up into his throat!" She shook her fist toward the marten shore. "But Auberon! That whiny leech! I'm so sick of him! Trey!"

She grabbed his shoulders, pulling him in. "You have to help me. I've tried to do it myself, but he won't listen. He follows me, he orders me, he gives me ridiculous gifts."

Trey didn't know how to tell her. This wasn't good. "Isabo—"

"Did you hear him try to tell me I couldn't be with you and Niko! And what he called you! Traitors! Outrageous!"

"Isabo—"

"I'm not going to Bry this time. He doesn't listen to me. I'm going to the Women's Council."

He slid his hand over her mouth. "Hush. Go to them if you wish, but it ended today. Bry will pay you balance tonight, and Shel and Estin will face fierce punishment."

She interrupted again, grabbing at his hands. "Auberon won't care about shame. He's so bold! He wants to be my lover, Trey, and I've told him no so many times!"

His guts were in knots. Trey closed his eyes. He had to know. "Isabo. Did he ever hurt you?"

He looked down at her and saw her thinking. His watercoaster wanted death. The

shift to battleform begin to slide through him. His neck grew tight, and his eyesight sharper.

"Trey! Not that mattered!" She stared at him, her lashes so dark on her pale skin.

It made him remember her in the water, floating, and he tried to pull it back, to reverse the shift. "Did he sexually assault you, Isabo?"

She blinked up at him. "Don't be mad."

Trey fell to his knees, and she cried out when his weight pulled her with him. "No, no," he whispered, clinging to her now, as she had to him. He took one moment to rest his face beneath the weight of her breasts, to press into her belly. But then he took hold of himself. "Tell me, and don't ever think I'd blame you."

She swallowed. "Will you tell Niko?"

"He'll need to know, as I do."

She shook her head.

"You're not alone anymore."

Still shaking her head, she told him. "It was after Jace died. He helped me so much. He really did. He was wonderful. But then I got better, and he kept on insisting on sleeping with me. He'd get hard, and I'd ask him to turn, but he told me I was silly, that he had honor."

Trey knelt on the cold beaten earth and stared at her, stunned at what he was hearing. Every marten in the entire Clan owed her a blood debt, as far as he was concerned.

"He'd help me wash, when I was well enough to do it myself, and he'd take too long. But he'd tease me while he did it, and make me laugh, and feel guilty for asking him to stop."

She looked down at Trey's hands on hers and he concentrated on softening his grip. "And then I woke up one night, and he had his hand under my shirt. He was rubbing my breast. He said it was time, that I was better, that I moaned in the night remembering sex with Jace, and he could be Jace for me. I got up and threw him out. He begged, on his knees, that he could please me, that I could pretend he was Jace. But I made him leave and that was the last time he ever slept with me."

His beastspirit twined and snarled, snapping fangs in sharp stings at Trey's ribs. "No one helped you?" Trey thought of all the times he'd seen her from afar, too afraid to get close enough to scent her. His cowardice had kept him from being there for her.

"I went to Bry but Bry said it was natural for a man to be attracted to a woman he was sleeping with. He agreed Auberon should stay out of my bed now, but told me to forgive him. Auberon followed me everywhere, begging and picking and finally I shrugged it off. But later, he'd sneak up on me and kiss me quick. He tried to get my lips but mostly I avoided that. He called them 'brother kisses'.

"I called him a bastard and slapped him. He laughed. He said I needed calming. He stole my clothes when I wasn't home and only left me what he liked. He tried to give me a sex toy. He said I needed it, and I should think of him when I used it. I had lunch with Niko's mother and Niko came by. We spoke in passing, it was nothing. But when Auberon came up to me as I left I thought he was going to hit me. That night he came in and cut my hair while I slept, because he said Jace liked it short, and I needed to live the way Jace wanted me to live, to keep true to his memory."

Her fear scent had faded as she poured out the words, and her anger had grown sharper. Trey was so proud of her. He let her talk, focusing on keeping his grief inside. It

also helped that he ground his knee into a stone on the trail.

"That's when my spiritmage went to Bry. I don't know what Crandall said, but Bry sent me to River Mountain, and it was better. Auberon didn't come by very much, and the women there looked out for me. He didn't hurt me, but I hate him, Trey.

"I hate him. I hate being afraid, and I hate remembering how Jace loved him, and how good he was to me when Jace died. I hate the things he said to me today, and I wish Bry would get off his ass and do something."

Trey lifted his hand and gently brushed her cheek. "Isabo, I am so sorry I wasn't there to help you."

She shrugged. "I never expected you to be, or Niko. The only ones who've let me down are Bry, and Auberon."

"Auberon will never frighten you again. Tonight, he dies."

Isabo knelt on the flat, beaten earth and looked at him. He held her stare and let her see that his words were not empty.

Her lip trembled, and her lashes fluttered. "Oh..."

She leaned forward and he wrapped his arms around her, not gently, but fierce, holding her hard and tight.

"Will Niko do it?" She asked, voice muffled.

"No. Bry. A Trux who has lost his honor isn't safe."

"I'm glad. How can I be glad?"

"You can be, Isabo. You're a warrior. Death is part of battle. You've learned that well."

She turned into his throat and kissed him. "Jace would have killed him."

"Yes."

She sighed, deep and weary. "Take me home, Trey. When can we get Niko?"

"I'm not sure." His voice roughed, and he cleared his throat.

He helped her stand, and kept his arm around her waist, leading her back to his Clan's territory.

He didn't take her home right away. He found his Domina first. She was sitting among the stripped blueberry bushes, sorting baskets of leather pants needing repair.

"Hi, Trey." She was Isabo's height, but slender and taut, with a head full of brown curls.

"Hello, Ann. This is Isabo."

There wasn't the slightest flash of sympathy or pity in Ann's eyes, despite the fact that as Domina, she knew everything Vos knew, if not more. "Hi, Isabo. I think we met at Autumnal last year. You were reading us naughty ancient poetry."

"Oh, yeah." Isabo glanced at Trey and blushed.

"What can I do for you, Trey?"

"I need Isabo to know that you outrank me. That even Bry doesn't have power over you, and you rule at Vos' side, not at his heels."

Isabo shrank against him, and he rubbed her hip reassuringly.

Ann cocked her head, narrowing her pretty blue eyes at him. "This is true."

Trey looked down at Isabo. "If you ever fear us, you can go to Ann."

Red rode the gold of Isabo's cheeks. She glanced at Ann and hissed with exasperation. "Trey!"

He tucked his finger under her chin, but she pulled away and he didn't force her to

meet his eyes. "You will never stand alone again. If we don't stand for you, Ann will."

She slapped at his chest lightly but the sound still surprised him. "You're a sandflea-brain."

Ann laughed. "You don't believe this one will ever use his strength against you?"

Isabo considered the other woman. An impish, pleased look crossed her face. "Well, he might. But he had me pick a safe word."

He loved her so much it made him dizzy.

Ann's mouth dropped open. She glanced at Trey, her eyes dancing with mirth, and pressed a hand to her lips. "Is that so? Well, then I think you're safe with him."

"And Niko," Isabo reminded, ever precise.

Ann chewed hard on her lower lip. "Oh, yes. And Niko. Mustn't forget him."

Trey beamed. "She's the bravest, most beautiful spirit I've ever met."

He'd thought so when he spent the day with a shy, nervous woman years ago, and believed it now that he'd seen her hold her own with them in bed for two nights, and heard what she'd survived.

