

# Gaven: The Bonding

J. C. Owens



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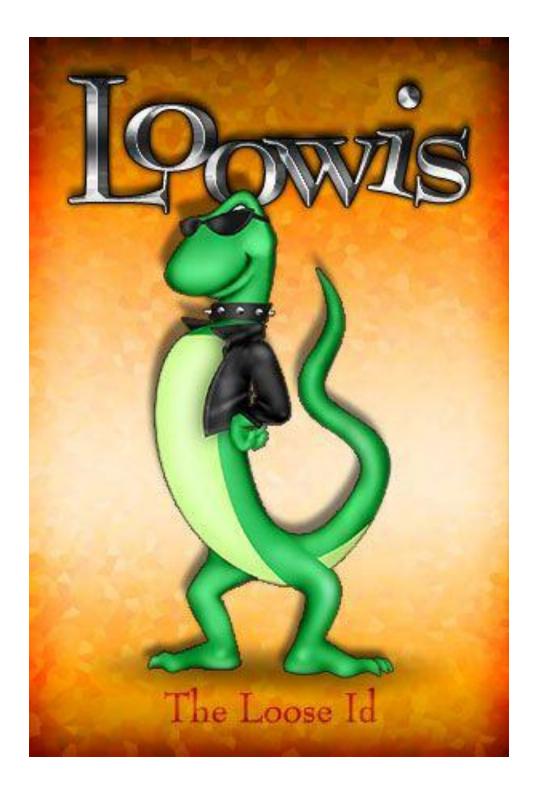
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## **Chapter One**

I whirled to the right, knowing in that instant that I had made a fatal error.

I managed to bring up the sword in time to take the blow on the steel instead of my shoulder, but the impact flung me sideways and I rolled in the dust, desperately trying to avoid...

#### Damn!

The sword point hovered in the hollow of my throat.

"Slow today, boy. Any particular reason? Or are you just being difficult again?"

I stared into green eyes with defiant silence, fighting to restrain the snarl that would only get me punished.

Vlar laughed softly, letting the sword gently sweep down my chest through the sweat that literally ran over my skin. The point finally rested right over my groin, the tip actually prodding my shaft and then my balls through the thin fighting pants.

"You're getting better in the bed, Gaven, but you have a long way to go in the fighting field." Vlar withdrew the threat of the sword and turned away, taking a cloth that one of his trainees handed him to wipe the blade clean.

I wanted to smash the ground in frustration, wanted to throw the nearest rock at my eramon's head, but I was learning restraint.

I felt myself flush then. I was learning restraint in more ways than one. I slowly and painfully pulled myself up from the ground and dusted myself off with shaking fingers. I felt unable to meet anyone's eyes. Had they heard my screams last night? Vlar had tied me up and tortured me with pleasure, telling me that the more control I showed, the shorter the session would be. Well, I had obviously had little control, because it had gone on for over three hours, until I had literally begged to be allowed to come.

It was a little difficult to be at ease with the other men when I felt I might be judged on those reactions.

Being Vlar's eramai was more difficult than I could ever have imagined. Now that the older man had official control of me—the right to treat me as he saw fit—he was harsh and often almost brutal in how he trained me on the field.

It was hard for me to hold my tongue. The one time I lost my temper, Vlar made it perfectly clear that I needed to lose the attitude. His training would keep me alive in times to come, and I had better get my head out of the clouds and get down to serious work if I ever wanted to be anything other than a burden.

It had stung, but it had also given me fire in my fighting, and I made several important strides from that incident alone.

I just wished I could control my reactions to Vlar's prodding. I was too sensitive, overreacting to Vlar's every word. But the man just had a way of setting me off without even trying.

It made me feel very young, and I wished that I could achieve the calm and control that Vlar displayed so effortlessly.

So I gritted my teeth and tried harder. Some of the best fighters in the army had been trained by this man. Not one of them could beat Vlar, but I could only hope that one day I would attain the impossible and kick the older man's ass.

I could dream. Probably the same dream as every other eramai that Vlar had ever had...

I rubbed my sore shoulder with a grimace of pain and tried to walk without a limp. Damned if I would rub my sore ass...

\* \* \*

Supper was loud and boisterous. I sat with mug in hand, brooding as I watched the other men. Teaser and Weasel were in fine form tonight, bouncing humor off each other and creating a raucous atmosphere around them.

They seemed so happy together, so *right*. What made it so? How had they found this? How did they keep it?

At this moment, I missed my old friend, Micael, even more than usual. The simple camaraderie the two men showed and the deep bonds among the Eight made me feel excluded. I stared down at the reflections in the wine, a frown on my brow. Everyone here was so close; years of fighting had bonded them into a tight-knit unit.

I felt like an intruder, and time had not seemed to lessen the sensation. I felt no more like one of these men than when I had first come here, felt no closer to being what the warlord wanted me to be.

As to Vlar...

My hand tightened into a fist, and I took a deep drink of the wine to quell the many emotions that coursed through me at the mere thought of my eramon.So many things had changed between us. Even his appearance was not the same as when I met him; his hair, which I had learned was not dark at all, was in truth various shades of blond. It had been dyed when I first met him, apparently due to some ceremonial coloring due to grief at the death of a friend. He had seemed like a creature of darkness then, and now he was all golden, all beautiful.

Across the room, I could see Vlar; the Finnarian laughing with some of the more experienced warriors, and my breath hitched. My body tightened, heat pooling in my groin.

I hated that my body reacted so easily to a mere glimpse of that powerful form. The way my very skin tingled and my mind seemed to want to force me to accept that this man almost owned me, could do with me as he wished.

Of the many emotions churning within me, indifference was not among them.

\* \* \*

The king himself had ordered that I also receive teaching in reading and writing as a noble's son, and this I found much more difficult than the fighting. I am a physical person. Sitting and listening to my tutor drone on and on was a far heavier burden than taking bruises from a sword blow.

I tried though; it seemed to make my uncle Sarin—the king—happy, and I had begun to quite like the man. He was very little like his brother, my father. Despite his burdens and responsibilities, he displayed a lighter hearted, more compassionate nature.

To my surprise, my uncle was obviously trying to forge a relationship of some sort with me. I could not imagine why, but I could not repel the advances without being rude. I am not good at being rude. *This* relative, at least, had never done me harm.

The king's attention seemed to draw notice to me, and more people seemed willing to make conversation with me. I doubted their motives and trusted them not at all, but still... It was nice not to be ignored or, worse yet, taunted as I had been during my childhood.

On this particular day, I sat staring at the sunshine, trying to focus my mind enough to practice my writing. I startled as a hand came down on my shoulder, and guiltily I looked up at my long-suffering tutor, Philas.

"Gaven, my boy. This is enough for today. I am not so cruel as to expect you to be enthused over letters when such a beautiful day calls you. Go enjoy it. We can continue tomorrow. I am sure that one day won't make a difference either way."

I could have hugged him as I leaped up, almost falling over my own feet.

Philas shook his head, apparently amused. "My boy you are like an overgrown colt, all legs and energy." He looked at me for a long moment, a certain seriousness appearing in his eyes. "You are far more intelligent, though, than you give yourself credit for, Gaven. Believe in yourself. A lot of your father is within you. Gareth is brilliant, almost too smart for his own good, but with an attitude as large as his

brain. You are a pleasant surprise; there is no arrogance in you, only a wish for kindness, and you are deeply empathic to others. I see you often sensing another's emotions before that person knows themselves. I feel that, one day, if you work past your own insecurities, Gaven, you would make a great leader, perhaps even better than Gareth himself."

I stared at him in mute astonishment, then blushed fiercely, scarcely knowing what to say to such things. I had no idea how he could witness these things within me, when I saw nothing at all.

He smiled then, a little ruefully, perhaps. "Go, my boy."

I bowed with respect, then lunged out the door eagerly on the way to a respite of freedom.

\* \* \*

The heat rose throughout the day until, in the late afternoon, it was nigh unbearable. The men sought ways of cooling off, and the favorite method was a swim in the nearby lake.

I ventured there tentatively and was relieved when I saw Teaser waving at me. It was easier then, and I stripped down, keeping my eyes averted so I would not see if anyone was watching me. It was still difficult for me to get past the modesty that had been so instilled in my earlier years.

I had no sooner set foot in the cool waters, trying to slowly acclimate myself, than I was tackled by Weasel. We landed in a great splash of windmilling arms and legs. I gave a choked yell that almost got me drowned; then I twisted in the older man's hold like an eel and ended up pushing Weasel under the water in retaliation.

Soon Teaser came to rescue his lover, and that set off the other six, so that it turned into a free-for-all. Whoops and yells called in any other guard in the vicinity; soon it was hard to tell where the brawl began and ended. I managed to extricate myself by swimming underwater for a ways, getting past the combatants. I popped up with a grin, watching the antics from a safe distance as Weasel slapped the water around him, looking for a rematch.

I escaped to deeper water and swam lazily, keeping an eye on the action in case it moved in my direction. I had no warning before an arm came around my waist, and I went under. I splashed to the surface, ready to fight, only to face Vlar.

I became flustered then; very, very aware of his hands resting on my hips, very aware of the close proximity of my very naked eramon.

Vlar grinned at me, a slow tilting of the lips that made my blush heat even more.

"We will make this another training session, Gaven. One in trust."

The mere word made me tense up, my breath coming harder with an effort to stay afloat.

"Lie back; let me tow you through the water. When you relax in trust, you will float. When you resist, you will sink. This is the test." Vlar's tone indicated he knew full well that I was going to sink quite a bit.

Having opened my mouth to argue, I snapped it shut and gritted my teeth. Damned if I would act as Vlar so obviously expected. Without a word, I lay back, trying desperately not to tense as Vlar put one large hand around my chin and began to tow me through the water.

I sank.

Rising to the surface, sputtering and angry with myself, I glared at Vlar, who merely arched a brow as he waited with all the patience of the rocks themselves.

I wanted to growl, but I restrained myself and once more floated onto my back. The hand gently encased my chin again, and I focused harder on letting go, letting myself relax into my eramon's touch. I took deep breaths, trying to urge my muscles to go slack. The more they did, the higher I floated. I shut my eyes finally, finding that it helped me focus. "Good, very good," Vlar rumbled, swimming strongly. "Give yourself into my hold."

I tried. I let my breath out, drawing in another slowly and easily, eyes closed. I tried to think of gentle things: of soothing streams and soft breezes, of Vlar's kisses on my lips...

I sank.

I came up snorting and wide-eyed. Where in the hells had *that* thought come from? I could not even look at Vlar, hoping that being Finnarian did not include mind reading. I could feel the telltale flush on my face and knew that alone gave away the tenor of my thoughts more surely than anything. Cursing a blue streak under my breath, I tried again.

This time was a little better, my determination to the fore. I would *not* think of my eramon. It was bad enough I had to foster with him; it would be far worse if I actually began to *want* him. That was not going to happen. Ever. *Ever*.

I got through the session without drowning, although the trust issue seemed to have gained little ground, judging by Vlar's grin and my time spent underwater.

This would definitely need some work.

\* \* \*

The meal that night was more formal than usual, for a delegation had come to see the king, and as family, I was forced to endure elaborate clothing and demonstrate precise manners that had me sweating and feeling utterly inadequate. I was amazed those around me—the new people—did not see me for the fraud I was. They treated me with the respect due to a nephew of the king, son of a warlord. It definitely proved appearances could be utterly deceiving.

I shifted uncomfortably on my seat, wary and silent, discreetly watching everyone around me, viewing their expressions and listening to their words. I felt like an invisible presence in the midst of life itself. It made for lonely contemplation. Vlar had left my side some time ago and was leaning against a pillar halfway down the hall, close in conversation with one of the delegates. He loomed over the other man, and something in his expression was predatory. I was embarrassed and looked away uncomfortably. When I looked back, the two of them were gone.

There was little doubt as to what they would be doing, and it made me restless and irritable in some way I could not define. Soundlessly I got up, nodding in my uncle's direction to excuse myself. I wound through the small knots of people, hearing snatches of conversations and laughter. Teaser and Weasel and the rest of the Eight, as I called them now, were not here, not high enough in rank to be present. I missed them. They at least did not mind my sitting silent in their midst, did not seem to view my inability to socialize as something terrible.

Outside, the night was blessedly cool, the heat of the day fading with a gentle breeze. There were torches along the many paths, and their flames flickered, casting objects into light and then shadow.

I took a deep breath of the scented air, stopping now and then to touch a night blossom, enjoying their gentle perfume. My body slowly relaxed. Here, away from people, I could just be me without worrying about my many inadequacies. I wished I could always be this invisible, this calm. It was people that gave me so much grief. Always people.

I sighed a little and decided to wander to my bench at the back of the garden, my favorite spot. Very few others seemed to make their way that far back, and it was most always peaceful and private.

But perhaps not tonight...

Just before I got to my spot, I heard soft murmurs and a low laugh that was all too familiar.

I froze in horror, but it was too late to back away without being seen.

Both men were gloriously naked, and Vlar was balls-deep in his lover and had the other man off the ground, pinned against a tree, long legs wrapped round Vlar's waist. Vlar's thrusts were slow and deep for a time; then he would snap his hips forward, making the other man cry out softly as he was impaled more deeply by the Finnarian's immense organ.

I could only stand there, eyes glued to my eramon, taking in the erotic scene. Every sound Vlar made was familiar, but to watch his body in action from an outsider's point of view was...arousing.

I shook my mind free of what I was seeing, then took a cautious step backward, hoping to be able to slide away unnoticed.

I should have known my eramon better than that. Finnarian hearing was up to five times more acute than a human's, and Vlar's eyes snapped up to pierce me to the core, their surface seeming to glow faintly red in the reflection of the torches.

I flushed deeply, beyond embarrassed to be caught watching such intimacy, but Vlar did not seem at all put out at being viewed. Indeed, he smiled slowly, never taking his eyes off me as he began to kiss gently along the man's neck, his long tongue coming out to lave the tender skin there.

His eyes were definitely glowing red now, and as I watched in horrified fascination, long fangs slowly descended into his smile.

The man writhed on his impalement, breathlessly begging for deeper thrusts, his head thrown back to offer Vlar better access to his neck. "Gods, yes," he moaned in a broken voice. "Please, Vlar, stop dicking around. Bite me *now*."

Vlar chuckled softly at the blatant impatience. My gaze was pinned to Vlar's as his fangs swiftly pierced the flesh, lips sealing over the spot as he began to suckle on the lifeblood of his lover.

I wanted to be sick, but the reactions of the stranger were confusing, irrational. He cried out at the piercing, yes, but his body went wild, hands clutching Vlar more closely, eyes rolling back into his head.

It seemed more like profound pleasure than pain.

The man bucked and arched, driving his hips into Vlar's, obviously trying to get more leverage, more sensation.

Vlar complied.

He began to thrust hard and fast, still with his teeth embedded deeply in this stranger's neck. The immense organ pistoned into the pinned body mercilessly, and this at last seemed to be the trigger.

The man gave a garbled scream, his hands spasming on Vlar's shoulders. Then he went totally limp, only giving an occasional whimper as Vlar continued to thrust deeply, perhaps brushing over what must by then have been the overly sensitive nub deep inside his body.

Vlar released his bite, gently licking over the site, cleansing and healing in long sweeps, then threw his head back, exhaling short, sharp puffs of air as he began to thrust erratically.

He came with a long, low growl, his hips suddenly stilling as he spilled his seed deep inside his partner.

I was more than familiar with that sound, but watching the act from afar gave me chills. I turned and fled, embarrassment and something else knotting in my chest.

\* \* \*

For some reason I could not possibly fathom, I was unable to go back to Vlar's rooms. The mere thought of Vlar demanding compliance at that moment made me physically ill. So far, since becoming his eramai, there had not been a single night when I had been able to sleep alone, and at this time, I could not bear the Finnarian touching me.

The reason for so strong a reaction escaped me totally. All I knew was I could not sleep there that night even though my absence would most likely be punished. I wandered aimlessly, not foolish enough to try to leave the palace grounds, aware that guards watched my passage with expressionless eyes, never moving from their posts.

How I longed for privacy, something rarely achieved within these walls.

Finally, worn-out, I stopped by one of the massive ponds, sinking down in a weary heap in the deeper shadow of a massive tree. I leaned back against its trunk, taking comfort in its solid presence as I stared out blindly over the still water. The moon was full, and its reflection perfect so that it seemed two glowing orbs existed within my vision, and I felt my strange sadness ease at the sheer beauty before me.

It soothed me, and I began to slide toward sleep before voices roused me once more. I sighed a little, too numb to even feel true irritation at this intrusion into my peace.

There was a splash, and the moon's reflection shattered into crystalline shards on the small waves created. A body cleaved the waters as someone swam out farther, then turned and came back toward the shore, the body sleek, the strokes strong and fast. A man stood upon the bank, laughing low as he watched the other return to him. In that moment, I realized it was Teaser and Weasel.

I almost called out—needing, wanting company. But as I saw Teaser's face in the moonlight, I knew this was not the moment.

Weasel rose from the water, brushing back his hair with both hands as he slowly approached his lover, the moonlight beautiful upon his lithe body. Each muscle was cast in silver light and deeper shadow, and the effect was truly breathtaking. Certainly Teaser seemed to think so. He cast off his clothing leisurely, never taking his eyes from the vision before him.

Weasel gave a slow smile, stepping up onto the grassy bank, then moving without hesitation into his partner's arms. Teaser enfolded him with such love on his face and in his manner that I felt tears rise. One could not help but feel the emotion between these two men. It was in every move they made, every expression they gave each other. It was real and tangible, and in some part of my lonely heart, I desperately wanted something similar. Someone who looked at me like that, like I was the most precious thing in the world. As if I and only I could fulfill my beloved's desire.

Instead I sat, alone and wishing, knowing that the likelihood of my ever truly experiencing such a thing was more remote than any dream. Who would want me?

I could not move without informing them of my presence and embarrassing myself and them, so I watched, longingly...

Teaser was a good head taller than his companion and heavily muscled, broad shouldered. His callused swordsman's hands gently framed Weasel's face before he tilted his head and kissed him, slowly and tantalizingly sweeping his tongue over pliant lips. Weasel made a needy sound in his throat, and Teaser smiled a little, letting his tongue dip into his lover's mouth, twining with Weasel's tongue, tasting each other's essence.

Weasel's hands tugged impatiently on Teaser's hair. Teaser gave a little chuckle and left that tempting mouth with a last lick and kiss. He nipped his way down his Weasel's throat, marking his territory with a growl that made Weasel shiver visibly, even from my distance. Then he captured one nipple in his lips, teasing it so he made the smaller man cry out, arching at the sensation, then whimpering.

Weasel writhed against the bigger body, his moan echoing out over the water. He clutched Teaser's hair more tightly as Teaser's mouth moved to his other nipple, lavishing it with the same attention.

Teaser fell to his knees, leaving Weasel clutching his broad shoulders for balance and support, before he swallowed his partner's shaft without pause. Weasel threw back his head, a short, sharp cry escaping him at the sudden pleasure.

Teaser braced him up but never ceased his movements. His tongue circled the long, slender shaft, then pressed up along the underside with repetitive sweeps until Weasel was reduced to indecipherable babble. Swallowing the shaft completely, Teaser deep throated his lover until Weasel could only gasp, his hips undulating as he came closer and closer to the edge. Teaser moved back then, his head tilted as he watched every nuance of Weasel's expressions, before he began to suckle on the head.

It was enough to tip Weasel over, and he came with a scream that echoed through the grounds.

Weasel collapsed onto Teaser's lap, boneless and sated, his head gently guided to rest on the larger man's shoulder. Teaser cradled and caressed him softly as he came down from the high, body shivering with reaction.

Using spit and Weasel's cum to lubricate his shaft, Teaser maneuvered Weasel's pliant body over the rigid organ, pulsing in the moonlight in its eagerness. Its tip probed at the puckered entrance, gradually stretching the small hole until it could accommodate the slick head, which popped through, so that Teaser grimaced as he was squeezed.

Teaser gave a low, drawn out groan; from the expression on his face, the silky heat that encased his shaft was the closest to heaven he ever expected to reach. He wrapped his arms around Weasel, holding his lover close against his own chest, his head bowing to lay a gentle kiss upon a wet throat. His shaft must have throbbed like another heart within Weasel's body, and he gave a small thrust, smiling at the weak moan Weasel gave from where his head rested on Teaser's chest and shoulder.

He spread his legs a little, forcing Weasel's farther apart, and used the new position to thrust more strongly, a little longer each time, a little deeper. Surely he felt the friction and pressure as he glided past the small nubbin within Weasel's body.

Weasel's shaft was trapped between their hard stomachs, and he began to pant and moan as he once again hardened despite his exhaustion, his fingers flexing upon Teaser's powerful shoulders.

Teaser settled his hands beneath Weasel's buttocks and began to lift and drop Weasel in time to his thrusts. Weasel cried out as he was pierced deep and deeper each time. He seemed to try to help as best he could, but he was breathless and shaky, out of sync with Teaser's movements. At last he simply went limp, letting Teaser do as he wished.

"So tight, so hot, my love. You make me want to come with just the thought of how deep inside you I am right now, how much I'm stretching you." Teaser's voice was hoarse with need and want, his eyes glittering in the moonlight. He leaned forward and claimed Weasel's lips, swallowing the sounds the smaller man made, possessing even that.

At last he drew back with a gasp, arching under his lover and thrusting even harder, so that Weasel was half lifted from the ground, all his weight impaled on Teaser's throbbing shaft.

Sweat ran down both bodies. Glistening in the moonlight, they seemed more than mortal, unreal in their beauty.

"Come, my love," Teaser panted breathlessly. "Come with me."

As if that was what he had been waiting for—those words—Weasel gave a keening cry, his seed spurting between their straining bodies, coating their skin, no doubt easing the friction as Teaser summoned a few more straining thrusts, eyes squeezed shut as he gave a growling shout, shooting his essence deep into his lover.

Weasel moaned at the moment of complete joining, body and soul. Then he drew Teaser to him with shaking hands, kissing him, stroking down his back in soothing motions as the bigger man slumped against him, trembling.

They took their time, giving each other a chance to recover, never letting their hands stop touching, whispering soft words of which only lovers could truly understand the meaning.

The moon had begun to wane, and the first hint of dawn was in the sky by the time they rose and dressed before walking off, hand in hand, complete.

In the shadows, I wiped away tears, letting my head slump back against the tree in weary resignation.

## **Chapter Two**

A rough shake to my shoulder started me awake, and I jerked defensively, hands trying to block the assailant.

I stared up into green eyes and slumped back in defeat as I realized it was Vlar.

#### Caught.

I gave a sigh, waiting for the punishment that was sure to follow my disobedience; I had not told my eramon of my location, had left the older man to find me. Definitely not the actions of an obedient eramai.

I waited...but the heavy hand did not fall upon me as I expected.

Instead one long-fingered hand came down before me, offering aid to stand.

I stared at it in disbelieving silence for a moment, suspecting a trick. Seeing no recourse, I accepted it and let Vlar pull me to my feet.

I stood uncomfortably then, trying to brush myself off, unable to meet those piercing Finnarian eyes that seemed to see far too deeply into my soul.

I waited with weary patience for what torture my eramon had planned for today, what humiliation was in store.

"Come; today we hunt. The wolves need exercise; they grow impatient with civilization, as do I." Vlar turned on his heel and walked away with his usual silent grace, leaving me gaping in his wake.

I felt a grin of disbelief slowly curve my lips, and I scrambled after my lord, something very like enthusiasm in my haste.

\* \* \*

The wolves lived in the forest that bordered the city, too wild to endure the palace with its people and rules.

Today it seemed Vlar himself had had enough of rules and confinement. He did not speak to me, but still, I was content. I was well used to my eramon's taciturn disposition and saw no need for conversation. The silence was comforting to me, who had spent most of my life alone, even among people, and the Finnarians themselves were not known for being garrulous. Silent for the most part, they were great hunters and trackers, warriors known to come for the kill, then vanish as silently as they had appeared. For one to remain among humankind was rare. Both Andar and the king himself had expressed on more than one occasion that they were amazed Vlar had remained with them for so very long, the equivalent of two generations in human time. Neither had been able to satisfy my curiosity as to *why* Vlar had remained. No one had the courage to ask, it seemed. Finnarians did as they pleased, and if in the doing they aided someone in power, well, that person could only be grateful—and not ask too many questions.

I was not so cautious. Silence might comfort me, but I also longed to ask a multitude of questions. My curiosity was greatly piqued by my eramon.

Did Vlar not get lonely with no others of his kind? No one had encountered another Finnarian during the time Vlar had been here. Did he not miss his own people, others who would truly understand?

There were those who were close enough, such as Sarin, the king, as well as Andar and Gareth. Some of the older warriors, those who had trained with Vlar, some as eramai, others simply to gain skill on the field, often joined him after feasts or on the training grounds. Still, to me, who noticed such things, Vlar seemed aloof from those around him, never quite a part of anything. There were many who admired him, lusted after him, sought his advice and training, but who among them actually *knew* him? It seemed to me to be a lonely existence, much as my own was. Perhaps that was part of the fascination with my eramon; I could sense that, in some part of him, Vlar might actually understand me better than others could.

No one had ever understood me, except perhaps for my friend, Micael. To meet someone as powerful as Vlar that might also hold knowledge, accept me as who I was inside, was a draw the lonely boy within me could not resist.

My fear of the Finnarian was becoming tempered with fascination.

The wolves welcomed us loudly and with great ceremony. There was much licking, jumping, and vocalization. The younger wolves concentrated on me, counting me as one of them, and I wrestled playfully, having over time lost my fear of them. Yes, there was the occasional bite or nip that slipped and drew blood, but on the whole, they were like playful puppies with me. With Vlar they were totally submissive, crawling to him with whimpers and rolling onto their backs, presenting belly and throat in acceptance of his rank within the pack, licking at his face and mouth (if he sat) until he finally moved away, signaling they could rise. If he was on his feet, they would lick his hands wildly, mouthing his fingers in loving tribute.

