

# Dragon & Fenyx 5

## Darksky's Home



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## **Dragon & Fenyx 5: Darksky's Home**

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A Swordbrothers / Immortal Heroes

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World of Dragonhope

## **Dragon and Fenyx 5: Darksky's Home**

By Auburnimp and Michael Barnette

# Chapter 1

## *Battles*

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Flamespirit couldn't settle at the front of the fleeing Dragon and Fenyx Clan so he left Lakesinger there to guide them as he went up and down the slow moving column like a demented sheepdog. He could see the distant dust cloud getting closer by the minute and knew they would never be able to outrun the bandits and slavers who were chasing them.

Added to that, he had the worry of his swordbrother and co-chief, Stormdragon, remaining some distance behind them with a very small group of warriors in an effort to slow the pursuit enough to give the clan a chance to escape.

He sighed and turned his bike to look back the way they'd come, brushing back an errant lock of red hair which had fallen over his brown eyes.

A towering cloud of dust, dark as any

blackstorm rose above the walls of the canyon where the clan had camped the night before.

The young blond warrior named Zephyr pulled up beside Flame. "From the looks of that they're giving our enemies a taste of hell."

Flame glanced at him. "I have a powerful windmage for my swordbrother but my own element is fire so my understanding of wind is poor. Can you read that dust or am I talking nonsense?"

Zephyr stared at the cloud which swirled like no true blackstorm. "I think Windspinner and Chief Stormdragon raised that dust storm, but..." he paused, his head tipped to one side as if he was listening to some distant, barely heard sound. "...they may have lost control of it."

Flame nodded. He knew Storm's power, had seen it at work and even added to it with his own to incinerate a dozen or more of Storm's previous clan when they'd tried to kill the two of them. He couldn't imagine his swordbrother losing control of it as he'd been so horrified by what they'd done - not unless something had happened to make him lose control of his power. Flame shuddered as his imagination took control.

“Star confided that Wind has trouble keeping a rein on his power. Maybe he’s the one who lost control,” Zephyr told the other two men. “Or maybe they’ve let the wind do as it will to cover their escape.” He frowned. “I can’t be sure since they’re really far away.”

Flame rested a hand on the young warrior’s shoulder. “From this distance, I think you’ve done remarkably well.” He imagined that Storm would have the power to rein Wind in if necessary, and if he couldn’t, his Dragon could.

He thought about the two other windimages back there and shook his head. Zephyr must be even more concerned than he, with two swordbrothers to worry about. “I’m going to stay at the back for a while. You want to keep me company?”

Zephyr glanced at the roiling cloud of dust and nodded. “Yes my Chief.”

While they’d been talking the rest of the clan had continued on their way with Lakesinger leading them on the long journey toward the caves that would protect them during the Storm Season.

“Do you think we’re going to make it to those caves before the first storm hits?” Zephyr asked Flamespirit.

Flame glanced up at the sky and calculated the temperature. His eyes widened. “According to Lakesinger, the caves are about another day away at this speed. We can’t travel any quicker so we’d better hope the wagons can protect us from the worst of the blow that’s brewing out there. I’d say it’ll be on us by nightfall. Can you narrow the timeframe down any?”

Zephyr’s brow furrowed and his lips pressed together tightly, the younger man evidently focusing his own magic on the task given him. He closed his pale blue eyes and gripped the handles of his cycle tighter. A faint hint of a breeze, the barest breath of air, blew through his pale hair. It shifted, moving his long locks in random directions.

“It’s going to be here before nightfall.” He met Flame’s gaze. “It’s going to be a nasty storm. Without better shelter than our tents and wagons we’re going to be in serious trouble.”

Flame nodded. It was pretty much what he’d expected to hear. “We need to find a canyon if

possible. I'll go and see if Lakesinger knows of any we can reach in time."

"I'll stay here at the back and keep an eye on things," Zephyr replied.

Flame smiled at the young warrior, and pulled on his goggles and dustmask before racing after the line of wagons, still moving over the Barrens. It only took him a few moments to catch them and overtake them as he headed towards Lakesinger's warcycle.

Once level with the watermage, he leaned across and touched his arm to attract his attention.

Lakesinger pulled his warcycle to the side of the column of wagons and called up to Breeze who was driving the first and heaviest. "Keep on this track for now."

Breeze nodded and the column kept moving.

Lakesinger pulled down his dustmask and shoved his goggles up to his forehead. "What's the problem?" he asked.

Flame pulled down his own dustmask to reply. "There's a blackstorm building and the beast will



be on us before nightfall. Is there a canyon we can reach in time to shelter from the worst of it?"

Lakesinger frowned. "I'm not sure, to be honest, My Chief. Dark knows this area better than I do." He glanced around and his frown lightened. "We've been this way, hunting. It was where some bounty hunters almost killed him with some poison. And there is a canyon there, as long as you don't mind sharing it with their skeletons."

Flame gave the watermage a chilling grin. "As long as it can shelter the clan, I'll share it with the Taunting One himself!"

Lakesinger tapped his teeth as he thought. Finally he nodded. "It's certainly big enough and I think it's just deep enough to save us from the worst of the blow."

Flame breathed a sigh of relief. "Just get us there before this damned storm hits us, that's all I ask."

Lakesinger smiled. "We should reach it within the next hour, My Chief."

Heartfire pulled up beside them and tugged

off his dustmask and goggles. "My Chief, I've found something I think you should see," he said as he tapped the clogging dust from his mask.

Flame frowned. "Good or bad?" he asked. "We've got an approaching blackstorm to contend with so we can't waste any time."

"My Chief, you're going to have to be the judge of that. All I can do is show you what Starshine and I have found," Heartfire replied.

Flame nodded as he made some quick decisions. "Okay, show me what you've found, Heartfire. Lakesinger, please get us to that canyon as soon as you can."

Lakesinger smiled again. "We'll make it, My Chief, as long as the blow doesn't hit us earlier than expected." He pulled his goggles down and his dust mask up and roared away to the head of the column to lead them off towards the left.

Flame shrugged and turned his attention back to Heartfire. "Okay, lead the way."

The warrior put both goggles and dustmask on and turned his cycle to lead Flame down a rocky hillside and to the entrance of a tiny pocket canyon hardly wider than the cycle the

man rode. He paused and pointed at the sandy ground where small footprints—none of them bigger than the length of Flame's hand—etched a shallow trail into the soft ground.

Starshine Greenhand sat her cycle to the right of the canyon's entrance.

"What do you make of this, my Chief?" Heartfire asked, pointing at the tracks.

Flame inspected the tracks and muttered darkly. "Barefoot children, not one of them older than seven or eight summers, at a guess, either that or they're extremely malnourished." He glanced down the tiny canyon. "We need to find them and quickly as they're not going to survive in there."

Starshine nodded her agreement. "The plants have closed up so there's a storm coming."

"That's the other thing we're worried about. Pocket canyons like this one become a deathtrap during bad blows," Heartfire remarked. "So who goes after them?" He glanced at Star, "They might react better to seeing a woman than strange men they don't know. At least that's my experience with kids from other clans."

Star nodded. "There's only one problem with it being me. I've got warrior stripes, most women don't."

Flame shook his head. "We don't have time to fetch any of the other women, Star. It will have to be you."

"I think you should go with her, my Chief. It might help if they know a clan chief is willing to help them," Heartfire suggested.

Flame sighed, realizing Heartfire was right. "Wait here, then. I don't intend to stop the clan moving so we'll need you to help transport the children when we catch up."

He edged his warcycle further into the canyon, hoping he wasn't on a fool's errand. Star followed on her scoutcycle and they rounded a corner in the canyon.

The canyon came to an abrupt halt in a sheer cliff. Huddled against it were several small figures. The children looked to be at the end of their strength and the littlest ones, not much more than toddlers, were crying.

Flame stopped his warcycle and waved Star forward as he removed goggles and dustmask.

Star stopped her cycle and removed her own dustmask and goggles before approaching the children with a gentle smile on her lovely face. "Hello, I'm Starshine Greenhand. Are you lost?"

The oldest child—a boy around ten or eleven years of age—got to his feet and stepped closer to Star. Dirt and dust clung to him in a thick layer. Under the dirt they could see how thin the boy was, the stark lines of his cheekbones showing in sharp relief.

"No we're not lost. Our clan didn't want us anymore," the boy said.

At his words the smaller children's crying grew louder.

Flame's hands clenched into fists at the boy's words and he wondered which clan had so little regard for its own children. It wasn't a question he could ask right now so he let Star do the talking.

"Would you like to join our clan?" she was asking.

The boy looked at the other children huddled

together behind him. "What do you think?" he asked them.

The oldest girl—she didn't appear any older than the boy—stared at Flame and Star with wide, distrustful eyes. "They might be slavers."

Flame stepped forward and the girl cringed back. He was glad he wasn't especially tall and therefore not too intimidating. "I am Flamespirit, co-Chief of the Dragon and Fenyx Clan. My clan does not agree with slavery."

He crouched down until he was at eye level with the eldest two. "If you stay in this canyon, you're going to die. There's a blackstorm building that will be upon us all before nightfall." He glanced around at the pocket canyon. "The cliff at your backs is good, but the storm will funnel through the rest of the canyon and sand blast the flesh off your bones.

"Come with us and see out the storm at least. After that you can decide if you want to stay with us or not."

While he spoke, Flame was using his power to check over each child. All of them had sore feet and one, a girl of about five had a broken collar

bone. He pulled his soul ball from under his leathers and ran it over the little girl's shoulder and all their feet. In his experience, healers were trusted by almost everyone.

The oldest girl's eyes went wide, she and the rest of the children staring at Flame.

The boy stepped closer to Flame and said, "We were with the Dragon's Clan held in the twisted iron claw of Dragonwind. He sees no need to keep the children of the people from his own clan he has murdered. He ordered his men to take us out into the Barrens and leave us. We've been trying to reach the City because it would be better to live as slaves there than die out here."

He glanced at the girl. "That is my sister, Sweetsong Greenbriar and I am Skysong Greenbriar. Please be welcome in our camp, pitiful as it is."

Flame exchanged a look with Star and grinned. "My swordbrother and co-Chief is Stormdragon, enemy to Dragonwind as am I, while this warrior is Starshine Greenhand a greenmage like your mother or father."

While Sweetsong gasped and exclaimed at

Star being both a warrior and a greenmage, Flame took Skysong to one side. "I must ask you for a swift decision, Skysong. We need to find shelter with the rest of the clan before that storm hits."

The boy's lips pulled into a tight line as he considered Flame's offer. "Chief Flamespirit I accept your offer for all of us. If you're right, and a blackstorm is coming, we'll all die without shelter." He glanced at the other children. "We're dying already. We haven't had anything to eat in so long I don't remember what food tastes like, and we drank the last swallows of water in our canteens yesterday."

Flame nodded. It was as he had expected. These children had been left out here to die, so there would have been very little food or water left with them. "I'm fairly certain we can feed you even during a storm," he said with a smile. "Right now we have to move and fast."

He gathered two of the smallest children up in his arms and Star perched Sweetsong on the back of her scoutcycle. "Wait here with the others, Skysong, we'll be back for you in just a moment."

The boy nodded. "We'll be right here."



Flame was about to start up his cycle when he heard the low rumble of approaching warcycles.

“Who is that coming?” the boy asked, fear tingeing his voice. The rest of the children pushed themselves against the cliff as if they hoped to make themselves small enough not to be seen.

Flame gestured to Star to stay with the children while he went to the bend in the canyon a ball of fire ready in his hand. He relaxed when he saw Heartfire. Goldstone was at the entrance to the canyon with a sidecar attached to his cycle. Flame let the fireball die and beckoned the children forward.

They came warily, the little ones staggering with exhaustion. Flame pointed up the canyon to the sidecar. “The smallest ride in there, the rest ride pillion.” He looked at the two smallest children, scooped them up and carried them up the canyon to the sidecar.

Once the children were all loaded Flame led the entire group to the slow-moving line of wagons and various cycles and bikes driven and ridden by the clan.

Off in the distance the roiling magical storm had subsided, but that only served to make the odd color of the sky in that direction more apparent.

A storm was coming. No doubt about it.



The slavers were approaching Storm and the other defenders of the clan at a fast clip. The weapons in their cycles weapon racks gleamed in the sunlight. Storm turned to Darksky and Windspinner. "If Windspinner and I make a duststorm, do you think you can create a wall? If they can't see it they'll run into the barrier. If their cycles are smashed up from an impact, and they get hurt, they won't be able to chase our clan."

Darksky grinned at Storm. "That's a great plan. Sure, I can turn the sand into a wall of stone, but I might not be able to block the entire opening of the canyon, and if they've got a good stonemage with them he might be able to undo part of what I do make, but it's worth a try. Like you said, if they can't see it, they might crash."

Storm glanced at Windspinner. "Do you think we can work together to make a wind strong enough to obscure their vision across the opening of the whole canyon?"

Windspinner considered for a moment, then nodded his head, blond locks swaying in a breeze that instantly rose around him. "I'm sure I can manage that much alone."

"Good!" Storm smiled at Sword and Trueflight. "The two of you be ready to deal with anyone who gets through the gauntlet we're setting up. I'm sure there are going to be some. While we can obscure the whole entrance to the canyon, Dark's too far away to block the entire thing."

Sword grinned fiercely. "Chief Stormdragon I'd be pleased to take care of anyone who makes it through a sandstorm made by Winspinner *and* a stone wall that Darksky creates. I don't think many of them will, but I'll be ready for them," he said and patted the sword rack of his cycle.

"On the off chance someone gets lucky," Storm shook his head, "or in this case really unlucky. I sure as hell wouldn't want to face you or your swordbrother in a fight."

Trueflight watched the approaching slavers. "There are too many of them to hope there won't be a few good stonemages or stone battlemages among them. I think quite a few are going to get lucky."

He glanced around at their surroundings. "I can get on that bluff over there and pick off quite a few who manage to escape the coming pile up." He turned his attention back on Storm. "Of those who do manage it, do you want them dead or wounded, My Chief?"

"I'd prefer we not kill anyone if possible. These men probably have families and children who depend on them," Storm informed his men as he focused his own wind magic and added it to the whirling rush of sand Windspinner had created. The blast of air raced toward the oncoming slavers, picking up dust and sand as it went.

"I won't say you're wrong," Darksy began as the sand near the end of the canyon shifted into a wave that rose shoulder high, the top edge fluttering in the leading edge of the mage made sandstorm. "But most slavers never take wives. They're too busy selling off everyone they get their hands on."

Storm frowned at Darksky. *Well I guess he'd be more familiar with slavers than I am. He's associated with them in the past.* He concentrated on the storm that he and Windspinner were developing together and drove the sand-laden wind farther down the canyon.

The storm they'd created screamed along, gathering power and more sand. It grew until it filled the narrow canyon and went blasting outward lifting dust high into the air and obscuring the entry of the canyon along with the slavers.

Flight climbed swiftly and was soon on top of the bluff, where he could see the approaching slavers until they hit the storm. He couldn't tell, through all the dust, if Darksky's wall was in place but a series of crashes and curses told him it was. He nocked an arrow ready for anyone entering the canyon.

The roiling mass of wind, dust and sand prevented them from seeing or hearing the results of their trap—at first. After a short time several men came though the choking dust and blowing wind. Two of them rode cycles in less

than perfect condition, the protective coating scraped, the front wheels showing damage. They carried swords as they raced their vehicles directly for Storm and Wind, their intention to kill both men very clear.

Sword revved his cycle and sped toward them, controlling his heavy cycle one handed as he drew his biggest sword from the weapon rack.

Flight raised his bow and shot one man through the sword arm. Seconds later he took another man in the leg, dropping him instantly.

But other men came through the shrieking wind, the driving sand and dust and over Dark's stone barrier. Several of them had their cycles and they raced toward the four men, their weapons ready, their intention plain. If they could reach the four men, they would kill them.

Storm fought to control the whirlwind he and Windspinner had created, but the mage created storm had developed a mind of its own. The storm didn't want to abate, and he could barely keep it from coming back toward them. He wrestled with it, struggling to regain control, but the wind shouted in defiance.

“There’s a blackstorm brewing,” he warned the others as the slavers came on toward them. “This storm Windspinner and I created doesn’t want to stay in our control, it wants to become part of the blackstorm,” He latched onto the outlaw wind with his magic as the wispy image of the Dragon in the center of his soul manifested. He could see the wings as they lifted over him, feel the Dragon’s power as it awakened to help him quell the raging wind before it slipped completely from his control.

Flight picked off a couple more of the approaching slavers before he scrambled down the bluff. There was still an arrow ready to fly in his bow. He stopped at the bottom and stared at Storm, which was what Windspinner, Darksky and Sword were also doing.

Darksky shook his head and said, “Am I losing my mind or does anyone else see a Dragon where our Chief is standing?”

Flight nodded. “It’s a legend come to life, he has an immortal being as a soul which makes him immortal unless another of the same type kills him.” He stared at Storm for a moment before

he shook his head. "But right now we have some determined slavers to deal with."

"We all know the legends. But..." Windspinner reached out and brushed his fingers along an ephemeral wing. "I can actually feel something there."

Storm jumped at the contact of Windspinner's fingers along the edge of his wing. "I thought only Flame and I could see our Immortal Beasts. I mean the legends all said that most people can't see them. And I didn't know anyone else could touch the Dragon. " Storm frowned. "And you're right about those slavers, they need to be taken care of. But I'm barely able to keep this storm Windspinner and I created in check. That blackstorm is close. Too close. So it's up to the three of you to deal with the slavers."

"How many of the legends and stories have been lost over the centuries?" Sword asked as he put his dustmask and goggles on. "I'm sure they've changed over time. Stories always do."