Ann held out her arms. "I hear you had a rough time, sweetie. If any of the men ever refuse to listen to you again, you come to me."

Isabo trembled, then stepped forward and hugged Ann. Ann's eyes gleamed with death at Trey over her shoulder, and he nodded. He didn't know if his Domina was riled by Auberon or warning him, but he agreed with both thoughts.

"Thank you," Isabo whispered to Ann as they stepped apart. She turned and looked up at him, and he went hard as a warclub with the love in her eyes. "Thank you, Trey."

Ann brushed a hand down Isabo's arms. "Stay with us as long as you like. Don't even consider moving back to the marten territory for a while."

Isabo's eyes went wide. "But, I'm a marten. I owe my allegiance to Bry. Won't that be—"

Ann shook her head and overrode Isabo. "Stay. Technically you're still in the same clanhome anyway." She grinned with the deep sense of play all watercoasters shared. "Besides, didn't you know women are the twelfth Clan? That's my theory. Sometimes we just have to stick together."

Isabo smiled and Trey snorted at his Domina's outrageous statement. But then Isabo's smile faded and she stared at nothing, her face easing into slackness. Her brows rose high and her jaw sagged open. She whispered words in the ancient language. Ann looked at him questioningly.

He shrugged, but stepped up beside her, wrapping his arm around her and sharing his warmth. "I want Oksanna to check her again. Have you seen her?"

Isabo remained passive under his touch, her gaze distant and blank as she continued to murmur.

Ann frowned, concerned. "I'll find her and send her to your lodge. Take her home."

Trey accepted hails as he ushered Isabo through the woods, steering her as if she were drunk. Everyone was concerned for her. It felt good ... except he knew that the martens were concerned for her as well, and yet she'd suffered Auberon's aggression for months. Watercoaster snapped in frustration at the thought of the man's execution. He made a goal to piss in the man's ashes later.

She still appeared withdrawn into her own world as he sat her at his table. *Niko.* *Where are you?* He pulled up water into the plunge pool in the corner, and heated it. Just

as he began taking Karl's clothes off her, Oksanna came to the door.

"Oksanna, she's drifted into some sort of dream state. Do you think I should send for a spiritmage?"

Isabo came out of her almost-fugue and focused on them. "Trey, I'm fine, it's just the scroll is finally making sense. Let me concentrate." She closed her eyes, and her lips moved over strange words.

"Let me check her," Oksanna said quietly. With a sweep of her hands and a moment's concentration, she stepped back. "She's fine, Trey. Her lungs are clear, her heart is strong." She motioned him to the top of his stairs.

There, Trey reluctantly accepted her offer to check him. He needed to be ready for anything tonight. Her power moved into him, warm, healing. "Thank you, Lady."

"It is my pleasure, Trey. I don't know about the spiritmage. I'd give her some more time."

Trey thanked her and went to undress Isabo. She helped, but her movements were slow, clearly second to the action inside her head. He led her to the bath, and sat her on the side.

"Isabo, swing in. There's a ledge to stand on, but stay toward the door, because it doesn't go all the way across."

She nodded, her brow creasing in irritation. Old words still whispered across her lips. He caught one he knew. *Treanon*. Death. It was a curse Niahdlu used when he was absolutely furious.

"Isabo, tell me again you're with me."

"I heard you. The ledge doesn't go across." Her fingers brushed his lips. "I'm fine, Trey. Let me work. Trust me."

He washed her, making sure to keep his movements smooth and impersonal as he swept her body. Her hair was harder, because she sputtered and scowled at him when soap got in her eyes and when he rinsed her, making sure she didn't fall into the tunnel that led to the Cove. When he lifted her clear, she gasped, grabbing his shoulders. Then she stood like a doll while he dried her off. His robe was gone, still at Karl's no doubt. Rather than dressing her in his own ridiculously too big leathers, he guided her into bed.

She took a sip of tea when he offered it, but then shook her head, staring at his root ceiling blankly, muttering. Trey sat at the table and watched her carefully, catching the looks that passed over her face. Wonder, revelation, confusion, fear, and surprise. It was hard to trust her, and let her be, when she acted so strange. He wanted to demand to know what she was thinking, but he stayed silent. It was enough to have her close.

Perhaps an hour later Niko came through the door.

"Trey!" he called.

He leapt off the stairs and Trey caught him against his chest. "Niko."

His feet slid to the floor, and they stood wrapped in each other. Finally, the sick feeling eased from Trey's gut. *Finally. Niko*. He buried his face against Niko's, clinging tight.

Softer, smaller arms surrounded them both. "Niko. We were so worried."

Both men jerked, as if her touch carried lightning. Their arms peeled away to include her, drawing her more gently in. Standing in his lodge, breathing the mingling breaths of Niko and Isabo, warm and whole in his arms, was one of the best moments of his entire life.

The Six hadn't gifted him with a Bonded. Other warriors wouldn't understand the way Niko kept him sane. They wouldn't understand how another man's Bonded, one who had also rejected him in the past, could be so special to him. To others, these people were both *less*, both substitutes for a Bonded of his own. But it wasn't so. These people made him stronger. They loved him, and his beastspirit loved them in return. They were his. No matter what Bry said tonight, they'd always be his.

"Does Bry know you're here?"

Niko's breathing was hard, shaky. "No." He lifted his arm from Trey and turned to Isabo. His hands looked big and tan as they stroked her hair over and over.

She smiled up at him, relief and love an open gift on her face. "You're all right. Did they hurt you?"

"Did they—Isabo." Niko shook his head. He glanced at Trey. "I didn't know. Forgive me."

"Of course you didn't know. I had to leave you. Forgive *me*." His fingers couldn't help but stroke the rise of Niko's strong shoulder.

Niko's full lips flattened. He nodded once, hard. "There's nothing to forgive. It was battle. We kept to our priority and prevailed." He turned to look down at Isabo's glowing face. Niko's emotions were always easy to read. Gratitude, confusion, awe. His hands dwarfed her as he cupped her cheeks and kissed her.

It was a Niko kiss. Nothing reverent about it. She moaned softly, her head falling back. Trey cupped it, supporting her neck against the force of Niko's pressure. He stood a handslength from his lovers and watched their tongues duel. His heart kicked, settling into a slow, thick rhythm.

Niko finally let her mouth go. He glanced at Trey, his brown eyes sparking with need. "Are you ready to claim her yet?"

Trey nodded, his throat tight. "I claim you both."

Niko leaned his forehead against Trey's. "Bry will address the Twin Clans in an hour. When he saw me leaving Dad's roost, he gave me such a look. I won't be kept from you, Trey. Will you go with me?"

Watercoaster spun and snapped. *Clan. Lover. Duty. Heart*. "It's not that easy. One of us needs to stand for Isabo. Would you honestly want to take her into exile?"

"Isabo might have her own wants, you know," she said tartly, leaning her head against Trey's shoulder. "Niko, is Auberon..." She swallowed. "Is he contained?"

Niko kissed her forehead. "Auberon, Estin and Shel are personally held by Bakar until balance is given."

Trey hoped the marten Shield was as cold as his father.

"I don't want anything from them. Or from Bry. Just you. Both of you. What are you saying? Bry will blame you for the fighting? He might send you into the Wild?" A tremor ran through her back.

Trey soothed her spine with steady, stroking fingers. "Bry considers our relationship to be problematic to the Clan. He's concerned about—"

"*What?*!" Isabo jerked from their arms. She spun, her fists on her hips. Standing nude, her breasts swaying, her neck tight with anger, she was magnificent. "Are you telling me he is considering your *exile* because you're *lovers*? Like you're anything close to Estin?" Her cheeks flushed red. "That is the most unjust, outrageous thing I've ever heard!"