The older wolves were more reserved with me and more dignified with Vlar. The alpha male and Vlar seemed to be on equal terms, respect on both sides, while the alpha female expected loving attention from both as her due.

Today the whole pack milled about, excited, scenting an impending hunt. I rose to my feet, rumpled and covered in wolf fur, my hair tousled and wild, probably grinning like a fool.

The wolves accepted me without prejudice. They did not care about my blood or my background. They did not care that I had come from somewhere else or that I had been treated badly as a child.

They just saw me now, accepted me as I was now. It was always remarkably freeing and simplistic, my time among them. It often seemed to bleed away some of my self-hatred, make me a little more confident. It was an enjoyable break from the intensity of the palace and the constant round of training I endured under Vlar's tutelage.

Vlar actually smiled as he wrestled playfully with the alpha, his own demeanor more relaxed and open.

He rose at last, brushing himself off, then tilted his head back and howled, low at first as the alpha male joined him, then the female. Immediately the rest grouped round, wolves tilting their heads quizzically at me until I reluctantly joined in, feeling that my howl still sounded too human for comfort.

The pack did not seem to mind. The song of our bonding rose in the earlymorning air, and the forest grew hushed, listening. Eerie and yet unmistakably beautiful, the clear notes lifted to the sky, then slowly died away, leaving a total breathless silence.

The wolves wound around each other, sniffing and pawing, organizing themselves, before the alpha and Vlar both took off running, the pack bounding behind, nipping at each other in high excitement.

I brought up the rear. I was an excellent runner, even better after my endurance training and richer food, but I was no match for these wild things neither wolf nor Finnarian.

I kept pace awhile, for they were not trying, only casting about for a scent. Vlar had an incredible sense of smell—as sharp as the wolves, I suspected. He would sniff the air; then the alpha would run with his nose on the ground, and between them, they always managed to find prey.

Their first find was a herd of smaller *misque* deer, their backs about as high as my waist. The wolves tested them, but the herd was fast, fleet, and healthy as they bounded away.

If desperate, the wolves would have pursued, chased them for hours and worn them down, but prey was plentiful here, and there was no need for such effort. An easier target was preferable After a half hour, another herd of misque, again healthy and strong. The wolves took a rest then, lying about, some rolling in the forest humus, making little grunting sounds of enjoyment. I could not help but smile, seeing these noble animals looking so...cute as they lay on their backs, paws lolling, seeming more like adorable puppies than lethal hunters.

For his part, Vlar never really seemed to require rest. He crouched on his heels, hands lax over his thighs, green eyes unfocused and staring into the distance as though his thoughts ranged far from this place.

I sat with my back against a tree, one of the younger wolves half splayed over my lap, giant head resting against my chest as I gently tugged the soft ears. My eyes never left my eramon as I waited for a signal.

At last Vlar took a deep breath, and his eyes cleared, nostrils flaring for scent. He turned from side to side, testing; then his eyes sharpened, and he rose, intent.

Immediately the wolves rose also, silent and deadly now, watching.

I rose in their wake, stretching, preparing for the true chase.

Vlar's lips curled back, his fangs descending, a growl rumbling in his chest. Then he sprang off, the alpha at his side, the other wolves in close pursuit. My heart pounded as I trailed at the end, watching the others move with effortless grace through the sparse brush.

I felt my body as almost a separate thing, felt its strength and grace as I dodged obstacles without even looking, fast and fleet as I ducked low branches and leaped over fallen limbs. Blood pounded in my veins, and if I'd had fangs, they would have been bared in primal display even as Vlar's were.

These hunts were toning me, maturing my body into a tool I could use at will, connecting mind and body into a unit as nothing else could have done. There was no place for thought here, only instinct. I ran, and my body sang with it, enough that I would have laughed if I'd had breath. In these moments, I seemed more than myself, something greater. Ahead, to my left, I saw a great *dwar* stag burst from the brush, eyes wild and bright, huge muscles bunching as he fled the threat. Tall as the Finnarian, dwar deer were powerful and dangerous, seldom hunted by man. At first I thought there must be different prey close by, for this stag seemed far too healthy to be a catch, but then I saw the wound upon one flank, deep and painful-looking, and knew why Vlar had chosen this one.

Perhaps it was from fighting another stag or an accident of some sort, but such a wound would soon fester. Either way, the animal was doomed.

The alpha and the older wolves spread themselves in a U behind the stag, darting in to snap at heels and belly as they ran, harrying him, stealing his strength with fear and exhaustion.

I had fallen somewhat behind, but as the stag began to slow, I caught up. The younger wolves and I kept back as the stag suddenly turned at bay, desperate and dangerous with it.

Huge antlers swept the ground before him, sharp points raking the air. He let out a bellow of rage and fear, charging at Vlar as the largest target.

My breath hitched as I watched my eramon dodge lightly to the side, letting the immense animal charge past, antlers just missing their target. My heart pounded with a certain fear I could scarcely understand.

The alpha leaped, caught the stag on his wound, and the deer cried out in pain, half stumbling, then whirling again, almost snagging the wolf on his deadly weapons. The alpha sprang away, but the wolf next to him was not quite so lucky. A point caught him, and with a single surge of the stag's mighty neck, he flew yelping through the air to land some distance away.

Vlar's eyes bled red as he heard the wolf's cry, and his growl could be heard even over the cacophony of wolves and prey. When next the stag charged, Vlar caught one of the great antlers in an iron fist, and with an impressive display of his race's incredible strength, he wrenched the stag's head around so that the animal's own forward momentum acted against him. Pulled off balance, the stag stumbled, white eyed, trying to regain his feet. Then Vlar twisted the dwar's head round sharply and sank his fangs into the animal's throat.

The stag gave a breathless groan as he went down, legs kicking in a last feeble protest. The wolves hung back for a moment, safely out of reach of this final struggle. Vlar was on one knee, holding the animal firmly, until the last sighing breath wheezed from the stag's lungs and he went limp in Vlar's grasp.

Only then did Vlar release his bite and put back his head to howl, joined by the pack.

I watched, trying to catch my own breath from the chase. The wolves gathered round—even the wounded one limping up to find a place—and began to feed even as Vlar traced runes over the stag's head, giving thanks to the animal's spirit, releasing the dwar's essence to be born again as his people believed. He whispered the words of reverence, then again bent his head and sank his fangs into the neck, drinking deeply.

I wiped suddenly sweaty palms on my breeches. I knew what was coming, and my body throbbed with an excitement that I wanted to resent, resist.

There was only the sound of the wolves growling at each other as they jostled for position; then I froze as Vlar slowly lifted his head, his glowing eyes fastening upon me with one hunger appeased, another only just awakening.

He rose to his full height, licking bloody lips. "Come here," he half snarled, dangerous in his needs.

To disobey at that moment would have been sheer foolhardiness, and I approached with alacrity, trying to calm the beast within Vlar that would brook none but his own wishes.

A hard hand grabbed my arm, dragging me up against my eramon. Bloody lips closed over mine, and I tried not to gag, going submissively limp in the brutal grasp. A small rumble of approval vibrated against my chest as Vlar accepted the submission as his due, his kiss deepening, one hand releasing his new prey to begin to strip me of my clothing. The coolness of the forest made me shiver as my skin was swiftly revealed, my shirt half tearing in the impatient process. When I stood naked, vulnerable, Vlar shoved me forward, belly down over the massive neck of the dead stag. I could feel the coarse hair of the animal bristling against me. I braced myself. Turning my head slightly, I watched Vlar slick himself with hot blood before presenting his massive organ to my entrance. I closed my eyes, feeling the shaft press against me, sliding a little; then, as my body began to open reluctantly, it centered itself, eagerly sliding forward. My fingers spasmed on warm hide as I grunted, trying to make myself relax as the head slid within the protective muscle. I gasped with pain, never quite able to get used to this sensation, nor able to make my body accept it with any grace.

I bore down desperately, knowing that there would be no mercy this day. Vlar was both in bloodlust and rut, a potent combination in a Finnarian, a point where they became almost completely feral.

I was just in time; as Vlar thrust deep into me, I cried out. He grasped my hips and pulled my body back with each thrust, impaling me deeper and deeper onto the spear of flesh that filled me. I could feel the blood on the animal's neck smearing over my skin, easing the friction of the hide against me, and I tried not to think of how this looked or on what I lay.

I yelped as teeth came down to grasp my nape, holding me tightly so I could not move away in the slightest. Then the thrusts doubled in speed and depth, leaving me gasping.

I moaned at the feeling of being pinned, being possessed by this powerful, immortal being, of being pierced time and again, helplessly opened and dominated. My own ardor rose despite the part of me that cried out at this, my own primal needs rising to meet those of the one mating me.

I keened deep in my throat, and Vlar stilled for a moment, listening, before flipping me to my back and plunging back in, wresting a cry from me as he filled me once more to the root, holding my legs up and out. I arched upon my impalement, gasping and writhing with increasing need as the one above me began to shorten his thrusts, angling to strike that nub that made me see stars, made me want to surrender anything for just another touch, another brush over it.

I clutched at Vlar, wild-eyed, needing, wanting more. Without thought, I pulled my legs free of Vlar's loosened grasp and wrapped them around my eramon's waist, meeting him thrust for thrust, baring my own teeth in primal communication.

Vlar's growl rumbled deep as he saw my expression. His eyes seemed to glow more brightly, his fangs to lengthen. He leaned down and kissed me again, his tongue sweeping within to take my mouth, stealing my very breath.

I hardly knew what I did; it was all instinct, all sensation and need, and my body cried out for completion. I panted and whimpered, little gasps escaping my lips, exciting everything dominant in Vlar. Again I made the keening sound deep in my throat.

The Finnarian gave a rumble deep from his chest in response. I opened my eyes to meet the red ones staring into mine. The teeth were at full length now, gleaming in the sunlight filtering down through the leaves above us, and suddenly my fear left me. I turned my head to the left, submissively going limp, and Vlar took the offering without hesitation.

There was pain for a moment as my neck was pierced. My eyes widened—I felt it—fear gaining a brief foothold. Then there was such soaring pleasure that I thought my body could not contain it, could not survive it. I felt like I flew, like my body was capable of anything at that moment. I could feel Vlar's pulse, feel my own as though they beat together. I could smell everything around me, see things so minute that I had never noticed them before. I could feel the great spear of flesh within me, its entry and exit, feel my body give in to the invader, then gently close behind it with each thrust. I could feel Vlar in every part of me, feel my eramon's fierce joy at my submission, sense his possessive feelings grow as he witnessed my utter surrender to this at last. At long last...

At that moment, I was not alone. I was not a single entity, but something much greater. I felt part of Vlar, part of all that was around me, as though I could feel the very heartbeat of the earth.

Was this what it meant to be Finnarian?

My body recalled me to reality as it desperately strove for completion. I drove myself onto Vlar with increasing force, taking my eramon deeper and deeper into my body in a search for something that lay just out of reach... So close...

I felt Vlar's tongue lave my neck before the Finnarian began to suck, draw blood from my spasming body. I whimpered, fingernails drawing blood of my own from Vlar's back. The feeling of my life's essence being given to another so intimately made my eyes roll back in my head, and with a short, sharp scream that made the wolves startle, I came harder than I could ever remember, feeling as though I was dying...and I could not care.

Vlar sucked harder, as though my taste were more savory with my orgasm; then he drove once, twice, thrice into my pliant body, my heat spasming around him with the last residue of orgasmic shocks.

Thick seed pulsed from him as he released my neck and gave a roar that echoed through the forest.

I could vaguely feel the hot, ropey cum coat my insides, deep within, where no one else was able to touch—only my eramon. I lay in dazed incomprehension, watching as needle-sharp fangs gradually withdrew into that lean jaw, as sense slowly came back into Vlar's eyes, red gradually fading back into green.

I whimpered a little as the semihard shaft slowly, carefully, pulled from my tender entrance; then I was stunned to feel myself lifted and cradled against a hard chest. I did not struggle. Indeed I curled into the warmth and security that those arms represented at that moment, pliant and submissive. A kiss was dropped on my head, and I nodded in lazy response, my mind not clear enough to fear these strange actions or try to imagine why I should.

I felt sadness as the perceptions I had sensed through Vlar began to fade, leaving me no more than human, blind and deaf to so much around me. But even grief was a vague thing at that moment. My body was sated and sore, feeling every bit possessed by a larger mate. For once, I did not seem alone.

I slipped into deep sleep, fingers clutching Vlar's thick golden hair tightly, as though I would never let him go.

# **Chapter Three**

I hugged the warmth closer to my body, snuggling into its comfort.

It gave a complaining whine and tried to wiggle away.

I opened sleepy eyes, wondering why Vlar would-

The wolf I held licked my face, giving me a reproving look when I still did not release him immediately, too shocked—

I let go. The young wolf licked me again, then got up and trotted off, no doubt to do his business in the nearby brush.

I pushed myself up to one elbow, my body chilling in the early morning dampness without my furry companion's presence.

Brushing back my hair with one hand, I looked round, feeling a keen sense of disappointment as I realized Vlar was nowhere in sight. There were only the other wolves, lying full and replete in various stages of sleep. Sighing, I sat up, grimacing as I looked down at my body. What had been right and good last night now seemed disgusting, and the blood that coated my body had dried. It flaked off as I touched it in distaste. I felt stiff and sore, and as memory came to haunt me, I rose shakily to my feet, trying to dismiss it all.

If Vlar had been holding me this morning, I might have believed this could be something more, but my eramon's absence told me much.

I could faintly hear water to my left, and I followed the sound, hoping it might be a spring or something that I could at least use to wash the worst of the gore off my body. It was a small stream, half-hidden by ferns and lush greenery, but large enough for my purpose. I gave a hiss as I knelt in the cold water, unable to gain enough bravery to splash myself just yet. I played in the water for a while, trying to ignore the chill, until my body finally accepted the water was *not* ice as I had first suspected.

I shivered violently as I began to pour water over my legs, soaking the blood and watching it swirl away as I rubbed at it. I yelped as the water trickled down over my shaft and balls, the temperature *truly* icelike for that moment, then gritted my teeth as I scrubbed my genitals too.

I spread my legs, lowering myself closer to the water, using one hand to gently cleanse around my tender entrance, feeling the copious blood and seed that had dried there. I flushed hot, remembering, reminded that most of that seed still remained deep inside me, residue of my claiming.

I grimaced. As if my soreness were not enough reminder, my body was telling me in no uncertain terms that it had been well taken, but its sated lethargy was most annoying. I did *not* want to feel content, I told my body in irritation. But it was determinedly ignoring me. My mind could fuss as much as it wanted; my body was happy, and that was that.

Realizing that I could not win an argument with so stupid an opponent as my own body, I gave up, growling under my breath.

I washed myself as best I could, then lay back in the water and let my hair soak clean, enjoying the gentle movement of the stream over my body. It just barely came halfway up my form, so I could rest comfortably and let my mind wander.

Water splashed into my face, and then a wet tongue rasped over my nose, making me sputter. I attempted to sit up even as a wet wolf tried to clamber over me, plopping heavily onto my lap.

I yelped at the abrupt contact with my tender privates and hastily gained my feet, dumping the young wolf into the water. This seemed an invitation to play, and I ended up facedown, tripped back into the stream by an overeager paw. A yelp of excitement from my playmate greeted the action, and I had to struggle against nips and licks in my attempt to free myself from both the water and the wolf, who leaped on me and over me in boisterous good humor. After several futile attempts, I finally managed to gain my feet and fend off the wolf, who retreated some small distance, dropping down to his belly and watching me with eager golden eyes for my next move in this game.

I brushed back my hair with one hand, exhaling an annoyed huff as I scrubbed water out of my eyes with the other.

I glared at the offender, who let out an excited whine, dancing to his feet, then dropping to his forelegs in a bow, tail waving in invitation.

I growled in response, then leaped forward at the culprit. The wolf dodged away, giving little yelps of encouragement to the much slower human as we weaved through the trees. When I fell too far behind, the wolf circled and nipped my heels or other tender parts of anatomy, encouraging me to new bouts of athleticism in my bid to catch the infernal tormenter.

Panting with effort and annoyance, I drew to a sudden halt as I spied Vlar leaning against a tree with arms folded over his chest, a frown on his brow.

A flush spread over my features as I realized how foolish I must look to my eramon—naked and dashing about in the trees like a mad thing. I drew back from the thought, standing there in uncomfortable silence, waiting for Vlar to make some sarcastic comment.

The frown deepened, making my heart sink; then Vlar turned away. "Come; we need to return."

I stood rooted to the ground for a moment; then I trailed along behind my eramon, head bowed, a tightness in my chest. What had I expected? My heart whispered its response.

#### Something more than this...

I found my clothing and dressed in haste, feeling Vlar's impatience with even this small delay.

Our pace was swift, and we left the wolves at the edge of the forest with only brief ceremony. I trudged in Vlar's wake, eyes fixed on my eramon's back with morose intensity.

How foolish had I been to imagine, even for the smallest of moments, that something special had happened between us. How many eramai had Vlar trained? I was simply one among many over time and many to come in the future.

Nothing and no one important.

The dust stung my eyes.

\* \* \*

The first thing I did upon my return to the palace was go to the kitchens and get food. I was starving. Raw meat did not appeal to me, and there had been no time to build a fire and cook some as I had done on other hunts.

My appetite that morning was immense, and the servants watched in bemused silence as I tucked into leftovers with ravenous enthusiasm. I avoided their questioning eyes, uncomfortable under their stares, and left as soon as I was full enough.

It was foolish to eat so much when practice was only two hours away, but I did not care at that moment, too sunk as I was in morose contemplation to be concerned.

I found my favorite spot in the garden and lay on the bench, watching the sunlight through the tree branches, my thoughts dark and troubled.

For that amazing moment, I had felt connected to someone, truly connected for the first time in my life. It had felt complete, right, as though I had found my place at last.

Now, I was convinced I had to have been mistaken. Vlar's behavior was, if anything, was more distant than before, so that feeling had to have arisen from my overactive imagination. My deep-seated need to belong, to feel wanted and loved, had once more come to the fore and tricked me into believing that Vlar could provide all that, that he was the one I could...

Heaving an aggrieved sigh at my own musings, I sat up, back against the tree behind the bench. I was being foolish in the extreme and creating problems where there were none.

Vlar was my eramon. That was all.

That was all there would ever be.

\* \* \*

Ink and Moss were at practice and had apparently been told by Vlar that they would work with me, instead of Vlar himself.

I tried not to think it was because I had done something wrong again.

I enjoyed Moss's company. The big man had a habit of patting me on the head and ruffling my hair as though I were a younger brother. Although anyone else would have gotten a scowl if he had tried the same thing, with Moss it seemed like a gesture of acceptance.

Moss was also an excellent fighter—not that any of the Eight were exactly slouches in that area. Moss was frequently mistakenly judged because of his size. His opponents saw him as slow and clumsy. It was often their last mistake. Although Moss *was* slow in his movements normally, when he wanted to, he could move like a snake and strike as quickly. His temper was so remarkably level, though, that even in battle, nothing he did was in anger. His actions were swift, businesslike, and then he returned to his normal quiet self. He would talk if coaxed by the right people, and he seemed to like talking with me.

I often would sit, listening raptly to the factual stories of their many battles. Moss was not one to embellish things, yet his accounts of the battles were interesting and filled with tidbits for someone like me, who aspired to fight at Moss's level someday. My own quiet nature seemed to mesh well with Moss's, and we would sometimes sit in comfortable silence for long periods, neither of us needing to speak to feel the companionship of the other.

Ink, on the other hand, was not so comfortable. Granted, he was not as inscrutable as Ice, his brother, but he had a way of watching people, gauging them, that was uncomfortable to the one being so viewed. I could never quite figure out what Ink thought of me, and it made me clumsy in his presence, awkward in manner and form.

Not that Ink ever said anything derogatory. It was just in his eyes and the slant of his mouth.

He was an excellent teacher, though, and he had many young fighters who came to learn from him. Like Vlar, he was an expert in unarmed combat, something that few of the men practiced. I had been a little ahead of the others in this. I'd had to be a tough little child, always scrapping with those who would have bullied me, and there had been many indeed who saw me as a potential victim. My background had given me the raw skills; Ink had begun to hone them into control and talent.

I was all anger and explosive force. Ink was showing me that thought and training; not anger, were the ways to defeat those who ranged against you.

It was difficult and trying for me, who had never had anyone care enough to control me—except for Vlar, of course. And that was totally different than Ink's teachings.

I could often accept Ink's words when I could not from Vlar, even when they were the same exact words. My own feelings for Vlar seemed to get in the way of his training, something I tried very hard to eliminate. If only Vlar did not wring such deep reactions from me.

On this day, Ink was running me through slow movements, practicing them again and again until they flowed naturally. I had thought this totally useless and stupid when he had first started several months ago, but I had since learned that there were actual *reasons* for what Ink asked of me. He explained them as Vlar often did not. Vlar might be teaching me to fight, and to control my emotions, but Ink was making me realize I had a lot to learn in all aspects of my training.

I was well aware that Vlar was even better than Ink in the martial arts, but now, Vlar's absence made me wonder; was I so hopeless that Vlar would not deign to teach me until I reached a certain level? Well then, damn it, I would reach that level, and then Vlar would see.

Once my thoughts settled into some sort of determination, thrusting aside my disappointment in the fact Vlar had not come to the practise in person, I made better progress. I did not protest Ink's instruction, bringing a gleam of satisfaction to the older man's eyes.

Caught up in my focus, I did not notice the newcomer to the practice hall, did not hear the small murmurs around me. I took deep, steady breaths, balancing my mind and body, letting each move flow through me, memorizing it so that in time, my body would follow through the motions without need of thought.

When at last I had to stop, muscles straining, body shaking, I let out a deep breath, feeling sweat running down my back. I shook my muscles out, stretching and bending, my mind slowly relaxing its intensity.

Only then did I notice the newcomer, and immediately any confidence I had gained fled.

I stared into eyes the mirror of my own, then swiftly bowed my head, color burning my cheeks.

"My lord..." I murmured uncomfortably. I had not seen my father for the whole of the six months I had been here. Why now would he come here?

I could feel the piercing eyes trained on me, and wanted to squirm beneath their judging, but I forced myself to stay still, to control the tremble that wanted to take my limbs.

I set my jaw. I was no child to cower before this man. Gareth had made it quite clear that he wanted no part of me. Well, I felt the same.

Those thoughts gave me strength, and I raised my head, met those cold eyes with a defiant stare, silent as I waited for the condemnation that characterized my father's dealings with me.

Gareth narrowed his eyes slightly, then began to pace slowly around me, taking note of each change since he had last seen me.

I had filled out with better food and more of it. I was gradually losing the youthful looks that had so characterized me before. My face had become leaner and more mature. With time and training, my body was gaining muscle, and I looked less gangly, more balanced in myself.

Gareth nodded to himself. Better, much better, that look seemed to say.

"How is he doing?" The warlord spoke to Ink, ignoring the angry flush that must have gathered on my face, the storm that surely swirled in my eyes.

Ink bowed his head in respect of his commander. "He does well, my lord. I have had to break him of several habits that had been drilled into him by *them*"—the distaste in his voice for those who had raised me was clear—"but he's a quick learner and with some inborn skill."

"Hm," was Gareth's doubtful reply, and my fists slowly clenched despite my attempts at inner control. Somehow, Vlar and Gareth both seemed to be able to find every chink in my mental armor, seemed to be able to exploit it at will.

I wanted to scream at my father. *I never knew about you before. I do not want you now! I do not give a shit whether you approve of me or not*! But it seemed childish in front of all the men watching and listening. I wanted to seem like one of them, not an angry child.

"Is he still protesting at every command?" Gareth's tone held a certain weary contempt that struck deeper within me than anything else could have.

"He is young, my lord. Give him time. We all had our issues at that age. It will come." Ink was calm and certain in his words, and I felt a jolt of surprise at Ink's defense of me. Certainly I had never expected that from this man, who usually seemed to hold me in the same contempt as Gareth himself. It gave me a little glow that Ink did not seem to find me utterly hopeless.

Gareth nodded but gave no indication what he was thinking or whether Ink's words had softened his attitude toward me.

He looked me up and down slowly once more, a faint frown between his brows; then he shrugged at some inner thought and turned away.

"As you were," he commanded as he left through the bowing ranks of men on the training grounds. He stopped on the far side to speak to some of the older men, then left entirely, his personal guards behind him.

I shook.

Moss patted my head.

\* \* \*

I sat at one of the tables set up under overhanging trees, watching morosely as the music and dancing progressed. It was a holiday in Masaria, celebrating the solstice. Everywhere it was festive and happy, only seeming to emphasize my loneliness and inner confusion.

Vlar had been elusive and grouchy for the past month, ever since the hunt, and was rarely in his room anymore. I slept alone, and I could not understand what it was that had driven my eramon away.

Not that I missed him. The bastard could go rot as far as I was concerned.

I just wished I knew what I had done.

Everyone seemed so happy. I wondered sadly if I would ever fit in here. Time was not helping as Teaser and Weasel had promised. It just made me more aware of the bonds that everyone else seemed to have and that I did not.

My thoughts veered as a drink plunked down in front of me. Startled, I looked up into Ice's expressionless face.

"You looked like you needed it." Ice sat beside me, taking a large gulp of his own drink.

I stared at him in astonishment. Ice was the last person I could have imagined would notice my isolation.

"Thanks," I muttered, burying my nose in the mug for want of anything else to say.