Darksky nodded in agreement. "The stories aren't even the same from clan to clan anymore. Who's to say what's been changed in the telling?" The stonemage lifted his arms overhead and a



wave of sand rose with the gesture and swept toward the oncoming slavers, growing higher as it sped away from Darksy.

Flight still stared at Storm, his face full of wonder. "Chief Flamespirit is immortal too? If so our clan is doubly blessed." He shot another arrow and took a slaver in the throat.

"Yes, he's a Fenyx." Storm wrestled with the wind and finally got it under control. With a loud susurrant of falling sand, the wind died, leaving nothing but a cloud of dust drifting in the still air.

The wave of sand created by Darksy hit the slavers, knocking three of the remaining five off their cycles and enveloping them in the choking sand and dust as Sword reached them. The two men still on their cycles went down, one taken from life by the keen edge of Sword's blade, the other slaver was lifted, cycle and all, and hurled high above them, sent there by Windspinner. The slaver landed far up the cliff, battered but alive. His cycle didn't fare as well and came tumbling down the rocks, bits and pieces of the machine breaking off as it fell.

"We need to get to the clan and locate shelter,

and we need to do it fast. There's a bad black storm brewing out there," Windspinner remarked.

Flight shook his head as if attempting to clear it of dazed thoughts before heading for his warcycle. "By my reckoning, the storm is about an hour behind us," he agreed.

Darksky made a fist and yanked his arm downward. The cycles the slavers had been riding sank out of sight beneath the shifting sands. The men who still lived grasped at their vehicles, but when it became evident that trying to save them would only drag the men down with their cycles they gave up. They cursed Darksky, but the tall, dark haired man gave a grim smile and strode toward his cycle. "That takes care of the slavers. At least this bunch."

"Yes, so it does," Storm agreed then said, "We'd better hurry," as he headed for his cycle. "We've got to get the clan to shelter."

"Breeze and Zephyr will have felt it coming," Flight said. "They'll be looking for shelter already in my opinion."

"Let's hope they find some, and fast," Storm stated. He could feel the tension of the

approaching storm in the air. It buzzed across his senses like a million angry hornets. "This is going to be a bad one."

Flight nodded his agreement and pulled on his dustmask and goggles as he climbed onto his cycle and started it.

Sword rejoined the group. "Did I hear you say there's a bad storm coming? I know there are lots of canyons in this area. We can probably find one big enough to shelter the entire clan."

"I know of one that's not too far away, and the clan's probably close enough to make it there. I'd bet Lakesinger's leading them to it right now," Darksky stated as he revved up his cycle.

Storm started his cycle up. "Let's get going. If we go fast we can catch up to them before the blackstorm hits."

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Sword agreed.

The cycles roared across the Barrens, chasing after the clan and outrunning a vicious blackstorm that was getting closer by the minute and building in strength as it came. If they or

the clan didn't make it to a canyon in time, they were doomed.

Storm wrapped a counter wind around his warband to protect them from the leading edge of the blackstorm's drifting dust. The worry over Flame and their clan ate at him. If they reached their people before the storm hit, even without the shelter of a cave, he and Windspinner might stand a chance of protecting the clan if the wagons and people were bunched close together.

But if they were strung out in a line, on open ground... there was a terrible risk that people would die, despite any efforts he and Windspinner might make.

*I can't let anyone die. I just can't,* Storm thought as they rode as fast as their cycles would go toward the clan while the blackstorm screamed across the barrens toward them.

## Chapter 2

### *Blackstorm*

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The entrance to the canyon, Lakesinger had been leading them to, finally appeared in front the clan about two hours before sunset. Even so they were cutting it fine as Zephyr's constant backward glances told Flame.

Although not so attuned to the wind, he could feel the air pressure change and a blast of cold air which always heralded the start of a really bad blow. He raced up the side of the column to rejoin Lakesinger at the front.

"It looks good," he shouted. "We'll need to find the leese and draw the wagons into a tight circle around us."

Lakesinger nodded. "It turns to the east about a mile in so should afford us some shelter," he called in reply.

Flame sighed in relief. They could see the leading edge of the distant storm now and it was coming in from the south. If they could press up

against the south wall they would be sheltered from the worst of it.

His thoughts went to Storm and the others who'd stayed with him but he didn't dwell on that. His swordbrother had seen him safely through a blackstorm when they first met, and Flame felt certain he could keep his companions safe.

Zephyr roared up on the warcycle that Flame could tell the small man had trouble controlling at such speed. The cycle skidded as it slowed, wobbled and almost went out from under the younger man. "That blow is almost on top of us," he warned as he reached Flame at the head of the column. "We've got to get ourselves into this canyon and use the wagons to shelter everyone." The young man's worried glance over his shoulder added to the tension in Zephyr's voice as he said, "This is going to be a *really* bad one for such an early storm."

"We'll be turning east in about a mile," Flame said, "So we'll have the south wall at our backs. When Chief Stormdragon and the others get here, he and Windspinner should be able to

keep the worst of it off us. They're both very powerful."

He stared ahead and spotted the turn ahead of them. "We've made it in time but we'll need to lash everything down."

"The women should get food out of the supply baskets. Enough for everyone for at least one cold meal. And the drinking bottles and canteens should be filled from one of the water barrels before the dust gets too thick and contaminates whatever barrel is opened. Those children need to eat and have lots of water before the storm gets too bad," Zephyr remarked, showing more wisdom than most people would believe someone so young might possess.

Flame grinned behind his dustmask. Zephyr was Storm's brother all right. They both shared the bossy streak. *At least Zephyr isn't a Black Fenyx*, he reminded himself, *not like the other brother*.

"Ride down the line and let them all know that," he said, "That way they can be preparing before we come to a halt."

Zephyr nodded, turned the cycle around

awkwardly, and headed back along the line of wagons, the young man shouting their Chief's instructions to everyone he passed.

Lakesinger chuckled. "I bet he's a handful for his swordbrothers."

Flame nodded. He was willing to bet there were a few power struggles in the four way bond and was glad Storm and he had no such problems. He knew Storm was more experienced in the ways of both the clans and the City than he and was happy and willing to follow his lead in most things.

They reached a junction in the canyon, the main route heading north while a smaller side canyon ran east. "Let's hope most of this bitch heads straight up the main canyon," he said to Lakesinger. "Can we get a fair distance from the corner?"

"The east running canyon goes on for about a mile, far enough for us to get away from the bend," the watermage assured him. "I can damp down the surrounding dust to keep it from blowing about quite as much."

Flame nodded. "Let's get in position, battened



down, fed and watered before we try anything too fancy. Somehow I don't think we have time to do much more than that."

Goldstone joined them at the head of the line. "Forgive my interruption, my Chief, but some of the women are getting anxious. They're afraid the storm's going to hit before we reach somewhere safe," he informed Flame.

Flame gestured at the sheltered canyon. "It's the best we can do at such short notice, Goldstone. Just tell them to be prepared as soon as we stop and make sure the wagons are in as close a semi circle against the canyon wall as we can get them. We will make it in time."

"Yes my Chief," the warrior replied and turned his cycle around to ride down the line in Zephyr's wake.

Flame glanced around them and brought his cycle to a halt. They were far enough from the corner to avoid any side blasts or micro bursts and the south wall was high enough to shelter them from a lashing although a lot of dust would fall to cover the wagons. "This is about the best spot," he said to Lakesinger. "Let's get them organized."

He gestured to Breeze who was driving the first wagon to start a semi circle coming out from the south wall. The blue haired windmage nodded and pulled the wagon into position. It was no mean feat as he was driving the heavy wagon which was full of Sword's forge and materials.

Flame climbed off his cycle as he directed the next wagon to pull in behind. Luckily Star was in charge of that one and could see what he was attempting. Once she was in position the other wagons followed suit.

"We need to lash the wagons together," he shouted.

Star grinned at him. "I can do better than that, My Chief." She jumped down from the wagon with a pot containing some sort of trailing plant. As Flame watched the plant's tendrils grew and bound her wagon to Breeze's. Another went the other way and bound the other wagons into the close semi circle. Then they spread out until they had created a thick trellis in the gaps between the wagons, offering even more shelter to those between the wagons and the canyon wall.

Flame noticed with interest that she kept the pot with her and brought it under cover

when she was done. She set it down and started distributing food and water to the children they'd found along the way.

Eager hands accepted the food and water as the dust began to drift over the wagons. An errant gust of wind shook the canopies of the wagons and sent the group of children scurrying for cover under some sections of canvas a few of the women were erecting as dust shelters.

Flame made certain the clan was as ready as it could be to survive the coming storm before he headed for the edge of the makeshift shelter. He gazed up the canyon, willing the small war party to come into view. It wasn't long before he was joined by Lakesinger, Zephyr and Breeze, all of them waiting for swordbrothers.

He knew Storm could survive and would do whatever he could to make sure they all got back safely but he still worried. He couldn't help it.

Another gust of wind made the canvas boom. The women screamed and one of them shouted, "Grab it before it hits the children!" The children screamed in fright.

Flame turned in time to see Breeze run

towards the canvas and catch it. The blue haired windmage held it in position while the women weighted it down. He then picked up the littlest child and carried her back to where Flame was standing.

“You see, there’s nothing to be afraid of when our Chiefs are such powerful mages,” he murmured to her.

Flame smiled at the child before turning his attention back to the canyon. Most of the dust was still blowing over their heads but he knew it was going to get a lot worse before it abated. He sighed and turned to Lakesinger. “You three watch for them. I need to make sure the clan is secure.”

Zephyr intercepted Flame before he’d taken more than three steps from the other two men. “My Chief, I hate to bother you, but I found something I think you should see.”

Flame nodded. “Very well, lead on.” He gave the clan a quick glance and saw things seemed to be under control. Star’s plant was keeping the wagons bound together and the tarpaulins were flapping but holding up.

Zephyr led him to a hole in the rock face. "You're small enough to fit in there, my Chief. Crawl inside and have a look," the younger man instructed.

Flame frowned at the hole not at all sure that he would fit but he dropped to hands and knees to peer in. It appeared to widen out after a couple of feet so he wriggled through on his belly, taking a couple of layers of skin off his shoulders as he did so. The hole opened out into a cave. He produced a flame on his palm and studied the cave. It was dry and the tiny opening would keep anyone in there safe from the blackstorm. It wasn't very big, just large enough to take all the clan's children and most of the women. The men, apart from Zephyr, Storm and him wouldn't get through the opening anyway.

He backed out, removing even more skin and got to his feet, dusting off his clothes. He gave Zephyr a grin. "Let's get the kids and some of the women in there," he said.

"As you order, my Chief," Zephyr replied and hurried off through the falling dust toward the tarps where the children and women had taken shelter.

Flame checked the wagons and the cycles and bikes huddled against them. He found Goldstone and Heartfire there and nodded to them. "Everything as sheltered as we can make it?" he asked.

"Thanks to Starshine Greenhand and that amazing sister of yours, yes," Goldstone replied.

Heartfire removed his dustmask and shook it free of the fine grit. "I'm wondering why children and women don't have dustmasks. Wouldn't that make some kind of sense, my Chief?"

Flame nodded. "It certainly makes sense to me. We could perhaps manufacture some when we reach the caves. Luckily Zephyr found a small cave for the children and most of the women so your family will be safe, Heartfire. There isn't room for all of us and besides, apart from Zephyr, Storm and me, none of the men would get through the opening. Still it's perfect for a vicious blow like this."

"Those abandoned orphans were very frightened to be out in such a nasty storm," Goldstone remarked.

"Speaking of the orphans," Heartfire said as he

replaced his dustmask, "what's going to happen to them? Our clan doesn't have many families, and there are a lot of children."

Flame grinned. "Well I think Breeze may have adopted the littlest girl. He was soothing her last time I saw him. I've a mind to take one of them if Storm agrees and there are a couple of greenmage children judging by their names, so Star might be persuaded to teach them. We'll manage. They're part of this clan now, so they'll be looked after."

*And not like Oasis and I were,* he thought.

"I'm glad to hear that. I was worried they might get handed off to another Clan at the first Gather we go to," Heartfire remarked.

Goldstone shook his head. "Our Chiefs wouldn't do that. I know that. They're men with hearts filled with kindness, not wealth grubbing bastards."

Flame chuckled. "Why, thank you, Goldstone." He turned a more serious look on Heartfire. "We've just rescued my sister who was sold to the City just because she was an orphaned watermage. I was only kept because I'm a healer

and I was treated little better than a stray cur most of the time. Do you honestly think I'd hand those children to people who don't want them or would use them or sell them as slaves?"

Heartfire blushed in embarrassment. "No my Chief, of course not! I just thought you might try and find them homes with other clans. This isn't a very big clan, and that's a lot of children to take responsibility for."

"They're from your old clan, Heartfire. Dumped in the desert to die by the Dragon Clan's so called chief, so they belong here." Flame relented and smiled at the other firemage. "Yes, we're a small clan and we need to grow. Those children will help us grow as, when they're old enough, they give us new blood and will find swordbrothers or swordsisters and wives from Gathers. That will make us bigger. But somehow I don't think we've stopped growing with new adults just yet."

"I thought I recognized a few of them," Heartfire admitted. "I have to say I never paid much attention to the children of my former clan. After Stormdragon left most of the children were kept close to their parent's camps. It's no secret



that Dragonwind despises children and looked for any excuse to sell them as slaves.”

Goldstone said, “That so called chief needs a good beating followed by an even better getting himself made dead.”

Flame exchanged a chilling grin with them. “He’ll get both one day, and I intend to do it.”

“That’s good,” Goldstone remarked.

“I want to be there to see it,” Heartfire stated.

Greycloud got out of the wagon they were nearest and joined them. “I wouldn’t mind seeing that myself, but the thing I’d really like to see right now is Chief Storm and the others riding into this canyon. The storm is picking up power and they’re still out there in it somewhere.

Flame nodded his agreement but he wasn’t too worried yet. If anyone could get them through it was Storm. Inside him the Fenyx screamed.



The blackstorm screamed around them and Stormdragon fought to keep the bubble of calm air centered around the group of them as they

raced forward. He could feel the Fenyx at the core of Flame's soul calling to him, guiding him ever closer to his lover, the Dragon roared in response.

They were getting closer, but the raging storm made it hard for them to tell where they were heading. The area he could keep protected didn't provide visibility very far in advance of their position, and the darkness created by the whipping sand and dust meant even the headlights on their cycles didn't penetrate the mad whirl of the storm that surrounded them.

Something loomed out of the dust and at first Storm thought it might be a wind carved boulder, but the shape was all wrong. He directed the group of them toward it and discovered what could only be a cycle covered in a tent canvas.

Sword jumped off his cycle the instant the group of them came to a stop, the powerful man pulling the tarp out from the thick layer of sand and dust covering it. Beneath the tarp was a pair of young warriors, one male, one female. They looked up at Sword with startled, dust covered faces.

"We thought we were going to die," the young

man stated as he got up and offered his hand to the young woman.

Even through the dust that covered them Storm could tell they were brother and sister because, other than the softer features of the girl, they looked identical.

“What the heck are the two of you doing out here anyway?” Flight yelled above the scream of the wind.

“Our father thought he knew what was best for Moonglow, my sister. He planned to sell her to a pair of swordbrothers even though she didn’t like either of the men,” the young warrior shouted to be heard. “Forgive me for being rude, my name is Bluerock Dunestrider, be welcome in our camp, such as it is,” Bluerock added with a wry half smile.

Flight shook his head and glanced at Storm. “They won’t survive out here in the open,” he shouted.

“You’re right,” Storm agreed. “I think the two of you should come with us. This blackstorm is picking up power and without better shelter than you’ve got, Trueflight is correct, you *won’t*

survive.” He held out his hand. “My name is Chief Stormdragon of the Dragon and Fenyx Clan. These are my clansmen, Trueflight Woodbender, Windspinner Bearbane and the two big men at the back are Sword Dancer and Darksky Stonetamerson. You and your sister are welcome to travel with us to somewhere safe.”

Bluerock clasped Storm's forearm and glanced at his sister. “What do you think, Moonglow?”

The young woman, little more than a girl with her fresh warrior stripes in the blues used to designate power over air, looked relieved. “Chief Stormdragon is right,” she yelled above the wind. “This blackstorm is growing in intensity and we won't make it out here alone.”

“We accept your offer to travel to safety, Chief Stormdragon of the Dragon and Fenyx Clan,” Bluerock replied. “And we thank you for your help.”

“Let me help you get your cycle out of the sand,” Storm offered but the young warriors had already grabbed the cycle and hauled it out from beneath the tarp. Bluerock grabbed the tarp and bundled it up then handed it to his sister to put away.

*They're a good looking pair. I wonder if they'd like to join our Clan once they've gotten to know us?* He would talk it over with Flame and see what his co-Chief thought. *They're young, and neither of them is bonded.* If they agreed to stay that would assure the Clan would grow, especially once they both made families and started having children.

Storm couldn't help but smile at the thought. Now all they had to do was convince the two of them to stay.

But before that, he and Windspinner had to get them back to the Clan before the power of the wind raging around them wore them out.

"Are the two of you ready?"

The young woman nodded, adjusted her goggles and dustmask and climbed behind her brother. He started up the powerful cycle and joined the formation of warriors behind Storm.

Storm focused his power and moved the bubble of wind magic that protected the group of them as he started forward. He could tell Windspinner was tiring, so he added more of his own windmage power to the mix. They had to get wherever the rest of the clan was and get into

whatever protection the wagons offered before Windspinner became too exhausted to ride.

He sped up, hoping Bluerock's cycle could keep up carrying double, because they couldn't afford to travel slow, not with the power of the storm increasing with every passing moment.

Out in the swirling mass of dust and sand Storm could feel the wind slamming against a tall stone barrier. Probably the wall of a canyon. They'd reached the end of this part of the Barrens, but whether the Clan might have taken shelter in this area or not remained to be seen. He tried to reach out to Flame, but doing that, and keeping control of the countering force of the wind around them proved to difficult and he gave up the effort in favor of protecting his clanspeople.