Niko slipped off his tunic. Trey ran a critical eye down him, approving of the bodymage work he'd had done. Not a bruise. Trey sat to take off his boots.

"What are you doing?" Isabo asked suspiciously. "Are you undressing? This is not the time for bedplay! You two! Listen to me. What are we going to do about Bry?"

Chapter Ten

Niko hopped on one foot to get his boot off. "There's nothing to 'do about Bry'. He's my Alpha. His decisions are for the good of the Clan. We'll face them as they come."

Trey tugged off his boots and stood to undo his pants. "He's not exiling us, Isabo. But tonight Bry will announce his open support of us, or his condemnation. Either way, the Clans will know where our Alphas stand. If he orders us to cease being lovers, we were considering exile by choice, rather than accept his decision."

Niko had his pants off, but was bent in half, fighting with his second boot. "But now we have you. We won't leave you alone. The Wild is no place for a woman. Maybe we'd take turns hosting you in our bed. We wouldn't have to go into exile at all, if we knew we were sharing you." Niko's flexing ass hollowed with his movements and Trey swirled his tongue through his mouth in anticipation.

The vision of that life unfurled for Trey. "Yes. And once in awhile, in the summer, we can slip into the woods and be together." It would be a way for them to stay together, and still honor Bry's decision.

Niko's voice was thick with excitement. "Trey and I wouldn't be able to fuck, if Bry's forbidden it, but we could share you. You'd be a way to keep us joined." He grunted as he finally got his boot free, and finished tearing his pants off.

Hope sprang open in Trey. "Just knowing Niko was here, caring for you, sharing your bed each night... It would be worth it, to sleep alone, until you switched to my lodge." He beamed at her, walking her backwards to the bed. "That's what you are, Isabo. Our bridge."

Her brows were a low, straight line above her sparking eyes. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." Wiggling in his grasp, she batted at his hands.

At once, he stopped, letting her step aside. Disappointment filled him. He spoke softly, "Of course you could choose who you prefer. We wouldn't make you move between our homes. I know that's a very unsettling way to—"

"Will you stop?!" She put both hands to her head, glaring at him.

Niko came up to stand by him.

She looked wildly from one to the other. "You love each other. You've only had me with you for a few days! I'm not meant to be a bridge between you. You *need* to be together."

"It's not about how long we've loved you, Isabo. We do." Niko stroked his cock, his gaze sliding down her form with heat. "If you would have us, we would still be able to be together, because we'd be able to pass our love through you." Looking over at Trey, he grimaced. "Golden Eyes, it would be something."

He nodded, understanding the anger that sat in Niko's shoulders. "It would be joy compared to what we'd feared, Morning Light."

Isabo turned her back on them, which made Trey's cock twitch harder at the dramatic pinch of her waist against the flare of her hips. "You're both nut brains. Nothing but a bunch of rattling nuts in there."

"I have a couple nuts right here in my hand," Niko began, but Isabo whirled.

The tears glittering on her black eyes cut him off. They both stepped forward,

horrified, and she held up her hands. "No. You *listen* to me. I am not going to accept this. Auberon was unbalanced. He cared for me, and that skewed into something possessive, dark and selfish. I will not have his dishonor spill onto you."

She stepped forward, reaching, and they both took her hands in theirs. She swallowed, and the tears trembled on the rim of her lashes like silver drops. "You belong together. The two of you. And if you choose to welcome me, that's different. I may be both of your lovers, but you are lovers, too. That's not something I could ever replace. Don't make me into some sort of bandage, when what Bry could do would cut you in half."

She lifted her face to the ceiling, sniffing. Pulling her hands free, she wiped at her eyes. "Gah. Don't try to make me into some imitation. I want to have my own love with each of you." She looked back down at them, and her tears were gone. "You don't try to imitate Jace, or take his love from me. I won't do that to you."

The scents of anger, lust, and determination spilled in the air around her. "I love you both. We'd go to exile before we'd let him force you apart. You belong together. Adding me doesn't change that in the slightest."

Trey stood there, feeling numb, sweating, so hard his balls ached. She understood. She accepted them. She enhanced them. He struggled to breathe with the crushing emotion she drowned him in.

"Trey." Niko croaked from beside him. "Trey, she's..."

"I know," he breathed.

Together they murmured, "Perfect."

Niko stepped forward, gently pushing her to the bed. "Now, Isabo."

"What?"

"Get. On. The bed." Niko gave her shoulders a shove, and she sat. His erection was right before her face.

She licked her lips. "Oh... *Yes*." Her black eyes looked past Niko to capture him. "Trey, please fuck me. It's time."

He held himself still, his chest blowing hard. He didn't want to fuck her. He wanted to love her. There were kisses, and soft touches, promises of gentleness to be shared. He had to explore her every joint, how each held a different scent.

But he'd seen Auberon shout at her. Estin had attacked her. She'd drowned, and hung so cold in his arms on that long ride across the lake. She'd worn Karl's scent, and gotten lost in her mind after talking with Ann. Now she was nude, here in his lodge, with Niko. It was all tangled up. All too fresh. If he took her right now, it would be a fuck. She didn't deserve that. He'd revived her from death today, for pity's sake. She needed care and—

She snarled at him, grabbing up Niko's cock in one fist, and stuffing the tip in her mouth. She could barely get her lips around him, and her jaw stretched wide. He saw her throat work, and all the time, she stared daggers at him.

Niko shook, his ass hollowing as he clenched. Trey remembered what her small mouth felt like.

Popping off his tip, she spat at Trey. "Quit thinking, you honorable prick. Get over yourself and fuck me."

Trey's thighs twitched, and he fisted his hands. "Niko. Stand for her." His voice was so slurred he sounded drunk.

"I'll check you, Trey. C'mon over. Let's be together."

Permission to fuck Isabo, his Isabo, Jace's Isabo, their Isabo, washed over him. Niko was there to stop him, and Isabo challenged him to take her. After all this time, she was his to take. They finally belonged together.

He sprang, landing beyond her, crouched on the bed. She twisted, gaping at him, and he yanked her by her hips into the center. He took one breath to look at her skin, golden, flushed, nipples pink and tight at the top of trembling mounds. He knocked her thighs wide with his knees, used both thumbs to pull her vulva open, and pushed his tip into her creaming vagina. Covering both tits with his gripping hands, he poised over her, body tight, locked and ready.

Her hands came down on his, her back bowing. "Yes!"

"Watch me." Her eyes focused on his, and he could see the gold shimmer of his own reflected in hers. He slid in with perfect control, his skin more alive than ever before. Pushing steadily against her gripping walls, he sank his fingers into her softness, sank his cock into her depths. She trembled and gasped, but held his gaze. Her nipples burned his palms, and her legs rose to lock around his waist, her heels digging into his cheeks.

When his balls rested against her ass, he felt a wave under his skin, like fur before he changed, like water after he dove into the lake. But it wasn't fur or water. It was Isabo, scouring all the pain and loss out. He was made for her to possess.

"Trey! Move!" Her neck strained, but she held his gaze, her face stretched in need. "Please!"

Very precisely, he lifted one hand from her chest and placed it on the bed beside her torso. She cried out. He repeated the control with his other hand, keeping his elbows locked, arms straight, so that he could look down on her from above.

"Niko, her tits."