We sat in silence, both deep in our own thoughts. Then Ice turned to look at me, still not a shred of emotion on his face.

"Do you want to dance?"

If Ice had suggested I leap off the roof of the palace, I would have been less astonished. I stared at him, blinking, trying to get the words to make sense in my mind.

"Stop being such a priss. Come on." Ice slammed his mug down on the table and grabbed my drink out of my hands, doing the same to it. Before I could even think to protest, my wrist was seized and I was literally dragged to my feet and into the swirling group of men just a few feet away.

Once there, Ice released me and began to move to the music with a grace and poise that I longed to emulate. Instead I just stood there, face aflame, feeling like everyone was staring at me.

Ice frowned at my stillness. "You actually have to move your body to dance, Gaven."

I tried to turn to leave, but Ice held me back.

"I do not know how," I finally snapped at my tormenter, embarrassed beyond words at this admission.

Ice stopped, staring for a moment, then gave a great sigh. "Boy, those assholes really messed you up. Well, here in Masaria, we dance and we sing and we have fun. Together. Men, together. And you are damn well going to learn."

I yelped as I was swung round and Ice glued himself to my back. Swordcallused hands rested on my hips, and my embarrassment and stress grew by leaps and bounds. I tried to pull away from the touch. "Calm, for the gods' sakes. I am not reaming your ass, cute though it is. Though that may come in the future if Vlar continues being an idiot." The tone gave no indication if Ice was joking, and in my mortification, I wanted to sink into the ground and disappear.

"Relax, pup. Just listen to the music and move to it. Simple."

Simple to him, who already knew how to do it, I thought despairingly. I tried to do as my irritating partner said, but tension made me stiff and without rhythm.

"Gods..." Ice hissed impatiently, his grip tightening as he pressed closer to my body. "Move with me."

I could do little else, and tucked into the curve of Ice's body as I was, I could feel a hardness against my backside—a very telling hardness. I tried to jerk away then, but Ice's grip was firm, and I did not wish to draw any more attention to us by struggling.

It was agonizingly intimate as I was forced to sway to the beat of the drums, the heat of Ice's body penetrating all along my back. I had so wanted to be part of everything. Now I only wished to be back at my table, invisible.

"Listen to the music, Gaven. Feel your body." Ice's whisper was strangely persuasive, and I closed my eyes, willing to do anything if it got me out of this situation more quickly.

It was easier when I could not see anyone around us, could only hear the drums, the melody of the other instruments winding through the beat. My body became more fluid as I relaxed into the sounds, Ice's grip lightening as he felt my compliance.

There...just there... I had it! I felt my body find the rhythm, and a jolt of victory went through me. I was actually dancing! Not just standing at the side and watching longingly as I had my whole life, but dancing.

I couldn't fight the smile that came to my lips and the wonder that widened my eyes.

Ice turned me toward him then, and I still could not help my grin, one that no doubt matched the faint smirk on Ice's face.

"See, easy as falling off a log." Ice's smugness showed in his glinting eyes.

I snorted but did not refute my dancing partner's assertion, simply keeping to my newfound rhythm and enjoying every moment of it, the sense of accomplishment making me giddy.

"Not bad for a start. You may have some talent yet." Ice's smile widened, and I could not help but laugh. I had never seen so much as a glimmer of humor in Ice, and it was amazing that, of all the Eight, he had been the one to see my isolation and draw me from it.

"Well, look who joined us!"

I looked over my shoulder and smiled at Worry, who, as usual, was dancing with extreme energy, the way he did everything. With him was Peace, swaying slowly, calmly, while the smaller man literally ran circles around him.

I grinned at the two of them, so very different and yet complementing each other. Worry was so high-energy that he exhausted most people in minutes, but then Peace was so easygoing he probably did not even notice. Worry barely came up to Peace's shoulder, and the difference between the shorter man, thin and wiry, and the giant beside him, whose arms were thicker than Worry's thighs, was amusing in any situation. To watch them dance together only emphasized the differences, and I had to hold in a laugh. I glanced up at Ice, and the older man shook his head in reproof, though his own lips were tilted in a grin.

He leaned forward to whisper in my ear. "Can you imagine them in bed together? Scary, is it not?"

I shot a look at him. "They're partners?"

Ice nodded, still grinning. "Have been for years. Made for each other, would you not say?"

I looked back at the other two and had to agree. Peace was looking down at his smaller companion, a fond smile curving his lips as he watched Worry frenetically leap around. Every so often, Worry would place his hand on some part of Peace, just a quick touch, as though to reassure himself that his partner was there and that he knew Worry was thinking of him.

It was sweet, and it reminded me of what Andar had said so long ago: that men could form a bond with each other, even unto a lifetime.

The longer I was in Masaria, the more I realized that to be true. These men— Teaser and Weasel, Worry and Peace—loved each other. It was not just lust or convenience; it was love as was seldom seen even between man and woman. That it existed here, in a form I had been taught to despise, was confusing. And yet...

The feelings I had held inside so long for my friend Micael no longer seemed horrible, filthy. When I was here and watched those around me and the casualness with which men loving men was accepted, it became almost normal. I wondered sadly what would have happened if Micael had not been killed. If he had lived, would he ever have accepted my love, or would he have been like the rest of those around him, horrified and disgusted?

I would never know.

My attention was brought back to the present abruptly as Ice grabbed me and twirled me round, so that I had to hold him or fall.

Ice began a manic route through the couples that seemed to include colliding with as many dancers as possible, using me as a shield when they laughingly turned to retaliate. Within moments, it was unclear whether this was dancing or a good-natured brawl in motion.

After the first few collisions, I began to get the idea and threw my body into it. We were an unbeatable team after that, leaving disaster in our wake, as evidenced by cursing, waving fists or laughter and promises of later retaliation. By the time we made it to the far fringes, I could no longer breathe for laughing so hard, my sides aching. I grabbed Ice's arm pleadingly and dragged him out of the melee to collapse on the grass.

I flopped back, spread-eagle, panting, tears of mirth streaming from my eyes. Ice knelt, not a hair out of place, only breathing a little quickly. I could almost hate him for that.

I was ruffled, one sleeve half torn off, completely and totally exhausted.

It showed how far I had to go to equal the Eight. Even that thought could not be morose at this moment; it was there and gone in the blink of an eye.

"What in the gods' names was that?" I questioned Ice.

Ice quirked a brow. "Martial dancing."

I choked. "Martial dancing? Do you use it in battle? It seems remarkably lethal and would certainly take the enemy by surprise."

Ice tilted his head thoughtfully. "You know, that is not a bad idea..."

I collapsed utterly.

We stayed there for a good hour. As I recovered my aplomb and breath, Ice watched the dancers with a small smirk.

I found myself staring at my companion, seeing him in a new light. Ice had always been so utterly standoffish that I had been too intimidated to even look at him most of the time. Now, it was like he was a different person—real—and the demonstration of his twisted sense of humor made him more open and likable.

He was very good-looking, I mused lightly to myself. Very good-looking. He was not overly tall, only a few inches taller than I, a nice change in circumstance. His body was compact and muscled, powerful, but with a grace that I completely envied. I often felt like my body was not completely under my control, and clumsiness often ensued. Ice, on the other hand, was so very in control of himself. He moved with the swift, silent tread of a predator and was often sent out as a scout for his very stealth. He was so aware of his surroundings—again like a predator—

and seemed so sure of the world and his place in it. His comfort with himself was something I longed to emulate.

I remembered the touch of those long-fingered hands, hard on my hips, controlling me—and a pleasurable shiver went through me.

What if...? My face warmed at the thought that went through my mind then. As far as I knew, Ice had no permanent partner. Would he...?

What would it be like to have one partner, to be loved and treasured? To know that person was there for you, loving *only* you? To not have to watch them... I tore my mind away from Vlar.

I did not care. My eramon was free to do as he wished. There was no bond between us but that of duty and training. Nor would there ever be. I had to remember that.

My chin came up at the thought, my gaze remaining fixed on Ice. Perhaps it was time to look elsewhere. I might be Vlar's eramai, but was I bound to him? That was a good question.

"Ice?"

Ice did not look at me, absorbed in a "martial dancing" maneuver taking place on the field. "Hm?" His tone was abstracted, to say the least.

That actually made it a little easier for me to ask what I needed to.

"Ice, if you have an eramon, is he the only one you can have sex with?" I could feel my ears heat with the blush I could not seem to damned well control. I fought it, made sure I kept my eyes on Ice and did not turn away or avert my gaze. I was not a child anymore; I was going to act like a man if it killed me.

And it might...

Ice seemed to freeze for a moment; then he slowly turned his head to meet my eyes, his brows arched into his hairline. He did not speak for long moments, watching me instead as I struggled to keep facing him. Then a huge grin split his lips, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "Well, well. Seems Vlar may have bitten off more than he can chew this time. He has created quite the little monster. He has awoken you to the arts of pleasure, hm? Now the little colt wants to try them out." He leaned over, and his eyes followed the heat of embarrassment as it spread down my chest and mercifully disappeared beneath my shirt. How far did it go? I'd have been even more embarrassed to tell him.

Ice reached out and gently unlaced that shirt, pausing every few moments. Did he expect me to protest or pull away? I did neither.

Ice's smile widened. I felt ripe for the picking and I raised my eyes, locating a tall golden figure off to the side of the dancing, talking to the king. My vision became unfocused.

"If Vlar does not get his head on straight, he is going to lose this little morsel," Ice murmured. "And how foolish is that? He had better mark his claim, or there will be many who would gladly snap up this beautiful prize—a boy who is ripe and ready, needing love like a plant needs water. I am ready to offer myself if others are too foolish." Ice's whisper made me shiver as he leaned closer yet.

Our lips met...

A growl over our heads stopped us, and I watched Ice suppress a smile.

"I can never get over the speed of Finnarians," he said. He leaned back, looking up with a lazy grin, meeting the faint red in Vlar's eyes with an aplomb few others could have matched at that moment.

That smile faded when he looked back to me. "Do you see how the boy curls into himself in your presence, eramon?" His eyes snapped back to Vlar, taking on a hint of challenge that Vlar could not seem to understand, judging by the way he raised a puzzled eyebrow.

It took mere moments for the Finnarian to understand his claim was being questioned. Vlar's eyes grew more red, his fangs descending slightly, and Ice nodded once, though his look was clear.

"You had best do right by this boy, Vlar, but you have not to this point."

My eramon's growl and the way he pulled me to my feet and held me possessively was answer enough. Ice grinned once more and watched the two of us move away as I was dragged reluctantly behind my eramon.

I looked back over my shoulder, watching wistfully as Ice rose to his feet, dusting himself off, and grabbed the nearest spectator, pulling him mercilessly into the melee that the dancing had become.

## **Chapter Four**

I wanted to dig my feet in and howl like a child. My resentful glare seemed to make no impact upon Vlar, who simply towed me along like I weighed nothing. It was humiliating, and the fact that my eramon had interrupted...

I flushed. How stupid was it that I had felt a moment of guilt as I looked up at Vlar, as though I had somehow cheated on the Finnarian by touching Ice.

How foolish was that thought? Judging by Vlar's recent behavior, why had he even bothered to come take me away? It made no sense. Not that the Finnarian ever did. I was getting tired of being treated like a wayward child.

The grip around my wrist was half crushing my bones, and suddenly I had had enough. I began to struggle wildly, swearing fluently and at length. My other hand clawed at the constricting fingers.

"Let me go! Stop treating me like a gods damned child!" I might as well have been struggling against rock itself for all the effect I was having.

Vlar stopped abruptly and looked down at me, eyes completely red. I stopped my thrashing, swallowing with difficulty as I took in the completely feral look in my eramon's eyes. This was *not* good.

Vlar drew me to him by my captured wrist, his other arm wrapping like an iron band to imprison me against his larger, harder body.

I shivered, but something told me it was not wise to fight right now, that struggles would only incite the Finnarian to greater heights of domination. Instinct swelled within me, and I made a small noise in my throat, turning my head to the side and presenting my vulnerable throat. It seemed to do the trick. Vlar's arm loosened its almost painful tightness, and an answering noise came from deep in his throat: a half purr, half growl that made me shiver in response.

A long, hot tongue traced the line of my throat, followed the throbbing pulse that gave away my fear and excitement. I almost expected to have those thin fangs pierce me immediately, but it was not to be.

Instead I was swept up, bridal-style, my lips crushed beneath the older male's, a tongue sweeping possessively into my mouth, stealing my breath.

Dimly, I heard myself moan, a soft, needy sound that would have made me flush in embarrassment if I had not been so very caught up in the taste of Vlar, the feel of his tongue, the sound of his low growls.

Somehow my arms were around my eramon's neck, my body arching up in unconscious entreaty, offering myself silently for the taking.

And Vlar was only too happy to accept the offer. He laid me down in the grass, some distance off the path we had been on, and with more haste than care, removed my clothing with swift, impatient tugs, apparently needing, wanting to see the pale flesh beneath, the body that only he had claimed.

I shivered at the touch of the cool grass, feeling wanton as the setting sun bathed my flesh in color, touching me with warmth, like fingers.

The fingers I truly wanted were now swiftly divesting their owner of his own clothing, and I watched with hungry eyes, detailing every inch of golden flesh that was revealed to me.

Vlar was so powerful across the shoulders, yet leanly muscled, not an ounce of fat to be seen. Every part of him was speed and strength personified, honed to perfection over the long span of time with which he had been graced. Lean hips and runner's legs...and his shaft...

Long and thick, curved slightly upward, the head broad and plum colored. Finnarians did not possess foreskin, and their shafts were thickly veined, the slit much larger and producing more natural lubrication. Already, thick, pearly liquid seeped from the tip in eager anticipation of possessing...me.

I swallowed heavily, and my passivity vanished. I found myself rolling to my hands and knees, my eyes fixed upon that shaft, wanting to taste, to touch.

Vlar froze as I made my first voluntary approach, his red eyes glowing with apparent satisfaction at this huge step in our relationship. The Finnarian remained motionless, doing nothing to discourage or frighten the newly emerging me, the wanton me, the boy finding his own sexuality and wanting to explore it.

An impatient tongue caressed the fangs that extended past Vlar's lips, his body obviously pulsing with the need to take...but he held back, letting me move at my own pace, however torturous that could prove to be.

I reached my target, rising to my knees as I licked my lips in anticipation. Tentatively, I reached out with the tip of my tongue, tasting the liquid that crowned the thick organ.

A gasp sounded from above, but I was too absorbed to take more note. The essence that oozed from Vlar's body was sweeter than I had expected, with a slightly tart aftertaste that left me wanting more. Grasping the shaft with one hand, feeling the blood pulsing through it, the heat, the strength, I leaned farther forward to lick the head more thoroughly. My tongue sought the source of the taste. It smeared over my tongue, and I followed it to the slit, probing deeper, seeking more. When it was not readily available to my greedy mouth, I began to suckle, trying to draw it forth. I began to sense his thoughts as I had in the forest, sense his very emotions.

Vlar's hips gave an abortive jerk. By his ragged breathing, he seemed to be fighting for control. That I was doing this willingly, eagerly even, for the first time, obviously inflamed my eramon. I tilted my head slightly to the side, wanting to see Vlar's face. The look in his eyes was so erotic, so enticing. Obviously it was all the Finnarian could do to prevent himself from taking me there and then. I could feel his body tremble, knew that every nerve screamed for him to dominate, to possess. *Mate*, it seemed to scream, all his instincts battling his mind for supremacy.

As we joined minds, I could feel that Vlar's need to possess, to claim, to mark, was almost overwhelming, and that never could he remember having so much trouble controlling his primal self. It was frightening, as though a beast fought to get out, to control his rational mind. How could this mere boy affect him so?

Although I felt his thoughts, I only knew that a great want was within me, a need to explore and touch. If I had been thinking at all, it would have made no sense, but my mind was not in charge, not at that moment.

I moistened the head, enjoyed the way Vlar shivered as my tongue teased the sensitive skin. The sight of his taut stomach trembling, the muscles quivering with strain, made me feel powerful, made me want to go further, press to the edge, see how far I could go before Vlar took over and regained control.

I licked lower, taking more of the shaft into my mouth, feeling the stretch at the edges of my lips as they encircled the sheer girth of the organ. I went as far down as my inexperience would let me, and then I licked and swallowed, using my hand to torment the rest of the length I could not encompass, alternating between twisting gently and then pumping hard and fast.

Vlar's body shuddered under my touch, and he spoke fervently in a language I could not understand. That was erotic in itself. The language, whatever it may have been, was graceful and fluid, beautiful to listen to. He could be swearing, and it would sound like the sweetest of poetry.

His voice alone was an aphrodisiac.

A large hand cupped the back of my head, fingers carding restlessly through my hair as the fingers held me firmly, encouraging me in my efforts. The muscles in those lean hips flexed, but somehow he found a way to avoid choking me, when it must have been so difficult to restrain himself from the sexual fervency he was feeling. I was hard as a rock just from watching his face, from listening to the small sounds that escaped his control, that spilled from his lips even as he bit them to try to restrain himself. To see my eramon in such a state, when he had always been in charge of our encounters, his manner cool and calm and faintly amused with me this was heady indeed. I found myself gently grasping his balls, needing to see him come, to know that I had done that, that I was the one to give him such intense pleasure that he could not restrain himself in any way. To know for that moment, he was mine.

I shook the strange thought away with haste, wondering at my sanity, but the moment seemed ripe for many things, not the least of which was dreaming of what could be

My fingers gently rolled his testicles in their soft sac, loving the feel of the pliant skin and the orbs within, so full of life, the very essence of him. He gave a choking gasp, his head lolling back, eyes squeezed shut, his thighs shaking with the mere effort of supporting himself.

I watched every nuance of expression, releasing his balls to fist my erection, my hips rocking against the stimulation, the sheer eroticism of watching this powerful man at my mercy, his face twisted with intense pleasure, the moments before his body found the pinnacle. He made a keening cry, undulating and powerful; then his seed shot into my throat. I almost choked at the first pulse, managed to swallow the second, then could only let the rest flow out of my mouth with a sense of loss. The heat of it, the taste of it, the knowledge that moments ago it had been a part of Vlar's body, held within his flesh, now becoming part of me, flowing into *my* body, was so very intimate that it sent me over the edge.

I cried out around his shaft, and that seemed to make his eyes roll back in his head as his sensitivity registered the extra vibration. I felt the hot rush of my seed, the almost painful sensation as my body expelled it in pulsing bursts that left me trembling and drained. I gave a last lick to Vlar's softening erection, then sank back upon my heels, bracing myself with one hand, unable to rise or to move farther than that. Now that it was over, I felt a little empty, a little...

Strong arms swept me up in a powerful embrace, and I did not protest for once. It felt good to be held so soon after, so wonderful to not be alone after such intimacy. Indeed I tucked my head under his chin, and I think I was asleep before he even managed to reach his rooms.

## \* \* \*

I woke suddenly, startling, sitting upright. For long moments I could not imagine where I was; then I flinched as the twinges from my nether regions reminded me of Vlar's taking. Memory rolled over me in unstoppable waves, and I cringed at its arrival.

What in the hells had I done?

Before, I had had the meager comfort of knowing none of this was my doing. I had been swept along since my capture, like a leaf in the wind, without purpose, direction, or control of my fate.

That had forever changed last night, and nothing I could do could take my shameful actions back. I had acted wanton and needy, as though some other part of me had woken and demanded expression. I was completely shocked to discover this side of myself. What must Vlar think of me now, my behavior, from reluctant and angry to almost begging for his touch, seeking his body?

Not only that, it had not started with Vlar himself. I had been attracted to Ice, would have kissed him before many observers. That particular action had roused my eramon, and I wondered with some corner of my mind if that was what my subconscious had wanted all along. How shameful was my behavior, to connive for attention? Had that really been my motive? How shallow could I be?

Groaning, I dropped my head into my hands, feeling the heat of my blush against my palms.

How could I ever face him?

The fact that Vlar was not here beside me was a mixed blessing. Had he left because of some duty? Or after the heat of the moment, had he been contemptuous of my behavior?

That difference meant everything to me.

I might dislike Vlar intensely, but I also conversely seemed to crave his approval. Why that should be so, I could not comprehend.

Was it because I desperately wanted to claim a place here, and the best way to accomplish that was through Vlar's training and approval? I truly did not understand my motivations in this matter.

All I knew was that the fact that Vlar was not at my side to either confirm or deny my inner agonizing was deeply mortifying.

Vlar had been so distant this past while, even with my training. Was he regretting his agreement with my father to be my eramon? Was I such a hopeless pupil after all?

I rose to my feet with some difficulty, flinching and swearing under my breath with asperity. I was confused as to time, but it seemed either very late evening or very early morning by the half-light in the room.

After attending to business, I dressed, too restless and heartsore to be able to sleep more.

Vlar's rooms opened out to a second-story balcony, and I sought refuge there. I walked to the stone wall overlooking the courtyard below, watching guards on their rounds.

My mind went blank as though I feared to think at all, feared my own musings. This all seemed so insurmountable, impossible to untangle.

I sighed, deep and low in my chest, closing my eyes and enjoying the faint breeze on my face. The sea lay a day's travel west, and so the wind brought tantalizing hints of salt water and beaches and sea life. I wondered wistfully if I would ever view it all for myself. It seemed impossible that such a massive body of water could exist, deep enough to float vast ships. I wanted to judge for myself how true these tales were. I wanted to travel, to see and touch and taste all the wonders I had never known.

With my bloodline, would I ever be allowed freedom? I had been told not to leave the palace without escort. My relationships to Gareth and the king made me a target for those with grievances or those wishing to have a lever against Masaria or so they said. I could not imagine how anyone could be foolish enough to assume I held any importance whatsoever in this country, no matter my blood, when I had such little faith in the affections and motives of both my father and my uncle.

I shivered at the mere thought of trying again to escape. Men had died during my last attempt, and the Eight had been punished in my name. The guilt still lay in me like a leaden weight; never would I be so foolish and self-centered again. I had learned my lesson well and in the harshest way. To watch men die was no pleasant thing. To know they died because of me was soulrending.

It made me wonder if I would ever be able to truly be a warrior. Such a reaction did not seem very warriorlike to me.

I drew a deep breath, opened my eyes, and stared blindly at nothing.

It took a moment for my senses to realize I was not alone. I stiffened then, fingers clenching upon the stone, trying to compose myself before I turned to confront the other male. I knew in my heart who it was.

When at last I gained enough courage to hold my head high, I turned on my heel to lean back on the low wall, my stomach in knots of anxiety.

Vlar watched me in silence. He sat in the shadows, as though he were part of them, comforted by them, at peace with them. Only his hair seemed of the light.

In this half-light, his eyes seemed to glow, though they showed no sign of red at the moment. Instead they were that intense emerald green—so vivid a color I had seen on no one else. I wondered vaguely if they were a Finnarian trait. He said nothing for long moments, and I did not break the silence. Let him speak. I really had nothing to say that was going to sound rational, adult, so it was best to keep my scattered thoughts to myself.

There was absolutely no emotion on his face that I could glean. It was blank, empty, and I felt a pang of something deep within, as though I had been shut out, however foolish that thought might have been. Nothing that had happened should change his view of me or his care of me.

I was his eramai, and although that held responsibility on both our parts, it did not make it either possible or likely that finer feelings might develop.

Despite all, I felt my lips twist in bitterness. I was a duty to him, no more than that. How much in the way of proof did I need before I stopped opening myself to further hurt? My craving for security and caring was going to get me into a great deal of trouble.

My fingers clenched spasmodically on the chill stone, but I refused to look away, refused to show my fears.

His body was half sprawled, one leg over the arm of the chair, his entire attitude one of relaxation. He certainly did not seem to be irritated or contemptuous, but then I hardly knew enough of him to judge.

His gaze was steady upon me, lazy almost, not his usual piercing, predatory stare. I did not know what to make of that. I was so ready for insult, ready for hurt.

Vlar was a master at the art of silence, I well knew, but still I waited, hoping...

The power of his presence washed over me, and I felt the by now familiar jolt of attraction, the heat of need rising in my body, though my mind fought it.

Was it some Finnarian trait to produce lust in those around them? There were few in the army who would not eagerly take my place in his bed. There were certainly many who had, past and present, and who certainly would in the future. I felt my purpose dim, my spirits sink. What use would understanding Vlar be? How foolishly optimistic I was to think of such a thing, as though I held any importance to him at all. I doubted I was even in his thoughts.

I pushed away from the wall, tearing my eyes from his with much effort, and headed back into the room, intent on going to find food and getting as far from him as I could to nurse my inner wounds.

Neither of us said a word in passing.

\* \* \*

As it turned out, it was early evening, and supper was in progress. I sat beside Andar tonight, which brought up my spirits somewhat. Much though I held negative feelings toward my father, I could find no fault in his lover and bondmate.

Andar was, and always would be, special to me. He was the one who had first welcomed me, the only one who had truly attempted to have me understand what was happening, who the Masarians were and what being my father's—Gareth's—son entailed. Without him, I do not think I could have done it, could have accepted my fate with anything even approaching sanity.

Certainly he had seen me at my worst and always seemed to forgive my transgressions with a calm aplomb that helped my own rash impulsiveness that seemed to get me in such straits. He was very soothing to be around, and I always found myself able to think clearly, to converse with him in a manner that was possible with few others. He did not make me nervous or accentuate my youth so that I had trouble speaking. I could just be me around him, and that was rare indeed.

His gentle good humor was much appreciated, and he was the only one who had ever been able to make me truly laugh—at least before Ice.

Vlar had not come to supper, and I was both relieved and concerned. It was not like him to miss food, and I wondered where he was.

I tore my thoughts away. Vlar, always Vlar. I was sick of thinking about him, sick of wondering where I stood with him. He was my eramon, and that was *all* that he was. I chastised myself harshly for my utter absorption in the Finnarian.