He heard the Fenyx scream, not sure if the sound was borne on the howling wind or in his soul but it did guide him and he made a turn towards the left. A change in the pressure of the wind told him there was an opening in the face of the cliff and he followed that, and the cry of the Immortal Beast that resided in Flamespirit's soul.

It wasn't long before he found the opening and led his people into a canyon, following the winding path between the sheltering cliffs of the canyon. The wind fell off considerably as they made another left hand turn.

Storm grinned behind his dustmask when he saw the wagons had been pulled as close to the rockface as possible. Thick vines wrapped around the wagons, holding them together so none of them could blow over. The growth even held the canopies of the wagons in place which prevented the canvas and leather coverings from blowing away. Tarps had been anchored to the wagons and pinned down to protect the warriors, cycles and bikes from the blowing dust.

*I won't worry about Flame leading the Clan anymore. He did a great job of protecting our people.*

A slight figure emerged from under the tarps and beckoned them forward. The red hair whipping in the wind identified it as Flame. He was joined by two others ready to get them all undercover.

Storm stopped his cycle beside Flame. "We've got company. A brother and sister we found

hiding under a tarp out in this storm. We couldn't leave them out there to die. I hope you don't mind, Flame."

The rest of their clansmen along with Bluerock and Moonglow hurried past Storm to get under the protection of the tarps and out of the drifting dust.

Flame nodded. "We found six abandoned children so we're even," he said, tone amused. "All the children and most of the women are in a cave Zephyr found in the rockface. Star and Oasis are keeping the plants round the wagons. But get undercover, Storm."

Storm moved his cycle under the tarp and shut it off. He removed his helmet, goggles and dustmask, staring at the filter in dismay before shaking it out. "If we'd been smarter we would have bought more of these while we were in the City so all the women and children had them too."

Darksky who stood nearby checking his cycle said, "We're not that far from the City. A few of us could go back to buy them once this storm is over."



"If my swordbrothers and I knew where the canyon is that you're offering to the Clan, we could go back and return before the next storm. It's not like we'll have to worry about slavers, they'll all be in hiding until the blackstorms are over," Sword remarked. "Maybe Lakesinger could go with us and show us the way there?"

"I think we've gathered a rather impressive group of people, don't you, Flame?" Storm asked.

Flame smiled but the expression didn't last. "I think Fate has something in mind for us," he said. "It is less than a moon since we met and in that time we've founded a clan of people who are very powerful and courageous. Add to that fact the children we found were abandoned by the Dragon Clan and things seem to be more than mere coincidence."

Storm shrugged, not ready to read anything other than coincidence into the events of the last few weeks. "If you say so, Flame. I try not to think about things like that. Life's complicated enough without thinking some higher power is leading us around by the nose."

Flame shrugged. "Tell me that again in a

few years time, Storm and I might just believe you if nothing else strange happens. But what am I thinking?" He turned to Bluerock and Moonglow. "Welcome to our camp."

"Thank you," Storm heard Bluerock say as he got off his cycle and took the water bottle he had out of his cycle's storage compartment. He took a few swallows as he stood admiring the plants holding the wagons together and listening to the conversations around him. It felt good to be with his people, even if they weren't in the safest circumstances. Still, they were much safer than most other clans would be under these conditions and that left him wondering how many clans had been caught far from their sheltering caves by the early blackstorm.

Flame made sure that everyone was sheltered and had some of the trail food before returning to his side and smiling. "Another woman with her stripes, if she and her brother stay we are indeed blessed."

Storm smiled at his swordbrother and nodded his agreement. "Then it's all right with you if we make them an offer to remain with us?"

Flame nodded. "Of course, we still need to

grow as a clan and they both seem like good people. I guess it might be a good idea to hear their story, find out why they seem to be clanless, but I can't imagine it being anything terrible."

"Their father was trying to marry Moonglow, that's the girl, off to someone she didn't want to be with, so she and her brother left," Storm explained. "His name is Bluerock."

Flame grinned. "Then I have no problem at all if they wish to stay with us."

"I didn't think you would," Storm replied and leaned closer to Flame to give him a kiss.

Flame returned the kiss with some passion before saying, "I was beginning to worry."

Storm frowned. "Worry about what?" he asked as he brushed a stray lock of Flame's hair away from his face.

"About you getting everyone back safely without exhausting yourself." He cast a significant look at Windspinner who was fast asleep.

"I have to admit I was more than a little concerned about that myself for a while there. Especially for Windspinner. He's got a lot of

power, but he can't control it very well. He expends his energy far too quickly because of that."

Flame frowned. "Can you help him with that do you think?"

Storm nodded. "I think so. It's a matter of learning how to pace yourself, and all that takes is practice." He looked around. "Is there somewhere I can sit down and maybe have something to eat? The fight and our ride here through the storm left me tired too, just not as exhausted as Windspinner."

Flame rolled his eyes. "I'm so thoughtless at times. Come further in. There's some trail rations and we've made a comfortable place to rest. Not much else we can do until this blows over."

"No there isn't, and this blow isn't going to be a short one. I'm very glad we laid in a lot of supplies too. I think this is going to be a long, and very bad Storm Season," Storm replied as he followed Flame to their small private spot under the tarps.

Dust drifted in, but not nearly as much as

would have been expected in an open canyon with nothing but tarps and some wagons as protection.

Storm sat down with a sigh. He was beginning to feel the results of using so much magic in a single day. Between making a storm and deflecting the blackstorm he felt a bit as if bars of Sword Dancer's steel had been fastened to his body.

"What do we have to eat?" he asked, knowing they would be eating cold trail rations rather than anything hot and filling.

"At the moment we have bread and jerky," Flame said, "but I left some firestones and food with the women in the cave and Zephyr should be bringing something hot across soon."

Storm stared at Flame, amazed at what his co-Chief had told him. "Really? A hot meal? In the middle of a blackstorm in a makeshift camp?" He smiled. "Our Clan really *is* amazing isn't it?"

Flame laughed. "We're just lucky that Zephyr is small enough to get into the cave. I got in there to check it for safety and dryness but

only by removing several layers of skin from my shoulders. It was very fortunate it was there and usable. Without it there would be no hot food!”

“Zephyr has a bad reputation because of his mother, but he’s proving to be a very valuable person, isn’t he?

“More and more I think what we discussed in the City is true. Zephyr’s father couldn’t have been a big man, he’s too small to have been fathered by someone the size of Sword or Darksky.” He bit off a piece of the jerky and started to chew. “And he has certain... qualities that make me think I’m right.”

Storm was even more convinced his suspicions about the identity of Zephyr’s father were correct. *In many ways he acts like father... or me. No one has to ask him to do something, he sees a need and acts on it. If that’s not the mark of a clan chief’s son, I don’t know what is.*

## Chapter 3

### *Arrival*

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Flame felt a lot better for the hot goat stew Zephyr brought them in a covered pot, good enough to take an interest in the young man and woman Storm had brought to them.

They were a good looking couple and the girl had her warrior stripes, which Flame still found unusual with his previous clan's attitude to women. He knew their new born clan would treat the women in it a lot better. But the stripes were still surprising so he had to ask about them and why the two had been in the middle of nowhere when the storm had struck. "Why did you leave your clan?"

Moonglow glanced at her brother. "It was my fault, Bluestone didn't have to leave."

"Yes I did. I didn't agree with our father's treatment of you. Besides, we were born together, I'm not about to let you go somewhere without me. Not after almost eighteen years doing everything together," Bluestone remarked.

Flame smiled but he felt bitter inside. He should have taken better care of his own sister like Bluestone had. When Bluestone mentioned their father he could guess the rest. “Unwelcome marriage proposal?” he asked in order to confirm what Storm had told him and to get the story first hand.

Bluestone nodded. “The two men in the bond were nice enough, but Moonglow didn’t really know either one of them, and she felt no love for them. I’d always thought that women were supposed to love at least one of the men in the bond. That’s what our mother always told us, but the swordbrothers offered our father a lot for her, and I think the offer, plus the fact the men are well regarded among their clan—they are quite wealthy too—blinded him to reason.”

Moonglow shook her head. “As you’ve probably guessed, this happened at the last gather. Those warriors weren’t even from our clan. I’d have had to leave my brother as well as my father. Besides, I don’t feel ready for marriage and children as yet.”

Flame nodded his understanding. “You’re



young to be considering it, I agree. What clan were you with?"

"We were with the Sand Dancer Clan. Most people have never heard of it," Bluestone admitted. "There are only swordbrother pairs, their wives and children, along with a few unbonded but married men, and a pair of bonded sword sisters and their man and children."

Flame's heart sank. It was just the type of small clan that Dragonwind would target sooner or later. He might well be facing its only two survivors. Aloud, he said, "We're still a very small clan too but you would be welcome to join us if you wish."

"We don't really know you that well. Perhaps we could stay with your clan during Storm Season then decide?" Bluestone asked.

Flame smiled. "That's a reasonable request and I agree, it would be better for you to get to know us better before you make any decisions."

"And for you to get to know us, too," Bluestone said. "We might not fit into your clan."

Flame chuckled. "So far it seems to me you'd fit in very well. We've collected a lot of people

with nowhere else to go for various reasons. I can't see any problems but a storm season is the perfect chance to spot any."

Moonglow smiled. "Oh yes," she agreed, "even good friends and bondmates can be at each others throats during them."

"This is very true," Storm said as he entered the sheltered area where Flame and the twins were talking. He took off his goggles and dustmask and sat down near Flame. "I've finished looking over your cycle, Bluestone. The problem you were having was a cracked sunstone. It's been fixed and your cycle should work fine."

The young warrior looked up at Storm. "A sunstone? How can I possibly hope to repay you for something so expensive?"

Storm chuckled. "Don't worry. I repaired the stone myself."

Bluestone's eyes widened. "You... repaired it? Yourself?"

Flame gave Storm a look that conveyed his pride in his swordbrother. "Chief Stormdragon is a miner of sunstones. The best I can do is firestones and healing."

It was Moonglow's eyes that widened this time. "Such talents are almost unheard of in our clan. Well, we have a healer but she's getting old and frail now." She glanced at her brother and bit her lip. "Am I saying too much?"

Bluestone shook his head negatively. "No, you aren't. It's pretty common knowledge that the magic is dying among some clans. People are even talking about it at Gathers. No one knows why, but it's the sad truth. Maybe it's because too many of the most powerful mages are being sold off to the City rather than being able to raise families."

Flame shivered as he remembered his sister's fate. "That does seem to be the case in a lot of clans. Was it so in yours?"

Bluestone shook his head. "Our Chief didn't believe in slavery, but we lost our most powerful watermage when we were children to the outlaw Darksy. Not that anyone really minded, the guy was a total asshole and treated everyone like his personal servants. The only thing we missed about him was his ability to call up water from places where the spring had gone dry."

Flame exchanged a look with Storm. What

Bluestone said bore out what Darksky had told them but Flame had to wonder how the young man would accept the presence of the outlaw throughout the storm season.

“Darksky is part of our clan. He’s no longer stealing people from their clans,” Storm explained.

Bluestone turned his head to look at his sister. They were silent for a moment then the young warrior said, “I don’t think we’ll have a problem with that, so long as he doesn’t try to sell anyone to the slavers and so long as he understands any attempt to sell my sister will result in him being torn to bits.”

Flame chuckled. “He just helped rescue my sister so I don’t think he’ll try to harm yours. Are the two of you able to talk without speaking? Oasis and I could when we were children.” His eyes narrowed. “Before our ‘chief’ decided to sell her to the City.”

Bluestone and Moonglow both turned to look at one another at the same time. There was a short pause then they both nodded in unison.

“Yes, we are able to talk through our thoughts

to one another," Bluestone admitted. "Our magic works together too."

"Useful," Flame commented. "We never got the chance to figure out how we could get fire and water to work together apart from hot baths. I envy you your years together, years Oasis and I lost."

"You may have lost years, but I'm sure that the connection will be there if you look for it," Bluestone said. "I don't think anything could take my link to Moonglow away. Not distance or years can change what we were born with."

Flame stared at the brother and sister, his mind in turmoil. Could he and Oasis still communicate the way they once had? Since she'd been rescued there hadn't been the time to try but during the coming storm season there would be lots of time. "Thank you," he whispered and leaned against Storm, wanting to feel his swordbrother's strength.

Storm put his arm around Flame. "The two of you are more than welcome to stay with us for as long as you like. Now, if you don't mind, I think Flame and I need to get some sleep. We've got

a lot of planning and work to do as soon as this storm's gone."

Bluestone stood. "No, of course not." He held his hand out to his sister. And you're right, my sister and I should try and get some sleep too."

Moonglow rose to her feet and turned to smile at Flame. "It'll be fine, Chief Flamespirit, I'm sure of it."

Flame smiled at her and nodded to them both. "It was good talking to you both. Enjoy your rest."

"You too Chief Flamespirit and Chief Stormdragon," they said together.

The twins had barely closed the flap of canvas that made a privacy wall between the small area that had been set aside for the two of them when Storm hauled Flame close and kissed him.

Flame responded for a moment or two, enjoying the feel of his swordbrothers' lips on his and Stormdragon's nearness. "I'll be glad when we get to the caves," he murmured against Storm's lips, "then we can do that planning of yours for the whole storm season - amongst other things."

Storm chuckled. "I've done a lot of pre-planning," he murmured into Flame's ear. His breath smelled of something sweet, like honey candy and it tickled. "Some of it involves you in varying positions that let me do wonderful, very naughty things to you."

Flame mock punched Storm's chest with the sides of his fists. "Why are you so cruel to me? You give me all these very appealing ideas under a canvas in the middle of a blackstorm when neither of us can do anything to make them reality!"

Storm caught his wrists and pushed him backward down onto the canvas beneath them. His lips touched Flame's ear and he whispered, "I want you aching and ready for me when we finally get to those caves and have some time alone, that's why. I want you to beg for my touch, and to cry out when I do touch you."

Flame gazed up at his swordbrother and smirked. "You might have to beg for my touch. Do you think I can't hold out as long as you can?"

Storm grinned. "Oh I imagine you can hold out longer than I can, but I'm trying to

be romantic and naughty here, so if you could cooperate I'd appreciate it." Storm's lips landed gently on the end of his nose. "Maybe when we get somewhere private a spanking will also be in order."

Flame sniggered. "A spanking sounds *very* romantic!" He stopped laughing and teasing and gazed into Storm's lovely aquamarine eyes. "You should know by now I'm yours to do as you wish with but, please remember you are also mine."

"Believe me, that's not something I ever forget. I think about the things you could do to me or with me just about every waking moment, and in my dreams too." Storm's lips brushed over his in a quick kiss. "And I can't wait until Storm Season when we're stuck inside with nothing much to do. I want time to sit and talk with you. We're swordbrothers but we barely know each other. And I want time to learn every inch of your body, to kiss every bit of you and hear you cry out with pleasure."

lame smiled and ran a hand over Storm's braids. "Yes to all of that," he said. His smile died as he thought about the children they'd found abandoned in the barrens. "Have you



seen the children we took in yet? They're all from the Dragon Clan and two of the little girls have features and coloring similar to yours or Zephyr's."

Storm sat back and regarded Flame with a dour expression. "If they look anything like me, then they're probably Dragonwind's children. He's got no use for young children, especially girls." Storm sighed as a pained, sorrowful look entered his eyes to darken the bright aqua to a dull grey-blue. "He's going to destroy the Dragon Clan, and every other clan he can get his black claws into."

Flame hugged Storm close. "Things happen for a reason, Storm. Dragonwind will not destroy the Dragon and Fenyx Clan and so many of your old clan are now part of ours, including the children.

"What I really wanted to know is would you mind if we adopted one of them?"

Storm's eyes widened and the darkness that had clouded their normally bright color vanished. The gold rim around the iris sparkled. "Us? You and me? You're serious?" he asked.

Flame stared at his swordbrother, confused over how he could be anything but serious over such a subject. "Of course, why wouldn't I be?"

Storm's arms encircled him, drew him into a tight embrace. Flame was kissed until he was breathless, then Storm released him, those bright aqua and gold eyes gazed at him. "Do you know how much I love you, Flame?"

Flame caught his breath and chuckled. "I guess, you're not against the idea then. I think Breeze has taken a liking to the youngest girl but the other little girl who looks like you is very cute. Unless you'd prefer a boy..." He glanced at Storm wondering if his lover would prefer a child who wasn't Dragonwind's offspring.

Storm didn't reply at first. He sat there in silence, regarding Flame, then he said, "Who better to take care of a child who's likely my niece than the two of us? Her dog of a father tossed her out like trash, I think if anyone is going to be responsible for her it should be the two of us, don't you think?"

Flame smiled. "I must admit I've taken to her. When we found them she had a broken collar bone but she was very brave about it." He fell

silent remembering the way Oasis and he had been treated as children. "I'd be prepared to take on one of the boys as well if nobody else wants to adopt them. I don't want any of them to feel this isn't their home clan or have the problems Oasis and I had as children."



Storm nodded. "Agreed. I don't want any children passed from camp to camp in our clan, so any of the children that don't find homes among other camps in our clan will be adopted by us. Will that make you happy, Flame? No child should be without a family. We can't give them a mother, but can give them all the love in our hearts."

Flame nodded, his brown eyes shining. "It makes me very happy and although we can't provide a mother we do have a ready made aunt!"

"Very true." Storm sighed. "I think we should get some sleep before it's time to move on. The dust should be settled by daylight, and we really need to get on our way and into those caves of

Darksky's as soon as possible. The good weather is at an end I think, and the sooner we're set up and comfortable in the cavern system the better." He yawned. "Getting places made for everyone is probably going to take a few days at least, depending on what Darksky's done already."