From his position kneeling beside them, Niko swooped under Trey's arm, gathering one breast up in both hands, his mouth leaning to the side so Trey could watch him eat at her tip.

She shouted, her hands gouging Trey's biceps as she jerked and arched. Trey held the position, his cock throbbing in the impossible heat of her. Her walls moved around him, dancing.

Niko groaned, growled, kneading her, licking her. She finally faded into it, her eyes rolling, her blank gaze jumping above him to the ceiling. Niko's shoulder nudged Trey's ribs as he crawled farther under him to get at her other breast. Her legs fell from around him. Trey kept himself pressed tightly against her.

"Trey! Please! More! Niko!" She ordered with every passionate kiss he planted across the soft globe.

Trey lost his sight line when Niko captured her nipple, but he could tell from his bobbing head how hard he sucked. Her nails scored down his arms, and then she grabbed Niko's head, her hips bucking as she tried to gain sensation. She cried out, her mouth opening repeatedly, shocked with the moment.

Niko's hair brushed Trey's chest, silky and frantic as he kissed and licked her breasts rosy. She cursed them, and begged. Niko's thumb and forefinger twisted one nipple tight, milking it with hard presses, and his mouth engulfed as much of her tip as he could, and sucked with groaning satisfaction. Her hips drove hard into the bone of his pelvis. She broke.

Watching the orgasm seep across Isabo's face while feeling her cunt writhe with it

made Trey's skin ripple with ecstasy. It was like a thousand feathers swept him from nape to ankles. Her mouth hung slack, her walls seized tight, and a low, pained groan wrenched from her throat. It came in broken beats, as Niko pressed on her nipples, and her breath struggled under the pleasure.

Finally, finally, her walls softened around him, easing the tight grip around his tip, and he was able to push in the final, full length. Now her body was ready for a fuck.

"Now..." Niko breathed as he eased from between them, his tongue lashing the side of her curves one final time.

Trey's elbows gave out, and he crashed down on top of her, her belly and chest catching him, welcoming him. He rested his forehead on her shoulder, drew his hips up and slammed down with all his strength. He felt the impact wave up her body, and the pleasure shrieked down his legs.

She sighed a dreamy, "Yesss."

After that, he was gone. His body danced, and she was his partner. The rhythm spoke to him, and he surged in her, thrusting, pounding, slapping, swinging his hips. He learned the depths of her, the width, and the strokes that hit her clit and made her come. She spoke to him, her throaty, deep voice a melody to his need, the words unimportant except for how they powered him forward.

Sweat grew between them, slicking their bodies, making the surge new with fresh texture. Niko's fingers were in her mouth, and she sucked them, moaning. Niko's fingers were in his ass, and he gloried in the burn. They rubbed the little ball of light inside him, and it was Trey's turn to growl, and shiver.

He snapped his teeth at Niko, and he withdrew, but the damage was done. The rhythm of the dance had been lost, and only the animal need was left. Trey's hips pummeled hers wildly, without care. Bliss. His cock was immense, her body the only thing he understood. His cock, stroking, deeper, harder, Isabo.

Niko's voice twined with Isabo's, and their harmony wove around his growls, led him faster as he chased the pleasure. Her voice grew high, taut, desperate, and still he wouldn't give it up. It was too strong, too perfect. He thrust and ground in her body, shining in her flesh and his, and she came yet again, falling silent.

He plunged over and over, ripping his cock from her internal grasp, shoving it back into her clenching channel. He hissed, rocking on her, his legs shaking with the effort to push deeper, press tighter, keep pumping.

"Enough, Trey. Enough." Niko's breath exploded against his ear.

A hard hand gripped his neck, and Trey roared when Niko forced his head to turn from her face.

"It's time!" Niko shouted. "Let go!"

Trey lunged, snapping his teeth at Niko's face, and he fell away. His hips continued to work, his abs and back burning from the use. A small soft dot of heat touched his jaw. He swung around at the light press, looking into her drowsy, flushed face.

Her fingers bumped his lips awkwardly with the force of his body heaving into hers, but they found their way into his mouth. He locked on them, sucking automatically. This time as she spoke, he understood her.

"My Trey. My guardian, my lost match. Fuck me. Always fuck me. Like Jace, and nothing like Jace. I love you. Fuck me, yes..."

He came. He fucked her through the pleasure, turning it into pain, into bright,

branding pain. His hips churned, pressing harder and higher against her, and there, he got the hit he wanted, and she shattered. Her hand went slack against his lips as she came, her head lolling to one side, but he sucked her fingers strongly enough to hold her in place.

Finally, he eased against her, tiny, compulsive movements his body couldn't quite let go of. Her hand fell from his mouth. His tip burned where it lodged deep inside her, and his legs twitched. He lay on her, gasping for breath, unable to control the harsh ugly sound.

Niko sat on the side of the bed, holding Isabo's other hand, petting it softly. White cum clung to the curls of his dark abdomen hair. "By the Six, Trey," he whispered. "Finally."

Trey eased off Isabo, and she moaned. "Heal her, please, Niko."

"Sure." Niko closed his eyes, her hand still in his.

She moaned again, longer, softer, easing.

"Isabo, Black Cloud." Trey lay next to her, worried. He stroked the wet hair away from her face, smoothing the strands behind her ear. "Shhh. Just rest now."

She opened her eyes, blinked to focus, and turned her head to him. Her smile was small, but clearly there. "So good, Trey. You fucked me so good."

His heart stopped, saturated with love for her. He curled to her side, and Niko stood, went to the corner, and bathed himself. Then he brought over a washcloth and stroked Isabo softly, until she purred.

Rinsing it, he leaned farther over her to clean Trey. The cool cloth sizzled across his skin, refreshing and awakening him. He gritted his teeth as Niko cleaned his crotch, the soft fibers turning to sandpaper at his sensitivity.

"Should I heal you, as well?" Niko asked wryly.

Trey shook his head, nuzzling into Isabo's breast. "No. I want to wear this pain awhile."

Niko chuckled. He put the cloth to dry and came back to bed, easing onto Isabo's other side.

Trey considered him. "Are you angry?"

"I was beginning to get concerned. Your endurance is... It ended well. There's no reason to be angry."

Niko lay across Isabo and kissed Trey. He tasted like pine and wind, which blended into a delight. Their lips moved and met, promising.

With a sigh, Niko laid down, his hand brushing over Isabo's belly possessively. Again Trey had an urge to apologize, but held it back. He wasn't sorry. She'd wanted a fuck. He'd needed to give it to her. It had been dangerous, and beautiful.

Propping himself up on his elbow, Trey licked up the slope of Isabo's breast. Lifting its weight in his palm, he sighed with contentment. Gently, he kissed and licked the soft skin of her upper chest, and the underside. The inner skin along her breastbone, and the outer ring of her aureole. She tasted like his own skin. Niko nursed on her softly, and the moments spun out. The smell of earth, the sting of his cock, his lovers in his bed.

A knock came at the door. Isabo went stiff, but Niko and Trey knew Vos' scent and merely lifted their heads.

"The drums have begun," Vos called. "Bring her."

Their private pleasure dissipated between breaths. Trey closed his eyes in despair, an image of Bry studying him like a curious bug flashing before him. The man was like his

father, so focused on Clan babies that he didn't understand the larger love that bound the men and their mates together in a wider Clan web. Auberon had laid his hate over Bry's own discomfort, and even in death would cost him his happiness. Trey would go into exile to live with Niko, because he simply couldn't imagine existing without him, and would probably be convinced to bring Isabo. But living without Vos, Ann, and the watercoasters in the Cove would scar him.