I needed to find other pursuits to take my mind off him. I needed to ask Ice once more whether having an eramon precluded other relationships. If it were not so, then I needed to move on, needed to find someone whom I could at least understand, and who would try to understand me.

This could not go on the way it was.

Perhaps I should speak to some of the eramai Vlar had trained in the past. If they showed the same level of absorption in Vlar, then I would know this was a common thing and of no true concern. Maybe then I could move on from it. Let it go.

I nodded to myself. That, then, was the answer.

With an inner sigh of relief that I now had at least a course of action, I turned to Andar with a true smile, and we began to discuss weapons.

\* \* \*

I slept well that night, even though I was alone. I did not twist and turn waiting for Vlar to join me. I had set my course, and it gave me a sense of calm, a plan to go by.

I could not put that plan into motion for several days, but I laid the groundwork, finding out from others who had been Vlar's previous eramai and where I might find them. It was enough to keep me occupied and feeling as though I was making headway in my self-appointed task.

Many of the men were in other units, not necessarily attached to the army that was currently residing at the palace. Apparently the units were often based in different cities and called in when needed. With our arrival, many of the units had gone on to their home bases and so were not readily available for my plan.

I did manage to find three men though, and hopefully that would be enough to gain the knowledge I needed.

The first young man, who had been eramai just before me, was a pleasant person indeed. He had a ready smile and a light step and always seemed to be helping others with one thing or another. He was so very different from me that I felt unworthy. Still, Vlar had not kept him.

This young man was now bonded to another, so that boded well, and he seemed very happy in the relationship. He was courteous and listened to my questions well. He told me that of course he was still in love with Vlar. Everyone was. Vlar was like a fantasy figure, something to dream of. But to bond with? He had a laugh over that, which crushed my hopes that little bit more. Vlar would never settle, he told me. He did not know if that was the Finnarian way or not. He seemed to know little to nothing about Vlar as a person, and I found that bothered me a great deal. How could you have a relationship with a person, even eramon/eramai, and not want to know more of who was in your bed?

I could not understand and perhaps did not want to.

I brought up the intensified hearing, the sense of smell, the feel of the earth, and he looked at me as if I were quite mad. He had experienced no such thing and felt that perhaps it was because of the intense pleasure. I had to have hallucinated. He patted my arm and hugged me, then swirled off with intense energy.

He was utterly exhausting.

By the time I had found and spoken to the other two men, I was completely and utterly worn-out and more confused than ever.

None of them seemed to feel any more than the surface attraction that the first man had spoken of. None of them had found a deeper need for Vlar, although they mentioned feeling it at the time they actually were eramai.

So that was good. It meant there was hope for me. By the time I left Vlar, perhaps I could look forward to a true relationship. They had also told me that they had had various trysts during their eramai training, although it was expected that you would not have a serious relationship outside of your eramon, because of the complications it could create. Certainly none of them had experienced Vlar interfering with those trysts, many of which had been in sight of him.

None of the men understood what I meant about the heightened senses, and all seemed to feel it was the intense pleasure Vlar could produce that must have made me imagine things.

I was beginning to doubt I had felt them myself.

I walked away at the end of the day with a raging headache and more confusion than ever. Their experiences did not seem to mirror mine in anything but a surface resemblance.

So what was happening? Had there been others that had experienced such heights, and I had just not spoken with them yet?

It all made no sense.

Most of all, I found it disturbing that no one really knew Vlar. I had even questioned Andar about him, and although they were friends—quite close, actually—Andar could not claim to know Vlar's thoughts on things, did not know his background or true history beyond when he had come to Masaria to serve the current king's grandfather.

It seemed a very lonely existence that my eramon led. None of his people had ever been seen since Vlar had arrived. No one seemed to see him as he truly was, to want to delve deeper and find the true person.

So why was that so important to me, then?

I stayed at supper for a long time, watching through the windows as a storm blew in, thunder shaking the floor occasionally or lightning blinding me. I loved storms, always had. Micael had always chided me for my rash behavior. I would usually go outside, daring the elements. He had never understood my fascination.

The storm produced a restlessness within me, and I excused myself, heading not outside, but up to my place in Vlar's rooms. It was dimly lit with a few candles within, only the flashes of lightning providing any sort of true vision for me, and it was within a flash that I saw him.

Vlar stood outside, in pouring rain, utterly naked. His face was turned upward, his arms spread, palms up as though to praise a deity, his body arched back slightly.

I caught my breath, stunned at his beauty. His long, golden hair, darkened by the rain, cascaded down his back, flowing with the water that ran down his form. His wildness called to something in me, as the storm did, and I found myself walking forward, slowly divesting myself of clothing. I never took my eyes from him, getting only brief flashes of images each time the lightning graced me with a picture.

The rain was cool upon my suddenly heated skin as I stepped out from the shelter of the room and into the storm. The wind buffeted me; the rain slid in rivulets down my body, like the touch of cold fingers.

Vlar felt me, I knew. He was too aware of his surroundings not to have, and I wasn't startled when he turned swiftly to face me. His eyes were not red, but held a certain wildness as great as his feral side, and I could not help but respond to him. I found myself before him, looking up into his face, and then my hand, as though it had a mind of its own, trailed up his chest and around his neck, gently urging him to lean down. He did not resist my pull, and I thought I heard a groan above the roar of the storm as his lips met mine.

It was no gentle kiss; we were both part of the ferocity around us, our tongues dueling and twining about each other, each tasting the essence of the other, devouring it as though it were necessary for life itself. His powerful arm came around me, pulling me close against his body so that we shared heat. I could feel every muscle that rippled against me, every bit of that body I so longed to claim as my own, only mine. That thought came and went without true acceptance on my part, but there were too many other things to think of, and so I did not protest it. Vlar broke the kiss, nipping my lower lip as he did so. Before I could take note of his expression, he had grasped my wrist and towed me behind him to the chair he had been seated in before. There he sat and pulled me onto his lap, facing him, straddling him so that my legs were apart and my buttocks felt the bar of flesh between his legs.

I did not flinch at its proximity, nor did I pretend reluctance. I wanted this, totally, and I was not a child any longer to play games. I wanted him and was not afraid to show it.

I leaned forward, being sure to rub over his shaft, feeling my balls slide over the velvet skin.

Vlar drew in a sharp breath, his eyes searching mine, something almost uncertain in them for brief moments; then he took charge, grasping my arms and pulling me fully against his chest, claiming my mouth in an almost brutal kiss.

I moaned into it, anything but reluctant, my hands smoothing over his shoulders, relishing the feel of the wet skin and hard muscle beneath my fingers. When at last I was let up for air, I leaned closer, laying my mouth on the skin of his neck, laving my tongue over the flesh, before nipping lightly in a parody of his own bite.

Vlar's hips surged up, his hands coming down to my waist, head thrown back as though that small caress drove him to the edge of control. I smiled against his skin, still giving small bites down across the front of his throat and up the other side, so that his flesh was peppered with red marks, much as he always did to me. I viewed them with satisfaction in the dim light coming from the room; then any thought fled my mind as his hand came to grasp my shaft, his thumb rubbing over the head, smearing its precum with gentle pressure.

I moaned, and that seemed to be the catalyst, the one thing that drove him to frenzy. I was picked up as though I weighed nothing at all and spun round, placed on my knees on the wet stone of the balcony. I blinked away rain, whimpering with need, feeling cold and abandoned. Then his hot body pressed up against my back, comforting me instantly. I had no time to wonder at my trust of him, for he was busy in other areas. I heard him spit into his palm, combining with the rain to smear over his shaft, then again to present to my opening. One finger pressed within, preparing the way.

I pushed back with my hips, wanting more, bracing myself with one hand on the stone floor as I reached back, needing to touch him, to know this was truly happening. In the next moment, I had no doubt of that as his finger withdrew and his shaft pressed hard, sliding through the muscle and into my heated depths.

I cried out—with pain or with pleasure—it did not really matter. At that moment, they were the same. I wanted both. Vlar's powerful arm came round me, pulling me back farther onto his lap as his shaft sank deeper into me. When at last he was completely embedded, I was spread over his thighs, my legs held wide, helpless to do anything but hold on to his arms as he began to thrust, slowly at first, with a twist of his hips that brought his shaft sliding deliciously over that nub within me, then with longer, deeper movements that had me arching back against him, my head lying on his shoulder as I writhed on the thickness that pierced my body.

It felt so incredibly good, and it was only enhanced as Vlar began to murmur into my ear, telling me how tight I was, how my channel clenched his shaft, caressing it with every thrust, how he could feel me pulsing; my very heartbeat was evident to the intruder within.

"Sing for me, Gaven," Vlar demanded in that beautiful, deep voice of his, and I could do nothing but obey.

I keened and mewled, my fingers restlessly clenching and relaxing upon his forearms, my eyes open, but blind to the storm. There were only the intense sensations that ruled me utterly; the cold, wet rain that streamed down our bodies, the feel of hard muscled thighs bunching and straining beneath me, the stretch and burn of my entrance as it was pierced over and over. My body felt so hot, so immersed in pleasure, that I was dimly surprised steam did not rise from us both. My cries grew more desperate, more needy, the pressure within growing, making me pant and attempt to thrust back on Vlar's shaft, trying to take him even deeper as though somehow that would keep him, bind him, never let him leave me.

I dimly realized I was begging raggedly, could hear Vlar's low voice telling me no, that I could take more, that he had me, that I was safe.

Whimpers escaped my lips. I was not strong enough for more; I could not...

He pushed forward, repositioning me so I was on hands and knees, so that he could kneel behind me, grasping my hips and beginning to truly hammer into me. The pleasure was so intense that I had to drop to my elbows, unable to hold myself up against the new storm that raged between us only. I could hear the short, sharp puffs of breath as Vlar pumped ever harder, his balls swinging to push against mine. My entrance spasmed and pulsed at the increased friction, and I arched my back, taking him deeper, crying out his name.

"Vlar!" I screamed to the heavens, and it tipped him over the edge. He grasped my erection with trembling fingers, and that was all it took.

"Oh gods, Vlar," I sobbed, overwhelmed by the dual pleasures of my own coming and his at the same moment, his seed filling me deep and full, bathing me with his essence, marking me.

I trembled beneath him, my shaft straining and jumping, my balls tight and high, before the blessed release of tension, the pleasurable aftershocks that left me limp and sated. I could not, for the life of me, move.

Neither could Vlar, apparently. After collapsing partially onto my back, for once he seemed less than in control as he shivered above me, his breath coming in hard, fast gulps.

We stayed like that, unable to find the strength to separate, the rain slowly washing us clean of sweat and seed.

Indeed, when Vlar finally did try to straighten away from my back, I reached one hand behind, holding to his thigh, silently pleading. He stroked my skin, leaning forward to whisper softly. "It is all right, Gaven. I will not leave you this night."

Tears came to my eyes then, that he had understood, that he would not leave me to a lonely bed again. Not this night. For once I would have him, if only for a short while. That would have to be enough.

He pulled out, and my tears came faster. I felt cold and empty without his strength within my body, but then he picked me up, cradled me like a child against his chest. I thought I felt a kiss upon my hair, but I could have been mistaken.

Then he took us both into the room and found towels to dry us. He was so gentle with me, and I could not take my hand from him. I had to be touching constantly, to know he was real, that this had not been a dream, an illusion I would wake from. He did not protest nor make any of his harsh comments. He only cared for me, then took me into the huge bed, tucking me close to him so that I snuggled along his great length, not one bit of me abandoned. He pulled the covers snugly over us and held me to him. I shivered and shook for a long time, whether from nerves or the cold, I could not tell. But he was there.

I was content.

There was no memory of even sliding into sleep.

## **Chapter Five**

I was completely disoriented upon wakening. I could not imagine where I was, for I was warm and safe, enfolded in softness and draped over something warm and hard, something that...

My eyes widened, and I froze in disbelief before slowly, ever so slowly, turning my head to the right.

Amused green eyes met mine, and I could feel my cheeks heat. Things that seemed so very right in the embrace of nighttime, seemed very different in the daylight. The transition from one to the other was often fraught with selfcastigation and soul-searching as to cause and effect. This morning was no exception...but this time, Vlar was actually here, and I had no idea what to do with him.

Vlar, however, did not seem to have the same problem. Before I could roll away and rise from the bed, escape the uncomfortable feelings that always arose around him, my eramon captured my face between his large palms and leaned forward to lay a gentle kiss on my lips.

It was a far different kiss than he had ever given me before, and I had to blink dazedly when at last I was released. It had been...caring...in some form. Maybe? Or was I just imagining this too?

Vlar actually smiled... Not the manic grin he was famous for, or the smirk that drove me mad with the desire to strangle him. No, this was softer somehow, filled with something I could not put a name to. He stroked one hand down my shoulder, his fingers capturing my wrist and slowly drawing my hand to his mouth, where he kissed the palm in a quixotic gesture, his beautiful eyes never leaving mine.

I stared into that green and was completely lost. I did not seem to have the strength of will to pull away, and I let him do as he wished. The strange gentleness unnerved me, made me jittery and uncertain, and he seemed to realize that, for he sighed a little and released my hand.

"I was not too hard on you last night?"

My mouth opened soundlessly; then I tentatively leaned forward to lay one hand on Vlar's forehead, fully expecting it to be irritably slapped away. Did Finnarians get ill? I had never heard of such from anyone, and certainly in the time I had been with him, Vlar had always been the very picture of health, but...

Vlar did not strike me away, but his brows rose, and he watched my confusion with a wry twist of his lips, eyes faintly amused.

"Answer me, Gaven." The tone was more himself, with more command in it. It soothed me, enabled me to find my place again.

I flushed a little, slid my eyes from his, my voice a slightly hoarse. "I am fine."

One large hand came beneath my chin and made me look back up at him. "Would you tell me the truth, little one, even if I had?"

The heat in my cheeks deepened, and I cursed its presence, wishing I could be cool and calm for once. "Yes. I would." I wisely said nothing about his "little one" comment. That was the least of my worries at this time.

He watched me for a long, unnerving moment, then nodded.

"There is something happening here, between us, that I do not understand. I need more information, so I have contacted my father. He will be coming within the week."

I leaned back on the bed, stunned.

"Your father?" I asked weakly, trying to get my thoughts to stop scattering enough to make a sensible response.

He nodded, his expression turning into a faint frown at something he was thinking. "He might know what this is."

"This?" I was proud that my voice did not crack or waver.

"There is something...different...about what is between us, Gaven. This is not anything I have encountered before, and it seems to perhaps relate to a Finnarian issue, so I thought my father would be the best one to help us understand."

"Oh," I murmured intelligently. "When will he arrive again?"

"Within the week..." Vlar murmured patiently; then he bent over me, his eyes beginning to redden.

I swallowed hard but willingly turned my head, presenting my neck for his delectation.

His hunger was apparent, but I did not mind, for my own rose to meet it, and it was long before I had the strength to even think of Vlar's father again or what his arrival might mean.

The sensory perceptions I had encountered before were even stronger this time around in our lovemaking and his feeding. I could no longer doubt them, despite the fact that the other eramai had claimed to never have experienced them.

Vlar was right. Something was definitely off here.

\* \* \*

When I informed the Eight of the probability of Vlar's father's arrival, it was like throwing a large log on a fire. There were sparks flying everywhere.

There was a shocked silence for long moments, then excited talk. Worry and Fish slipped out of the room as if on a mission to spread the word.

I was bombarded with question after question, and I had to hold up a hand to stop the barrage.

"That is all he told me. His father is coming sometime this week."

Weasel plopped down next to me, his face shining with excitement as it often did if he was in the forefront of gossip.

I rolled my eyes and glanced over at Teaser, who could only shake his head at his lover's peculiarities.

"Wow, I can hardly believe it. To see another Finnarian in my lifetime, and for it to be Sadan..."

I shot a disbelieving glance at him. Weasel knew about Finnarians? All this time I'd been chasing my tail and a source of information had been right next to me? I sighed.

Of course.

"What do you know of his father, Weasel?" I questioned with a tinge of exasperation.

"Only one of the best fighters ever created—exceptionally tall and powerful and the only Finnarian to ever have caught the affections of a Draconian." Weasel's eyes were dreamy, and I heard Teaser snort.

"A Draconian?" I echoed, confused. "What in the heavens is a Draconian?"

"They used to be part of our army, through a gift from their king to ours, but over time, they were all killed, except for Graitaan. Then Sadan came on the scene and swept the lonely warrior off his feet..." Weasel spoke like it was a grand romance.

Teaser snorted louder this time, catching my eye. "More like Sadan was the only one strong enough to prevent the Draconian from killing him. I heard it was entertainment for years, and many were the bets placed on who would be the victor. Neither of them was a gentle being. Apparently Sadan prevailed though. Finnarians are amazingly persistent once they want something." His eyes slanted to me, a twinkle in their depths.

I frowned quellingly at him.

Weasel was still at it, nattering away, and I had to scramble mentally to catch up to his conversation.

"Draconians were said to be the fiercest of warriors and to never bond outside their own kind. It was a great scandal among the Finnarians, apparently, that Sadan insisted that his bondmate would be a Draconian."

I stared at him a moment, my eyes widening in wonder. "Finnarians actually take bondmates?" That was the most important part of the nattering as far as I was concerned.

Weasel frowned impatiently at my interruption to his story—or nattering, however you chose to name it.

"Of course, Gaven. Do you know nothing of Finnarians?"

My mouth opened and closed speechlessly; then I sagged against the wall behind me, shaking my head.

"No," I could only answer meekly.

He patted my head consolingly. "You need to get out more, Gaven. You are too insulated from the rest of the army. You just ask me. I can tell you all the things you need to know as Vlar's eramai."

I viewed him with a jaundiced expression, I'm sure.

"How could I not have known who to speak to?" I sighed.

Weasel shook his head at me.

"Anyway," he said with a pointed look, "Draconians, from what I have read and heard, are a beautiful sight. They look somewhat like a dragon, but with a more human body. They have scales over their shoulders and back, with smaller ones down over the chest and upper legs. Elsewhere is black skin. They have long retractable claws, wings, and a large tail. Their head is dragonlike, again with smaller scales covering it and they have large golden eyes with vertical pupils." He sighed longingly. "Do you think Sadan might bring Graitaan with him? I would love to meet him. A real Draconian..." I shot a glance at Teaser, who only shrugged his shoulders with a certain resignation.

"Anyway." Weasel brightened again. "As I was saying..."

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The news that another Finnarian was arriving, and a famous one at that, spread like wildfire through the ranks, and I took to hiding in the palace library in a feeble effort to escape the constant questioning from a veritable plethora of Masarians. They seemed to be utterly fascinated with the stories of Sadan and Graitaan. If I had to say one more time that I did *not* know whether the Draconian would be accompanying his lover, I was going to snap. I noticed with some irritation that no one seemed to be harassing *Vlar* for information.

My eramon was noticeable by his absence during the days. He was nowhere to be found, and the only time I saw him was at night, when he would silently arrive just as I was getting into bed.

Whatever else had happened between us, my body seemed to have awoken to a great need for him, and it would stupidly arouse itself to a fever pitch as soon as Vlar was in reach.

In tune with his usual perverseness, *now* Vlar seemed to have some asinine idea that I was not to be touched in any way, other than to be held through the night with care and gentleness.

Before, I would have given anything for such treatment. Now, I wanted to kill him for it. My body ached constantly with need, so that often sleep was elusive. I was tired, horny, and damned grumpy with it all.

I was not even going near the question of what Vlar's father would tell us. I was all too focused on the yearning that my foolish body had developed.

On this day, I was ensconced in the library again, trying to find anything and everything about Finnarians so that I might greet Sadan with some knowledge to assuage my nervousness at meeting a member of Vlar's family. I had tried asking the one who should know, but certainly Vlar was useless in this respect. He would merely grunt and shrug his shoulders or change the subject.

The resident "expert," Weasel, *thought* he knew a lot, but I had my doubts as to the veracity of it.

But everything that I found in books seemed vague or written by someone who was surmising rather than speaking with true knowledge.

It seemed the world was as ignorant of the race as I was. It made me feel somewhat better, though I wondered how it was possible for Finnarians to have been part of the Masarian political and military landscape for thousands of years, and yet no one was interested enough to truly delve into their abilities and needs.

Was it because of lack of interest, arrogance—or perhaps due to Finnarian reticence?

If my dealings with Vlar were reliable evidence, the latter seemed the most likely.

Vlar never spoke of his people or of himself other than in relation to current training. He had a well-honed ability to turn the conversation on the speaker, so they found themselves imparting personal information that was nothing they wanted to share. It often cut the talk short as they clammed up.

Either way, it achieved what Vlar wanted. The talk was over, the questions gone.

Finnarians had to be both reticent and wily.

At least, if Vlar was typical.

It seemed hard to believe Vlar was typical of anything but himself. I sighed and shut the last book with resignation. Little there could help me. The only hope was that Sadan would prove more vocal about his race than his son had.

It was over three weeks later that I would finally receive my wish for information.

At feast on that particular night, I was withdrawn and introspective, my thoughts far from food and companionship.

Vlar sat beside me, and he also seemed far away, eyes often fixed in the middle distance as though he listened to something none of us could hear. His strange behavior curbed any desire I might have had to speak to him, and I pushed the food around my plate in moody silence.

I only came back to myself when Vlar's head snapped up, like a hunting hound on the scent, eyes intense, utterly focused.

It was only moments later that a large warrior walked through the great doors of the feasting hall, without fanfare and apparently having avoided all the guards. No doubt this feat would only add to his mystique.

I blinked. This could only be a Finnarian. Only Vlar wore such strange, ornate armor.

There fell an immediate silence as people froze, gaping at the sudden emergence of this stranger in their midst, so close to their king without escort. My uncle looked nonplussed at this breach of security, and he shot a questioning look at Vlar, slowly relaxing as the Finnarian gave a reassuring nod as to the identity of the newcomer.

This, then, must be Sadan. If so, he was as beautiful and deadly as his son, if not more so. His hair was not the many shades of gold that Vlar's was. Instead it was so pale that it seemed silver in the light, longer than his son's, down past his buttocks, and he was taller, a little broader than Vlar was. His face was sharper and more alien, eyes slightly slanted, though they were the same striking green as Vlar's. He wore ancient-looking armor of great richness, and his bearing was that of a king.

His air of calm surety in his own power reverberated through the great hall, leaving no one in doubt this was not a being to cross.

Vlar rose to his feet, putting a reassuring hand on my shoulder for a brief moment, before he left the table to approach his father, booted feet making no sound on the stone floor as he walked through the silent masses.

Sadan did not move, only watched his son's approach with expressionless eyes and cold countenance.

Upon reaching his father, Vlar sank to one knee, his right hand placed palm first over his heart, head humbly bowed.

Never had I seen Vlar show anyone such respect or display such submission. It only emphasized the power Sadan must possess, something that could be felt clearly throughout the assembled people.

It made Sadan all the more terrifying to me, and certainly so to all there, to whom Vlar was the epitome of strength and dominance. Sadan did not move for long moments, his cold, brooding gaze fixed upon his son's down-bent head. Then he laid one large hand upon Vlar's hair, and for the briefest moment, his eyes softened.

"Rise, my son. Your greeting is accepted." The words were low, yet they seemed to echo strangely about the hall.

Vlar rose to his feet, straightening his body and meeting his father with pride in his stance.

Sadan laid a hand upon his shoulder and gave the smallest of smiles, a mere tilting of lips.

"Introduce me to your king, Vlar; then we shall attend to the business you so urgently indicated..."

\* \* \*

With one hand on my back, Vlar guided me into his rooms, and I tried to swallow my fear as I seated myself in one of the ornate chairs. Try as I might, I could not look up, could not meet Sadan's gaze as he followed us within.

The soft *snick* of the door closing made my heart pound more swiftly, and my fingers clenched, white-knuckled with all I could not express.

Sadan had not looked at me nor acknowledged me in any way while we were within the hall. Nor had Vlar introduced me. I could not decide whether to be grateful or insulted at this lack of notice. Still, it had been pleasant to be overlooked as I viewed the resulting furor as Sadan was introduced to those present.

Certainly I had not wanted to be included in that uproar. Everyone wanting to meet the new Finnarian, everyone almost clamoring for attention.

I still had a headache from that.

Now, hours later, that formidable personage would be focused on me, and I had no idea how to cope with it. As it always had, attention being paid to me made me anxious and withdrawn, longing for anonymity. Being invisible was safe; people giving me notice was always a precursor to something unpleasant. Well had I learned this over the years.

I fought for composure, greatly feeling my youth at this moment. I could literally sense the great age of Sadan; his presence pulsed with it, with knowledge and experience beyond imagining in my feeble mortal body.

He was totally intimidating.

Here, in this familiar room, he seemed even more frightful. He was so tall—at least a hand's span taller than Vlar himself. He was proportionately broad across the shoulders, and although his height made him appear slender, the weight of the armor he wore pointed to great strength. An ornate gambeson began to appear as Vlar silently helped his father remove the armor, piece by piece. It was done with the ease of familiarity, and although there seemed to be no speech between them, I thought I could faintly feel thoughts flying from Finnarian to Finnarian. Vlar was bad enough on his own. With Sadan present, I felt completely overwhelmed. I could scarcely imagine a time when there had been a whole unit of them—plus a Draconian, apparently.

Ancient times must have been hellish indeed to warrant warriors of that magnitude.

I could only be extremely thankful that Sadan had not brought his lover with him. I could not have coped with a *dracon* as well.

Thank the gods for small mercies.