Flame ran his hands through the many tiny braids in Storm's hair. "Darksky works quickly and with other stonemages to help him it won't take too long." He chuckled, the sound somewhat bitter. "When he was young, he made the Stone Clan's storm caves really homelike. Then he was banished and the caves slowly deteriorated over the years. Now they're little better than that place we sheltered in when we first met."

Storm sighed. "I hope everyone can stand being cooped up for Storm Season. I don't want to deal with bickering and fistfights among our people." He lay down among the pillows and the furs that had been gotten out for a makeshift bed, then he held his arms out to Flame. "Come to bed with me, my love. You look as tired as I feel."

And Storm was tired. Bone-aching tired from the magic he'd expended and the stress of getting

his little warband—and the two newcomers they'd discovered—safely to this sheltered area.

Flame didn't argue. He crawled onto the furs and settled into Storm's arms. "They'll wake us if they need us."

Storm grunted a wordless reply, pulled Flame close and rested his head on his lover's shoulder. Sleep claimed him almost instantly.



Everything had been packed and prepared, the orphan children given rides on the wagons or pillion on the cycles and bikes of the clanspeople.

Storm glanced at Flame as he climbed aboard his warcycle. "I talked to Darksky and he said it was about four or five hours to the canyon where his caverns are at the speed the wagons can travel. About another hour farther into the canyon after that so we'll be there late this afternoon."

Flame's brows rose. "That must be a huge canyon," he commented. "I'm looking forward to seeing it."

“Apparently it is huge. He told me there’s even more than one cavern system in the place, though he’s only done major work on one of them,” Storm replied as he checked his dustmask. He put it on, along with his goggles and helmet. “Everyone’s ready if you are.”

Flame nodded. “I’m ready.” He adjusted his own goggles and dustmask and started his cycle.

Storm started his own cycle up and the two of them rode to the head of the column to lead their clan to the canyon that belonged to Darksy and his swordbrother Lakesinger. The blackstorm of the day before had left a layer of very loose dust that the clan vehicles churned into the air in a tall plume. The very sort of plume that often attracted outlaws and slavers, but Storm wasn’t very worried about them being attacked. Not after the powerful storm that had scoured the Barrens yesterday. Even the outlaws and slavers had to take cover for the Storm Season, and that’s where everyone, slaver, outlaw and clan would be heading, if they hadn’t already gone into their bad weather shelters.

The clan reached a narrow canyon opening which Lakesinger—driving the first wagon in the

line—indicated was their destination by turning the wagon into the opening. The entrance was so narrow that Darksky had to move stone aside to let Sword's wagon, the largest anyone in the clan owned, through.

They entered the canyon which wound along for a distance, the narrow space was in twilight since the sun had passed zenith. The light faded even more as they passed beneath a stone arch that curved above them. Lions, darbears and even dreadcats leered down at him from the ceiling of the passageway. They passed into a wider area that narrowed again so that they had to stop and let Darksky open the passageway. Rock flowed aside fluid as water, the passage widening, the forms of animals appearing in the stone as it solidified. They passed through Storm admiring the newly made stone beasts. More darbears, lions and dreadcats snarled and crouched ready to pounce on them from the rockface.

They passed through the tunnel into a knife-cut narrow canyon where only a slit of blue sky showed above the towering walls. Here again the walls were sculpted into the forms of animals, everything from tiny jumping mice to

the biggest predators known to the clans, huge six legged things they called Horrors because that was the reaction of any clansperson who saw one: stark horror.

They rode on, Storm admiring the work that Darksky had done to create such works of art through the entrance to his domain. He turned his head to Flame and said, "This is unbelievable. He must have worked for years to transform so much of the stone into these sculptures."

Flame chuckled behind his dustmask. "You've seen how Darksky shapes stone. It flows like water for him. So I'm guessing this didn't take as long as you might think."

Darbears, large as life had been shaped from the very stone of the canyon walls. There were dozens of them. Adult males rearing up on their hind feet. Females and cubs, grizzled battle scared males in their last years of life. Dozens and dozens of darbears adorned the trail.

Farther on two massive darbears stood, twice as big as life, one slightly in front of the other and Storm knew they'd arrived because that had to be the entrance to Darksky's caverns.



“Amazing,” he said in an awed tone. “Simply amazing.”

Flame glanced around, a thoughtful expression in his eyes. “I don’t believe someone wholly lost to the life of an outlaw could have created such beauty.”

“You might be right,” Storm agreed as he put his cycle into motion again. He glanced behind them to find the people he could see—the Four Winds swordbrothers and Heartfire—gazing up at the mass of stone bears with the same rapt expressions he was sure he and Flame had on their faces.

“Makes this canyon rather distinctive, doesn’t it,” Storm remarked as they continued the remaining distance to the towering bears that fronted the entrance to Darksky’s cavern system. Now that they were close they could see that the way in had been sealed with mage formed rock. “Impressive. There aren’t many stonemages who could make a hole through that if it’s as thick as it appears to be.”

The former outlaw came racing up on his cycle and stopped near the two Chiefs. “When I’m not here I seal the entrance closed so animals

or people can't get in." He dismounted from his cycle and went to the seal. The big man set his hand on the stone seal and it flowed away with the same fluidity as water, reforming into an archway which formed into a pair of young darbears playing above the entrance.

Storm shook his head. "That's some powerful stone magic," he remarked.

Flame nodded but his expression was grim. "You can imagine how the Stone Clan viewed it. I honestly think only Oasis and I weren't terrified of it."

Storm frowned. "Yeah, I can. And I *still* don't understand how those idiots think their clan can survive slavers, outlaws and the Storm Season without any real mages in their midst, but that's their problem, not ours."

Darksky turned to face the two of them. "Be welcome into my caverns, my Chiefs. For the Storm Season, at least, they will be home to you and the Dragon and Fenyx clan."

Flame smiled at his old friend. "Thank you Darksky, we and the Dragon and Fenyx Clan are very grateful for your hospitality."

Darksky returned the smile. "I hope we can get everyone settled before the next storm rolls in and from the look of the sky I'd say we're in for another one tomorrow or the day after."

Storm glanced upward and frowned. "Late tomorrow is my best guess."

"Then we've all got a lot of planning and work to do. Especially me since I never bothered to work on the back caves much. I didn't see a need when it was just me, and even after I got Lake, there wasn't need for space. Now though, well, I'd better get working."

Storm dismounted. "Let's go have a look then, shall we?" He turned to Flame. "You should come too, between the three of us we should be able to figure out where we're putting everyone."

Lake was frowning at his swordbrother. "Got Lake? In the end I chose to stay! Be nice or your baths will be cold for a while!"

"Be good or your butt's going to sting for a while," Dark retorted. "Make yourself useful and help the women by showing them around our kitchen. I'm sure they'll like the running water,

and the orphan children need baths. I'm going to help our Chiefs figure out where everyone is going to be staying."

Flame removed his helmet and dismounted. He grinned at the small argument between their hosts and winked at Storm. "Hot baths will sound good to everyone I'm guessing."

"I think you're right." Storm agreed as he removed his goggles and dustmask and stowed them in his helmet which he hung from the handle of his cycle. "Let's have a look at these caves of yours, Darksky."

The tall man motioned them to follow him as he headed inside. The cave was cool and very dark once they got past the darbears. Darksky tapped a scone by the door and the firestones that filled it came to life.

If the animals carved into the wall of the canyon had been impressive, the menagerie inside the cave was nothing short of stunning. There were animals of every type and kind formed into the walls, and they... glistened as if they'd been coated in some sort of sparkling dust. Storm leaned close to the nearest animal and peered at the stone, trying to discern how

the shine had been created. Whatever the source of the strange reflective material might be Storm discovered it was fused into the stone rather than being applied to the surface in some manner as he'd initially believed.

"Flame, look at this," he urged, motioning his swordbrother over for a closer look.

Flame stared at the sparkling stuff, his frown showing his bemusement. Behind him Lakesinger chuckled. "That happened when Dark and I became swordbrothers," he said.

Flame nodded. "You remember the small storm of red and blue we created? It was a pity we couldn't stay there."

Storm's smile was bittersweet as he remembered the small cave where he and Flame had become swordbrothers. "We know where the cave is. Perhaps Darksy could find a way to move the stone for us."

Darksy rubbed his chin and nodded. "I could probably remove it from the walls, load it onto a sled and transport it here then I could reflow it onto the walls of your own cave, whichever

one becomes yours. That is, if I'm going to be accepted into the Clan."

Flame glanced at Storm and frowned. "*I can't see any reason why you shouldn't be.*"

"Let's do what we agreed on and make sure we get along during the Storm Season first before we go setting any claims on Darksky's home. He may decide he doesn't want us here. After all these caves are rightfully his," Storm reminded.

Flame grinned. "I'm not sure I'd want such a desperate bunch of misfits in my home either. Seriously though, Darksky, we cannot thank you and Lakesinger enough for giving us shelter."

"Well my sincerest hope is that we can get along well enough for Lake and I to join your Clan. I'm sick of being an outlaw. It's not the life I chose for myself and I'd be grateful to see it ended and us with your clan. I owe Lake a better life than I've had, and..." Darksky smiled. "We both want a family of some kind, but until we have a clan that's out of the question, though, I think Lake might be considering asking me if we can adopt one of those orphans. He hasn't worked up the nerve yet."

Darksy motioned them toward the back of entrance cavern. "Let's have a look at the caves farther back. That way the two of you can discuss how best to utilize the various areas." He pulled one of the scones filled with firestones from the holder on the wall. "We're going to need light back there. I haven't made any improvements and there are no baskets of firestones past these front caves."

Storm slipped an arm around Flame. "Well if he works up the nerve to ask you, let us know. Those children need good parents and from what Flame's told me, you're exactly the kind of parent any of those children could benefit from having."

"Dark's talked a lot about having a family and how much it means to be part of something," Lakesinger said with a blush. "I was just too mixed up to see it before I met him."

"I'll give you a bit of leeway since you're still getting over being a total brat," Dark said as he led them into another cave behind the first one. From behind them they heard Oasis exclaim, "Look at this lovely bathtub!" Which

was followed by several appreciative cries of happiness from some of the clan's other women.

"I guess I'm going to be busy putting more bathing facilities in, along with improving the living caves for the clan's families," Dark commented as he pushed a thick darbear hide aside and led Storm and Flame into a wide natural corridor. There was sand on the uneven floor, and the walls were rough and unshaped which drove home to Storm how much work Darksky must have put into the outer caves.

"This is going to take a lot of work. Maybe some of the clan's stoneworkers can help you," Storm suggested as they reached a branch in the corridor.

"And if there's anyway of using wind, fire or water that would help you, let us know," Flame added. "I'm almost certain Oasis would be happy to help in any way she can and I know Storm and I would. Even if it's hauling unwanted rock out of the way."

"I normally use any excess rock from the walls to even out the floor or fill in holes somewhere else," Dark explained as he took the left hand branch of the corridor. "I thought the two of



you could use this area,” he added as he held up the firestone torch to illuminate a large, dry cave. Off to one side there was a narrow opening big enough for a person to fit through. “This is big enough for you to hold meetings of the clan while we’re here and back this way,” he led them through the cleft in the wall into another cave with yet another opening in it. “This could be your private living and cooking area while back here,” he took them into the next opening into a third cave. “This can be your bedroom and I can install a bath over there,” he pointed to a sort of natural alcove off to one side.

Flame’s eyes widened. “This would be perfect.” He grinned at Storm. “A meeting space for everyone and privacy.”

“And you’re willing to give up the main entrance cavern for the clan to use?” Storm asked.

Dark nodded. “There’s lots of room here, and the main cavern will be a good central kitchen and dining area for when everyone wants to celebrate something. It’s also a good place for the children’s schooling. I can make some tables

for eating and learning and add to the size of the kitchen.”

Storm smiled. “I like this idea. Now what about space for the rest of the clan?”

“That’s down the other side of the corridor. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Flame took hold of Storm’s hand and whispered. “Isn’t this place amazing?”

Storm nodded as the two of them followed Dark into a series of interconnected caverns and tunnels. He showed them cave after cave which formed more than enough space for a clan three times the current size of their Dragon and Fenyx Clan.

At the end of the system—which stopped at a large cavern complete with a shallow pool of water that contained a few sightless fish and some sort of shellfish unknown to them—Darksky turned to the two of them. “What do you think? Is there enough room for everyone and their work projects?”

Storm smiled. “I think if the clan doubled we’d have more than enough room for everyone and all their projects.”

“There are two other large cavern systems in this canyon. It’s why I chose it,” Dark remarked as he lead them out of the final cave to begin the return journey to the entrance. “I thought if I ever found a clan willing to take me, offering them a cavern system in this canyon would be enough to pay the blood price for me being a former outlaw.”

“Well if things don’t work out, maybe we can work out some sort of deal to take one of the other cavern systems,” Storm commented as he ducked under a low hanging spot in the passage.

“If things don’t work out, it won’t be Dark’s fault,” Lakesinger said. “I’m the antisocial brat of the partnership and I turned Windspinner and Starshine down when they approached me to bond with them. If there are any problems they’ll be because of me.”

Flame exchanged a look with Storm. “We’d better put Wind, Star and Spring in the cave farthest from you then.”

“I think that might be for the best,” Storm agreed as they passed into the passageway that would take them back to the entrance.

"This isn't the biggest of the cavern systems," Dark commented as he held the firestone torch higher to help everyone with their footing in a bad section of floor.

Storm glanced at Flame. "This could work out very well if we ever decide to make a friendlier place for the clans to meet besides the City."

He helped Flame over a very rough patch of ground, managing to pull Flame off balance so his lover would fall against him. He gave Flame a quick kiss and whispered, "In a few more hours we should have some time alone. Won't that be good?"

Flame clung to him for a moment before smiling. "The last time we had any real alone time was back in the City and it already seems like a lifetime ago."

"Yes it does," Storm agreed. They reached the main cave and found the rest of the clan already unpacking and getting ready to move into the caves.

"We're going to need to find somewhere to stow all the cycles and wagons too," Storm remarked.

Darksky smiled. "I've got the perfect place for that, not far from here."

Storm turned to Flame. "I'll leave you here to organize things, while I go with Dark to see about this cave to shelter the wagons and vehicles, if you don't mind, Flame. The sooner our people are inside and safe, the happier I'm going to be." He glanced out of the cave entrance. "I don't like how the sky is starting to look."

"Me either," Darksky remarked. "It's got that color it turns right before one of the really bad blows."

"I think we can forget going back to the City for anything more," Flame remarked, "what we've forgotten we'll have to do without until the Storm Season is over." He moved back towards the front of the cave. "Okay people, let's move further into the caves and get everything inside, that storm isn't going to hold off for long."

"I think you're right about that. This year is already shaping up into a really bad Storm Season," Storm remarked and patted Flame on the shoulder. "Love you, be back to help as soon as I can," he said and followed Darksky out of

the cave to go and look at the storage area for the cycles, bikes and wagons.

He cast a glance back at Flame who was directing some of the women to put baskets of food close to the back wall of the first cavern. Storm smiled, proud of his lover's growing ability to lead their people.

*All we need is a council and we'll be well on our way as a fully functional clan.* He cast a sideways glance at Darksky. *And I think I already know one of the men I'd pick for a position on the council. In fact, I think I know of several people worthy of places on the Clan's council.*

## Chapter 4

### *Settling In*

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Outside the storm howled and screamed but Darksky had sealed the entrance so no trace of dust entered the caves. Flame could only be glad they'd reached this haven before the storm had. It was far stronger and was lasting much longer than the one they'd waited out in the canyon.

Around him the Clan sorted themselves and their possessions out with remarkably few squabbles about who had what cave...so far. Even the children were helping by moving things from the first cave into the caves their respective families had settled on. The only one's looking lost were the children he'd found on the way.

He smiled at them. "We need to find you a place to stay too," he said.

"The man with blue hair took Lightwind with him," the little girl he'd healed offered before sticking her thumb back in her mouth.

Flame frowned and looked around. With everyone so busy, nobody had given any thought

to who was looking after these children. Breeze appeared to have taken one child under his wing and Flame was happy to take on one or two of the others but that didn't help the rest.

"Star," he called as the greenmage passed him to gather more things.

She turned and smiled. "Yes, My Chief?"

"We need to find homes for these children but I don't want anyone to take on a child they won't care for. Could you ask around some of the women, see what they think."

Star's smile died. "Most of them have enough children of their own to be too keen on the idea. I think Breeze wants the littlest girl and I've spoken to Wind and Spring and we're happy to share our camp with the brother and sister so they can stay together."

Flame nodded. "That helps, thank you. Storm and I will take one on, perhaps even two if need be."

Greycloud, who was nearby helping Goldstone and Waterlilly—one of the slaves they'd rescued when they'd gotten Oasis out of Lord Lucas' home—cleared his throat and came



closer to the two of them. "I ummm... wanted to ask you about one of the children," he told Flame. He opened his mouth to say something else, but Goldstone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Where should we put these two barrels of flour?" the other young warrior asked.

Greycloud frowned. "Forgive me, my Chief," he said to Flame as he turned to motion toward the area of the main cavern that had been hurriedly remodeled into the Clan's communal kitchen. Darksky had added many shelves and storage cabinets, though, from the look of things, there'd need to be additional changes later.

Storm had put Greycloud in charge of organizing the kitchen supplies and, from what Flame could see, Greycloud was doing an excellent job. "Put them over in that unused corner. It's the only place they're going to fit and still let anyone get flour out."

Goldstone smiled. "Good point. Sorry for bothering you," he said and returned to where he and the former City slaves were unpacking the community supplies.

"Sorry, my Chief." He gave Flame a nervous

smile. "I know I'm not married. I'm not even bonded to a swordbrother yet, but I wanted to ask about Spider. He seems to have taken a liking to me. He's bright, curious and he's going to be a handful, but I'd really like the responsibility."