Isabo's fingers feathered through his sweaty hair. "Don't borrow trouble, Trey. I'm the wronged party, and I'll have a few choice things to say."

"Black Cloud—"

Her nails set in the top of his spine. "Shhh. Kiss me."

He kissed her, and she was fierce. Her little teeth stung, and her tongue burned. Her eyes were hard when he pulled away. He licked across her nipple, the demanding tab of it a dark pink. Niko already had his pants on, and held his hand out to help Isabo up.

It was all spinning apart. He was weary. But his lovers needed him, and he'd stand with them. Trey pulled himself to his feet.

Chapter Eleven

As they hurried through the woods toward the martens' roosts, Isabo focused on the strong, purposeful surety she'd known before Trey had taken her. She pulled up the outrage, the fury that her men would be wrenched from their homes because Bry was *weak*. The men were silent as they strode on either side of her, and she held her hands to her belly to hold her surging emotions in.

She missed Jace so badly. Bry was going to kill Auberon. How horrible. How Jace would have cried. Almost, she could feel him, his big head burrowed into her chest, his massive arms wrapped around her ribs. He'd be ashamed. He'd be bitter. Even though Jace wasn't here to be wounded by this, she took his wound as hers. She'd tried. Bry had failed.

She made her loves take her to Jace's roost. She took up the leather satchel with the explosive revelation she'd worked out, and took off her borrowed leathers and put on a plain, shapeless brown dress. She reeked of Trey, and her thighs had again grown slick with their sticky fluid, which she loved. Jace would sometimes lie between her thighs as she drifted to sleep after lovemaking, and lick her clean.

She threw a glance at their old bed, the two pillows neat along the headboard. The fantasy of lying there and having Jace lick Trey's cum from her core flashed through her. She studied the table of notes and references, imagining Niko fucking Trey there while they watched Jace lap at her thighs. Her men. All her men, loving her, accepting each other.

Jace loved her, and loved pushing her sexually. They had never been able to reach their sexual peak with each other, especially after that time he'd beaten her ass. Yet Trey had made no secret of his constancy. Was it possible that Jace would have admired Trey's devotion and become less jealous as they'd matured? Could he have invited Trey into their bed in a few years? Was it possible that she would have fallen in love with him, even while she still had Jace? Didn't she have Jace now? And then wouldn't it have been a short jump to invite Niko into their bedroom as well?

She had to stop for a moment and press her fingertips into the wet folds of her legs, grinding her shocked, delighted clit into submission. The vision was powerful, but unlikely. Just as Niko and Trey were unlikely to accept her sleeping with others, Jace had been possessive. And just as Jace had satisfied all her sexuality, the idea of considering anyone besides them seemed absurd.

Niko stroked her arm and offered to carry the leather tube, but she declined, and they went to the Cove's main beach. She was summoned up onto the platform by Bakar, Bry's Shield. It was surprisingly easy to step up and stand before all the watercoasters and martens, holding on to her anger. She was ready to end this, even though it would be the end of one small piece of Jace, too.

Niko stood in front of the low stage, just before her. Trey's hand held his so tight their fingers glowed pale. They were in the first row against the waist-high platform. Keeping her in their sights bent their necks. She stood, so small and round, between Bry and Vos, with Ann at his side. Only two nights ago the Clans had gathered here to celebrate a birth. Now they gathered in shame. But she kept her chin up. The satchel

gripped between her palms gave her strength. She was a woman, and they hadn't listened to her. She hadn't deserved this.

Vos nodded off to the side, and his Shield blew into a shell. The sound was ugly, sharp and loud. The small murmurs of the anxious crowd fell silent. Isabo licked her lips. She was proud Niko's family stood at her loves' backs, including Trey in their protection. Niko's mother, Dove, and her Bonded Vaylo, along with Niko's brother Orson, his Bonded Kari, and their son Brend ringed them with support.

"Through a series of actions, Isabo drowned today. We rejoice at her revival." Bry's voice carried bold and loud out over the crowd.

She was strangely glad she'd been spelled asleep the whole time and had no further details to add to her repertoire of nightmares. Her fierce river wolf could not be denied in water, and had saved her.

"Her danger sits squarely on my shoulders." Bry stood bare-chested, in a leather warskirt, and scanned the crowd as if looking for enemies.

Even knowing Bry had let Auberon disintegrate into madness, even knowing he was about to condemn something pure and good, Niko still stared at the aging man with intent respect. He was the Marten. He was the Clan. Isabo looked at Niko's thick brown hair hanging over his impossibly handsome face, those warm dark eyes yearning for Bry. She felt sick. He might kill Auberon and declare an end to her fear, but she was going to bring Bry down. Niko deserved better.

"Her immediate attackers will be dealt with. But we bear the shame of knowing they were building to it. You bear the shame that despite so many of you coming to me in concern about his behavior for over a year, I was blind."

Bry shook his head. "I was wrong. None of our alphas returned from their lone territories or the Council's service to challenge me. None of you approached me on a dark moon night to chastise me."

Niko hung his head. Dove began to cry quietly behind him. The words of the scroll boiled in Isabo's blood, almost aching to be heard after centuries of buried truth.

"It is not your responsibility to keep me honorable!" Bry's voice roared in anger. "Look at me!"

Niko lifted his head. Bry's gaze swept the crowd. "Your respect was a gift of trust I no longer hold. I failed you, as surely as I failed Isabo. She came to me six times."

Isabo flinched as every eye, young and old, swung to her.

"And her spiritmage, now fallen, berated me twice. I sent her away, and the rogue warrior continued to visit her, try to control her, and bully her. She lived without comfort of our clanhome, in our small lair in River Mountain, for too long, and I lied to myself, saying it allowed her to heal." Bry spat the words with self-disgust, and his anger rode the wind.

Isabo chewed her lip. It had allowed her to heal, a bit. She shouldn't have been so stubborn, should have asked for another spiritmage. But it had been sex with Niko and Trey and Jace's memory that had truly healed her.

"When I summoned her back, it took just a day for the rogue to reveal himself. Niko warned me immediately upon her return, and I put him off."

Isabo's eyes snapped at him, remembering his promise not to go to Bry. She'd have something to say to his Trux honor later. He shifted, dark eyes sliding away from hers in an adorable little flare of guilt.

"I tell you now, I sorrow over this. Personally, and as Marten. On the moon after this one approaching, we will host the trials to prove a new alpha worthy. The Martens will rise to honor, and leave this debt to me." Bry turned to face Isabo.

She stared at him, and all her desire for revenge shriveled. He'd just taken himself down, willingly, realizing the scope of his failure. Oh, how Jace would press against her and cry over this. She and Trey would have to be there for Niko.

The crowd swayed and rocked in a rippling wave with the shock of Bry's words. Murmurs poured through the people. His father's hand settled onto Niko's shoulder as he staggered. Trey slung his arm around Brend's shoulder and turned his face to Brend's neck. Brend's thin chest shook with sobs. Bry was going to leave the Clan. There would be a new Alpha.

Bry knelt before Isabo, yet was big enough to come up to her chest. He held her eyes while he transformed one finger into an extended claw and sliced the side of his neck. He shoved his fingers against the wound and lifted his hand up to her. She stayed stone still and he had to lean forward, stretching to paint his blood on her throat, a symbol of the debt of honor he owed her.

She slapped his hand away as soon as it was done, and several gasps rang out. "I claim my debt." Her voice was solid, cold. He'd sided with Auberon over her. He'd ignored his own people, her spiritmage, had so many chances. Now there would be death and pain and she refused to feel guilty for any of it. They owed her.