When at last the armor was totally removed, Vlar offered his father a clean tunic. Without the slightest hint of modesty, Sadan stripped off his gambeson and donned the tunic. His skin was paler than Vlar's, rippling with muscle as I had suspected, and he bore many scars, evidence of the military life he had lived. I wondered vaguely if he fought still in some foreign war, or if he was retired...so to speak. It was hard to believe this Finnarian would do anything at another's whim, yet he had served several Masarian kings.

I took a deep breath, bracing myself as, with everything else tended to, Sadan turned to me, his eyes intense and focused.

He walked—no, glided, in that particular Finnarian way—toward me, and I felt more like prey every moment. I gripped the arms of the chair to give my hands something to do. They tightened to the point of pain upon the wood.

Sadan stopped an arm's length away from me, silent and still as he seemed to assess me in some mystical way I could not understand. I stayed motionless, my gaze sliding away from his so that I looked at the floor, trembling ever so slightly, my posture as utterly submissive as I could make it.

Long fingers came beneath my chin, lifting my face, making me look at him. Once I met those eyes, I could not look away. Beautifully green, they were bottomless, ageless. They seemed to search to the heart of me, discover every flaw, every weakness that I bore. They stripped to the very base of me. Knowing that he would be contemptuous when he finished, I felt tears start to my eyes, for what was there to find of worth within me?

He took a deep breath; then his thumb gently brushed away a tear that had trickled down my cheek.

"You are deeply wounded, my boy. It will take time for my son to heal you. But you must let him, do you understand? You *must* let him. Open to him." I stared at him in mute confusion. Where was the contempt, the mockery, the disgust? How had he seen my pain when no other ever had?

Sadan leaned closer and brushed my hair back with one hand, his eyes softer than I had yet seen them.

"You will never be alone again, Gaven. You will be part of our family now."

I stiffened, incredulous, shooting a glance at Vlar-who looked just as stunned.

"It is true, Father?" Vlar's voice held disbelief and a certain amount of hope that amazed me. Vlar could not really want...me? Could he?

Sadan nodded, a smile slowly growing upon his lips. "You are most fortunate, my boy. Besides myself and Graitaan, I have known of only five other couples. Gaven is not just your bondmate; he is your bloodmate unto eternity."

Vlar took a deep breath, joy rising in his face, making him breathtakingly beautiful for brief moments. Then he became normal again, less than a god, more than a mortal.

He bowed his head, and a trick of the light made me think that I saw a tear in his eye. "Thank you, Father," he whispered. "I had only hoped for a bondmate, never anything so great as you have had."

Sadan laughed, a surprisingly light sound in one so seemingly serious. "You have proven yourself worthy to one of the gods, my son. This is a gift not lightly given." He looked back to me, his smile gentling. "I know this is all bewildering to you, Gaven. I will try to explain as best I might."

I leaned away from him, shooting another desperate look at Vlar. I did not understand any of this, nor did I like the sound of what I had heard.

Yes, I might be fascinated with Vlar, want his attention, but that would wane with time. I would live a normal life, find a normal lover. There was no indication of this in Sadan's initial words.

I felt the sweat of fear begin to dampen my body.

Sadan seated himself across from me, watching my reactions with a slightly wry tilt of his brows.

"You know little of us as Finnarians, do you, Gaven?"

I shook my head, the only response I could dredge up at the moment.

"We are immortal—that part you already know—and we are a very reclusive race. We keep to ourselves for the most part, but when our king sees something that may affect us in the long run, he sends some of us out to fight alongside certain human kings to influence the outcome so that our people are left in peace. Other than that, we have no need of other races and prefer to avoid them. The less they know of us, the better."

His look turned teasing for a brief moment, his eyes twinkling.

"You already know we feed on sexual energy..."

I turned a no-doubt-fascinating shade of red and found the tabletop immensely absorbing.

Sadan chuckled, the sound holding nothing of mockery, only of true amusement.

"It is the energy we feed on, Gaven, both sexual and the life force of blood. Both are powerful energies for us. We go through cycles in a month. First is rut, when we must have sexual energy. That goes for seven days before there is a neutral cycle when we can be normal; Next there is bloodlust, when we must have blood energy, then back to a neutral cycle once more. We tend to go into seclusion for rut and bloodlust when we are in our own home, but sometimes, when we are with other races, it is seen in the open and gives us our bloodthirsty, sexual reputation." He smiled again. This time it was a frightening expression. His eyes, faintly red, made me cringe.

He blinked, and the expression cleared abruptly.

His eyes met mine seriously now. "We are not mindless killing machines, as is often attributed to us, Gaven. We follow our nature, as any being must. We are what we are, neither totally gentle nor totally brutal. You have stumbled into our midst and must now learn to cope with us."

I swallowed hard and gathered my courage closely.

"I think there has to be an error, my lord." My voice sounded hoarse and hesitant even to my own ears. "I am no one special. My eramon must be mistaken in his choice of me. Perhaps it is another nearby he is feeling—"

Sadan shook his head with a firmness that made my words stumble to a halt.

"My son asked me to come to ascertain this very thing, Gaven. You are the one."

I stared at him in bewilderment. "But I cannot be, my lord. I am not even purebred, only a cross between two races. Surely..."

Sadan put out his hand and covered mine where it clenched upon the arm of the chair. "My boy, I know this is a shock to you, one more shock among all that you've had to learn since coming to Masaria. But it is truth. Bloodlines or supposed purity have nothing whatsoever to do with this. Your energy melds perfectly with his, as Graitaan's does with mine. It is the choice of the gods, and nothing we can decide. The choice has already been made for us, and we can only be grateful. It is a wonderful thing, my boy. Believe me when I tell you that. It is a meeting of body and mind and soul in such a manner as few can ever experience. You will see."

I sagged in the chair, staring at him, despairing. How was he unable to see that I was entirely unworthy of his son?

I jumped when Vlar's hand came down on my shoulder, a feeling of possessiveness in it now. "It will take time for him to believe, Father. He feels too little self-worth to understand right now." His voice held an exasperated fondness I had never heard before.

"Then you will have your work cut out for you, much as I did, if in different ways." Sadan grinned, the expression making him look ridiculously young for a brief moment. Vlar laughed out loud such as was rarely heard. "I give thanks to the gods, Father. I could not have survived the same courtship you had!"

Sadan gave a proud smirk. "No one could. That is why I alone got my prize, my Graitaan. I fight to keep him even to this day. He is a handful, to be sure."

Vlar chuckled. "I am grateful I have Gaven. He's more to my liking. I wouldn't like to fear for my life each time I bedded him."

Sadan winked at me. "It adds spice to life, my son. I am never bored."

They both laughed then, and I stared at them with little understanding. Closing my eyes did not seem to help. I had to have fallen down a hole somewhere, and this was but an epic dream.

One that made little sense.

Surely I would soon wake ...

## **Chapter Six**

But I did not.

I found myself in a whirl of people who seemed wildly happy for me, as though they knew more—or at least had asked more—than I had.

I was too much in shock to be able to ask Vlar the questions that flowed through my mind. I had to solidify them for myself before I could word them properly for others, and by then it seemed everyone else was more in the know than I.

Strange times bring strange actions in people, for the one who seemed most happy for me was...my father. Gareth took the news with silent astonishment, then a sort of quiet pride that I had never seen in him.

He clapped me on the shoulder, told me, "Well done." Since I had come to Masaria, I'd never received the slightest praise from him, and now I was given an accolade for something I hadn't even consciously done. I had not sought Vlar nor attempted to place myself in a position where he might notice me. It had all been done against my will. Now there were those people who spoke as though I had planned this, created this.

It angered me.

On this particular night, I sought out the peace of the garden, trying to silence my own inner conflict, find some way to come to terms with this...this...whatever it was.

I heard Vlar's footsteps enter my sanctuary, knew he made sound deliberately, for normally he was utterly silent. I did not turn to face him, only leaned against a pillar and looked up into the face of the full moon, my thoughts fragmented and unhappy.

Vlar's hand came down upon my shoulder, and I did not shrug it away or flinch. Whatever was happening was beyond that now. It was time that I learned more, asked more. This was my life that was changing yet again. Surely I was entitled to understand why.

His large hand trailed down my arm and caught my hand, using it to gently turn me to face him.

"Speak to me, Gaven. You have been so silent. I've waited, for I knew you had to mull on what is happening between us, on what this means to us both, but this has gone on too long. You need to voice your concerns." His tone was low and deep, but with a certain gentleness and understanding I had not expected from him. He seemed so changed since this had been confirmed, so different with me. It made me more confused, more uncertain of my place. He had been the hub of my existence since I came to Masaria; his behaviors and actions had fueled my own responses in every way.

Now even he was different, and I had no idea how to cope with this.

He drew me to a high-backed marble bench and made me sit, still retaining his hold on my hand as he followed suit.

"Speak to me," he repeated, eyes fixed on mine.

I swallowed with great difficulty, forcing myself to keep looking at him, to not shift my gaze as I longed to do. I needed to watch his expression, to see his reactions to my questions. Only then could I believe his answers.

"What caused this? How is it possible that I am this person of whom you speak?" I winced a little at the weak quality of my voice. I wanted to sound strong and intelligent.

"Gaven, I don't know what you were taught as to gods, but among my people there is great belief that when we are born, we have a path. There are variations, perhaps, but the path is there, in one form or another. Along that path, there are those who will affect us, in good ways and in bad, to teach us and for us to teach, to influence us in all ways. If we are truly fortunate, we will be blessed with one to love us, truly love us. To accept us in all ways, to see us in all our weaknesses and in our glory and to take our hearts, as we take theirs." He rubbed his thumb across my knuckles, green eyes intent on mine. "The gods choose, Gaven. When you were born, this was already your destiny."

I drew a deep breath, trying to subdue my panic so I could actually think, actually listen to what he was trying to tell me.

"But I am not Finnarian, my lord. How can I be this...mate...if I will only die before you? That seems cruel in the extreme for you."

"My father says that things can be done to remedy that. He has not told me how yet, but he seems confident there is a way. You too will be made immortal by the energies of our people."

I stared at him for a moment, then moved on, unable to even dwell on his words. There were too many other things to be considered at the moment, and the thought of immortality was too unreal to even imagine.

"Does this mean we will continue to live here, or will I have to return with you to your land?" The trepidation was evident in my tone.

Vlar gave a small smile, and his face looked so much younger. Indeed, since this had all happened, he seemed so different, so much more approachable. I kept waiting for him to return to his harsh ways, but at least with me, it seemed that this new state of being was here to stay.

I could not decide if that was good or bad. I was used to the old Vlar, my eramon, my mentor, my nemesis. Who this new person was I had yet to discover, but it all left me feeling lost again, adrift.

"We will have to see, little one. I will not stay here forever, no. Someday we will return to my people, but not before you have become accustomed to being bonded. I would not take you away from those you have only just begun to know as friends and family." I huffed out a short breath of relief, realizing how afraid I had been of bring uprooted yet again.

"Are you still my eramon, then?" I blurted.

"Of course. You haven't yet reached the pinnacle of your fighting ability. Until that day, I will train you." He smiled then, and it was not a good smile. A very bad twinkle was in his eyes, and he leaned closer to me, one hand coming up to cradle my nape, holding me firmly.

"It is in the bed that things will change," he murmured against my lips, then slanted his mouth over mine, imprinting his taste upon my tongue.

I whimpered a little, tried to push him back, beginning to growl with annoyance. I smacked his shoulder as hard as I could, and he slowly, very slowly, retreated with a last lick at my lips, a satisfied grin on his face.

The best quelling frown that I could muster seemed to do little to take him to task. To my irritation, his smirk remained.

"Good, you are already more comfortable with me if you are becoming more physical." His smirk widened as I grumbled in answer. He did not even deign to rub his shoulder.

"What am I to you, then? What does it mean to be this bloodmate?" I drew a deep breath as I waited for him to reply. This above all other questions haunted me. What if this was something Vlar hadn't wanted? Was I simply a burden all over again?

Those green eyes gentled, as though he knew all too well what I was thinking. He moved so that he cradled my face. He leaned closer, and all I could see was him.

"To be a bloodmate is the truest of bonds among my people. It is considered inviolate, sacred. It is a meeting of two souls unto eternity; never will those souls part once joined. When I drank from you for the first time and you began to sense my world, feel things the way a Finnarian does, then I began to question, to wonder if it was possible... When it continued, I was almost sure, but I had to have an elder confirm it, to sanctify it. Thus I called my father." His thumbs caressed my cheeks. "As to what you are to me, Gaven, you're my little bloodmate, my other half. I will do all in my power to make you happy, to protect you and cherish you until the end of time."

The conviction in his voice and eyes eased something inside me, but I needed to speak.

I clutched his arm with one hand, willing him to truly listen.

"I know you seem to want this, but are you aware what you are getting? This is not going to change who I am. I am just Gaven, not some dream person. I am not better than I was before you discovered this, and I will not be better after. I am just me. Do you really understand that? Do you really see *me*?"

He tilted his head a little, a faint smile curving his lips, though his expression was stern enough to convince me he was taking this seriously.

"Gaven, you are the worst judge of you. Your harshness upon yourself blinds you to all the things that others see. I have not been gentle with you. I am not a gentle person. I will try my best to be a good mate, but I am often harsh in my dealings, and if I believe you're being obstinate—as you often are—I will still be difficult."

I shifted on the bench, actually relieved by his words. I did not want him to change totally. Well, perhaps he could be a little less harsh...

Vlar chuckled, as though he read my thoughts, and leaned forward to kiss me again. "I see *you*, little one. Do not doubt that. I see far more than you do when it comes to yourself. Remember that, but don't doubt that it is you, not some imaginary person, I want. I know who I want in my bed each night."

My cheeks heated, evident even in the moonlight, no doubt, and I finally gained the courage to ask the most difficult question of all.

"Does being a bloodmate mean...? Will you...?" I floundered hopelessly, then managed to skirt the issue somewhat. "Will you be an eramon after me?"

Vlar grinned, shook his head at my squeamishness. "What you mean is will our relationship be exclusive? Will I bed others?"

I nodded, half holding my breath.

"I will not be an eramon again, little one. Those days are over, as is trying to find satisfaction among multiple bodies. Both physically and mentally, once mated, a Finnarian can find no comfort or completion among others. Only his mate will do."

My breath sighed out in relief. I had hardly hoped for such a thing, and to hear it stated in such a matter-of-fact way soothed my fears. I was beginning to care for Vlar far too much, and I wasn't one to share well. I had a possessive nature in some regards; I knew that. This knowledge that Vlar would be mine and only mine sat well with me.

As if in response to those thoughts, Vlar continued, "As will be the same with you." His tone hardened. "There will be no others, and I will not suffer another to touch you in any fashion. Is that clear?" Obviously, thoughts of Ice were on his mind.

I nodded, wide-eyed, never really having conceived that possessiveness would run the other way. Not that this would be a hardship. With Vlar in my bed, how could I possibly have time or energy to take another lover?

He rose to his feet then. "Enough talk. I would rather show you, little one."

I opened my mouth to protest his using that endearment...then gave an undignified squeak as he swept me up into his arms as though I weighed nothing at all. I was almost full grown now, a man, not a boy, but I had to concede that in Vlar's eyes, perhaps I was a little one. Not that I was ever going to accept such a thing.

He kissed the side of my neck, laving the skin with his tongue, then turned and carried me back toward his—our—rooms.

He threw me down on the vast bed when we arrived, and I felt at least some satisfaction in that perhaps he realized I would not break, that I was not in any way fragile. I would never accept being treated as such. I might be smaller than he, but I was a man. I wanted to be acknowledged as that despite the difference in our physiques.

He stood there, his heated stare running over me deliberately, making my breathing slowly pick up, my body tingle from that ethereal touch alone.

Vlar's large hands went to his tunic and lazily began to unbutton it, a piece at a time. My fingers clenched in the covers of the vast bed, my gaze pinned upon him, on each small movement as he began to uncover his body for me.

For me.

Not for another. For me. For Gaven. That body, so glorious in all its perfection and masculine beauty, was mine.

Vlar had said so.

It made this all different somehow.

I watched, my breath suspended, as his pale skin was exposed, hard muscle rippling with each movement. He stripped off his tunic, and my heart began to pound with need, my body tensing.

His shoulders were so broad; his chest coated in thick muscle, honed from years of swinging a sword. Biceps to match that strength and corded forearms flexed as long fingers unlaced his breeches.

I drew a quivering breath, finding myself on my hands and knees, almost stalking toward him at the foot of the bed.

His eyes lit to fire as he watched my approach, and he drew out his shaft, stroking it absentmindedly. His callused fingers caressed the silken skin.

I licked my lips, watching, but held back, looking pointedly at his breeches and boots.

Vlar gave a low laugh then, bending to untie his boots, giving me a wonderful view of his back. I loved that part of him. Often I had just sat by when he was in the practice yard, after he had finished training with me and was free to open himself to the full of his talent with the older warriors.

There was no one, of course, who could match him, but they would try, and I would watch his speed and agility with admiration. Heat would coil in my stomach as I watched the muscles of his back flex and glide beneath sweat that highlighted the definition.

Now I could see it at closer quarters and feel the beginning of a sense of possession. I could touch that back now in ways that I had never dreamed of. Something in me opened to the possibilities of this bond. I could not yet believe in the truth of it, but for even a little while, it would be pleasant to have Vlar to myself.

Divested of his final remnants of clothing, Vlar straightened, flinging his glorious hair back over his shoulder and standing with hands on hips, proud and regal in the candlelight, eyes reflecting slightly, eerily.

He was truly beautiful.

I came to the edge of the bed and reached out with one hand, curling it behind his thigh and pulling him closer. He came willingly enough, his heated stare boring into me. But I looked down to my prize. I leaned closer and, without any warning, swallowed him deeply.

He gave a harsh cry, knees half buckling against the side of the bed, and I grinned around his turgid flesh, though I was far too busy to relish my victory for long. My left hand squeezed and stroked the base of his shaft that I would never be able to take in the confines of my mouth. I always felt the impressive girth with a faint wonder that it could possibly fit within my channel either. My tongue caressed the vein on the underside, rubbing, pressing, before coming up to torment the head.

I actually heard him moan, felt the muscles of his thigh shake, and it spurred me to greater efforts. I let my teeth gently graze the tender skin, and he jerked, one large hand sinking into my hair, not to push me away, but to hold me there.

"Yessss," he hissed, head thrown back, fingers restlessly kneading my scalp.

I hummed with pleasure, and he gave a choked cry, pulled me off him by my hair, picking me up from the bed and pulling me to him for a brutal kiss that left me dazed and needy.

Before I could gain thought, he had whirled me around and taken my hands, wrapping them around the bedpost.

I obeyed the unspoken command, staying in my bent position, opening my legs and arching my back in invitation.

An invitation swiftly accepted...

There was little preparation, only a swift greasing of his shaft with his own leaking essence; then I looked down between my legs, seeing Vlar positioning his body behind me, felt the press of that massive head against my entrance.

He began to push in, inexorably, and I cried out, flinging my head back in ecstasy and pain both. I pressed back, hastening his entry, and only when his balls were hard against me did I stop my efforts to take him deeper.

My hands spasmed on the wood post, my head hanging now. I was panting, my senses attuned to the pressure within me, the feel of him piercing me to the core, deep within my body. Vlar ran a hand down my spine, the rough fingers making me shiver and arch into the touch.

"Please ... " I whispered hoarsely.

The hand settled on my hip, long fingers playing with the soft skin where hip met groin. "Please what?" his deep voice asked. I shuddered with want in response to the gentle tone.

"Please. I need you. In me, deep in me." My voice hardly sounded my own; it was so husky and sensual, wanton.

"As you wish, little one." His grip tightened and hips flexed against me, that rod of flesh pressing deeper, then withdrawing deliciously, playing at my entrance for long moments, then pushing within, stretching my channel around its girth without mercy. I did not want mercy; I wanted action.

I pressed backward, growling, demanding, and he gave a low laugh, snapping his hips, making me cry out at the depth he commanded.

He set a punishing pace then, and I had to lock my arms to prevent myself from being flung against the bed. His shaft rubbed continually over my prostate, and my body shuddered with the sensations that made me writhe and twist upon the spear within me.

"Oh gods, oh..." My breath came harder, so that I gasped for air. My body tightened to the point of pain, my balls drawing up tight. "Vlar, gods, Vlar," I screamed—and came. Great pulsing streams of seed shot from me, my whole form frozen in a wanton arch of ecstasy. I felt Vlar thrust one last time, his hands pulling me back upon his shaft, impaling me farther, if possible. And deep within, I felt the heat of his seed bathing me in his essence. Marking me.

"Mine!" he snarled out at that moment, and the sheer force and possessiveness of that word made me whimper.

"Yours." My voice was faint, but he heard me and growled, running his teeth over my nape for long moments, dominating me.

I was utterly content with the submission. Safe. Protected.

He had not even fed from me, and still it had been amazing. Intimate, perhaps, in a way we had not experienced before. Like a pledge of sorts.

He withdrew from me with an exquisite gentleness so at odds with his fierce taking and held me up with one arm as he pulled back the covers on the bed with the other. He guided me onto the softness and followed me down, pulling the covers over us both and encasing me in warmth and safety.

I cuddled along his body, my arms around his back even as he pulled me half over him, my head on his chest, his fingers carding softly through my hair.

I let out a great sigh, feeling a strange peace steal over me, as though this was right and good and what I had sought forever. \* \* \*

"Your father is as big an ass as you are," I stated flatly as we moved through the town on our way to the vast forest where Vlar's wolves were. The expression I wore seemed to make people move nimbly out of my way on the busy streets.

I only heard a faint chuckle behind me as Vlar reacted to my words, and I pondered the wisdom of stopping for a brief moment and smacking him. But I needed to be free of this place for a time, and so I kept on going, albeit with gritted teeth.

Sadan had seemed like a reasonable, if frightening, being when I first met him.

It only showed that appearances could be deceiving.

Vlar's father was a madman.

Now that it had been confirmed that the link between Vlar and me was of such import, Sadan had taken it into his head to create a bonding ceremony of great pomp and circumstance. His madness seemed to be shared by a great many people, including my uncle, the king, and the Eight.

I had thought perhaps they were my friends. Obviously I had been greatly mistaken. No, they had taken it upon themselves to torture me endlessly over the last week, badgering me constantly for details of what I wanted in the ceremony. On and on and on...

I unclenched my fists in a conscious effort to relax and not turn on Vlar with my frustrations.

Although why I was bothering... After all, this was his fault. I was not quite sure of the particular details, but I knew it was damn well his fault somehow.

It sure as the hells was not mine.

My soon-to-be bloodmate was remarkably calm about the whole thing, was even pleasant to people. That, on its own, assured me the world had gone quite mad. So as the caring Finnarian that Vlar was, he had suggested we go for a run with the wolves, so I did not kill him in the interim.

I was not sure that mere exercise would work, but at last, as Teaser came through the door with yet another question, I had fled with Vlar in tow.

Courage has never been my strong suit apparently.

It was market day in town, and I cursed under my breath as we made our slow way through the throngs. I had no eye for the merchandise on display, did not listen to the hawkers shouting their wares. I was too focused on escape.

However, my step did falter for a moment as I caught a glimpse of a faintly familiar face before the man disappeared down an alley with swift strides.

The glimpse was so brief that I could not place the face at all, and after a puzzled moment, I cast the problem aside in favor of moving on. I met so many people through the Masarian military that it could have been most anyone.

I could only heave a sigh of heartfelt relief when we at last stepped through the great gates of the city and passed into the relative peace of the outside world.

Vlar tousled my hair, then laughed out loud at my best glare as I struggled to tame the mess he'd made. The two guards who had come with us watched indulgently, and I rolled my eyes, turning away grumpily.

"Come," Vlar said, grinning. "Let us run."

I was not at all averse to *that* suggestion.

We broke into an easy lope that would cover ground without excess effort, something all the warriors were trained to do.

I took a deep breath of the morning air, feeling my tensions slowly begin to dissipate. Oh how I had needed this!

None of us spoke. There was only the sound of our steady footsteps on the packed road and the sun on our faces. As my muscles warmed, I relaxed into the rhythm, enjoying the peace after the bustle of our life in the city.

People on the road waved to us, and I responded with less hostility now that I had freedom almost in my grasp. I was looking forward to being with the wolves again. Their simple, straightforward company was exactly what I needed to chase away human insanity.

About a mile from the gates, we turned off the road and toward the forest. We passed through a few sparse trees; then we had to cross a clearing before we would reach the main forest itself. There the guards would leave us, wait for our return. The wolves would not suffer them to accompany us. They were very selective in their choice of humans.

I was fortunate, it seemed, for I had been accepted totally and completely. I smiled at the thought of them, eager to be in their company.

We stopped for a moment, and I turned to face Vlar, about to say something, when his face changed abruptly, his eyes reddening, his fangs elongating.

Immediately I sank into a crouch, reaching for my weapons, but it was far too late.

They were upon us in moments, silent.

So many of them.

I heard a gurgling scream, saw one of the guards go down, his throat cut. My fear turned to fury as I fought the hands that grasped at me, prevented me from drawing my sword or freeing my dagger. They dragged me down as I struggled, their sheer numbers beyond my ability to battle.

I heard Vlar's roar of fury as I went down. He battled a dozen attackers or more, struggling to get to my side

Then I saw a figure step into view, a bow drawn, to the left of me.

I had only a moment of horrified recognition; then the arrow flew—into Vlar's throat. I froze, mouth open, mind blank. I stared, numb, only a moment of stunned disbelief, before a second arrow found its mark in my lover's heart.

Vlar's eyes were on me as he sank to his knees, one hand trying to pry the arrow from his throat.

His lips moved. I thought it was my name...

It was then that I screamed.

I fought them like a mad thing as I crawled toward Vlar, his name a mantra on my lips. I saw him fall to the side, saw the two guards dead behind him, and I went insane. I struggled against our attackers tooth and nail, fighting inch by inch to reach my Vlar, to touch him.