Flame glanced down at the little boy called Spider. "Would you like that, Spider?" The child nodded and charged at Greycloud before proceeding to climb up the young warrior's leg. Flame chuckled. "I think you're right, he is going to be a handful. I can't see any problems as long as you and Spider are happy with the idea."

The little girl removed her thumb from her mouth and ventured another remark. "I want to stay with you cos you made the pain in my shoulder stop."

Flame caught her up in his arms and hugged her. "I think I want to stay with you, too, but there's a rule. The thumb has to stay out of the mouth from now on and you need to tell me your name."

Two thin arms crept round Flame's neck as the child said, "I'm Redbird."

Greycloud smiled at Flame. "Looks like we've

both become fathers," he remarked as he picked up the boy called Spider. "I'd better get back to work now, my Chief." He gave the boy a hug and added, "Thank you for letting me try to raise him alone."

Star chuckled. "There are enough of us around to keep an eye on Spider if you should need a break, Greycloud." She smiled at Flame. "Your problem seems to be solved, My Chief."

Flame didn't smile. He was gazing down at the last child, a sturdy boy of about seven summers and hoping Storm didn't object to two children. "Not quite," he said softly.

"I've got a feeling you're a stonemage in the making, am I right?"

The boy nodded his eyes alight with excitement. "I can shape sand already, that's why I'm called Blacksand." The light died. "At least, that's what my parents called me before one of my fathers argued with the Chief. Both my fathers and my mother vanished after that."

Flame still held Redbird so he couldn't clench his fists the way he wanted to. Dragonwind had so much to answer for, so many senseless and

needless deaths. He wondered just how many small bands of children had been abandoned by the bastard. "You're safe here, Blacksand, I promise."

Darksky entered the main cave, the man covered in a fine patina of dust and sand. He headed for the large basin of fresh water Lakesinger had filled earlier. "I've got three of the caves in usable condition, including the ones for you my Chief," he told Flame as he filled a cup and took a seat on the bench of one of the stone tables he'd made the night before. He sighed. "I need to take a break, I hope no one minds."

The man glanced around and frowned. "I hoped Lake would be around to make something for me to eat. I'm starving. Have either of you seen him?"

Waterlily, one of the slaves who'd escaped from the City when they'd rescued Oasis, smiled at the stonemage. "I'd be happy to make you something to eat, Darksky. Just tell me what you'd like and I'll see you get it." She gave him a warm smile that had all the signs of a woman who found a man to her liking. The fact her loose top slipped

off one shoulder to expose pale skin added to the obviousness of her flirtation.

"You've got enough to do," Dark replied as he searched around the cavern, evidently looking for his swordbrother, or anyone to rescue him from the woman's attention.

"Don't be silly," Waterlily said. "This stuff can wait, but no man should be forced to wait for a meal when his belly's empty."

Dark cast a distressed gaze first on Star, then on Flame, his expression a silent plea for rescue.

"When I last saw Lake he was cooking some food in the side cave there," Star said nodding her head towards the bathing cave. "He and Spring were diverting water to make sure we didn't bath in the drinking water, when he dropped everything and started cooking."

She had just finished speaking when Lake appeared with a large pot of aromatic stew. "I timed that just right," he said, "I knew you'd be hungry with all this extra work."

Flame saw Lake frown at Waterlily before asking her, "Haven't you got work to do?"

The woman smiled at Lake and sat down beside Darksky. "I was planning on taking a break about now anyway. I'm hungry too, which is why I offered to cook something for Darksky."

Dark's hands clenched on the top of the table. "I really wanted to spend time with my swordbrother. Alone, if you don't mind," he said.

Waterlily sighed. "Oh, I um...." She got up and her top slipped even lower, exposing the upper curve of both breasts, "Maybe we can talk later, Darksky. I'd really like to get to know you better."

"I'm pretty busy," Dark replied.

"Oh," Waterlily replied, her expression showing that she might be getting the hint that Darksky wasn't interested in her.

Flame shook his head in disbelief at her stupidity. Any of the women could have told her going after one of a pair of swordbrothers without attracting the interest of the other was doomed to failure. But she could also make a real nuisance of herself if not stopped.

He approached with Redbird still in his arms and Blacksand following behind and sat down opposite Darksky. "Waterlily, I'd be obliged if you don't attempt to attract one of a pair of swordbrothers and not the other. If they are interested, they will approach you. Together." That was as blunt as he could put it without being downright rude.

Lake smiled sweetly at the woman. "And believe me, dear, we're not."

Waterlily, her cheeks stained red with embarrassment, said, "Forgive me, my Chief. I've been in the City too long and I've forgotten my manners." She got up and left the table, hurrying toward the back caves and out of sight.

Lake's smile became more genuine as he grinned at Blacksand. "I was wondering where you were. Do you want to learn from the best stonemage in the world?"

Blacksand nodded and shot a shy, questioning look at Darksky.

Dark kicked Lakesinger under the table and turned a stern look on him. "I'd love to teach

Blacksand how to be a stonemage, too bad I can't teach you to stop being a brat."

Flame hid his face behind Redbird's small body so Lake wouldn't see his grin. The watermage merely chuckled. "You like me being a brat!"

"Not like that I don't. And don't try to pretend you don't know what I'm talking about either. There was no reason for you to say a damn thing after Chief Flamespirit spoke to her." He motioned at Lake, "Go get bowls for us, spoons too. I'm hungry and I'm sure this boy of ours is too."

And just like that, Darksky made his intention to adopt Blacksand clear.

Storm entered the cavern from one of the side caves, a basket over one arm. The smell of freshly baked bread filled the air. "Breeze is one amazing cook, that's all I've got to say." He set the basket down on the table and took out a steaming loaf. "Here, you look hungry enough to eat this and half a darbear," he said to Darksky as he handed the man a loaf of bread as long as his forearm and half as big around.

He turned to Star. "Would you mind looking



after Redbird? I need to talk to Flame in private and I thought we could have lunch at the same time. That is if you don't mind watching her for a while?"

Star smiled. "Of course I don't mind. She's a delightful child."

Flame handed Redbird over and smiled at Darksky. "Don't be too hard on Lake. The aggravation was great."

"He wasn't the one being aggravated," Dark replied as he tore off a hunk of bread and offered it to the boy who tore off a piece and smiled up at Darksky.

"Did I miss something?" Storm asked as he picked up the basket and wrapped an arm around Flame and started them on their way to their own caves.

Flame sighed as he leaned against his swordbrother. "The woman we rescued from the City made a play for Darksky without worrying about how Lakesinger might feel about her. If she keeps playing games like that she could be trouble."

“Did you say something to her?” Storm questioned as they left the main cave and headed back through the winding passage to their own spacious living quarters.

I did suggest she should wait until swordbrothers approached her rather than flirt with one but I'm not sure how much notice she took. She even flirted with Dark in front of Lake.”

Storm shook his head. “She's going to find out the men in this clan aren't much interested in women of light favors,” he commented.

The corridor was lit with metal baskets of firestones—Sword having employed some of the metal in his wagon for the purpose, along with a number of his firestones—so the pair had plenty of light to make their way down the newly smoothed passage.

Storm ran a hand over the smooth wall stopping to admire the striations in the stone. “I still find it hard to believe that he made so much progress in less than two days. It's nothing short of awe inspiring.”

Flame nodded but he was worried. “We need

to make sure he doesn't exhaust himself," he said.

"Lake has promised he will make sure Dark gets enough rest and food," Storm told him as they reached the wider space that marked the fork in the passage and the caves that were their Storm Season home.

At some point since Flame had last been here someone had fashioned an actual door, using wood from an unknown source. The door had been set in place with metal hinges that had to be the work of the Clan's only smith. The hinges themselves were attached directly into the stone.

On each side of the door was a wall bracket, both of them filled with small firestones that lit the forms of a dragon and a fenyx painted onto the wood of the door. Small stones, pale blue for the dragon and rich brown, formed the eyes of the two creatures. Above the door a third basket of firestones shed their light down on a dragon and fenyx worked into the stone, their wings were spread upward as if they were both about to leap into flight. Like their painted counterparts

on the door, both Beasts had small stones set in their eyes that gleamed in the light.

Flame gasped at the beauty and detail of the work done and realized how much the clan must think of them as there was more than one man's work here. "They've made it so beautiful."

"And in less than two days, that's what amazes me," Storm remarked. "Makes you wonder what might be on the other side, doesn't it?"

Flame nodded. "I'm almost afraid to look," he admitted. "I'm not used to being treated with such reverence and respect."

"Me either. At least never to this degree. I think they're all just so happy to *have* a clan they're going all out to show their appreciation," Storm said. He stepped aside. "I'll let you have the honor of opening the door and getting the first look inside. I've got the feeling our caves are going to be something special."

Flame turned the handle, yet another example of Sword's work, and pushed the door inwards. He took a step inside, gasped and came to a complete stop. "Oh my, Storm, look at this. It's amazing."

The walls were perfectly smooth in the first room, the only protrusions were a grouping of shelves on the wall left of the door, six to each side of a fireplace crafted to appear like the open mouth of a dragon. A pile of firestones piled between the dragon's teeth provided warmth and light. Close inspection of the fire place showed that the dragon's long tongue could be moved and that the twin tips of the forked tongue could be angled to hold pots suited to cooking a meal or multiple kettles for tea.

On the opposite side of the wall a fenyx had been worked into the stone and an assortment of tiny firestones were set along its wings and down its tail to provide light, as well as ornamentation.

The floor of the room was covered by new carpets which must have been purchased during their trip to the City, though Flame had no clue when or by whom they'd been bought, through he was fairly certain Storm hadn't purchased them.

Large, colorful floor pillows lay in piles and groups around the room, making it a comfortable gathering place for a large group of people.

At the end of the room, instead of the traditional curtain of hide, was another brightly painted wooden door, though this time the Dragon and the Fenyx were cuddling, their wings around one another, their necks entwined. More tiny stones glittered where their eyes were, and others marked points along their bodies that sparkled in the light from the firestones.

“Truly the work of master craftsmen,” Storm remarked as he stepped into the room

“This is too much,” Flame whispered. Flame sank to the floor like a deflated cycle tyre. “All my life I just got leftovers and snarls for my healing but now I have all this and you and I don’t feel as if I deserve any of it.”



“Well we can’t ask them to take it back, can we?” Storm knelt down and wrapped his arms around Flame. “You’re a clan chief now, Flame. And I think we’re both going to have to get used to the idea that our clanspeople love us.”

“Let’s see what’s on the other side of the next door. Maybe this is just for show, in case we

entertain other clan chiefs here. I can understand why they'd want a room like that to be opulent."

Flame looked up. "Of course, I hadn't thought about that." He stood up. "Ready when you are."

Storm smiled and opened the next door.

The next room turned out to be a combination living area and private kitchen. A second dragon fireplace took up the right wall, though this one was made in the form of an entire dragon, with the tongue, tail and one set of legs creating spits for roasting meat and places to hang pots and kettles. An arched wing curved outward toward the room to direct more of the heat toward the rest of the room.

Near the hearth was a low table around which were arranged six pillows, more than enough places for Flame, Storm and a small family to gather for a meal—once they had a family. Under the table was a brown and cream colored carpet that made the pillows seem even brighter.

On the other side of the room were more of the brightly colored floor pillows. Storm glanced at Flame. "I recognize a few of the pillows that

we owned before we went to the City, and I see a couple that I bought for us, but where have the rest of these come from?"

This room had three other doors leading off of it and Storm glanced at Flame. "I don't remember this many caves back here either, do you?"

Flame shook his head. "No, that's why I thought the first room was our living room. And I did buy a few of those pillows but certainly not all." He shrugged. "Maybe there were caves that we didn't see at the time."

Storm frowned as he studied the wall across from the dragon fireplace. "Whoever did these paintings," he began as he moved closer to the fenyx painted on the wall over the floor pillows, "is an amazing artist." He touched one of the bird's metal feet, looking at the small scales etched into the metal and the cage of firestones held one in each foot. The lamps themselves were in the pattern of narrow tongues of flame, and the glow of the firestones they held lit the room in conjunction with the glow of the fireplace.

The room was cozy and warm, a place Storm already felt at home in. A home he'd happily



raise a family in, if they had a wife. And *that* was something he didn't anticipate having. Neither he, nor Flame seemed much inclined toward women.

But there were always children in need of parents. Children like those they'd found abandoned in the Barrens.

"Let's see where these doors go," Storm remarked. "You open the next one."

Flame turned from his examination of the dragon fireplace. "I'm almost afraid to," he said with a smile. He moved towards the nearest door and opened it.

Their bed platform—easily large enough to hold three adults—was formed of stone and covered with furs and pillows. Above it, with wings outstretched in flight, a stone Dragon and Fenyx held rich hangings in their mouths. On the wall opposite to the bed was a dresser, formed of stone with wooden drawers. Along the wall across from the door were several shelves, a three seater couch, two chairs and a table and several stone lamps filled with firestones—all designed to resemble the sort of furniture found in the City—but formed from stone and made

comfortable with furs and pillows. Furs and carpets were scattered around on the floor but sections of the smooth polished stone peeked through to reveal stripes in cream, rich reddish brown and a soft golden color.

Storm stepped inside and looked around. "How in hell could they get all this done in two days?" he asked.

Flame shook his head. "I've no idea, but I can see why Dark is so tired. You want to open the last two doors?"

"Go ahead, Flame. It's your turn," Storm instructed as they returned to the previous room.

The next room turned out to be a bathing chamber with a deep tub that filled from stone pipes fitted with metal valves with heads in the shape of a dragon and a fenyx. The hot water came from above the tub where a large stone container—fed from above by a stone conduit and another valve—sat above a cage of firestones which heated the water.

The dragon and fenyx motif had been repeated here also, with the a small dragon stood on the

edge of the tub, a bar of soap from the City resting in it's mouth. The fenyx perched at the other end, balanced on it's tail as if it were coming in for a landing. It's claws held washcloths at the ready.

Flame smiled. "I think Lake and Oasis worked out how to do this." He waved a hand to indicate the water heating system. He moved out of the bathing room and crossed their living room to open the last door.

"You're probably right," Storm agreed and followed Flame to the last door. His lover pushed it open. On the other side was the plainest and largest room. A few pillows lay on the floor on top of a bright colored floral rug in cream, red and blue. A couple of empty trunks stood against the walls. Some shelves and another dresser were the only other things in the room. The walls were covered with the forms of slightly stylized baby animals painted in natural colors.

Flame traced one of the pictures. "Redbird will love those. Zephyr's work, of course." He looked round the room. "This room is far too big for just one child."

"They're expecting us to have or adopt a lot of

children.” He smiled at Flame. “I think they’ve figured out how much you like and want them, Flame.”

Flame frowned. “What about you, Storm? Do you want a lot of children?”

“I never really thought about it, Flame.” He slipped an arm around his lover’s waist. “Probably because I’ve never been all that attracted to women. I’d always considered that you should have a wife in order to raise children. I never thought about adopting.” He hugged Flame close, “But I’m happy to take Redbird, she’s a cute little girl and she needs parents, even if it’s just us.”

Flame pressed his forehead to Storm’s. “I just don’t want to see another child suffer the way Oasis and I suffered. I’m not sure how good I’ll be at raising a child but I can’t be worse than those who ‘raised’ us.

“As for women, I like them well enough, but I feel no desire for them. I’ve no wish for a wife. If we raise children other than Redbird, we will do it together and without a wife, although I’m fairly sure the women of the clan will help with advice and so on.

"I just need to be sure it's what you might want. You're right, someone's read my desire for children, but what about you?"

Storm held Flame close, kissed his forehead. "When Sandrunner and I were together we used to talk about it. He wanted a wife." Storm gave a soft, slightly bitter laugh, "actually he planned for us to have, as he put it, a whole bunch of women."

Flame pulled away far enough to look into Storm's face, his eyes full of horror. "How could he want that when he had you?"

"He enjoyed being around women, and he liked making love to them. It didn't mean he loved me any less, but he wanted us to have children and at least one wife. He wanted us to have a family. It's hard to have children without a woman, you have to admit that." Storm sighed. "Unless you find a bunch of abandoned orphans." He hugged Flame. "If it meant never seeing another abandoned child, I'd find us a wife."

Flame made a face at that comment. "I think we're going to see a lot of abandoned children while your brother still lives. I wonder how

many have already died out in that storm or the last one?"

"I don't know. I hope that the ones we found were the only ones, but..." Storm fell silent, held Flame close. "But I know my brother and if it wasn't some children it would be someone else. A woman, a young man, anyone he deemed of no use to *his* clan. He'd take everything they had and leave them behind, or he simply killed them like he killed my father."

He let Flame go. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. There's nothing that can be done until after the Storm Season. But when this is over, we need to find him and get rid of Dragonwind once and for all time."

Flame nodded. "I agree," he said. "A black Fenyx is not a good beast to have roaming free."

"I don't know about other black Fenyxes, I just know about Dragonwind, and he's not someone we can let live much longer. Not if we want to keep him from wiping out more clans we can't." Storm gave Flame a kiss. "Come on, let's go try out that new bed of ours."

Flame chuckled and followed his lover back

to their bedroom cave. "I'm wondering how hard that rock platform will be compared to my old bed."

"Guess we're about to find out, aren't we?" Storm swept Flame up into his arms and put him down on the bed. "Well what's your verdict?"

Flame wriggled about for a minute. "Not bad at all. There's something soft under me."

Storm patted the bed with his hand. "You're right, that's not bad at all." He tugged Flame's shirt off and tossed it aside. "Now for the real test," he remarked as he pulled off Flame's boots. "Let's see how comfortable it is when we're making love."

Flame leaned back and pouted. "There's something very unfair here. What about you getting naked too?"