Bry nodded, and stood. "It is your debt, Lady. Keep it until—"

"No. I'm using it now." She focused on his lined and scarred face. She studied the man who had watched over her amazing, terrifying Bonding with Jace, seen her take Jace's beastspirit, felt the echo of her soul as she gave it to Jace.

"What would you have, Isabo?"

"I am switching my allegiance to watercoaster. I want to foster with them now." She took his protection and threw it in his face as the worthless honor that it was.

A gasp ran through the crowd.

"Well, you will always have a harbor with the martens, but if you—"

"Agreed." Vos' voice rang out over Bry's.

Bry's jaw jumped, but he nodded.

Isabo clung to the heat bubbling in her ribs. Perhaps it was only imagination, but the severed relationship stung the back of her neck, a faint echo of the seizure that had taken her when Jace died. *Oh, Jace. I call on your strength, on your steady gaze.*

She took a deep breath, and stepped solidly into the future. "As a widow, I need a man to stand for me in the Clan. For the watercoasters, I claim Trey. And because my Bonded will tie me forever to the martens, despite the fact I will never feel safe among your pine roosts again, I claim Niko."

Bry stared at her.

She stared back. "Isn't it time you laid Auberon's hate to rest?"

The crowd fell totally silent.

"Did you think he had cause for it? Well he didn't." Isabo faced the crowd, her face flushed, lips tight. She struggled to breathe, focusing on speaking clearly and not breaking down. "He was tainted by fear and jealousy and that's why he hated us. He knew I wanted them, and it made him insane. I want them both, Bry. I claim their love as my debt." She couldn't feel her feet.

Bry's eyes narrowed on her, and power twisted in their cold depths. Before Isabo could step back, Trey vaulted onto stage, a graceful, deadly, quivering presence. He crouched at Isabo's side and she put her hand on his head, like he was her hunting pet. She feathered her fingers over his close-cropped golden hair, and leaned all her weight on him. He held her up without ever looking from Bry, his fists braced on the floor, ready to push off and go for him. Her fingers brushed his downy skull again, less for her own comfort and more as an anchor.

Niko surged forward but his father clamped his hands on his arms and hissed in his ear. She was thankful when he stayed below, hands gripping the stage edge. It was getting crowded up here.

"The debt is something I owe you, Isabo."

Oh, he was not getting out of acknowledging her claims. "And you owe me the right to pick my own champions, since the one who chose me for himself was such a bastard." She spat the words without fear, standing an arm's length from a disgraced Alpha.

Bastard was a human term, one the Truxet didn't recognize, as all children were worthy regardless of their parents' status at birth. But the disrespect she coated the word in registered.

"Actually," she slung the little pouch off her shoulder and pulled the lid free. "You owe me a lot more." Her hands shook, but it was from the excitement of revealing the scroll, from facing down Bry and seeing him admit he'd failed. She was going to force him to accept her men.

Bry stepped back uneasily.

She fumbled with the box and lifted out a curl of hide. The smell of centuries of magecraft rode the air. It smelled like women, and it smelled ... angry.

Isabo pivoted to face the gathered faces. The water helped her low voice carry. "I have finished the scroll! I have found the Fortress! I know where it is, and I know who it belongs to. Us! Women!" She held the scroll up with two hands, holding it with reverence. "The Truxet have lost their honor before. And the women left." Oh, how Jace would have been proud of her, for translating this. He'd have been fascinated.

The crowd swelled with astonished whispers. She ignored it, and curled one hand around Trey's focused, deadly face, holding him to her side. His chin jutted, and his cheeks were stark, his golden eyes eerie. Isabo cupped the thick scroll to her chest, holding it like a baby.

"I want these men. I want you to put aside your own putrid imagination and see that they are strong, honorable, and dutiful. I want you to recognize you fear them without cause, and they have every right to live the way they choose."

She stepped into Bry's space and said, "Now do you honor your debt or not? Let me state this clearly. I am furious. With reason. So do I leave, and take my men with me, like women did last time, or do you accept me for who I am and keep our strength?"

Bry raised his big, powerful hand and she never even thought of stepping away. He brushed his knuckles along Isabo's jaw, ignoring Trey's growl. "Lady, widow of our beloved warrior, daughter of my shame, watermage flowing through ancient secrets, I hear your request but cannot grant your debt."

There was sudden movement from the side of her vision where Niko stood, but she couldn't look away, shocked that Bry dared to defy her.

Bry's voice lowered to private levels, and the audience held their breath as one to

hear. "I glory in your fury. It tells me you are not broken by the abuse I condoned. You say you have reason to go, and I agree. But I ask you, don't go. We need your strength, and that of the warriors who love you. Who love each other.

"You challenge me to recognize my own fear, and I do. I do. I say to you here and now, that such a love that you three share confuses me. But love isn't about reason. If we followed our reason, would we ever have found the miracle of a Bonding? Would we ever have merged our two halves into our battleform? Isabo, you don't have to demand your debt from me, because I owe Niko this without you shaming me into it. You may choose them to stand for you, and belong to both Clans, and I state clearly their right to bed who they choose, and none of that touches the depth of what I still owe you."

Bry stood before her, his shoulders squared, his hands hanging by his side. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Time stopped, and tears blurred her vision. Bry was a brave, strong man. She passed the scroll to Trey. Slowly, she raised her arms, and held them out. He moved toward her and wrapped her in a hug. Trey stared daggers up at him, but Bry's eyes were closed. Isabo hugged him, tentatively, and ached. *Jace, oh, Spark.*

Vos stepped forward, thrust his fist in the air and shouted, "Honor!"

And over four hundred warriors, mates, and children roared back. The words were honor, Watercoaster, Marten, Isabo, or Clan. But they all meant love. They all helped heal. She would have her men, and they would have their Clans. The Truxet would have their history, and the darkmages would know the women were going to take back what they'd found and perverted. Isabo would always have Jace, and it would always hurt, the same way it would always be beautiful.

* * * *

Trey was learning to breathe again. He'd come down from the sinew-stretching agony of Isabo exposed before the Clan. He kept repeating the refrain his heart beat: *Isabo and Niko were his.* Bry had given Isabo to the watercoasters. Vos had accepted. Bry would allow Niko and Trey to be together. Now they were all just waiting for the dice to roll Blood and Fire.

An hour had passed and the crowd was much smaller. The children and most of the women were gone, as were the watercoasters, except for himself. No one approached to suggest he leave. No one was that stupid. Night had fallen. Mist writhed over the water, and the moon was just a sliver.

Trey couldn't bear to be separated from either Isabo or Niko. His hands were constantly on them. Niko's family still surrounded him, and he leaned on Vaylo, Niko's father. Dove stood with her arms wrapped around Brend, and even though the youngling was edging his grandmother out in height, he let her. Niko spoke quietly to Orson, telling him some details of his upcoming duty to help quarter the Royal grounds for darkcraft. The martens were still riled in the recent weeks at the revelation that a Princess' assistant was a darkmage who'd lived for a year under Truxet noses. Kari stood with her face buried in Orson's chest, shaking continuously.

Trey wanted to ask Orson if he'd known Auberon was bullying, manipulating, and psychologically terrorizing Isabo. But he held his tongue, allowing the idle chitchat. After all, he couldn't quite find the strength to take his weight from Vaylo's solid shoulders. The shame was on all of them. Isabo moved between them, lying against Niko, then

turning to burrow into Trey. They were all waiting.