Vlar...

Then something struck the back of my head, and I knew no more.

## **Chapter Seven**

I woke slowly, the pain in my head throbbing like a second heartbeat, my skull aching fiercely. I groaned softly, wanted to sink back into blessed darkness, but something on the edge of my thoughts shrieked at me. There was something...

Thoughts drifted within my head, none making sense. Then an image appeared, and my eyes shot open, my body freezing.

## No!

My breath stopped, and I had to force it to start again. It was a dream; that was all. A terrible dream. It could not be true.

My thoughts skittered away from reality, and I looked around me, trying to deny truth.

I lay on a bed, filthy and rumpled, in a small room. It was simply furnished and obviously masculine; weapons and other battle paraphernalia littered every surface.

Where in the hells was I?

Other sensations began to filter through my mind. I was naked; I could feel a faint breeze moving over my skin. My hands and feet were bound with chains, and when I tried to roll up, I realized, to my horror, that a collar graced my throat, a chain leading from it to a ring on the floor.

## What the...?

The door swung open even as I tried to make sense of it all.

A man came through carrying a tray, and I froze in horror. The man who had held the bow, the man who had... A scream of rage tore out of my throat, and I thrashed against the chains, choking myself, making the steel cut into my flesh.

I did not care, did not feel the resulting pain. I had to kill him; I had to.

He set the tray down and turned to me, cold eyes watching my frantic struggles with satisfaction.

Without any reaction to my screamed obscenities, he took a seat in a chair near the bed, his eyes never leaving me.

He waited with the patience of a hunter until I collapsed with exhaustion, tears flowing like rivers down my cheeks, hatred burning from my eyes into his.

"We meet again, boy. I have waited long for this day." He tilted his head slightly, mockery glinting in his eyes. "I do hope you remember me."

Well I did.

The bandit leader I had encountered almost a year ago. The one whose men the wolves had slain.

I closed my eyes as realization dawned. This was revenge. Revenge against Vlar, who had never touched them. But the wolves were his, and this fool would never blame himself for kidnapping me in the first place in that long ago incident.

Really it was my fault, all of it. If I had not tried to escape my father back then...

None of this would have happened.

Oh gods. Vlar—

I curled in on myself, pain ripping through my heart and mind so that I could scarcely find the next breath.

He watched it all, a merciless, unamused smile at the edges of his lips.

"You remember," he said softly, with a great deal of satisfaction in his tone. "You will remember my name for a long, long time, boy. It is Carnon, and by the time I've finished with you, you will scream it in your sleep." I stared at him in silent defiance, rage and hatred seething in my soul. He might think he had the upper hand, but one day, the time would come. I would be the wolf—and he would die.

I would avenge my mate, come what may...

My lip curled with a silent snarl.

His fist across my face was only the beginning of a long and brutal night...

\* \* \*

The sun beat down upon my unprotected head, making me dizzy and disoriented. I almost fell again, but having been dragged the last time, I grimly kept my feet under me, the pull on my collar without mercy.

I could feel Carnon's satisfied stare upon my naked back, but I said nothing, made no sign I even noticed him.

For seven days, this had been my new life. I trudged in the wake of one of the wagons, chained by my collar to a ring in the wooden backboard. My feet were bleeding from the rocky ground, my neck raw and swollen from when I had fallen and been dragged. My skin was sunburned, and lash marks crisscrossed my back from his whip, my body mottled with bruises from his beatings.

Hatred was all that kept me going.

I don't think I was quite sane, but then, what did it matter? My only reason for being was to kill Carnon. When that had been accomplished, there would be nothing.

I could not think of Vlar at all. There was no grief, no sorrow, only hatred. This man had taken everything from me, had taken my only chance of happiness and destroyed it, killed the one I loved, who had loved me.

My mind roiled with fury, and I am quite sure that at that moment I was more beast than human. I was as the wolf, waiting...

It never crossed my mind to fear for myself.

He had told me the very first night what my fate was to be, but I hardly cared. Perhaps he was perplexed by my lack of reaction; it was hard to tell. He was not an easy man to read.

He had told me I was to be taken to the borders of the Arun Desert, far to the west, and sold there to the tribesmen. It was said that to be a slave to them was endless death; I had heard this many times from the Masarian men. They had said they never fought close to those borders for that very reason.

Now I was to be taken there, sacrificed to the mad whim of Carnon, who was as insane as I was.

My only thought was that I had to find a way to free myself before that border, had to find a way to kill him, even if it was with my bare hands.

On this day, before the noon sun, the slow caravan wound its way through a series of low hills until we came upon a small town, dry and dusty, in the valley.

The wagons drew up before an inn, and my weary body sank down in the dirt, little caring of pride.

I knelt there, head down, eyes closed, saving my strength.

When fingers touched my chin, I jerked back, snarling, scuttling backwards until my spine hit one of the wagon's wheels.

The man who had touched me grinned. "Feisty little thing, isn't he? Cleaned up, he would be quite the prize, Carnon. I cannot believe you have not sexually tasted him yourself. What a waste to sell him to the tribes without even sampling him."

My growl was answer enough, low and vibrating with rage.

Carnon watched me expressionlessly, his eyes cold and hard.

"I'll be here for two days while the rest of my men come from the west. Perhaps I will." A smile formed as he watched my anger rise at his words. "It might be pleasant to sample him before the tribesmen take their turns. There won't be much left after that, to be sure." The other man laughed. "You can bring him out back, Carnon, and give him a washing first. He's filthy, not exactly a bed prospect. I'll give you discount for the rooms if you let me have a turn at him."

Carnon shrugged. "Why not? You can have him after I'm finished. Just don't damage the face too much. He will bring more money that way."

I spat at them, and they both laughed, secure in their position of power. I fought down my anger, seeking to form it into strength within me. This might be my best chance if I could just get him off guard, even for a moment.

Partly because of this thought and partly because of sheer weariness, I did not struggle when Carnon hauled me to my feet by my collar and dragged me behind him as we crossed the busy courtyard of the inn and moved behind the huge main building. I could feel the curious stares and hear the edge of various comments, but I felt no shame. My mind was too focused on my goal to care of others' opinions.

Here was the stable and the cobbled area in front of it. I was pulled to one of the horse troughs and chained to a post there, hands above my head. I stood there without struggling, wary eyes following their every move.

The other man brought out from the stable a bucket filled with various things. When he took them out, I saw there were cloths and brushes that made my battered body twitch at the mere sight. Surely they would not use brushes...

The man dipped the bucket into the trough, and I barely had time to draw breath and hold it before he threw the water over me. I shuddered at the frigid temperature, sputtered for breath as the deluge soaked into wounds, burning like furies.

Dimly I saw both men approach me, and I snarled weakly, fighting the chains as best I could.

It was utterly useless. Bound as I was, there was no room for movement or true struggle, and they took soap and began to wash me down harshly.

I cried out, despite all my determination to the contrary, as Carnon used a brush upon my back. The agony was indescribable. The soap trickled into the newly opened wounds, the bristles sinking into raw flesh, and I writhed against the post, trying to escape the burn. I could feel hot blood trickling down through the cold water, and the suds at my feet were tinged red.

Invasive hands mapped my body, washing and fondling at will. I tried to kick out, but the chains held firm, and the sheer sense of helplessness made tears of fury and fear start to my eyes.

My body arched, a choked cry escaping me as Carnon sank a soapy finger into my body.

He watched my expression with hungry eyes.

"Soon that will be my shaft, boy. Deep in you. And you can do nothing at all about it, can you, hm? I will be the first of many, but I will be the one you remember."

He sank his other hand into my hair and jerked my head back so I had to face him. He moved his finger deeper, and I bit my lip to stop from screaming at the careless prodding.

How very different from Vlar's touch. This was defilement.

The thought of my eramon, my lover, made me convulse with grief, fresh and raw, and I slumped in the chains, uncaring, tears invisible in the water dripping from my hair.

Satisfied with my surrender, Carnon thrust violently with his finger a few more times, then pulled it out, wiping it across my face, a satisfied smirk pasted on his lips.

He poured soap into my hair, and I closed my eyes desperately, trying to avoid additional pain. I did not resist the other hands that moved over my genitals, only gave a grunt as they squeezed my balls, testing.

"I think he could take quite a bit of mauling, Carnon. He seems pretty strong." The other man seemed excited by this thought. I despaired inwardly, struggling to keep my convictions and determination alive. I was so weak now; what shape would I be in after these two were finished with me—and would they be the only two?

I hung in the chains, little caring of the extra pain of the metal biting into my flesh. What did it matter?

I shivered as more water was flung over me. The deluge rinsed soap off me at least. My wounds throbbed, and Carnon growled in annoyance as the blood continued to flow down my back.

"We may have to use him out here. I don't think you want blood all over one of your rooms."

"Wouldn't be the first time." The other man laughed. "Leave him awhile. The bleeding will stop, and we can eat lunch before we take him upstairs. Cook made venison stew today." The punishing hands left me, and I was suddenly, blessedly alone in my misery and pain. I closed my eyes against the curious looks of the stable boys nearby and let my head fall against the post. My mind slipped into a strange twilight, where thought was vague and pain was only half present.

Where Vlar was there to comfort me...

I knew not how much time had passed—not nearly enough as far as I was concerned—before I felt the chains being unlocked. Carnon did not waste time trying to get me to walk. He simply pulled me over his shoulder and carried me. I hung limply in his grasp, eyes glazed and unseeing, the fight gone out of me. It was all too much, and I did not want to return to reality and the pain it brought.

Voices were just smears of sound, and it was only when a hand brutally slapped me that I came back into my senses.

I blinked dazedly, meeting Carnon's eyes with blank incomprehension.

He growled a little, slapping me again, snapping my head to the side with the force of the blow.

"Come on, boy. You are stronger than this, surely. I counted on you to be more entertaining. Don't prove me wrong." The sarcasm in the voice stung me as much as my wounds did, but, unable to even dredge up that much emotion, I didn't react.

It was as though I were drained of all thought and action.

I slowly came to the realization that I was kneeling in a room, a long chain attached from my bound hands to a ring in the beam overhead. The other man from earlier was lounging in a nearby chair, wine in hand, his hooded eyes watching Carnon's actions with an approving eye.

Even my bare coherence seemed to elicit an approving grunt from Carnon, and he pulled me forward so he could see my back more clearly.

"Seems to have stopped bleeding for the most part," he commented.

"Doesn't matter," his friend answered with a grin. "This is my special room. It cleans up well after...activities."

Carnon shook his head in mock reproof, before he turned his attention back to me. "Stand up."

I simply looked at him.

He hauled me up by the simple expedient of using my collar, and although I flinched at the additional pain to my neck, I did not struggle when it was patently useless.

A small voice in the back of my mind kept whispering, *Wait. Do not fight. Save strength. Your time will come.* 

I could do little but listen to it, pray it knew that of which it spoke.

When I was standing relatively steadily, Carnon released me and began to remove his shirt.

I let no expression cross my face as he did so, except, perhaps, for an uncontrollable glint of distaste in my eyes.

A faint anger flashed across his face for a brief moment, and I felt the smallest stir of satisfaction. Had he thought I would find him arousing? Good gods but the man was delusional in the extreme if he thought he held any appeal after the beauty and grace of my Vlar. He could have been a god, and I would not have been interested.

I thought perhaps he would strike me again for my impertinence, but he did not. He only narrowed his eyes and thinned his lips. I would no doubt pay for it in other ways before the day was through.

Drawing a shuddering breath, I waited, shifting my eyes between Carnon and the other man, who at the moment seemed content to merely watch proceedings. I could not hope that such a state of affairs would continue.

Somehow I had to endure this, find the strength to move past it and focus on what I had to do.

Easier said than done.

Carnon's hands went to his breeches, and he untied them slowly, a smirk of anticipation curling his lips.

My hands clenched in the manacles, itching to wipe that expression off his hated face, but I would not let my expression show it. I kept my eyes on his. The briefest of glances at his genitals had informed me that my taking would be painful indeed. What hung between his legs was not small.

I took a deep breath. Be strong, be focused. You can do this. Remember also that men are often at their most vulnerable when their shaft rules.

There might be a chance.

Carnon stepped up to me, eyes alight with a rising need that sickened me utterly. He trailed possessive hands over the skin of my chest, making me want to flinch away. But I held firm. If my eyes might have betrayed me before, I kept them impassive now.

He grinned then, and I knew my lack of response was only fueling his need to dominate, his wish to break me. I lowered my eyes, hiding my strength.

He laughed a little, perhaps pleased by this small submission, and went to a nearby table before returning with jar in hand.

His fingers pressed between my buttocks with little warning, and I could not help the pained grunt that left my lips as two cold, greased fingers speared within me. My body arched in pain at the careless touch, my innards spasming in mute protest, my entrance burning. He pressed deep and hard, probing and poking, and I gave a choked scream as he deliberately aimed straight at my sensitive nub. What could produce such incredible pleasure was apparently also capable of agonizing pain.

My eyes rolled up, and I slumped against the chains, trying to pull away.

His arm around my waist held me firmly, and he played within me, avid eyes watching my pain, drinking it in and reveling in it.

The defilement of his touch made me want to weep for the loss of my Vlar all over again. How could one male make it so very special and another destroy the beauty of it utterly?

Vlar. Tears slipped past my clenched eyelids.

The torture increased as the touch retreated, then returned with three fingers this time, then four.

I shook with the pain, helplessly rising on my toes to escape.

"Fuck him deep, Carnon. His suffering is beautiful." The other man's voice held raw lust.

Carnon laughed and complied, then added his thumb to the mix, and I realized to my horror as he began to force them all deeper that he was going to try to use his whole fist inside me.

My mind gibbered in fear, and my voice rose to a pained shriek.

Dimly I heard the other man coming closer. "No, not this way. We cannot see it properly. I want to see him tear."

The hand withdrew, and I hung in the chains, shaking, stunned. I felt the chain between my ankles being removed; then the two men lifted me onto the bed, the chain to my hands still attached to the roof beam.

I tried to writhe away, but Carnon knelt between my legs, holding me open, and the other man, still fully dressed, leaned down on my shoulders, pinning me, his lustful eyes following Carnon's greased hand. I tried to kick Carnon, but he simply speared his fingers in, taking away the last of my strength at the pulsing pain that dominated everything.

I closed my eyes in despair at my own weakness. I could not endure this; I could not. My revenge would not happen now. My mind only wanted to flee my body, never return.

I am sorry, my love. I cannot even honor your memory. Forgive me.

The pain deepened.

Pounding on the door barely registered in my consciousness; there was only the sudden cessation of the agony, and I slumped to the bed, trembling.

My dazed mind tried to make sense of what had happened, and I caught Carnon's snarl as he wrenched the door open to reveal one of his men.

"This had better be important, Sarl, or I will fucking kill you. I told you not to---"

The man's worried eyes moved past his leader, realizing what he had interrupted, but his urgent demeanor did not change in the slightest.

"Sorry, my lord, but troops approach, the Masarian warlord at the head. I thought you should know, sir."

Carnon swore at length and with great detail.

"Get the men rounded up. We haven't the numbers to fight them. We will have to slip out."

The man nodded and ran back down the stairs.

Carnon's friend rose, looking anxious. "This better not involve my inn. What have you done?"

Carnon snarled at him. "Nothing you need be concerned about."

The man's eyes cooled considerably, a hint of hostility to be seen. "This is my livelihood you're playing with, Carnon. I won't be happy if you involve me in one of your problems." He left me on the bed, moving to confront Carnon.

"You know the rules. You don't bring your trouble here. That's the deal."

Carnon glared at him as he reached for his pants. "There is no trouble."

The inn's owner raised a sceptical brow. "You're trying to tell me the Masarian warlord himself is not trouble? How foolish do you think I am? You must have done something major to earn his ire. You need to leave. Now."

Carnon growled his rage. "I'll be gone shortly. Thanks for the fucking support."

The man moved to the door and opened it, his cold eyes sliding back to Carnon for a moment. "I will kill you myself if you've brought me to the attention of Masarian royalty." The door slammed behind him.

Carnon swore again, finished tying his pants in haste and fury. His eyes fell on me for a moment, then moved to his packs by the window. A cruel smile slowly curled his lips.

"The Masarian warlord, eh? I heard he's your father. I took your lover. Now how about your sire too?"

My dazed eyes tracked him as he bent over the packs and removed...his bow.

My breath caught and held, suspended. No!

He grinned at me; a wild, desperate edge to it as he strung the bow and drew a long, powerful arrow from the quiver. Turning, he slowly pushed the shutter open just a little, his eyes following movement outside.

I slid from the bed, biting my lip at the pain in my backside, swallowing the moan that wanted to form.

Looking up at the chain above me, I came upon a faint idea. I shot a look at Carnon, whose total attention was on his target.

Hatred fueled me, gave me strength. I backed up on silent, bare feet, then took several swift strides forward, even as Carnon drew his bow.

I leaped, manacled hands striving desperately to grip the chain, lifting myself, giving myself momentum, then releasing as I flew forward, legs outstretched, praying.

It was enough. I hit Carnon, smashing him against the windowsill, his shot releasing, but without aim. We crashed to the floor together, and I saw his rage as he turned on me, sure of my helplessness with my bound hands.

But not my legs.

Vlar's training came to the fore, and my legs whipped around Carnon's neck, my thighs clasping tight, cutting off his breath. His hands came up, his eyes wide and startled, fingers digging brutally into my flesh as he clawed at me.

My hands, though manacled, had just enough width between them. I braced them on the floor and grinned at him, my intent cold and hard, rage and grief flowing through me like strong wine, giving me all the force I needed.

"This is from Vlar," I snarled and twisted my body as I had been trained. The *snap* of bone was loud in the room, and I watched with vicious satisfaction as Carnon stared at me in bewilderment for long seconds, before his eyes dulled; his body went limp. I wanted to scream a war cry, but all I had the strength to do was lie there, panting, holding him still, making sure.

After several moments, I let my legs loosen; then I kicked him away, spitting on his body.

I had done it.

Shouts from outside startled me, drew me from my haze. I had to escape before the other man came back or my father arrived. I could not have my father see me like this. The thought drove me, and I was frantic with haste. I weakly scrabbled across the floor, my body failing me as I tried to reach Carnon's clothes, hoping, praying he might have the key to my manacles within them. But stretch though I might, I could not reach them. The cursed chain held me back. I collapsed utterly, trembling. So very close...

My mind blacked out for a moment, I think; then the sound of the door splintering brought my attention back to reality.

I rolled to my side, snarling weakly, ready to fight in whatever way I could manage.

I met my father's eyes, and I startled at the madness there. A snarl also curled his lips, and he looked ready to kill anything that moved.

As he saw me lying there, such a wealth of relief came over his face that I blinked in amazement. He flung his sword down. My jaw dropped in shock at the sight. His sword was everything to him; even I knew that.

With two swift strides, he was at my side and kneeling, his hands hovering as though he were afraid to touch me, his eyes wide with...relief? Fear? I could not precisely tell what he was thinking or feeling, only that it related to me in some fashion and it was surely not anger at me.

His presence was so powerful, his emotions so unusual, that I felt tears start to my eyes, and tried desperately to blink them away. He would think me weak.

I tried to turn my face away, and his gloved fingers gently turned me back.

There were tears in his own eyes before he took a deep breath and brushed them away with one hand. Then he seemed to get hold of himself once more, and returned to his normal brisk efficiency.

"The keys?"

I had to fight to speak; my throat was rough with the cries I had uttered so shortly before. "The clothes," I rasped, praying for it to be true. Not that it mattered really. Looking at my father's face, I knew he would kill everyone until he got those keys. A thought came to me, and I was so shocked that I could not move even if I had had the strength.

He cared. For me. Somewhere inside, my father actually valued me in some way of his own. I could not breathe for a moment, the thought was so strange, so wonderful. Something I had only dreamed of.

He found the keys and lofted them triumphantly, kicking Carnon's body viciously as he came back to my side. His professional eyes immediately saw the cause of death, and he looked at me with a brow raised, a faint smile curving his lips.

"Vlar's training?"

I nodded. I felt my lips curl back involuntarily into a snarl as I looked at the body once more.

Gareth's smile faded as he bent over me. Then he was swiftly releasing my wrists, taking them in his hands to gently turn them, checking the wounds there. He turned to the bed, pulled one of the sheets off and ripped it effortlessly. Those same powerful hands then so very carefully wrapped my wrists.

He unlocked the collar and threw it violently across the room, eyes black with fury, before his fingers softly touched the edge of the abrasions and swelling around my neck. His gentleness was almost my undoing. I lay there, drawing deep breaths, trying to control my rampaging emotions.

Gareth looked down into my eyes, and his lips thinned. "Did I find you in time? What did they do to you?"

The ferocity in those words was comforting, protecting.

"You came at exactly the right moment...Father."

His hands stilled for a moment. His eyes went blank, and I thought perhaps I had gone too far.

Then he gathered me up to him, his large form cradling me on his lap, heedless of the blood and filth from the floor. He held me as though I were but a boy, and I curled into him like one, suddenly able to do nothing but weep. I despaired at my weakness, but he hushed me.

"Let it out, Gaven. It is no shame, my boy."

My hands clutched at the cloak over his armor, and I wept fully.

He rocked me, kneeling there on the floor, the great warlord—my father.

One of his men brought a cloak, and Gareth wrapped me in it, his eyes lighting to fire as he took stock of each of my injuries. He listened to my halting account of the events that had led me here, and he pulled the memory of what had happened in this room out, making me relive it.

The telling seemed to release something within me, and I sagged against him with relief. My father shook with fury, and sent his men to find the inn's owner.

Gareth rose to his feet with me in his arms and I was awed anew at his strength. I felt pride rise in me. This was my sire. His blood flowed through me, and one day, gods willing, I might become something close to what he was, might have his stature and strength, though I would never have such a powerful presence.

It would be enough.

I felt no shame as he carried me from the room. I laid my head against his shoulder, comforted by his power now that it protected me. I heard the voices of his men, many of them concerned for me in a way I would not have expected. They seemed to genuinely care about me. The thought was so foreign to anything I had ever believed that I had to push it aside rather than ponder on it.

I only opened my eyes when I heard a familiar voice that made my whole body stiffen in fury.

The inn's owner struggled between two soldiers, his face pale with fear as he saw Gareth holding me and realized the implications.

"I had no idea who he was, my lord. I swear! I would never have touched him otherwise." He was almost babbling.

Gareth looked down at me, read my answer in my eyes.

"Kill him," he said calmly as he turned away. "Slowly. He likes that, apparently."

I shut out the screams with ease, my eyes closing in contentment. No other would have to suffer that man's perversions ever again.

## **Chapter Eight**

I do not really remember the ride back to the palace. I know it took more than a day, even at some speed. Probably I was unconscious for most of it, for Gareth had had one of his physician-warriors look at me and give me poppy to dull the pain.

My father held me in his arms during the ride, guiding his horse with knees alone. He would not relinquish me to any other, and that, more than anything, told me his new care of me was real. At night, when we rested, he lay close, one hand on me as though to assure himself that I was present.

I floated in the comforting drug haze, wondering if I could stay like this forever. There was no pain here, no grief, no self-hatred. It was wonderful.

On the last night, I lay in silence, my eyes dazedly watched the sparks of the nearby fire as thoughts floated quietly through my mind. One thought came suddenly to me.

"Where is Andar?" I questioned vaguely.

"He stayed to protect my brother. We didn't know what your taking portended. It might have been a move against the royal family. We knew nothing of the manner of person who had you." Anger was evident in his voice, as was the residual tension of that time of uncertainty.

My hand lay in his, the touch comforting. The large fingers stroked across the backs of mine.

His deep voice sounded across the small space from where he lay. "You must not grieve, Gaven. I feel your pain. Vlar is not dead, not gone from you."

I slid down into sleep, smiling sadly. It was not true, but how very kind of my father to try to comfort me.

\* \* \*

I was beyond worn by the time we finally arrived at the palace. I was aware of our passing through the town, of people's soft murmurings as they saw my limp form cradled in Gareth's arms.

I could not care. I only wanted rest, sweet blessed rest, where thought did not intrude, where pain could not follow. Sleep was all I craved.

Opening my eyes was far too much effort, and even Andar's voice, even the sound of the Eight close by, their concern warming me, could not rouse me to acknowledge anything.

Gareth passed me to Andar, and I smiled a little. Andar was the only one my father trusted enough, loved enough to relinquish me to. I felt truly cared for in a fashion I had never experienced before.

I had a father.

Andar took me to be bathed gently and to have my wounds checked again. Soothing salves were put over the worst of the injuries, and clean, sweet-smelling bandages were wrapped around me.

I was laid in a soft bed, and the sense of well-being and safety made me sink deep into sleep, my escape at last.

I know not how long I slept, only that I wished never to wake, never to have to face what awaited me in the real world.

\* \* \*

Teaser, Weasel, and the others had different ideas.

"Do you think he is really asleep?" Weasel's voice was loud even in a whisper.

"His eyes are closed." Teaser's tone was wry.

"That does not mean anything. You always close *your* eyes when you do not want to talk anymore." Weasel sounded miffed.

"Then maybe Gaven just does not want to talk," Teaser supplied helpfully.

"But *I* want to talk." Weasel was not letting this go, apparently.

"Gods above, I am not sitting here and listening to you two argue the whole time. It's been long enough." Ice's tone held exasperation and impatience both. A large hand came down on my shoulder and shook me.

"Gods, Ice. Careful! He is injured!" Worry sounded appalled.

"Tough. He has slept long enough, and it is driving us all crazy." The hand shook me again.

"Well, if Gareth shows up, *you* can explain to him that *you* woke Gaven if he's not ready."