"I've got two hands, Flame. One thing at a time," Storm remarked as he tugged at Flame's pants.

Flame looked to be unconvinced but he did lift his hips off the bed to aid in the removal of his pants.

“See, now it’s my turn” Storm said as he pulled his shirt off over his head. His boots and pants quickly followed. Undressed, cock hard and eager for Flame’s exposed body, Storm joined his lover on their bed.

“Now what should we do?”

Flame said not one word as he pulled Storm close and kissed him passionately. At the same time his hand reached down to stroke the hard length of Storm’s cock.

Storm groaned and pressed Flame down gently to the bed without breaking their kiss. He slid his hands over Flame’s body, caressing his lover’s smooth skin, sliding his hand down over Flame’s belly to grip the hard rod of need between his thighs.

Flame broke off the kiss and gasped out, “I want more than a mutual jerk off session, Storm. We’ve had to wait long enough.”

“Impatient as always,” Storm remarked as he looked around the bed for where the lube might be hidden. “All of our things might not be unpacked because it looks like we don’t have lube near the bed.”



Flame sighed and joined in the search. "What's that?" he asked as he pointed to a small door set in the wall.

"Good question," Storm said as he examined the door for some way to open it. He found a little dip, pushed on it and it popped open to reveal several small jars of the sort they used for lubricant. "Clever."

Flame grinned. "It looks like all our unpacking is done. Now where were we?"

Storm tipped his head as if trying to recall what they'd been doing before the search for the lube. "Hmm.... that's a good question. I can't remember what we were doing, can you?" he teased.

Flame gave him a dirty look. "Well if you've lost your memory, I'm sure I can find things to do outside."

"No sense of humor what so damn ever," Storm muttered and took a jar out of the small cabinet. He opened it, slicked the hard length of his cock and closed the jar. "How do you want to do this? On your back, on your knees or lying down back to front?"

Flame raised an eyebrow. "I thought I was the impatient one. What if I said I want you on your back or knees? Would you refuse?" His tone was perfectly serious.

"No," Storm replied honestly. "I enjoy being fucked as much as you do." He leaned closer to Flame and kissed him before he asked, "Is that what you want? Do you want to fuck me?"

Flame smiled. "Yes," he said, "but it seems a shame to waste that lube on your cock. As long as I know you want me to fuck you sometime, I'm happy. You do *remember* the lube on your cock, don't you?"

Storm frowned, glanced at his erection then at Flame. "Well now that you mention the fact my cock is lubed, yes I remember." He pushed Flame's shoulders to the furs and winked. "Now back to that question I asked. Face up, on your knees or side by side?"

Flame's smile stretched into a grin. "I like to watch you come, you're so beautiful then, so face up."

Storm frowned. "So you only find me attractive when I come?" He sighed. "And I guess the rest

of the time you just tolerate how I look? It's not fair. I like how you look all the time."

Flame chuckled. "You're always beautiful, silly, just more so when you're fucking me."

Storm kissed Flame. "Okay, that means I don't have to be upset so we can fuck now." He grinned. "You know I love you, right?"

Flame grinned back. "Even though I have no sense of humour?"

"We'll have to work on that later," Storm replied as he gripped Flame's legs behind the knees and lifted to give himself access to Flame's anus. He rested Flame's knees on his shoulders and leaned forward until his cockhead nudged Flame's tight entrance.

Flame gazed up, his grin now softened into a tender smile.

Storm leaned in closer to set his lips to Flame's mouth as his cock penetrated the tight ring of muscle, sliding into Flame. The contact felt so good, Storm groaned and shivered with the pleasure.

Flame moaned into the kiss as his hands

stroked all the parts of Storm's skin they could reach.

Storm closed his eyes, feeling the touch of Flame's hands, and the light tickling of the Fenyx's soft feathers across the scales of the Dragon as both Immortal Beasts surfaced. He didn't need to open his eyes to know what he would see. He could *feel* Flame's Fenyx pressed to his Dragon just as he could feel the softness of the furs beneath his knees, the silken smoothness of Flame's skin and the caress of the magical energies rising around them.

The knowledge that their bond was forever, eternal, shook Storm to the core. They couldn't die, except by one of their own kind. And on all the world, there was only one creature that could threaten their existence together: Dragonwind, the Black Fenyx. His own brother. The man they must kill before he destroyed the clans.

Storm pushed his worries about the future aside and concentrated on what he was doing as he slowly withdrew his aching cock from within Flame then just as slowly pressed it inward.

Flame gasped and the Fenyx screamed out its

pleasure simultaneously as the Dragon gave a sound like a titanic purr and Storm groaned.

The two Beasts were manifest around the men, and Storm finally opened his eyes. He met Flame's gaze, saw the Fenyx superimposed over his lover. "So beautiful," he murmured and caressed Flame's cheek the sensation of soft skin on his hand, the feel of soft feathers on against the scaled talons of the Dragon.

He still wasn't accustomed to the duality they shared, man and Beast, both of them Immortal. The stuff of legend. He thrust slow and steady into the yielding entrance of Flame's body as the Dragon mimicked the action. Lazy spirals, ribbons of energy in red, orange and yellow flowed off of the Fenyx to mingle with the blues and greens of Storm's Dragon. The energy slipped and slid across Storm's skin, the tingle of the magic strong and intense, heightened the physical contact of their bodies.

Storm shut his eyes again and let the wash of the powerful magic fill him, add to the pleasure of Flame's hands touching him, of his cock slipping in and out of Flame's tightness.

"Open your eyes," Flame whispered.

He did as his lover requested, opening his eyes, remembering that Flame liked to see his face as he came. "Do you see our Beasts? They're beautiful, don't you think so?" Storm asked as he picked up the pace, his hips driving his erection into Flame.

"Oh yes, I see them," Flame gasped out. "I see the dragon's eyes through yours."

"And I see the Fenyx, burning bright as the color in your cheeks," Storm remarked as he thrust faster, each stroke deep and hard, taking both of them closer and closer to completion.

Flame screamed in the voice of the firebird, "Storm!" and spurted over their bellies.

Storm groaned as the wild power of his own release erupted into Flame's body and the Dragon threw its head back and roared, wings spread wide. The magical energies dancing around them flared into a riot of cascading gold and red motes of light mingled with ribbons of blue, green and gold.

"That sure... didn't last... very long," Storm panted as he braced himself off Flame on trembling arms. He kissed Flame, the Dragon

mirroring the action by swiping its tongue over the Fenyx's beak.

"Too intense," Flame panted out. "And we had to wait too long. I'm sorry."

"There you go again, apologizing for something that's no one's fault," Storm said.

Flame shrugged. "A lifetime of apologizing for my very existence is a hard habit to break. I only do it with you now so that's an improvement."

Storm kissed Flame again amused when the Dragon gave a slow slurp across the Fenyx's beak. He chuckled. "I think the Dragon likes how your Fenyx tastes. Do you think the Fenyx tastes like a roasted canyon hen? If you tasted like that I'd be licking you all the time," he teased as he eased himself out of Flame.

Flame chuckled. "Your dragon tastes of sweet red berries and summer winds."

Storm's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "What? I taste like berries and..." He sat back on his heels and gazed at Flame and licked the back of his hand. "What the hell! You're right, I do taste like red berries and.... well wind."

He leaned in abruptly and licked Flame, the taste of something slightly spicy, smoky filled his mouth. "You taste like... spices and smoke." He grinned. "So you don't taste like a canyon hen, just the seasoning for it."

The next thing he knew a pillow had hit him squarely in the face. "Seasoning! Hmph!"

"Hey!" Storm objected, picking up a pillow and walloping Flame with it.

Flame hit him with his pillow again but he was laughing.

"All right bird, you're asking for it," Storm said. He tossed the pillow he was wielding aside and tackled Flame. He went for his lover's ribs, tickling him without mercy.

"Ah no! The tickle torture," Flame gasped out between giggles. "You fiend!"

"Yes, I'm a fiend! And I intend to torture you until you yield to me!" Storm gave a loud, badly done 'fiendish laugh' that sounded more like the bray of a goat than anything else as he pinned Flame to the bed.

"And now, while I have you in my clutches,



I'll have my way with you!" He pressed Flame's shoulders to the bed and kissed him until they were both breathless before he rolled Flame over onto his side and reached for the lube.

## Chapter 5

### *Clan Business*

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The buzz of conversation in the communal cave came to an abrupt halt as Flame entered. One of the women, Unity if he remembered correctly, turned from the fire pit to say, "We were just about to bring breakfast to you, My Chief."

Flame shook his head. "No, I want to get one thing straight right now, I don't want or expect to be waited on by anyone. If I want privacy, I'll retreat to our caves but, I spent most of my life as an outcast and I refuse to live like that again."

Breeze glanced up from helping Lightwind with her breakfast and smiled. "I agree with that sentiment, My Chief. I think the idea of a chief sitting with his clan a good one."

But Redbear was frowning. "A chief should keep a certain amount of distance from his clan."

Storm entered the main cavern from the side chamber which had become the clan bathing

room with Darksky right behind him. "That might be how other clans do it, Redbear, but it's not the way a good clan chief behaves. A good clan chief moves among his people and speaks with them. How better to understand the needs of a clan than to know its people?"

Flame shot his swordbrother a grateful look. Storm always did put things better than he did and it was good to know they felt the same way on this issue.

Redbear shook his head, his red braids fanning out around him. "Move amongst us and speak with us, yes, but to sit with us, do the same work?" He smiled suddenly. "This is a most unusual clan, but I'm learning to like the strangeness of it."

Breeze chuckled as he let Lightwind go and play with the other children. "Like Chief Flamespirit, I know how it feels to be an outcast, tolerated rather than accepted as part of the clan. It's not a good place to be and I think there are several here who understand what it feels like. That's why this clan feels so good to us, I think."

Storm and Darksky sat down at one of the many tables and Unity hurried up with a pitcher

of tea and some cups for them to drink out of. She smiled at them both then hurried back to the kitchen to work on whatever project she was handling.

Storm turned to Redbear. "Clan Chiefs who sit on their butts and do nothing are not worth the food they eat or the water they drink," he remarked. "The sign of a good chief is the willingness to work alongside his people to the good of everyone and any *chief* who says otherwise is a no chief I'd be proud of."

Darksky smiled. "Which is why our Chiefs, Stormdragon and Flamespirit, are far better than the majority of clan chiefs these days. Chief Stormdragon knows the old ways where chiefs work with their clan and women are treated with the respect due equals."

Flame smiled at his childhood friend and nodded his agreement. "I'd like to see more of the women of our clan earn their warrior stripes or mage marks or both like Starshine has."

Unity turned from her cooking to stare at him. "Could we really do that, My Chief? Oh, not me, I'm too old to learn to fight with more than a skillet, and I only have a rudimentary control of

water, but my daughter, Lioness, dreams of being a battle wind mage.”

Storm smiled at the woman. “I don’t see why she can’t join the other children for lessons in mage-craft and the use of swords. In fact Sword Dancer was talking about instructing the children and younger warriors in the use of weapons as soon as there’s somewhere he can hold training sessions.”

“The Old Man,” Darksy began, “I think his name’s Eagle, said something about teaching the children to read and do at least the basics of mathematics and I’m willing to teach any of the children with the aptitude the magic of stone shaping.”

Storm’s smile transformed into a thoughtful look. “I’m sure we can find someone willing to teach magic in all the elements to the children with the same abilities,” he commented. “I’d be willing to give lessons in wind magic. For that matter I promised Star I’d help Windspinner learn better control, he expends his power so rapidly it exhausts him to fight, and he was a lot more tired than I was from helping me protect the group of fighters from the storm.” He

frowned. "In fact I think he's still doing a lot of resting."

Spring, Windspinner's swordbrother, entered the cave during Storm's little speech and nodded, his face showing his concern. "Yes, he is. It's as if his magic eats part of him when he uses it. I don't know how to explain it better than that."

Flame was thoughtful. Neither Oasis nor he had received any formal training in the use of their talents and yet they came instinctively, all they'd had to do was endure as they'd grown. Of course, his clan hadn't been interested, except in how much they could get for his sister.

His hands clenched into fists at that memory and he pushed it away to think about the idea of one's power cannibalising one's body. "I was never trained in my power, nor was Oasis. The only help we got was from Darksky before his brother threw him out in his fear of magic. Perhaps we were lucky that our powers didn't exhaust us."

Spring spoke up. "I wasn't trained either, it all just happened. I think I would have benefited from some training, though."

Storm frowned. "My father made sure I got the best training the windmages in our clan could provide though by the time I was ten I was more powerful as a windmage than anyone in the clan." He poured tea for both Darksky and himself. "And yes, magic can drain you if you can't properly control the flow. For most of us that aspect comes naturally, but sometimes, as with Windspinner, it has to be learned." He looked up at Riversping. "I guess no one in his former clan could teach Windspinner how to control the flow of his power, or no one bothered."

Darksky took a drink of his tea. "Well we've got lots of time for all this training, we just need to find a good spot in the caverns where it can be done." He scratched his chin. "There are some caves that exist in the rocks around this system. They're not connected, but it wouldn't take a lot of effort on my part to change that."

Breeze looked up at Storm's words. "Both you and Windspinner are very strong windmages, My Chief," he said in his quiet way. "Someone like me would not be strong enough to teach either of you control, even though I have it." To

prove his point a small updraft of air lifted one of the firestones.

Spring nodded. "He did say Lakesinger was the only mage in the clan strong enough to form the bond with him and Star." The watermage flushed suddenly as he glanced at Darksky. "Sorry for bringing that up."

Darksky shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Things worked out for everyone didn't they?" He picked up the tea pitcher and offered more to Storm who nodded his acceptance of the refill.

A group of children came racing into the main cavern from somewhere deeper in the system. They ran between the tables, shouting and laughing.

"The sooner some school time is set up, the better," Storm commented as a pair of young girls ducked under the table where he and Darksky sat. The pair shot out from the other side and went romping toward the back of the main cave with the rest of the pack on their heels.

Flame chuckled at his lover's attitude towards the over exuberant children although he had to agree in principal. Racing through the caves like



that would soon get very trying for everyone. "It might be an idea to make a list of any with magical talents as well as draw up a teaching rota."

Storm grinned. "Good idea. Have fun organizing that information," he said and downed his second cup of tea before he got to his feet. "And now Darksy and I have to get back to work figuring out a good place for those classes."

Storm patted Flame's shoulder as he passed. "I'm sure you'll have all the information we need by the time I see you for dinner here in the main cavern tonight. Be sure to ask the girls if they want to be warriors when they grow up. That's something worth encouraging." And with those parting words, Storm left Flame to deal with the job.

Flame stuck his tongue out at his sword brother and silently vowed to get even when they were alone before turning his attention to Unity and Redbear. "You have a lot of children in your family. Do any of them have any magical ability?"

Redbear shrugged. "Ask Unity. I have enough trouble remembering all their names!"

Unity shot her husband a look before smoothing her clothes down with her hands. "Let's see. Little Redbear seems to have an affinity for water. Darksong has no talent that I've noticed apart from a good singing voice. Lioness is quite strong with wind I think and the younger ones have shown no talents at all as yet."

Prosperity—the wife of swordbrothers Courage Stormreaver and Blackness Dustformer, some of the people who'd left Dragonwind's clan—set a tray of hot tea and jelly tarts down beside Flame. "My Chief, if you would be so kind as to eat a few of these and tell us what you think, Summerbreeze and I would be very grateful." She cleared her throat. "I can tell you about my children to save you some time, if you'd like me to."

Flame smiled at her and picked up one of the tarts. "Yes please," he said. He took a bite and grinned. The confection was delicious. "And these whatever they are called are wonderful!"

Across the cave, Breeze blushed. "They're called tarts, My Chief."

"We're making them with some of the jelly that was bought for the use of the clan, though I supplied a jar of red berry preserves from my own supply. I have my husbands buy jars for me then during berry season I pick and preserve them in the jars," she explained. She took a deep breath and went on, "I've promised to teach Summerbreeze how to make it so next Storm Season we'll have a lot more stored for clan use."

She offered Flame a bright smile. "Now about my children, there's my oldest boy, Bronze. He's twelve. His step-fathers—he's from my first marriage—are teaching him to hunt but he needs to learn other things. I'd love for him to be able to read, write and do math. None of us are very good at reading or writing and well," she blushed, "I can count to one hundred and do simple addition and subtraction, but that's about it."

Flame nodded. "I think a lot of us could use extra skills in reading, writing and math," he agreed. "Has Bronze inherited your fire magic?"

“Yes,” Prosperity said proudly. “He’s going to be a combat mage, I’m sure of it.”

Flame smiled at her. “As you should be, too,” he said. “What about your other children?”

“Well Lily’s only a year old, so there’s no telling with her for a few years, and Brave is only five, so he hasn’t started showing any sign of power either. Lavender has a touch of fire magic starting to show, but she’s more interested in sewing clothes for her dolls than in magic.”

And so it went for the rest of the early part of the day, Flame taking down the information about every child in the Clan.

He was thoughtful as he returned to the main cave for dinner. Not only were there several untrained mages amongst them, some of them adults, but there had been a keen interest shown in basic literacy and numeracy by most of the clan.

“I hope you and Dark found a large enough school cave,” he remarked as he sat beside Storm at one of the tables.

“We may have done just that,” Storm commented as he shoved a few stray strands of

his blond hair out of his face. His braids were coming loose and his clothes were dusty as if hed' been crawling around in narrow tunnels.

"Believe it or not the entrance that Darksky made to reach it is right after the branch in the corridor on the side where the majority of the caverns are located. It's going to take some work though. The floor is very uneven, but Darksky's sure he can get it ready after he's finished the living quarters for everyone. He can probably get started on it in about two weeks, at least that's what he told me."

Flame nodded. "That's good news as we have several young mages to train as well as a lot of the clan interested in learning to read, write and do math."