He couldn't believe what she'd done. How she'd faced down the Marten, and all the Clan, and declared herself theirs. Now they stood at the far end of the beach, where Trey had asked Niko to stand with her as he danced. The stage was far enough that it would be indistinct to the women. But not to their Truxet eyes.

She'd wanted to be here. He didn't know how he felt about that. His heart still pounded with possession, but he also pulsed with anger now that it was time to end this. He wanted to whisk her away, to drown her in pleasure, to erase his failure.

The drums sounded. Slow. Angry. Sad. The beat was simple. The three nude men stepped up onto the stage, led by Bry and Bakar. Trey remembered Bry's decision to test a new alpha, to pass the Marten on. He was fiercely glad Niko wasn't alpha. The need to challenge was hard enough as it was.

The smaller, more scattered crowd turned to the stage, the night silent without the drums. No creatures rustled. No breeze stirred.

Isabo grabbed onto him. The men parted their hands and closed tight around her. He was so grateful Niko's strength bracketed her. It would take both of them to hold her against Jace's loss, to help her live and heal.

"He is the last of Jace," she whispered sadly.

"No. He's nothing like Jace," Niko murmured back.

Estin fell to his knees, weeping, begging forgiveness, devastated. Niko growled. Bry slashed Estin's chest three times. Blood sprayed. It was right. He pronounced exile, and his grandfather, uncle, father, and brother howled.

Shel was more stoic. He took his hits standing, although he swayed with each. His exile was met with silence, his parents just as contained.

They moved to the corner of the stage. Now Bry stood before the warriors while Bakar slashed marks of censure into his chest. Six blows. They went on and on. Some of the warriors cried out, as if it was they that took the hits. Some turned away, some spat on the ground. Trey moved his hand so that he covered Niko's where it rested on Isabo's shoulder. Niko trembled. Ah, by Bone, what would he do if Vos had failed the Clan in this way? When it was done, Bry swayed, lost his balance, and staggered.

Then it was Bakar's turn. Two hits. Trey took that to mean that the man had done much to go against Bry, but let himself be overruled. Such bitter shame. Regret was so much easier in hindsight. Trey almost felt sorry for the Martens. Almost.

Finally it was time. Bry ignored his streaming wounds and spoke to the stocky man who stood with his hands clasped, shoulders bowed. His words carried to Trey's sharp ears.

"Your name is banished from our Clan. Your legacy is darkness. You betrayed me. You betrayed your brother and his mate's trust. You have no honor, and thus no place among us."

Niko's steady growls were picked up by Orson, and Trey felt Vaylo's vibrate through his arm. The growls grew, spreading through the still warriors. Snarls, hisses, and yips filled the air. The tension built. Truxet were not human. He was not satisfied with words, no matter how biting. None of them were. Control of their beastspirit's possessive and violent urges was required. This wasn't entirely about justice. It was about Auberon's personal failure that would forever mark him as weak and unworthy to stand with as a brother warrior.

Niko shook Isabo's grip from his hands and wrapped her in his arms. Trey wound his around them both, and felt his bloodlust fade. Her soft form was cold and stiff, but she leaned on them. Her eyes never left the stage, her chin up, jaw locked. Trey's furious heart steadied. He bent to her ear and whispered, "You are not alone."

Her sharply indrawn breath marked the distant, soft splatter of Bry ripping out Auberon's throat. It was the end he'd always feared for himself. No longer. He looked up at Niko, unafraid of the thickened neck, the glowing green eyes, and stretching jaw that preceded battleform. Unafraid for their human lover in his hold. Niko knew what honor was. They were not unbreakable, but at this point they'd survived with each other.

Niko turned to meet Trey's eyes, grief and shame swarming his scent. They had to forgive each other, or they'd go insane. Now that Trey wasn't holding them distant from Isabo with his fear, they would do a better job protecting her.

Turning to look at the platform, he saw Bakar help Bry from the stage, the old man moved stiffly, accepting a cane from another warrior. One of the crowd grabbed Auberon's body and dragged it from the stage, flinging it onto the sand.

Another warrior stepped forward, twin balls of flame around his fists. He threw them onto the corpse. More men hurled battle flames onto the body. The crowd tightened, and Trey lost sight of the burning mound, although the thick smoke swirled white against the night sky. Luckily, they were upwind, and didn't have to smell him.

Niko rained kisses down on Isabo's head. Men came to them, their eyes bleak, but Orson stepped forward. His hands spoke for the three of them. *Later. Go.* Trey growled.

Isabo shuffled around, burying her face in his shoulder. He breathed her in, her scent of vanilla and parchment, sex and sorrow and Niko. He stood on the beach with his lovers and watched Bry limp up to them, Bakar at his side.

Orson stepped aside.

"Bry's coming," Niko told Isabo.

She shivered and pressed her cheek to Trey's chest. Her breath blew hot and damp. Watercoaster twined through his guts to think she was crying.

Trey stared at the man he'd wanted to attack today, a strong leader, a man who had given them his support too late. He'd made a horrific mistake, wounding an innocent woman in his care, and he'd bear the scars of it for the rest of his life. Good. Trey hadn't been able to stand it when she'd stood before Bry alone. Niko couldn't be expected to face down his own Alpha. Trey had braced her up, and she'd been radiant in her anger and bravery.

"Niko," Bry rasped.

"Alpha," Niko answered. He trembled beneath Trey's touch on his back.

How bitter it must be to claim such a man after that spectacle. Trey stroked Niko, sending him heat.

"I want to ask you something." Bry's gaze passed over Isabo's shoulders and Trey's flat gaze. His pride was back. He'd worn leadership too long to dwell in the regret he'd revealed earlier. Trey didn't like respecting him for it.

Bry spoke. "I was very intrigued by something Vos said today. I've heard Trey's version, but I want to hear yours. If you ever go to a bright moon choosing, how would you convince the woman to join your..." He paused and shared a smile that actually looked fond with Niko. "Relationship?"

Trey couldn't believe the asshole was still pushing this issue.

Niko sucked in a deep breath and lifted his chin. "I'd tell her the truth. That friendship and respect are equal partners to passion. I'd tell her how loyalty and love are expandable, and how privileged I would be to discover her. I'd tell her about my lovers, knowing that if she was right for me, she'd grow to love them, too."

Vaylo's hands came down on Niko's and Trey's shoulders. "Well said, son."

But Bry frowned.

Dove's gentle hands stroked down Trey's spine. "Bry, my son would never refuse a mate. He yearns for that same closeness, just like any warrior. But these people aren't replaceable, or interchangeable. Let me ask *you* something."

The circle of darkening sand around Bry's bloody feet grew, but he inclined his head to the woman.

Dove spoke, soft and firm. "If you found a mate a year from now, would you care less for Bakar?"

Bry stared at her.

Kari spoke up, her voice hoarse from crying. "Wouldn't you expect your mate to meet him? To respect him and become his friend? Wouldn't it hurt, if you were told you could never speak to Bakar again?"

Bakar stepped forward. "Enough. Alpha, you must heal."

Bry rocked, and in one fluid movement, Bakar was under Bry's arm, holding him up. Bry groaned. The cane fell to the sand. "Niko, I'm sorry."

Bakar growled and turned them, heading toward the sleeping roosts.

"I am too, Alpha," Niko whispered.

The Alpha and his Shield moved off into the shadows. Niko threw himself into his father's arms, and Trey stood with Isabo while Niko's family converged on them. The women's weeping definitely set off Isabo. She squirmed from his hold and went to Dove and Kari, and they all rocked together.