There was a pause, and I could almost hear Ice's shrug. "Gareth...or stuck with all of you whining and wringing your hands... I think I'll take Gareth."

There was a cacophony of protest that none of them was whining and they had never wrung their hands in their lives and...

I opened my eyes.

"He's awake," supplied Peace helpfully and very calmly.

There fell an immediate silence; then eight faces were peering down at me with various expressions of concern.

"You're awake!" Weasel grinned, obviously glad to be the first to inform me of that.

Ink rolled his eyes as he laid a hand over my forehead, checking my temperature. "You are such a master of the obvious, Weas."

Weasel frowned. "Weasel. Wea-sel. Stop using the shortened thing. I hate it." "Sure, Weas."

"Teaser, you are closer. Hit him." Weasel's voice was indignant, as if he fully expected his lover to come to his aid.

Teaser sighed and smiled down at me gently. "I'm sorry, Gaven. We are all a little much to wake up to."

I could only silently agree. I licked my lips, trying to swallow past the dryness in my throat.

"He needs water." There was the sound of galloping to the side of the room, then argument as to who was going to have the privilege of bringing the water to me.

In the end, Moss ignored the ruckus, quietly lifting me up to a sitting position with his huge hands and carefully holding a cup of water to my lips that he had calmly taken from the jug while the others argued.

There was a sudden silence broken only by the sound of my swallowing; then there was a general galloping back to the bed.

I leaned gratefully against Moss's solid body, eyeing them all with the smile that I could muster: small but sincere.

"It is good to see you all," I half whispered.

"It's damn good to see you," Fish blurted, then flushed at his unaccustomed forthrightness. I raised a brow. Fish rarely, if ever, spoke. It was a measure of his concern that he did so now. I felt a great warmth within me and reached out to touch his arm.

"Thank you," I said softly, and he flushed more but returned my touch, as though he had to reassure himself that I was truly there.

"You worried the shit out of us, boy." Ink's voice was gruff, but his eyes told of the trial it had been for them. "We went out with one of the search parties for days, then got word that Gareth had found you. I wish it had been us." His expression grew cold and hard. "We would have cleaned that place out for you."

I grinned a little. "Had to do it all myself."

Their faces turned fiercely proud. "We heard. Good on you, Gaven. Well done."

Their praise made me feel stronger, more settled in myself. These men did not give a compliment lightly.

There was no mention of what had happened to me, nor would there be. These men would silently help in any way they could, but it would not be spoken of, letting me keep my pride. Andar would no doubt be the one to pry it out of me, to make me speak, make me heal. These men would be my support—my friends.

It was hard to imagine I had friends here, as though at last I truly belonged. It was an awe-inspiring thought. Did this mean I was finally becoming Masarian?

Considering how hard I had fought this very thing at the beginning, the concept of it now seemed less intimidating, more like...like coming home. The fact was, I *was* part Masarian, always had been. I just had not known it.

Now, here, with these people, friends and family both, it seemed *right* somehow, not an exile as it had before. I had received acceptance here as I never had from the country where I had been raised.

Perhaps this was home.

\* \* \*

My meager strength was beginning to flag after an hour or so in their company, and it was with some relief, mixed with trepidation, that I saw Sadan standing in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest.

As usual he was utterly expressionless, though he did not seem particularly annoyed by the presence of the Eight.

When he was spotted by my companions, there was an instant uncomfortable silence.

Sadan gave a small smile, which lightened his face to something approximating human.

"I will need to steal him from you for a short while, but I promise to return him in better shape than he is now."

Brows rose, but the Finnarian's rank and reputation had a sobering effect even on this group, and they rose to their feet reluctantly, glancing my way for silent permission to leave me with this being about whom so few knew anything. I nodded—only that—and it calmed them somewhat. They began to leave with many a glance backward, and several of them gave warning looks to Sadan as though ensuring his good behavior with me.

It was very sweet in an insane kind of way.

Sadan was no one to trifle with at the best of times.

When we were alone, only then did Sadan approach the bed. I began to pleat the bedcovers nervously.

The Finnarian had lost his son because of me. Was that why he was here?

Sadan sat in a chair by the bed and leaned forward so that we were almost eye to eye, his expression opening into concerned gentleness, surprising me greatly.

"Your father tells me that you are under the impression that Vlar died."

I gaped at him, blinking, my heart beginning to beat a wild tattoo. I had no words to answer him. His statement whirled round and round my mind, making no sense whatsoever.

He took both of my hands in his immense one. "He did not die, Gaven. There are things that can kill a Finnarian, yes, but I got there soon enough. Although his wounds came close, he did not go over. He is alive, but deep in a healing sleep."

I felt as though my heart were going to beat right through my chest. I could not be hearing this; it could not be true.

My body was much faster than my mind, apparently, for it was flinging the covers back and trying to struggle upright before I fully comprehended the words.

I managed to gain my feet but could only stand helplessly swaying, unaware of my nakedness until I began to shiver.

Sadan clucked his tongue and wrapped a blanket about me before swinging me up effortlessly into his arms.

"I will take you to him."

I lay there numbly, fingers clenching the blanket's soft nap, my mind whirling. Could this be a dream? I closed my eyes against weak tears. If so, do not let me wake. Let me stay here.

We passed down silent hallways, and I dimly wondered what time of day it was to be so unpopulated, but my musings soon ended as we approached the door to Vlar's rooms, a place so achingly familiar.

Two guards were outside, fully armored, and they saluted Sadan as he approached, their eyes shifting to me with a certain amount of curiosity. They did not speak though, but held the door open, allowing us passage before quietly closing it behind us with a soft *click*.

I was beginning to tremble, something that increased as I beheld Vlar, my Vlar. He was lying on his back in the bed, covered completely with thick blankets to his chin. His beloved face was frighteningly pale, and fear spiked through me.

I began to struggle in Sadan's arms, and he gently set me down. He tested my balance, though, before releasing me.

Standing there, swaying, I was afraid to approach the bed, afraid that indeed this was but a dream, and if I touched my lover, I would awaken, alone and bereft and bereaved once more.

I took a tentative step forward, shivering despite the comfort of my blanket, my eyes trained on what had to be an illusion. Surely I could not be this fortunate...

Two more shaky steps brought me to the edge of the bed, and I leaned against it, panting, before managing to pull myself up onto the softness. What little strength I had was fading, my wounds throbbing within and without, and I had to lie down beside him.

Gingerly, I raised one hand, laid it on a frighteningly cold cheek, then snatched it away at that icy touch, shooting a look of horror at Sadan.

"It is fine, my boy. He is alive, believe me. When Finnarians go into a healing sleep, we are often mistaken for dead. Our body functions shut down; we have no heat at all and barely seem to be breathing." He shook his head at my doubt. "He is alive, Gaven. Believe in it."

I turned back, tears beginning to prickle at the backs of my eyes. Again I touched, flinching at the chill, stroking that beloved skin with the backs of my fingers. So still, so cold. I tried to believe in Sadan's words, but...

There! I felt it! The tiniest flutter of breath from Vlar's lips. My own breath caught and held in wonder, and the tears began to flow in earnest. I stroked his hair with a hand that would not stop trembling. A sob hitched in my chest.

Gently I laid my head down beside his, terrified to touch him more than this lest I hurt him further than he had already endured.

Sadan appeared on the far side of the bed, his expression so very, very gentle, open as I had never seen it before

With great care, he folded back the blankets for a moment, freeing Vlar's right arm and repositioning it on top of the covers. Taking my hand, he laid it over Vlar's.

"Touch him, Gaven. It will help his healing if he knows you are here. That you are all right. He has not sunk as deeply as he should into sleep because his mind feared for you, sought you." He stepped back, leaving us alone.

The hand in my grasp was as icy as the cheek had been, but I had purpose now. I carefully moved closer, my heart clenching as I saw the bandages at Vlar's throat, exposed now that the covers had been moved.

Memories of that gods-awful moment of his wounding came back to me, and I closed my eyes against the images desperately. This was here, now; that time was gone.

I laid a kiss on the fingers I held, tears dripping down onto them.

"I'm here, Vlar. I'm fine. Sleep now; heal for me. Please heal. I love you so very much, if that helps at all. Come back to me when you are whole, please."

If dream this was, I would never leave it, that I vowed.

My senses slowly faded, but I never let go of that hand.

\* \* \*

I woke to total recognition of my surroundings and what I had to do. It was the strangest thing, like I had been told things in my sleep, reassured as to the future and Vlar's recovery. My body seemed stronger, my mind more at peace than it had ever been.

I didn't question such an occurrence, only accepted it wholeheartedly and with deep gratitude.

Having risen from the bed, wincing, I dressed in the clothes Sadan had laid out for me. I was slow and breathless, but I felt more normal when I had finished, and Sadan brought in food that—once I discovered I was actually hungry—I wanted to eat.

Sadan watched me closely; then he smiled, truly smiled, and nodded to himself.

"You will do well, Gaven. Very well indeed."

I did not understand what he was speaking of, only that it seemed to be a compliment of some sort. I nodded to him but did not stop to fully consider the words. I was too busy thinking.

"There are things I need to do now, Sadan. If you will help."

"I have been waiting for this day, Gaven. There is much you will need to know to be Vlar's bloodmate." He sat back in his chair, sipping some hot beverage, his eyes trained on me.

There were things I needed to clear up first, though.

"What happened after I was taken? I am a little confused on the details and on why no one except my father has mentioned Vlar's injuries." This had greatly bothered me during the Eight's visit. Not one of them had mentioned that Vlar was still alive. Why would they have kept that from me?

"They do not know of Vlar's wounding. No one does except your uncle, your father, Andar, and I. I was the one who found Vlar when you were taken, and although people know about the two guards being killed, they know nothing of Vlar being with you. We have kept it secret, for we did not know at the time what the motivation of your taking was. Everyone else thinks that Vlar is off searching for more of the culprits and that we have not been able to contact him to inform him of your rescue."

I mulled this for a moment. "So I should not tell anyone?"

Sadan shrugged elegantly, the gesture so like Vlar that I ached with longing. "There is no longer much purpose in keeping the information secret." He grinned for a moment, his eyes lighting with mischief. "You should tell the man named Weasel. He would be forever grateful to be the one to spread the word around, to be the first to know."

I laughed then, the sound odd to my ears. "You know them so well, already."

He gave a small smirk, again so achingly familiar. "They are good souls, those men. Loyal to you. Be as loyal to them, and they will always be your friends. Such men are not easy to find."

"I value them, believe me. Some days more than others perhaps, but I do care deeply for them. They have been there for me when no one else was. I cannot ever forget that." My tone was fervent with all I felt for the Eight.

"Good." He nodded. "I am glad to see you better this morning, Gaven. You have found your inner strength, and it will not leave you now."

I glanced at him with surprise, then shook my head. I was not going to ask how he knew what I had discovered this morning. For all I knew, he read minds.

"How long before he wakes, Sadan? Is there a way to know?"

Sadan's eyes shadowed slightly, the only sign of worry I had seen from him. "If he were at home, it would be less. Here, it will take much longer. The energy here is not strong enough to help him."

"I dreamed that I need to give him energy, give him strength."

He considered me silently, measuring me in some fashion I could not discern. I did not turn my eyes aside nor fear him. This was too important for me to be less than totally strong.

"There are ways and means to bring energy here from our homeland, if you are willing. It will be hard on you, unused as you are to our ways and our powers."

I straightened in my chair and met his eyes unflinchingly. "If it helps him at all, I will do it. I don't care about cost. I love him."

There, the words were out, said, made true by their weight and portent.

Sadan tilted his head, scrutinizing me more closely for long, breathless minutes; then he closed his eyes for a moment, as though listening. When he opened them again, he was smiling in truth, a certain respect in his expression.

"You will do well with him, Gaven. I wasn't sure before, but I am now. You're strong in yourself, when you do not think of it. You'll be strong for him now, and you'll be stronger yet when he stands at your side. It is good, his choice of you."

I flushed a little at the unexpected praise, wondering what I could possibly have done to earn such an accolade from Vlar's father of all people.

"So..." I brought us back on topic, unable to focus on anything but what must be done for Vlar. "What can I do?"

"First you'll sleep and heal."

I flung my head up, wild-eyed, protesting without words. I had to do something now, not later! How could he not see this?

He read intent well, it seemed. "Doing energy work is not for one who is himself healing, Gaven. This is a serious thing that takes much out of a person. If you try before you are ready, you will do little good for Vlar and indeed may harm him, for he may feel your distress and try to wake."

The stern tone brought me to back to reality with a thump.

Yes, I was willing; yes, I wanted to help, but I knew next to nothing of this type of healing and so very little of Finnarians themselves. I had to rely on Sadan's knowledge, and he was not going to let me bypass the basics.

I felt suitably chastised. Enthusiasm was no match for true skill and experience.

I drew a deep breath and nodded, determined not to take his stern words personally. He was right. I would need to be strong.

"Yes, you're right in this. I'll do as you say."

One of his eyebrows rose in faint wonder, his lips tilting slightly. "Already you have more restraint than half my apprentices had to begin with. That is a good sign, my boy." He became utterly serious once more. "It is good you listen, Gaven. There are many things that can go wrong with hasty preparation. This time will not go wasted. I'll teach you what to do and of Vlar's physiology, all that you will need when you are ready."

I relaxed, my impatience satisfied that I would be doing *something*, anything, in the meantime.

Going back to the bed, I looked down at Vlar, running a gentle finger across his almost colorless lips. "Can I stay with him? Will my healing disturb him?"

"You can most certainly stay. It will be good for both of you...as long as you look after yourself. I will tell the others of the true story now, inform them of the severity of his wounds. That should keep people away from Vlar until you are both ready."

I nodded gratefully and, moving carefully for my wounds and so as to not jostle Vlar, climbed back upon the bed and snuggled down against Vlar's side, pulling another blanket over me. I wished I could be against his skin, but even with covers between us, I was trying not to shiver at the cold that radiated from his form.

Sadan put out a hand and, with a flash of blue fire, lit the wood sitting in the grate of the fireplace. I jumped a little, eyes wide, but then I had already seen Vlar

do this soon after our meeting, so it was not *totally* surprising that Sadan had this talent. It was the sheer casualness of the action that was disturbing.

I heaved a sigh and laid my head down next to Vlar's, my hand cradling his once more. *Hurry up and heal*. I chastised myself, closing my eyes as if in answer.

\* \* \*

My tutor would have been properly amazed at my stellar performance and dutiful studying. Sadan was a good teacher, and the determination that it was my right and privilege to assist in healing Vlar gave me motivation as never before.

I read until my eyes ached, listened and took notes from Sadan until my fingers cramped.

I think my studious and serious attack upon my new duty amused Sadan, for I often caught him watching me with a glint of humor in his eyes. I didn't let that daunt me; I merely scowled at him, perhaps growing overly bold with the familiarity of days spent together in a common purpose.

Whatever it was, I felt braver in his presence, less overawed. No doubt that was because I did not truly understand what he was and what he was capable of, but I was content to treat him as I did the other mentor in my life, Andar.

Sadan, for his part, seemed fine with it all, and his patience was truly amazing. He would tell me things, and if I did not understand, he would simply come at the issue from another angle until it made sense to me, in my own way.

Because of that, I felt pleased with myself about the speed with which I understood and took in the pertinent information. It gave me confidence to proceed with the entire business.

If only all teachers went about imparting knowledge with the same flexibility!

As it was, even with my impatience, I learned and healed within the same time frame.

My healing, physically, was going well. I tried not to think of what the physician had told me, of how torn I was inside and how that would take time to mend. Memories themselves, of Carnon and his tortures, I tried desperately to thrust aside, as though they still had power to truly hurt me even now.

Andar was working with me on that, but he was gentle in his dealings. Not overly so, but bracing enough to keep me on the right side of inner darkness. He let me rant and express my emotions in any way I chose, and that freedom began to cleanse me of what had happened.

Andar's ability to make me talk, even when I had no desire to do so, even when it made me wildly angry, was purging me of the poison that could have festered within. Even when I screamed at Andar, something inside me was so very, very grateful for his strength that let me rail against him and know he could take it and keep on coming.

Even as Andar helped me unselfishly, so did my father begin to build our relationship a step at a time, something that also healed me, made me more whole than I had ever felt before. Gareth would never be a gentle man, never be the perfect, loving father that I had sometimes imagined as a boy, but then I did not need that now as I came into manhood myself.

Gareth was gruff and sometimes sarcastic, his wit sharp and somewhat harsh, but he had a sense of humor I would never have expected. His comments on events and people's foibles were on the mark and often wildly and unexpectedly funny. I could see the resemblance to the king and the sharp intelligence that made them both rulers in their own way.

With time and some degree of patience, I was worming information out of Gareth about my mother. He had been careful to speak of her with neutrality and to never let his emotions overshadow what I needed to know about my background. She had been a seeress of Rallneis, a country far to the south, who had come on a pilgrimage to a temple in Masaria. During her teaching, she had met my father, and while it had seemed initially that there might be hope for a true relationship, in the end they had parted ways with bad feelings between them. Gareth was gentle in the telling, and for this I was amazed and grateful in the same breath. He was not an empathetic man, and it was a measure of his care for me that he attempted it at all. I had the feeling there had been mistakes on both sides that had led to the disintegration of their relationship. That my mother had never informed him of my birth, that he had had to find out on his own, was obviously a sore point. I was as careful of things as he was, unwilling to prod his temper or renew bad memories. He had the right to feel as he wished, but I wanted to hold on to my love for my mother. It was best that we both avoided tender issues and held everything but the facts to ourselves.

I treasured our time together and gradually began to understand his cold demeanor was nothing more than a shield. The true Gareth would be shared just with those he trusted and cared for, and suddenly, unexpectedly, I was included in that small, elite number. I could only be proud.

What had changed his mind about me, whether my near loss or something else, we never discussed. It was enough that it had happened. The how or why of it did not really matter in the end.

He had no idea what to do with a child, but I was no longer that, and he could relate to me on a new level. He was not completely a father to me, and I was not totally a son to him.

We were forging something new, something that suited us both. I was happy with it, content in some way that had been forever missing since my birth.

The days passed so very swiftly despite my impatience. There seemed so much to do, so much to experience.

As my body healed, I renewed my training with Ink and Moss, determined to keep myself in form for when Vlar could return to being my eramon. I would not disgrace him by lagging in my practices. It was also good for my mind to have my body stretch and burn, sweat and strain. I always felt more relaxed after the intense exercise, as though I had released some inexpressable inner frustration. I was more and more aware of my body maturing. It showed in my growing muscles, in my breadth of shoulder and strength of arm. I was becoming more than a boy, not quite yet a man. Soon, very soon, I would be ready to step into adulthood and leave behind the uncertain child I had been.

I felt the power of all I was learning and becoming growing within me, ready.

It was a solid month before Sadan would even consider letting me work with energy for Vlar.

During this time, I had spent many a night lying beside my lover, talking to him in low tones, telling him what was happening and why, informing him of my day and what I had achieved or what I felt I had not done correctly.

There was, of course, no response I could readily identify, but somehow, I felt he was listening, hearing me in some part of him that was still aware.

It comforted me, kept me from sinking into despair at his continued lack of movement, his pale, silent sleep that seemed so very close to death. Despite all Sadan's comforting words, there were times that I feared, times I felt that this was all useless and that Vlar could never come back, that he would simply sleep forever.

Those times that I could not control my tears, I would go out on the balcony, breathe in the fresh air, remember our tryst in the rain. The vivid images would renew my faith, my determination.

He *would* come back. He was strong. I was strong. Together we would defeat this, heal what had been torn. Carnon would *not* win. The bastard was dead and he would never damn well have power over us again.

### **Chapter Nine**

Now that it was time, I was frightened, nervous of my abilities, but sure in my duty. This *would* be done. Together with Sadan, the two who loved Vlar most—except for the mysterious Graitaan—could not fail.

We started by sitting in comfortable chairs near the bed, relaxing our minds and bodies, letting the world around us go.

It was hard at first; random thoughts chased themselves within my head, pulling me away from the deep focus I sought. Gradually, though, I sank through my consciousness to where I heard no sound, felt nothing around me. There was only peace here, a place within myself I had never known, of which I had never conceived.

Here I could feel Sadan as something quite different, a force more than words could describe, a power beyond imagining. He was much greater here than could be seen in the physical world. Here was Finnarian strength; here was true power.

He was unmistakable, and I went to him willingly, fearing neither his talents nor his power. He would protect me, not harm me. Such trust was foreign to me; even with Vlar, it was tentative at best.

That I would trust Sadan so completely was amazing to some faraway part of myself, but even that distraction soon disappeared. He showed me the earth beneath us, the energy that lay there, showed me the lines that flowed north, to where the Finnarians called home. There lay such immense stores of energy that it was not at all surprising Finnarians had developed into the beings they had.

Sadan then showed me Vlar, showed me my lover's body in a very different way that revealed the weaknesses, the wounds that drained his strength, left him in a state of suspension as his body struggled to draw energy in a place far from home.

My mentor guided me gently as I tentatively ventured to touch the Finnarian energy. I drew back with a gasp as it leaped at me, raging at my presumption. I did not flee, though; Sadan's teachings had been thorough indeed. I placated it, spoke with it, let it feel my bond to Vlar. It was neutral for a time, as though judging my worthiness as mate to a Finnarian; then suddenly it was around and through me.

It was too much, and I almost panicked, but Sadan's strong voice recalled me, reminded me what to do.

I took charge then, coaxed the energy to a softer force, then, with gentle, loving care, slowly fed it into Vlar.

His inner spark, his life force, seemed so very dim from this perspective, frighteningly weak. The Finnarian energy seemed to do nothing at first, and I fought dismay. But then gradually, very delicately, it began to enter him. It sought the areas of damage immediately, curled within them, emitting the power that would give his body what it so desperately needed.

I watched, hopeful, my own energy beginning to drain in the face of such a foreign source. I felt myself begin to thin somehow, and then Sadan was drawing me back into the world.

A deep gasp for air drew me out of my focus, and I panted then, limp and worn, feeling like I had fought a battle—and perhaps I had, of a sort.

It had seemed like so little a time, and yet, while we sat here, afternoon had somehow become deep night and all was quiet and still outside. Only the sound of a night bird in one of the courtyard trees broke the stillness.

I looked to Sadan, who seemed a little hollow himself. He nodded—only that. But it comforted me, gave me the strength to rise to my feet, albeit somewhat shakily. It was like I had to learn to walk again. With fast-beating heart, I approached the bed. My eyes roved over Vlar eagerly, waiting for something, although I knew not what.

Was there a hint more color in his face, a little more life?

I reached out a tentative hand and touched his skin. My heart sank as I felt the familiar cold.

Tears came to my eyes, and I slumped against the bed despairingly. What had I done wrong? How had I failed?

Comforting arms came around my shoulders, urged me up to lie on the bed beside Vlar.

"It will not work in a moment, impatient one. Give it a little time. His body must use the energy slowly, regain its force gradually. Something happened; I felt it."

I looked up at him wearily, wanting so desperately to believe, but unsure of the reality of what I had done now that I was back in myself. It felt so very unreal, so far-fetched. People like me did not do things like that.

Sadan brushed back my hair with a tired hand. "Replenish your strength now, Gaven. Let it be. We will see in the morning."

I nodded, trying to rein in my turbulent emotions, realizing I was too out of control to rationalize anything.

I saw him sink down onto one of the sofas by the window; then my eyes were closing almost against my will. My body knew what it needed, and it had little compassion for a needy heart.

I grasped Vlar's hand once more and sent a prayer to any deity that might be so merciful as to listen.

Even as I worded it, I sank into sleep.

\* \* \*

It was far into the day by the time I woke. My body was stiff, as though I'd moved not an inch during the night, and it took time and much flinching before I could even rise onto an elbow.

My first priority was to check Vlar, and this time I could *see* improvement, *feel* it. His skin was warmer, his color much better. He looked like a living person now, not a corpse, and I could see him breathe.

I put my head on his hand and wept.

I knew not what had truly helped, whether deity or chance or what Sadan had guided me through, but whatever it was, I gave repeated and heartfelt blessings.

\* \* \*

It was as Sadan had said: a slow progression of small improvements. He smiled at my impatience, my need for Vlar to waken fully.

"He heals, Gaven. I can feel it. He will waken when it's time. Even then he'll not be fully himself, so be prepared. He'll wake with a great hunger, and I must be present for that, for he'll be primal, the drive to feed overwhelming everything else. It's a frightening thing to see, much less endure."

"I don't care," I replied stubbornly, even if a certain fear woke within my mind. "He can feed from me. It has to be from me."

Sadan nodded slowly, though his eyes were concerned. "I must be the one to control him. He would kill you else, bleed you dry. There is nothing of rationality in a newly awakened Finnarian."

"Vlar would not harm me," I declared staunchly, though his words and manner had shaken me somewhat.

"He is not Vlar when he awakens. He is the primal side of himself, and that has no emotion but the instinct to live, whatever it takes." Sadan put a reassuring arm around my shoulders and curled one long-fingered hand under my chin, so I had to face him, had to read the seriousness in his green eyes. "Believe me, child. I only hope this does not turn you against him. That would break him utterly." I swallowed with difficulty but didn't try to break from his hold, didn't deny his words. He knew so much more than I, but I *did* know the depth of what I felt for Vlar. It would have to be enough.

He searched my expression for long moments, then released me with a comforting clasp to my shoulder.

"Be strong, Gaven. That is what he most needs now. Remember that what you will see is not truly him, only an instinctual beast."

I nodded, drew a deep breath. There were many things I'd had to face in my life, most of them unpleasant. With all that training behind me, I could and would do this.

Apparently, the army was more acquainted with how Finnarians healed than I. Upon word that Vlar would be awakening soon and that I would be the initial donor, they viewed me with some degree of awe.