"That's good news. The better educated we are, the less likely the City people are to take advantage of us." Storm glanced toward the kitchen where the women and some of the younger warriors were busy getting the food for the evening meal out of the pots and into serving dishes.

"Oh, and Dark is sure he and Lakesinger can make a second bathing cave and toilet facility in

one of the back caverns. It gets pretty crowded up here in the evening when all the children are being bathed," Storm informed.

"He's going to be exhausted by the time he's done all these modifications," Flame said with a worried frown. "Do you still have doubts about him?"

"I said something to him about that, and his reply was he could rest after the work's done." Storm patted Flame's hand. "And no, I don't have any doubts about him. Not after this," he added, gesturing to the huge cave where the clan was gathering for the evening meal.

Flame smiled in relief. Having rediscovered his one and only friend, prior to Storm entering his life, he was loathe to lose him again. "Life is good," he remarked. "I not only have a wonderful swordbrother but also my sister and best friend again."

"Speaking about Oasis, how is she? I haven't seen much of her since we got here."

The women who'd been working in the kitchen area began coming out carrying bowls of cooked vegetables, meat and fresh, piping hot bread.

Flame sighed and nodded. "We've all been busy. As far as I know she's been helping Lakesinger with the bathing rooms. Once the work is done and we're more settled I'll be able to spend more time with her."

"That sounds good," Storm remarked. "I'd like to have more time to get some work of my own done. We need more sunstones. Some of the stones in the cycles are old and in need of replacement."

Storm smiled and nodded when Unity silently offered him a helping of the vegetables. She served him, then offered Flame a helping.

"Thank you, Unity," Flame said before returning to his conversation with Storm. "Sword Dancer used a lot of the firestones from his forge to light and heat the caves for us all so I need to get busy too."

"Just about everyone pooled their stones, Flame, but you're right, the majority of them belong to Sword." He nodded when a younger unmarried woman named Merry offered him a thick slice of the roasted meat. "Might I have a second one?"

"Of course my Chief," she replied and stabbed a second slab of the roast and put them on his plate. She offered Flame two slices also.

Flame shook his head at her. "I haven't been crawling through tunnels all day, so one slice will be fine, thank you."

"Heartfire can make small firestones, but the big ones that generate the heat Sword needs only I can make. Plus we'll have quite a lot of burnouts over the Storm Season."

"Comfort's family has already lost an entire basket of stones. They did that weird flash thing and the whole batch burned out," Storm informed as he picked up his knife and fork and cut a bite of the roast. "This smells amazing." He took a bite and chewed, smiling as he did. "This is really good, Flame. I wonder who cooked and seasoned it?"

Flame chuckled. "My guess would be Breeze. That man's a genius with food." He took a bite of his own meat and regretted not taking the second slice. "Oh yeah," he said when he'd swallowed, "a real genius."

Storm took a bite of the vegetables. "These



are really good too,” he remarked as Prosperity set a stack of sliced bread down between their plates and moved on to serve other clanspeople.

“So you’ve got a list of all the children and whatever power they might have?” Storm asked as he sopped up some of the rich meat juice on his plate with a piece of the bread.

Flame nodded as he chewed on some more of the delicious meat. Once he’d swallowed he said, “Yes, and lists of all adults who feel they need extra magical or warrior training and those who want reading, writing and arithmetic.”

“Is it a big list?” Storm asked as he ate the meat-juice soaked bread. He made an appreciative sound. “This is dangerous. With food this good I’m going to get fat while we sit and wait out the Storm Season.”

Flame chuckled, both at Storm’s comment about the food and the size of the list of those wanting schooling. “It’s enormous. As for you getting fat, no, not going to happen.”

Storm studied a piece of the meat he had on the end of his fork. “With food this good every night, it could easily happen,” he stated. “So

there are a lot of people interested in learning things besides the children? That's good. Now we have to figure out who's going to teach what and when, and where, they're going to do it."

Flame grinned at his swordbrother. "The who, what and when is dealt with. We just need a where." He nodded towards a spot at one of the tables where an elderly man was seated. "Eagle has very kindly offered to deal with the reading, writing and numbers and will be happy to teach at whatever time is convenient to people. I'm dealing with two or three fireimages, including one adult battlemage, and Lakesinger seems to think Darksky will be happy to take on any budding stonemages. I was hoping you'd agree to help any young windmages."

Storm nodded. "Of course I will, and I've spoken briefly with Windspinner too. He's agreed to try and learn better control from me in the evenings when I'm done with my chiefly duties."

He turned his head and glanced at the old warrior named Eagle Bookman. "I wish we had more people his age in our clan. He must get lonely for more mature company."

Flame's smile died. "Yes, he lost his swordbrother to illness several years ago. We do have another older person." He glanced round the communal cavern until he spotted her talking to Star. "There she is. Dove Healingsong. She knows medicinal herbs and I'm told she can sing wounds closed so I may not have to do all the healing for the clan. At least, not for a while."

"That's good. I've spoken to her, but not at any great length. I do know she's never been married or had any children." Storm put another bite of meat into his mouth, burped softly and shook his head. "I'm eating too fast. I blame Summerbreeze for that. I *would* blame you but this time it's not your fault." He smiled at Flame. "You'll notice nothing's ever *my* fault."

Flame made a face at him. "No, of *course* not, My Dragon Chief," he said with studied politeness.



Storm studied the newly finished school cave, taking in the rows of shelves, the tables where the students would do their class work, and the

desk where Eagle Bookman would sit during the learning sessions.

A door off to one side led to Eagle's private chamber and bathroom, the other side had a door that led to small room with several toilets and places to wash up.

He turned to Lakesinger who'd finished the work directing water the student's toilet and Eagle's private bathing room. "Darksy did a great job in here, but I'm worried he's going to wear himself out doing so much work in such a short time."

Lakesinger made a face. "Well our private life has certainly suffered. All he wants to do is sleep. Seriously though, my Chief, I think he's just so happy to have company again after so many years alone out here that he's enjoyed doing the work." He smiled and Storm could see why Darksy had fallen for him. When he wasn't pouting he was very attractive.

"Unless someone needs extra tables or shelves, stuff like that, I think he's done all he can until Storm Season ends. Then he's talking about some of the caves further down the canyon being set up as shops and stalls."

He glanced sideways at Storm. "Are any of the children watermages? If they are I'd be happy to help teach them." He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Sorry, I forgot. You have Oasis and Spring who are both as strong as me and probably better with children."

"You know I'm not sure if they are or not," Storm admitted as he turned to walk out of the class room. "How goes work on the bathing chamber at the back of the caverns? Last I heard the water wasn't coming through as more than a trickle. Has Darksky figured out what the problem is, or is he still working on it?"

"It's tricky," Lakesinger explained. "If he forces too big a hole in the cave wall the water could gush through and flood the whole cavern system. Both Oasis and I are convinced there's an underground river at the back of there somewhere and the last thing we need is all that water breaking through. In fact we'd better get back there and see how they're getting on."

"I was thinking that myself. If that bathing room won't work, then we've got to figure out some alternative since the one at the front of the caverns is much too small for everyone to use."

Storm led the way to the rear of the caverns which had been greatly expanded by Darksy's long hours of work. Numerous baskets of firestones lit the way, though they were spaced far enough apart that there were areas of semi-darkness between some of the lights.

Back here the caves used by various families of the clan had simple doors of hide held in place with a stone bar above the doorway. From behind the hides the sound of children playing, a baby crying, and the other sounds of a clan in their Storm Season home spilled into the narrow passageway.

They reached the end of the narrow corridor, the hall widening out into a small waiting area where clothing and towels could be stored in cubby holes in the walls, and where stone benches provided places for people to undress or dress before their baths.

"This cave was empty last time I was back here," Storm remarked.

Lakesinger smiled. "Wait till you see the actual bathing room. Dark's made it as luxurious as a cave can be and Chief Flamespirit has made

enough firestones to light it well. I really hope we can sort out the water.”

“So do I.” Storm followed him into the large bathing cave. A partition divided the room in to halves, both sides had five tubs for bathing that were walled all around with a foot high, two foot wide ledge that gave a mother somewhere to sit while she bathed her children. The remainder of the tub was sunk into the floor.

Simple brass spigots let the water flow into the tubs, and drain holes let the water out, though there were drain plugs to stop it from emptying while the tubs were in use. Over a dozen baskets of firestones lit and warmed the room to comfortable levels.

“You’re right, Lakesinger, it’s an impressive job.”

Darksky, Oasis and Sword Dancer were standing at the back of the bathing cave their expressions showing they were deep in a serious discussion.

“I take it the problem isn’t solved yet?” Storm asked.

Oasis shook her head. “We either stay with

too little water or risk having too much. The underground river is almost immediately behind this wall and we really don't want that in here as it's strong and powerful."

She brightened when she saw Lakesinger. "You're just the man we need. I can feel the river, know its direction and strength but I can't quite work out distance from this wall."

Darksy smiled at Storm. "Greetings my Chief. If worse comes to worse I can redo this whole area, and strengthen this wall so it will hold, but that means everyone sharing the front bathing and toilet facilities for a week or more. Shoring up a wall and redoing all our work will take time."

Storm nodded his understanding. "It sounds like an awful lot of work. I don't know how we can repay you for the generosity, not only of offering your own Storm Season home for us to use, but for all the improvements you've made."

"Let Lakesinger and me remain with the clan and that's all the payment we want or need," Darksy replied.

"Oh you have *nothing* to worry about Darksy.



We're all very appreciative of having your home for our use and for everything you've done. You can rest easy in the knowledge that you're part of this clan," Storm explained.

"Thank you, my Chief. And my thanks also to Chief Flamespirit. Lakesinger and I appreciate being given the chance to belong to a clan. I don't think there's a single clan out there, other than the Dragon and Fenyx clan who would even consider taking us."

Sword Dancer patted the stonemage on the shoulder, the gesture one common between good friends. "I told you that there was nothing for you to worry about, didn't I?"

Darksy nodded. "So you did."

Lakesinger crossed the cave his eyes distant. "You won't need to shore up the wall Dark. Make a small channel just there." He pointed to a spot low on the wall before going distant again and grabbing Oasis' by one hand.

Flame's sister gasped. "Can we do that?"

"Just feed me your strength for a moment," Lakesinger said.

Storm felt a strange jolt come from the two watermages and then there was water pouring through the channel Darksky had made at a rate steady enough to be used but not enough to flood the caverns.

Both watermages staggered but kept their feet. "If you don't mind, I'll deal with heating it when I get my breath back," Lakesinger said.

Oasis frowned at him. "Let Spring heat the water. You've exhausted yourself."

Dark put an arm around Lake and steadied him on his feet. "I've got an idea on what we can do with the excess water. I can make a collection tank that can be heated with firestones like the small one in the bathroom we made for our Chiefs."

Sword smiled. "Good plan, that way there's always hot water even if one of the watermages isn't around to warm it. He gave a nod to Storm. "If you'll excuse me, my Chief, I have to go make another valve or two for the new pipe work needed to make the collection tank work."

Storm gripped Sword's forearm and the smith returned the grip. "Thank you for all your hard

work.” He smiled at the others, “My thanks to all of you. You’ve done so much to help the Dragon and Fenyx Clan, and I’m not sure how to repay any of you.”

“No need,” Sword said. “You’ve given my swordbrothers and me a clan when we were beginning to despair of ever finding a clan to take us. That’s more than enough payment as far as we’re concerned.”

“He’s right,” Darksky added. “Lakesinger and I weren’t likely to find any other clan to take us either.”

“Still, I feel we owe you something for the work you’ve done,” Storm remarked.

Lakesinger shook his head. “If you feel that way, repay us by being a good chief. I think that comes naturally to both you and Chief Flamespirit anyway, but don’t become like those other bastards, only interested in what they can get out of their clans.”

“Oh never worry about that from either of us. We’re not greed driven assholes,” Storm replied. *And with the Immortal Beasts that are our souls, we’re not likely to change.*

“Well I’m off to make some control valves. See you later,” Sword remarked as he headed off.

“I should get the water tank done so it’s ready when he gets done,” Darksky remarked and turned to start the task. He put his hands out and stone started to flow, fluid as the water rolling down the short trough. It flowed upward from the floor to form a large cylinder on broad feet. As it formed a deep depression beneath it also formed which would allow a large number of firestones to heat the water. The tank that formed could contain enough hot water to supply many baths.

Storm gave a soft whistle. “No matter how often I see you work, Darksky, I can’t get over how easily the stone moves for you. I don’t think there’s another stonemage in the world that comes close to your power.”

Darksky shrugged. “A simple matter of birth. I take no credit for what I can do.”

“You should, though,” Storm countered. “Not only do you move the stone easily, you’ve the skill of a master sculptor to go with it. That *is* something you’re trained yourself to do. Even

the best artists in the City don't make animal statues that look so realistic."

"Just a matter of some practice. It really has no practical use."

"I think a lot of the people of this clan would argue otherwise," Storm said, "but I'll allow you to retain your modesty. It's very becoming in a skilled artisan or a warrior."

He glanced around the bathing chamber, unable to believe how much work had been accomplished in a single day, most of it done by the stonemage alone. "When this is done you should stop working for the rest of the week."

"It gives me something to do," Darksky replied. "Once it's all done I'm going to be bored. May as well keep working on whatever I can find to do."

Lakesinger smirked. "Well, there's a young stonemage who needs some training so you shouldn't get *too* bored."

He glanced at Oasis and quickly looked away again, a blush colouring his cheeks. "I hope I didn't drain you too much," he said.

She smiled and shook her head. "No, I was

surprised we were able to divert enough of the flow from the river without causing any problems.”

Lakesinger shrugged but his blush became even more pronounced. “I couldn’t have done it without your help.”

Storm turned away under the pretense of looking at one of the spigot handles. A smile twisted his lips. *I think Lakesinger’s falling for Oasis. I hope he is. She’d be a good wife for those two, and gods know they need a woman to help them. Neither of them is any good with laundry or clothes mending, and I think the only food Darksky makes well is pancakes.*

*I wonder what Flame will think about that? Darksky is a little old for her...* He frowned at his own thoughts. Darksky had an Immortal Beast at the core of his being. He wasn’t likely to die any time soon, if he could even die.

But that was something the three of them—Darksky, Lakesinger and Oasis—would have to sort out on their own, hopefully without any interference from Flame.

“Talk to you all later, I’ve got to go help Flame sort out the training schedules,” he told them.

“See you at dinner,” Darksky replied. “We should have this about done by then.”

“All right, let me know how it goes,” he replied as he headed down the corridor. He went to the private rooms he shared with Flame, hoping that’s where his lover would be working on the schedules for the needed classes.”

Flame glanced up, as he entered, and smiled. There was a neat stack of flat slates by his side and an old hide stretched across the rest of the table. On this was a pile of newly made firestones of various sizes and another pile of plain rocks and stones. “You must have been busy,” he remarked. “The schedules are all done.”

Storm sighed. “I had a look at Eagle Bookman’s rooms, then went to see what was going on with the bathing area at the back of the caverns. There was a minor problem with an underground river but Lakesinger, Oasis and Darksky seem to have worked out the problem with the water flow.”

He joined Flame at the table and picked up a small rock. “So you’ve got the training schedule

done?" he asked as he closed his fist around the stone and focused his power on it with the intent of making a new sunstone.

Flame nodded. "Yes, didn't I just say that? I don't think there will be too many fights this Season. People will be too busy."

"Let's hope so, though, so far, everyone seems to be getting along well enough. That could change once we've been cooped up in here for a few months." He picked up the top slate and took a look at what was written on it. "So the youngest children have all the early sessions while the older children go in the afternoon. That makes sense since the little ones eat lunch and then fall asleep at that time of the day."

Flame grinned at him. "I like to think I have *some* sense, thank you."

"I know that, which is why I pointed it out. I wouldn't have thought of having the little ones come to class first thing in the morning and then having the older children come later in the day."

Flame chuckled. "It was only when I asked some of the women about children's habits that I worked it out. Redbird kept dropping off after



lunch and I got worried about it and asked. The women laughed and said it was natural until they hit six or seven summers.”

“Well I guess we still have a lot to learn about being the chiefs of a clan.” Storm put the slate down and looked at the next one in the pile. “How is Redbird doing? I haven’t gotten to spend much time with her since we adopted her.”

“She’s fine. Spends a lot of time with the other children but I guess that’s natural. We have a lot to learn about being fathers too.”

“Yes we do,” Storm agreed as he switched slates, admiring Flame’s work.

Flame cocked his head to one side. “How’s Lakesinger getting along with Oasis?”

“He blushes *a lot* when he talks to her.” He looked up from the slate, smiled and added, “So you know about the two of them?”

Flame nodded. “The signs were there, I just wasn’t sure how far it could go as I was under the impression that Lake doesn’t like women. Blushing sounds hopeful.” He smiled suddenly. “It would be perfect as she’s been in love with

Darksky ever since she was a little girl. I just hope he can feel the same about her.”

“She’s not a little girl. Her feelings might have changed over the years, but I agree, I think she’d be good for them. Darksky is pretty helpless when it comes to certain things, and Lakesinger never had to do much for himself when it came to camp duties. There was always someone else to do things for him from what I understand.”

Flame gave him a look. “Her feelings haven’t changed. Empath, remember? And yes it would be good for all of them I think. I know I’d find it hard to trust anyone else with her.”

Storm sighed and shook his head. “I forget you can tell how people feel about one another.” He put the slate aside and grabbed a couple of pillows to lean on. “I don’t know about you, but I’m tired. I’ve been running around the caverns since around daybreak.”

Flame sniffed. “Then put that potential sunstone down. Time enough to make them in the months to come. I made us some supper, just a light hare stew with herbs but it will work for breakfast if you’d rather wait.”