Trey left them and strode to the few men who still stood over the dishonored's ashes. Firecraft wasn't natural, and a smoldering pile of foul-smelling glowing lumps were all that was left. Trey spit into the remains.

She'd never fear again. He would love both his lovers, and watch over them, and be there for them until the day he died.

* * * *

Niko held Isabo between his legs, his hands laced around her belly. She grounded him, when he kept wanting to skitter around the tree trunks with wild energy.

She talked earnestly with the five Clan Dominas gathered nearby. Their lovely, unique faces shone red, flashed orange, then gilded gold in the leaping flames. They were at Vos' central fire, and it was late.

No time had been wasted spreading the news. The warriors were buzzing from Isabo's full translation. Dom, the Council's leader, was there, bending over maps with Grif, Delavega, and Vos. The two Alphas of the flighted Clans were preparing for a dawn reconnaissance far out over the sea using the clues from the scroll.

But the women were more fascinated by what it said about the Fortress, than where it was. He wasn't listening anymore. He'd tried, but her brain was sharper than his, honed to an uncanny ability to focus. She'd talked through the implications with the women so long her voice had become scratchy, yet showed no signs of flagging.

Niko couldn't take his eyes off Trey. He was dancing to a lone drummer and a few flutes. It wasn't the show he'd put on a few nights ago but it was still compelling. Trey referred to this kind of dance as his meditation dance. He wore a loincloth of soft, thin leather out of deference to the Dominas.

Brend leapt and twitched with his friends. Niko was so proud the boy had inherited all his talent. Orson and Kari were laughing and swaying off to the side. Many others were drifting in and out of the dance, but mostly it was down to the pack of gangly younglings and Trey.

His family had followed them to the watercoaster's territory to discuss the scroll. Bry had been there, scars freshly healed, but had gone back a short bit ago, along with Niko's parents. Now Niko sat with Isabo in the circle of Dominas and a few of the Clan Alphas. The Mountaincat was behind his tiny mate, nibbling on her neck, trying to convince her to leave. It was bizarre to sit among this much power. The men made his marten slink, fur sleek and round ears pricked. The women made the beastspirit quiver in caution. He'd noted them from afar during Autumnal, but besides Ann, he'd never been so close to the most powerful women in the Clans.

His boner had been semi-hard all night, between Isabo's staggering bravery and honesty, and her brilliance. But watching Trey always sent him straight into a full erection. Trey swayed, his body humping and flexing to the music. Daiyu understood Trey, and the song had a way of continuing, changeless, and yet ever-changing, like a gentle version of Trey's astonishing fuck that afternoon. A master musician paired with a master dancer was a lovely thing.

He popped the last grape into Isabo's mouth and considered her fed. She glanced at him with laughing, excited eyes, and went back to discussing with the women. The Wolf Domina almost cracked her jaw, she yawned so deep. Instantly, the shadow behind her stirred. She was drawn up, protesting, and led away without a word of goodbye from him.

The Mountaincat took the opportunity to toss his tiny woman into his arms. She laughed and kicked, and said good night. The other three women agreed to meet with Isabo and a few other scholars who had been reading texts from a similar time the next day. Ann went to the discussion at Vos' table, the Snowcat Domina went hand in hand with her scarred Alpha, and the elderly Bear kissed his laughing wife off into the shadows.

They sat alone now, the rare gathering of powers dispersed. Still, Trey danced on.

Isabo's head tucked under his chin, Niko found his hips rubbing ever so faintly along her back. "Isabo."

"Yes?"

"I'm going to fuck Trey tonight."

"Oh." She grew small, shrinking in his arms.

"You are always welcome in our bed. Always. But as you understood earlier, sometimes we need each other."

She nodded, her silky hair riding his throat. "I know. I just don't want to interfere. I won't need to always be with you, but tonight..."

"You're not sleeping alone. Ever."

Trey flew through the air as if it were water, like he was a skymage to hold himself in mid-flight. The boys all immediately tried to copy him to much bruising, cursing, and hilarity.

"Do you enjoy watching?"

"Watching? You mean, you and Trey?" She swallowed. "Oh. Yes, I think I would. I know I would." She twisted to look up at him. "Is that a kink?"

He grinned down at her, leaned in and kissed her closed eyelid softly. "Yes. Watching other lovers is a kink. Sexy."

"I want to try all the kinks," she announced decisively.

Niko stroked his thumpingly hard cock against her back. "We're the luckiest warriors in the world."

"Within reason, of course," she cautioned.

Niko grinned so wide his cheeks hurt. "Didn't you hear Bry today? Reason has no bearing on love. But I will allow that it might have restrictions on sex. So we will take you on a tour of kinks, within reason." And the very first he wanted to see was Trey taking her ass, watching his face as she submitted to him with such happiness.

"So tonight you'll fuck Trey?" she asked.

"Nah. I changed my mind. I'm going to make love to him first, and then fuck him later."

She shivered, and it wasn't from the cool night air. "Oh. That sounds ... good."

"Go tell him for me, will you?" Niko knew that Trey had been so hard for so long, he was absolutely primed. One touch from her ought to do it. And if that didn't, then her words would.

Trey had danced around the fire until he faced them on the far side of it. So Niko had a perfect view of Isabo coming up to him. She reached for his shoulder, but he spun, chest arching to keep her fingers from grazing him. Niko saw him stand, gleaming muscles outlined starkly, torso flexing from exertion, and stare at Isabo like she was a rainbow come to life. Niko sent his hand into his pants, thighs flexing as his hand clamped on his sensitive, taut cock. He squeezed. Good thing he was now alone in the shadows.

Isabo's mouth moved. He saw the words form, could imagine her soft, sultry voice. *Niko wants you to come home. He needs to make love to you, and I get to watch. After you finish, he'll fuck you.*

Trey stood still, then slowly turned his head. Niko met his gaze, the flames flickering between them. Trey's hand flashed to his hips, pressed to the jutting cloth. The tension sang between them, the day's changes whipping through his blood. His abs tightened, his ass clenched, his throat swelled. Niko's cock spurted at the same moment Trey's did. The only sign Trey gave was a slight arch to his back, but Niko knew him that well. Niko sat with his legs spread, knees drawn up, the same position he'd held Isabo in. He groaned, gritting his teeth as the heat pumped in a delicious release, his toes curling in his boots. His hand stroked roughly up and down, and he anticipated the smooth, hot grip of Trey's ass.

Trey held out his hand, and led Isabo past the begging boys. His loincloth was saturated with enough sweat to disguise the wet ejaculation, but he reeked of sex. The boys fell back with laughter. Niko pushed to his feet in one movement, rising to meet them. They stared at each other in the night, in awe of their new reality.

Trey turned his head and looked down at Isabo. "Home?"

She beamed. There were no shadows left in her black eyes, only joy.

Niko stepped up to them. Trey's strong calloused hand gripped his wet one tightly.

Firm, tiny fingers wrapped around his dry hand. His cock twitched, the fire crackled, and the flute changed to a lullaby. He walked beside Isabo as Trey drew them down into the green, rooted depths of his lodge.

The End

About the Author:

Mima is a dreamer in upstate New York. When people query her on what she's reading, she answers proudly and simply, "A really sexy romance." She firmly believes women know the difference between fantasy and reality, and need both. No matter how sweet the kids, husband, mother, cats, house(work), and job are. Mima is at runemima@yahoo.com and www.mimawithin.com

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