In the past, only the most stalwart and brave of men had volunteered or been recruited for the task of being a Finnarian blood donor at the point of waking. Always there had been one or more other Finnarians at hand to ensure the event went smoothly, but stories seemed to have made the rounds. Whether from the donors or pure speculation was hard to say.

Some of the tales were quite horrific.

Certainly the Eight seemed to try to keep them from me, but others were not so kind and seemed to take delight in passing them on to me with every gory detail. Human nature is so very strange.

I didn't bother to refute them, for how did I know the truth? Perhaps it was good that I would go into this with an abundance of exaggeration in my mind. Perhaps that would make the whole thing less in the end, for it surely couldn't be worse than people had already made of it.

I have to admit that there were times when I sat down and wondered what in the hells I was doing, loving a Finnarian. Then I would laugh a little and continue my day. I had never been normal, never would be. This only emphasized it.

On this particular day, I was at practice and was taking a breather, drinking copious water as I stood on the sidelines, sword sheathed for the moment.

The day was hot and bright, and the cloth shades that overhung the yard were not quite in the right position to protect all the expanse of sand.

I felt scorched. Raised in a northern climate, used to cold winters and mild summers, I found this heat almost unbearable at times.

Still, it had its compensations. I eyed the men still fighting and wiped the water from my mouth with the back of my hand. A sea of beautiful, sweaty, well-built men.

A servant handed me a cloth, his eyes respectfully lowered. I thanked him quietly and used it to wipe my face and neck before handing it back.

Ice and Ink were out there, sparring lightly, and I watched with respect, as did many. The brothers were a sight to behold. Stripped down to short pants, they circled each other, eyes intent on their opponent. If not for Ink's tattoos, they would have looked more like mirror images than two men. Ice was perhaps a smidgen taller, Ink perhaps a tiny bit heavier, but it was hard to tell when they were both moving.

Because they were both so familiar with each other's moves, it forced each to stretch his abilities to come up with some new maneuver that might take his sibling by surprise. It always made for excellent entertainment and gave me new ideas to work on. Their deep brown eyes were fixed unwaveringly on each other, their long dark hair tied back. Both of them had the beautifully rich golden skin of the south, slick with sweat now, gleaming in the sunlight.

There were many who appreciated the sight.

I had heard both men had many lovers, though neither seemed to be in a hurry to settle with anyone in a permanent fashion. I shivered, remembering Ice's touch during the dancing. Anyone who gained their true attention would be fortunate indeed.

If I had not met Vlar...

But I had, and my heart would never veer from him now that I knew he loved me. One day I would have to see that the roguish Ice found his own mate. He deserved it, although it was hard to imagine all that energy confining itself to one man.

As was the case for Ink, no doubt, from what I had heard.

Peace, with Worry tucked under his arm as usual, and Moss reclined close by on the long benches, their massive bodies like mountains at rest. They watched the goings-on with half-lidded eyes, their usual calm demeanors focused utterly on the match.

Fish stood next to me, arms folded over his chest, expression intent on the match, and Teaser and Weasel were out on the sands, bellowing encouragement to Ice and Ink, shouting suggestions.

Other fighters stopped what they were doing. As always, bets had to be made on the winner.

Masarians seemed to be addicted gamblers. They bet on anything and everything, but the outcome of matches seemed to be their favourite. Whether it was because I had been raised differently or because I was only a half-blood Masarian, I didn't seem to possess this weakness—or strength, depending on who you spoke to.

Ice and Ink ignored their supporters and detractors with equal ease, each aware only of his opponent. They circled with slow movements, then suddenly exploded into a flurry of kicks and leaps that, as always, took my breath away.

My father had told me that they had been trained as children by a master fighter in this particular style of combat. It was amazing to watch, like a deadly dance. Today it wasn't with blades, to my relief. I could not quite lose the worry that they would seriously injure each other, and I cared for them both too much to think of that with any aplomb. For now it was only hands and feet, deadly enough had any of the blows landed—but really they were only playing. I couldn't see how they could fail to strike each other, how they could coordinate themselves while moving at such speed, but they seemed to use the moves only to intimidate, to force the other to retreat in some manner only they could decipher.

It went on well past any stamina I could ever have mustered, even if my rangier, less compact body had been able to replicate what they were doing. It made me weary just to watch the energy they expended.

When at last they stopped, abruptly, the dust not even settled yet, they bowed to each other, and the spectators immediately clamored to know who had won.

Generous today, Ink indicated Ice with a grin. Often they would tease their audience for hours, men following after them, begging to know whether their bets were fruitful.

I blew out a breath now that they were both safe, and sank down onto the bench beside Moss, who rumpled my hair fondly, as usual.

"You have to stop worrying so, my friend. They've only broken a few bones doing this—nothing serious."

I raised a brow at him, shaking my head. Masarians... Broken bones were looked on as nothing. No wonder the army was so damned powerful and regarded with wary respect among the countries around it.

They were mad. One could not combat the insane.

I leaned back into the welcome shade of Moss's form and closed my eyes for a brief moment.

Sudden silence alerted me, and my eyes snapped back open, my heart freezing in my chest as I beheld Sadan beckoning to me, his face grim and tight.

The men stared at him, then at me, their expressions ranging from deep concern to curiosity.

The Eight closed ranks around me immediately, each one touching me briefly in a form of solidarity as they helped me gain my feet on legs that suddenly seemed less than steady.

I wished I'd had time to bathe, to prepare, to...

Nothing would make this easier but courage and the will to move through it and beyond, to where Vlar and I could be together to celebrate our bonding. That was what I had to focus on: what would come after, not what I had to do now.

My chin went up; my step firmed.

Teaser watched me with serious eyes, then smiled a little as I gathered myself. With him on one side of me and Weasel on the other, the others trailed behind. I walked toward Sadan, steady and resolved.

\* \* \*

I could see the difference when Sadan and I entered the room. We closed the door quietly behind us and locked it. Vlar moved, actually moved, body restless, color high in his cheeks, his eyes still closed.

His fangs were beginning to descend, distorting his face slightly, and his hands clenched and unclenched, perhaps loosening the muscles. So long inactive, surely his body ached and burned with the sudden return to movement.

I wanted to feel joy at the signs of his awakening, but my heart pounded, and I wiped cold sweat from my forehead. I fought the fear, for Sadan had said it would only make the situation worse, Vlar being able to sense such an emotion. Fear would make the primal self act more aggressively.

I wished I could control myself better, but despite all I could do, there *was* fear. I took deep calming breaths to fight it down.

When Vlar's eyes suddenly snapped open, I jumped, my breath hitching. They were bloodred, and they held nothing of sense in them. One minute he was in the bed, the next he was by the window, half crouched, his hands extended into claws. Sadan was silent, watching, and I stood beside him, denying the impulse to hide behind his powerful form like a coward.

Vlar froze, his gaze fastening on us. His head tilted, nostrils flaring, seeking our scent. Then those eyes snapped to me, and he licked his lips. There was no recognition in his expression, nothing but rabid hunger. Small, low-voiced growls began to issue from his mouth, and I fought the instinct to flee the predator he'd become.

Wary of Sadan, Vlar approached me cautiously, not with the rush I would have expected.

He kept an eye on the other Finnarian, obviously seeing him as a rival for the available food resource: me.

I stood my ground, though my body wanted to shake, wanted to shrink away from the force of this being.

A long arm snaked out, snatched me from Sadan's side, pulled me against Vlar's still-chilled body.

Vlar snarled at his father, backing away, dragging me with him. I looked helplessly at Sadan, who gave me a warning stare, reminding me of all I had been taught in the last few days.

I nodded, did not resist the pull, though I flinched at the force of the fingers locked around my arm.

By the window, Vlar stopped far enough from his competitor to feel safer. Those red eyes dropped to me as his fangs slid completely into position. At this moment, he looked more like a monster from legend than my lover, and I struggled to remember my duty, my love.

I didn't struggle, and his grip slackened slightly. He leaned forward, sniffing my neck. Drool dripped from his mouth.

I shivered but tilted my head away, lowering my eyes in submission.

He growled in approval, his body relaxing somewhat.

With no more warning, he pulled me tightly to him, restraining my arms against my sides so I could not fight, then plunged his fangs into my offered neck.

A cry escaped my lips despite my best intentions. The pain...

I choked as he sank deep, far deeper than he ever had. There was nothing of control, and I realized then how very gentle Vlar had always been with me in his biting. If this was what a Finnarian really wanted to do, dear gods...

My body shook with pain, and it took every bit of courage within me not to struggle, not to believe that this beast would kill me, consume all I was.

Whimpers came from my throat, and I could no more stop them than cease breathing. Vlar's mouth closed over the wounds he had created, and he began to suck strongly, that in itself a torture of endurance.

I could feel my blood draining—far, far more than he had ever taken before. He was ravenous, hands bruising me as he clutched me closer. The sensation of his feeding held nothing of eroticism, only of need and desperation. I could have been anyone. I held back tears. Sadan had warned me of this. He had said it had nothing to do with how Vlar felt for me.

I had to remember Sadan's words. This was not truly Vlar at this moment.

It was hard to think clearly with pain beating into me with every movement of his jaw, with every shift of his fangs within my flesh. I closed my eyes, trying to move past the pain, to relax. It was utterly impossible.

His nails bit into me, leaving bloody crescents in their wake, and he crushed me closer yet, so that it became difficult to breathe. My senses spun; my body weakened. I could hear his sucking—the wet, soft sound of my blood being drawn from my body—and I tried to take comfort in it, tried to think of nothing but how my essence would help Vlar, bring him truly back to me.

It was hard to focus, hard to think. My body began to go limp, and that at least seemed to have the benefit of his grip slackening somewhat. Somewhere I heard a voice, not really recognizing it as Sadan, and Vlar growled against my throat, guarding his prey.

The voice persisted, strong and dominant, and slowly something in Vlar seemed to respond. His feeding slowed, then suddenly his fangs withdrew, and he dropped me to the floor. I groaned with the pain of contact with the hard stone, then turned my head weakly to watch as Sadan continued speaking, his arm out, beckoning Vlar to feed on more potent blood.

The younger Finnarian seemed mesmerized by the flesh offered to him; he licked bloody lips, taking slow steps in his father's direction.

Sadan's eyes glowed red. His tone held encouragement, his voice taking on a certain purring quality that seemed to calm Vlar.

Hesitantly, flashing many a glance at Sadan's face, Vlar took the offered arm and sank his fangs in deeply, his body trembling with eagerness and unbearable hunger. Sadan did not even flinch; he merely spoke quietly with that purr, letting his son feed.

I wondered blearily how he would get Vlar to stop, but after several moments, Vlar seemed to become dazed and disoriented, weak. He stopped feeding on his own, and Sadan caught him before he collapsed, sweeping his son into his arms before settling him on the bed.

Vlar watched him with confusion that faded as his eyes closed and his body slumped into unconsciousness.

Sadan released a huge sigh, body sagging with it; then he turned to me and lifted me also, effortlessly despite his evident exhaustion.

He moved to lay me beside Vlar, and I stiffened.

"No," I whispered. "On the sofa, please..."

Sadan looked down into my fearful eyes, and his expression became saddened. He nodded without speaking, laying me down carefully on the plush furniture before finding a thick blanket to cover my chilled form. "Sleep, Gaven. Restore your strength. Now we can bring in others to feed him. He'll be controllable now. You must rest; you have done so much for him." I thought I saw tears in his eyes, but surely I was mistaken; then he leaned down and kissed my forehead. "It will be all right, my boy. He'll be back with us now, weak, but himself. Remember that. He will be *himself* now, not what you just experienced."

I nodded dutifully, but my weary mind wanted nothing more than to sleep, to forget the pain and the fear I had endured. My eyes closed, my body sliding into blessed darkness.

\* \* \*

I woke with a pounding heart, body shaking with fear. Something was here, something...

The darkness of the room was relieved only by three candles, their shadows dancing across the tapestries that lined the stone walls.

I gulped a breath, drew it deep, and let it out slowly, trying to calm myself, trying to remember.

"Gaven..." The weak voice seemed but a whisper on the air, but it flayed me so that I cringed against the comfort of the sofa, my fingers clenched white on the blanket around me.

It was then my memory began to return, and I realized it was Vlar calling me. At long, long last he was awake, remembering.

Again it sounded. Again I fought the primal fear in my mind and body, the fear that wanted only to gain distance from the being that had hurt me earlier. Once...twice I tried to rise, to go to him, but each time my terror ruled, and I shrank back.

Time passed, and the feeble calls died away with such a despairing note that my heart overcame my mind.

On shaking legs, I rose, steeling myself for what would come, clenching my hands into fists as I approached the bed.

There was no sign of Sadan, and I thought perhaps I should call him, but...

The single candle near the bed flickered over Vlar's face, making him look demonic as it cast him into shadow, then back again to my sight. His eyes slowly opened, and I tensed, but they were clear, not reddened, and the sadness in the green depths tore at me, sweeping away the last of the fear.

I went to him then and took his limp hand. He stared up at me in silence, eyes slowly tracing over my features, then dropping to the wound on my neck. If it looked as bad as it felt, it must seem horrific.

He lifted one large trembling hand and touched it, tears rising. I almost gasped at the sight, my heart wrenching. Never had I seen such emotion in him, such grief. It made me clutch his other hand more tightly, lean over him, and brush back his tousled hair.

"I did that, didn't I?" he whispered, hand dropping weakly to the covers.

The pain in those words made me slide closer, lie down next to him, never ceasing my stroking touch.

"I am sorry." The true regret in his tone eased something in me, that part that had feared him. It cleansed away the vision of him earlier and replaced it with now, with the wonder that was his true awakening.

He was back.

I laid my forehead against his and shushed him with a finger over his lips.

"It's fine now. Let it go. I wanted it to be me, Vlar. I wanted to be the one to bring you back, to give you my lifeblood. My blood in you, so you're now a part of me again."

He smiled then, a small curl of his lips, a faint glimmer of his normal grin. "Possessive little thing, aren't you?"

I laid my lips over his, holding his head, caressing his cheeks with my thumbs. "Where you're concerned, yes, and I always will be. Do not think that you will run amok with me as your mate." I breathed, continuing to gently kiss him, slowly relearning every inch of his beautiful mouth.

His hands came up to wrap around my back, the muscles quivering at so little a thing as that.

"I fell for your wily charms a long time ago," he rasped, trying to kiss me back as best he could.

I raised a brow, feeling an easing in my chest at our banter, the intimacy of this peace, just the two of us. I had wished for this for so very long...

"Wily charms? You had not mentioned this earlier."

"I knew better than to give you any more weapons. You already had enough to defeat me." He licked my lips, then lay back with a sigh, admitting his inability to continue what he wished to do to me.

I felt a smile on my lips, a feeling of joy rising in me. "I? Defeating the great Finnarian warrior Vlar? I hardly think such a thing is possible."

"I thought so too, but you destroyed that illusion," he grumbled with the faintest of twinkles in his eyes.

I laughed then, letting the pain go, realizing I *had* moved through it. This was the other side, where happiness was possible...

## Chapter Ten

How could I have forgotten that Sadan was a madman?

And those I had thought my friends—what about them?

I looked up at Weasel with beseeching eyes.

"I thought you cared about me."

"Stop whining, Gaven. It's unbecoming in one about to be bonded. Now do you want red or blue flowers on the table today?" Weasel was utterly merciless.

"Why do we have to have flowers at all?" At least Teaser was sticking up for me.

Weasel glared at his lover, and Teaser folded, glancing at me with a shrug and rolled eyes. "Red is nice."

I rubbed my aching forehead, then turned back to Weasel, feeling beleaguered and worn. I took Weasel's hand in mine.

"Weasel, I have found your taste to be so very close to mine that I think I should just leave the details to you. Whatever you choose will be wonderful, and Vlar and I will be greatly appreciative of all your efforts." *Even if it results in the most hideous things imaginable.* 

Weasel preened for a moment, shooting a triumphant glare at Teaser. "Well..."

"Please, Weasel. I just want to spend time with Vlar. I almost lost him, remember, and..." My tone was pathetic and with a faint tremble in it.

Teaser shot me an impressed look.

Weasel laid a hand on my shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "For you, I will do this. For no other, though." He looked up like a king at court and pointed to

the others. "Come with me. We'll see this done swiftly for Gaven." He swept the protesting men out the door and shut it behind him, leaving me in blessed peace.

I collapsed onto the chair, sprawling over it in weary relief.

Vlar chuckled from the bed, where he had been pretending to sleep to escape the Weasel whirlwind.

"Oh yes, you were a lot of help," I groused, glaring at him accusingly.

"But you were doing so well, my love, and look what you achieved all by yourself." Vlar's tone was teasing as he sat up, the covers falling away from that gorgeous chest, the sight distracting me utterly. "I, even as powerful as I am, could never have gotten Weasel to do my bidding in such a manner. You are truly a man of many talents and wiles."

I growled at him halfheartedly, then got up and went to the bed, unable to resist that chest.

He pulled me to him, and we lay there, languidly stroking and caressing.

"Do we have to wait until after the bonding ceremony?" I whined plaintively, my fingers tracing longingly over his pectorals.

Vlar laughed deep in his throat, the vibrations making me shiver against him. "I'm saving my strength for that very thing, little one."

I looked up at him, tracing his jawline, turning contemplative.

"You've done well in these weeks. You are gaining strength rapidly, Vlar. Don't doubt that."

He laid a kiss on my brow, then growled deeply into my ear, delighting in my shudder of need. "I only want the strength to claim you, to finalize the bond. The rest does not matter."

"Only to Weasel," I muttered with an irritable huff.

"Let the man have his fun. It's not every day a human and a Finnarian bond. It *should* be well marked for history."

"This is not history," I scoffed. "This is just us."

He gave a quiet little smile, those green eyes softening for me. For me... I would never cease to wonder at that. Never.

"Sleep with me. When we wake, it will be time, and then... Then we will have each other, just the two of us."

I closed my eyes for a moment, then raised my head again, resting my chin on his chest as I met his eyes.

"Why did you come here to Masaria in the first place, Vlar? Why did you stay?"

His lips tilted, and he stroked my hair back with one hand. "Because I dreamt that I would find the one I loved here and not in Finnaria."

I blinked at him, then scowled. "You're making that up. It is very romantic, but you're making it up."

He grinned, his poor attempt to look innocent. "No, I swear; I had a dream and followed it. I was just a little vague on the time frame."

I closed one eye and looked at him critically.

"What?" he asked, all maligned.

I merely huffed and put my head back down. There would be time later to ascertain whether he was telling the truth, and many ways to make him talk.

If we could just get through this ceremony. I sighed deep and long, weary of all the preparation and fuss. I just wanted my Finnarian.

"I will not be able to sleep, you know." I murmured against his chest, nuzzling the hardness.

\* \* \*

"Gaven..."

I moaned and swatted at the hand that shook my shoulder.

"Gaven, you need to wake. We need to get you dressed."

I mumbled a curse word under my breath and hid my head under the pillow.

A cruel hand removed it.

"Gaven, don't make me get cold water."

I rolled over and glared at Gareth and then at Andar, who stood behind his shoulder. "I thought fathers were supposed to love their children."

Gareth laughed, looking younger with his eyes glinting mischievously. "I do love you, Son. That is why I'm giving you away today."

My scowl seemed to dampen his spirits not at all, and he grasped my arm to pull me to a sitting position. A quick glance to my right showed Vlar was gone—the coward. Or had Gareth and Andar chased him out?

Either way, I had been abandoned to the less than tender mercies of these two. And then my uncle Sarin, the king, walked into the room. Good gods, was there no end to this torture? It was just a bonding. Why all this fuss?

Sarin took one look at my disgruntled posture—hunched on the bed, arms crossed defiantly over my chest—and burst out laughing.

"This look is familiar, Gareth. I remember you had exactly the same visage upon your bonding with Andar."

I raised a brow and looked at my father, who flushed a little, clearing his throat. "It wears on a man, this amount of formality."

"To say nothing of the responsibility and commitment." Sarin fought to keep a grin at bay as both my father and I shuddered in synchronicity.

Andar rolled his eyes at us and pushed Gareth aside, giving him a hard swat on the rump that had the warlord yelping and rubbing his abused posterior with a sharp look at his bondmate.

Andar only snorted at him. "Oh yes, you suffer so much from being bonded." His amused gaze fell upon me. "Up, Gaven. We have to get you dressed, and there is not much time."

I shot a pleading glance at my father now that I knew he understood.

He shrugged, his look at Andar tinged with fond exasperation. "Sorry, Son. Once Andar gets something in his head, Weasel himself could not change it. It really is easier to give in."

Sarin nodded. "Get it over with, boy. Chin up."

I sighed. They were right, damn it.

Andar dragged me to my feet and then began to tug my tunic up over my head. No sooner had it disappeared than the ceremonial tunic was pulled back down. I gasped for air under the assault and took a deep breath as my head finally emerged. I'm sure I looked like a newly hatched chick with my hair awry and standing on end.

I didn't even have a chance to appreciate my new tunic before Andar thrust black breeches at me. I hurried into them, lacing up the front with some haste, then sat back on the bed as Gareth handed me a pair of beautiful boots. They were black also, with blue laces up the sides, intricate carving in the leather.

My fingers caressed them in wonder. Who ...?

"I thought you might like a really good pair, and I finally got them finished."

I stared at my father in silent wonder, and he coughed and looked away, clearly uncomfortable.

"You made them?" I breathed.

He nodded, and I stood then and hugged him, really hugged him.

He startled beneath my touch, then eased into it, his arms tentatively coming round me.

I finally pulled back, blinking quickly.

"Thank you," I whispered, smoothing my hands over the leather in wonder. Nobody had ever taken the time to make something like this for me. The hours involved in the carving alone...

"You are most welcome." He shifted restlessly and gestured briskly. "Try them on."

They fit beautifully, and I felt like a prince when I stood and viewed myself in the mirror on the wall opposite. I had to stare for a long moment, for this could not possibly be me.

The long-sleeved tunic was blue silk, and it changed color as I moved, from deep peacock tones to a lighter sky blue. Black embroidery swirled around the neck and chest, sleeves and hem, and I stroked it unconsciously, wondering at the skill that had created it. The black pants, tucked into those marvelous boots, made me look so tall and slim

I did not look like a boy at all.

Andar stood behind me, wetting my hair with a cloth and beginning to comb it into some sort of order. I watched his work speechlessly, eyes wide. When my dark hair lay slick and tamed, Andar smiled and hugged me, looking over my shoulder into the mirror.

"Now you look like the royalty you are, Gaven." He grinned at my shocked expression as I stared at the stranger I had become. "Vlar had best be swift, or you'll be poached on the way to the ceremony. There'll be many who want you."

I scoffed a little but did not take my eyes from the image. I was almost...handsome.

The blue of the tunic seemed to make the color of my eyes leap out. And did my shoulders seem broader than I remembered?

Sarin came to me and hugged me carefully, unwilling to destroy Andar's work. "You look amazing, Gaven. I'm proud to name you nephew, as I have been from the first." He took my hands in his, looking deeply into my eyes. "Vlar is lucky to have you. Remember that. You have your own nobility from more than blood." He laid one hand over my heart. "You have it here, Gaven. Never doubt that."

I blinked away sudden tears and had to hug him too.

He held me tightly, murmuring soothingly.

"You have family now, Gaven, and we are more than proud to present you to your bloodmate today." He slowly pushed me back so he could put a hand under my chin. "Be proud of what you've become, my boy. We are."

I nodded, fighting back the emotions that would have had me weep like a child, now when I wanted so much to be a man.

He smiled gently and took my arm, even as my father took the other.

"Come," Gareth said, his own eyes a little bright, though he would never admit it, and with Andar leading the way, we headed out into the brightness of the day.

When I saw the army waiting, my friends to the fore, dressed in their best, it took everything in me not to bawl like a baby.

This was getting ridiculous. I was a man now. Men did not cry like this.

I reformulated that thought as I realized there was not a dry eye among the Eight.

#### Well then.

I took a deep breath and smiled at them as they closed around us, providing an honor guard as we walked through the silent throngs of men who stood in formation.

The whole thing felt like an illusion, as if I might regain senses and be alone again, longing for this.

But the moment didn't shatter, and I could see Vlar now, waiting up ahead with Sadan.

I inhaled sharply. Now I understood Weasel's reference to red and blue. I might be wearing the blue, but Vlar wore red, and he looked stunning. It brought out the sharp planes of his face, and his golden hair lay vivid against the crimson, the length of it braided, intertwined with soft red leather. His black breeches looked to be silk, and they clung to him, drawing my eyes. Black boots similar to mine, with red laces, completed the outfit, and he looked utterly magnificent, so that I could scarcely believe he would be mine.

A circlet lay on his brow, proclaiming him a Prince of the Blood, and beneath that symbol, his piercing eyes were fixed on me, the green depths intent and gleaming with possessive fire.

I swallowed hard, trembling with the force of his presence, feeling a fear rise that I would not be strong enough to withstand him, to be a proper bloodmate and not just a weak...

Gareth pinched my arm.

I came back to myself with a gasp, my chin rising unconsciously.

I had stood up to him at the beginning when I did not even know what he was, when I had had no hope. Now I knew him, loved him—trusted him.

I would be strong enough. I was too stubborn to be anything else.

Vlar held out his hand...and I took it.

# THE END C

## Loose Id Titles by J. C. Owens

Gaven Gaven: The Bonding Wings

## J. C. Owens

J.C. Owens originally wrote historical fiction with three published books under J.C. McGuire and still loves the genre but, having discovered the art of writing erotic male/male fiction, is now obsessed with it. Fantasy backdrops make a beautifully blank page to work with and J.C. only wishes that the characters were real!

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