“Where did you get a hare, or is that what Zephyr was doing out this morning? I knew the storm eased let up, but I didn’t think anyone had gone out hunting.” Storm kept his fist closed around the rock in his hand. “And I’ll put this new sunstone down as soon as you get a canister for me to put it in.”

Flame rolled his eyes, stood up and crossed the cave to one of the cabinets. He retrieved one of Storm’s canisters and returned to the table with it. “There you are, my lord and master, one canister. As for Zephyr, yes he went hunting with Flight but they stayed close to the canyon as there’s another nasty storm coming in.”

Storm frowned as he put the sunstone in the canister Flame had gotten for him. “I asked you for the canister since I can’t let this thing go to search in a drawer,” he remarked sourly as he closed the metal tube.

He leaned back on the pillows. “There are a lot of storms coming in, very close together. I think this is one of the worst Storm Seasons in years and if it keeps up like this we’re going to run out of fresh vegetables and meat.”

Flame nodded but he smiled. “Star says fresh

fruit and vegetables will be no problem. She's already started growing them. It's meat that will be our biggest problem."

"She's growing *plants* in the caves?" he asked, astonished. He's always understood that plants had to grow where they could have sunlight.

Flame smiled. "She's set up an area with soil and some of those oil lamps from the city for light."

"Oil lamps? Will that work?" he asked. He didn't know much about plants, it was true, but he supposed if a greenmage wanted a plant to grow, it would grow regardless of the conditions.

Flame shrugged. "She says so. Something to do with the fact they throw out white light rather than the red light of firestones. So, did you want some stew before bed or should I save it for breakfast."

"I could eat, I guess. Though, I'd rather have my dessert first." He grinned, sat up, and reached for Flame, leaning way across the table so he could kiss him.

"So much for being tired," Flame commented after they broke apart but he was smiling.

“I’m never too tired for some dessert. I like swordbrother flavored sweets best, you must know that by now,” Storm remarked as he got to his feet and held his hand out to Flame.

## Chapter 6

### *Love and the Future*

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Flame grabbed Storm's hand and followed him into their bedroom where he let go and stopped in his tracks. "I want to do the fucking this time if that's okay with you," he said.

He wasn't sure how Storm would react to that but he felt if he kept letting his swordbrother be the one in charge all the time it would gradually work its way into every facet of their lives together. He felt he was already seeing signs of it with Storm's already autocratic nature coming to the fore with him.

He glanced at the windmage Dragon, watching and feeling for any signs of disgust or refusal of his suggestion.

Storm shrugged. "Are you *sure* you're ready to try fucking me?"

Flame sighed and shook his head. "Forget I even made the suggestion. It's obviously never going to happen."

"That is *not* what I said. I just want to make

sure you're not going to get anxious and not be able to finish what you start," Storm replied. "You know how you get when you're not sure about yourself."

Flame stared at his swordbrother. *Is that how he sees me? As unsure and anxious?* He thought back over his behavior since they'd met and found what he thought was the answer.

"I was an orphan, trying hard to survive in a clan that despised me from earliest childhood. Within a very short time, I met you and became co-chief of a clan. Unlike you I was not raised to such a position so yes, I can be unsure of myself as a chief. That *doesn't* mean I'm unsure of myself as a man."

Storm nodded and took off his shirt. "All right, you take the initiative then," he said and held his arms out to Flame.

Flame nodded. "Okay." He stripped off his own shirt and walked into Storm's arms, wanting to take control but also wanting to show his love. He put a hand to the back of Storm's head and drew him in for a passionate kiss that Storm returned, his lover's arms wrapping around his neck as Storm pressed himself close.

Flame parted Storm's lips with his tongue and delved into the moist cavern of his lover's mouth, enjoying the unique flavor of his lover. He pulled away only when they were both breathing hard. "I want you so much," he whispered.

"Impatient as ever," Storm remarked as he reached for the laces of Flame's pants.

"Oh, is it wrong to want you then?" Flame asked. "I've waited a long time for this I'll have you know, my love." He batted Storm's hands away. "Now who's being impatient? I haven't had my fill of kissing you yet."

To prove his point he captured Storm's lips in another kiss, just as passionate as the first.

Storm moaned softly, and his hand pressed to Flame's erection to rub it through the leather of his pants, teasing Flame.

Not to be outdone, Flame returned the gesture, caressing Storm's balls through his pants.

Storm ended their kiss. "You are a wicked, wicked man, Flamespirit Dragonfire."

Flame grinned. "I've had a good teacher."



Storm gazed at him, head tipped to one side. "Yes, I imagine you have."

Flame's grin turned into a chuckle. "You admit you're wicked then? I might have to make a note of that for the sake of posterity."

"Me? Wicked? Oh hell no! I'm positively corrupted, perverted and incorrigible. I surpassed being simply wicked a long time ago," Storm joked. He leaned in close and whispered, "Do you want to tie me up, or would you rather spank me?"

Flame felt his body clench in excitement at the words and wondered if he could play those games as well as Storm did with him. *I want to do those things so bad but I need to be sure of the basics first.*

"Yes, I want that but not this evening." He took a deep breath. "Remember what you said about me getting anxious? Well, much as I want those things, I'd better learn to walk before I start trying to run, don't you think?"

"Hmm... I suppose. But how are you ever going to graduate from wicked to perverted if you aren't willing to practice?"

Flame gave his lover a speculative look as he wondered just how much he could get away with. "You could have a point there."

"Of course I have a point," Storm replied as he unlaced his pants. His cock sprang free the instant he wiggled out of the tight leather. Storm chuckled. "And right now it seems to be aimed directly at you."

Flame shook his head at the pun and glared in mock anger at Storm. "That does it! Punishment time for appalling puns."

He dived at Storm, catching him off balance and with his pants round his knees, and wrestled him onto the bed. "I think a spanking is in order."

Storm struggled beneath Flame. "No, no, please don't beat me! I'm going to be good! I promise I will," but the laughter spilling from his lips ruined the effect of the pleading.

Flame chuckled. "You wouldn't know *how* to be good so I'm going to have to spank you."

He pulled and pushed at Storm till he had him over his lap. "You've been asking for this,"

he said as he brought a hand down on Storm's butt.

Storm yelped and squirmed on Flame's lap, his hard cock pressed tight against Flame's thigh.

Flame felt uncomfortable with his rock hard cock pressed tight against the lacings of his pants but at the same time he felt wonderful about Storm trusting him to do this. He brought his hand down again on the other cheek. "No more awful puns!"

He ran his hand over the reddened skin of Storm's ass and smirked. *No wonder he likes doing this to me. It's a real turn on! I must stay in control though. I can't let him down by coming as soon as I enter him. I can't let myself down that way.*

He spanked Storm some more. "Are you listening to me? Enough with the bad jokes! And you have the nerve to say *I* don't have a sense of humor!"

Ouch! Help! Stop!" Storm cried out as Flame spanked him. "I can't stop telling bad jokes or I'll wind up like you! No sense of humor at all!

Stop, oh stop!" Storm was laughing so hard his breathing was reduced to ragged gasps.

Flame rubbed the reddened cheeks gently, admiring his handiwork. He gave them a last hard slap and then let Storm up. "I need to get out of these pants in the worst possible way."

Storm grinned at him. "Do you?" his hand brushed across Flame's cock under the laces. "Why look at that! You told me you were a firemage, but that looks like the work of a stonemage."

Flame giggled as he fought to untie his laces without doing himself an injury in the process. "No, it's all the fault of a windmage."

"A windmage? You don't say? I wonder how a windmage could turn something into stone like this?" Storm asked. His hands batted at Flame's pushing them aside so his lover could undo the laces that had defied Flame's best efforts to untie them.

He breathed a sigh of relief as his cock was released from its uncomfortable prison. "That's better," he said as he eased his pants down. He sat on the bed to remove his boots.

Storm dropped to his knees at Flame's feet and gripped his left boot. "Let me help you with those."

Flame lifted his leg so Storm could ease off the boot. "Yours will need to come off too, you know," he remarked.

"Yes, but we're not to that point yet, are we?" Storm countered as he pulled the boot off Flame's foot and set it aside. He reached for the other boot, his aqua gaze leveled on Flame. "Besides, you haven't asked me to get undressed, have you?"

Flame blinked. "I have to ask?"

"Or you can order me to undress. It's up to you." Storm replied, a tiny smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

Flame shut his eyes and shook his head, amazed at how slow he'd been there. Storm was on his knees in the process of removing his boots and that fact alone should have given him the hint he needed. "My pants too," he said, his tone stern.

Storm braced his hands on Flame's thighs and rose so he was nose to nose with Flame. "You're

so cute, do you know that?" His lover turned his head and kissed him. "I enjoy corrupting you, I really do."

He stepped back, and Storm reached for the laces of his own pants, his gaze fixed on Flame's face. Slowly Storm undid the laces on his pants, his hands caressing the hardness beneath the leather.

Flame's breath hitched at such an erotic sight. He had to get control of his body or he would embarrass himself. "Did I tell you to touch yourself?"

Storm's mouth curled into a taunting smirk. "No. So what do you intend to do about it?" he asked as he ran his hands over the hard line of flesh.

Flame sighed and looked away. "This isn't going to work, Storm. You're too strong willed."

Storm sat down beside Flame. "Flame, if you'd stop reminding yourself of your past you'd be able to move into the future I'm offering you. You are a Fenyx. An Immortal every bit as powerful and strong as I am. Why can't you believe in yourself the way you believe in me?"

Flame was embraced, pulled close, held tight. "More to the point why can't you believe in yourself the way I believe in you?"

He shuddered, returned the embrace, glad that Storm still cared even though he was such a sorry excuse for a man. "You really believe in me?"

Storm slipped off the bed and knelt on the floor. His hands framed Flame's face, forced him to meet his lover's gaze. "Yes I do, with all my heart and soul, Flame."

Flame stared into those beautiful aquamarine eyes as he searched them for any signs of doubt. There was none. All the doubt was in him. He took a deep breath. "Get your pants off, right now. I'm feeling impatient again."

Storm grinned. "That's more like it," he said. His boots went flying, followed by his pants. He stood there, exposed to Flame's gaze.

Flame licked his lips and tore off his own pants. "Come here." He pulled Storm onto the bed and kissed him again. His lover returned the kiss with evident hunger, his cock pressed to Flame's thigh proved Storm's need.

Flame broke off the kiss and chuckled, a soft, sexy sound. "I think you might just be as impatient as I am this time." He reached into the little cupboard built into the cave wall and removed the oil they used as lube. He remembered how Storm always prepared him and opened the small jar. He dipped in his fingers and extracted a generous amount of the stuff. "Onto your front please, Storm, so I can reach you better.

Storm winked at Flame. "Yes my Chief," he quipped, a sexy smile curled his lips as he lay face down on the bed.

Flame laughed as he realized he was being teased again. He would have to get used to it in the long years ahead of them.

He inserted a lube coated finger into Storm's shapely ass as gently as he could. He doubted anyone had done this since Sandrunner had been murdered.

Storm let out a soft, contented sigh. "It's been a long time since anyone's done that to me," he remarked. "I'd almost forgotten how good it feels."



Flame smiled. He must be doing it right. "Yes, it does feel good. Or it does to me."

He removed his finger, added more lube and inserted a second finger with the first. "Still good?"

Storm gave a quiet moan and nodded his head. "Very good."

Flame frowned as he looked at his fingers and then his cock and decided that a third finger would help Storm to accommodate him. He withdrew his fingers and once again liberally coated them with oil, this time including a third. "I don't want to hurt you," he whispered, "so tell me if I do."

Frowning in concentration, he inserted all three fingers, ready to pull out if Storm showed any sign of discomfort.

Instead of discomfort, however, Storm's moans grew louder and more insistent. "More, Flame, I want more. I want your hard cock inside me. Please."

Flame took a deep breath and removed his fingers. He coated his cock with more of the lube, hissing at how cold it felt on his heated flesh.

Once assured that he was liberally covered, he pressed up against Storm's entrance. He pushed forward as gently as he could and was surprised by how easy it was to slip into Storm's body and once he was in...

Oh, tightness and heat and absolute bliss. He was so overcome by the sensations he forgot to even breathe let alone to move.

Storm groaned, his entire body rocked to meet Flame's entry. "I'd wanted to give this to you for a holiday present," he admitted with a quiet sigh, "so now I have to figure out something else to give you."

Flame felt bad for pushing the issue after Storm said that. "I'm sorry," he said before he could stop himself. "I don't think I could have waited that long. And you don't have to give me anything. Just being with you is enough."

"You say that now. But when everyone else is exchanging presents and having fun you'll feel left out if I don't have something to give you." Storm's hand slid along Flame's thigh in a gentle caress. "Maybe I'll just not let you have this again until then. That will make it special."

Flame grinned and moved. "Maybe you'll want it before then yourself."

"Maybe. Or then again, maybe not." Storm gave a soft laugh. "I like fucking you an awful lot you know. You look so damn sexy when you're face is flushed with passion and you can't even think well enough to speak."

Flame scowled and snapped his hips determined to make Storm feel and look just as he'd described.

Storm gave an appreciative cry of pleasure and then laughed. "Good, now do it again."

Flame grinned and did just that over and over again as he rained kisses down on every part of his lover he could reach, Storm encouraging him with soft gasps, moans and cries of pleasure.

"You look so damn sexy when you're moaning and gasping like that."

"Fuck me, Flame. Do it hard and fast please!" Storm begged.

Flame decided it was time for a little payback. "So impatient," he said.

"And now you know how I feel when you're

begging for me to fuck you,” Storm remarked. “More fucking, less chatter, please.”

Flame laughed aloud at that. His swordbrother always had to have the last word but it didn't really bother him. His life had improved so much since they'd met so he was prepared to overlook Storm's autocratic temperament.

He changed position slightly looking for that spot inside which Storm always found in him.

Storm gasped and shuddered under Flame which made him wonder if that meant he'd found the right spot. Storm's hands fisted the bedcovers. “Do you know that I love you, Flame?”

Flame almost glowed at his swordbrother's words. Sometimes he wondered if he was successful in filling the void left by Sandrunner but moments like this helped convince him he was. “I hope you do, as I'm never letting you go.”

Storm gasped again, then said, “As if I'd let *you* go.”

Flame smiled and pulled back slightly. He

stopped moving altogether. “Are you sure about that?”

Storm turned bright aqua eyes on him. The normally narrow gold rim was wider than usual, and some trick of the light—or the Dragon—made the pupils appear like vertical slits. The Dragon appeared abruptly and his lover shuddered again as the Dragon's wings unfurled. This time the Beast was superimposed directly over his lover, rather than floating in the air above them.

Ribbons of power—which had not been present—burst forth from Storm and Flame to mingle in an intense display of unleashed power.

Flame could feel the weight of the Fenyx' wings on his back and cried out in alarm until he saw what had happened to Storm and realized the same thing must have happened to him.

Swirls of blue and fiery red floated around and through them and Flame gasped and plunged into the Dragon's body once more. “Oh gods, Storm, I love you so much!”

Storm groaned out a wordless reply that

turned into a roar as his body bucked beneath Flame's. The streamers of magical energy—blue, gold and pale green—spun into a twisting storm into a small tornado of power that whipped across the pair of them. It ruffled the Fenyx's feathers, some of the streamers bled into Flame, igniting into blue, gold and red sparks across the surface of the wings arching from his shoulders.

Flame attempted to say how amazed he was by what was happening but it came out as the shriek of the Fenyx. He stopped fighting it then and continued to thrust into the Dragon that Storm had become, his talons gripping the Dragon's back.

Yet even so, it still felt like Storm's body, the talons felt like his hands on smooth skin. He couldn't make sense of it so he stopped trying and simply enjoyed.

Storm shouted out his pleasure as he came and the Dragon roared and shook as the Fenyx's cock drove the Dragon over the edge to climax.

Storm's—or the Dragon's—reaction was enough to topple Flame the Fenyx over the edge and he came with another scream from the firebird.



Storm sucked in a few deep breaths, his heart hammering out a beat that Sword Dancer would have difficulty matching on his anvil. Lingering ribbons and motes of power still spun lazily around them, soaking into their skin. They tingled where they touched Storm, and he closed his eyes.

“Do you think we’re really immortal?”

Flame hugged him from behind, the warmth of his body pressed to Storm’s back. Storm could hear his heavy breathing and sense his accelerated heartbeat. It matched his.

“I’ve had to bring you back from the dead three times now. I know I’ve died and returned once, when your brother’s thugs beat the crap out of me, so I do think so. Yes. And what I just witnessed confirms my belief.”

Storm sighed. “I’m having a lot of trouble getting my mind around the fact that we’re going to be together for... well however long ‘immortal’ means.” He twisted under Flame, rolling onto his back to wrap his arms around Flame.

“We need to make some plans. First thing after the storms end, we need to find and then deal with Dragonwind. I don't think that can wait much longer. He's destroying too many clans from what I've been told by our clanspeople. And Eagle Bookman has kept records of the atrocities he's personally witnessed, and there've been a *lot* of them.”

There was a fleeting expression of pain on Flame's features, quickly gone as he nodded. “I agree. I want him dead in the worst possible way after all he did to you - and your father.

“As for immortality, I don't know what it means either, but, if you don't want to spend all of it with me, I'll try to understand.”

“I was worried you'd get bored with me,” Storm replied. “And what he did to me and my father are not the worst things he's done. At least, after talking to Eagle, I don't feel what he did to me even comes close to some of the things he's done to other people... or entire clans.”

Storm ran his hands over Flame's shoulders and back as he debated telling Flame some of the things Dragonwind had done. “You know what he's doing to the children already. He's doing



worse things too. Things that Eagle had a hard time telling me.” He gazed deep into Flame’s eyes. “Things so terrible I don’t want to repeat them to you.”

Flame took a deep breath and let it out on a long exhalation. “I think you have to, no matter how terrible the things he’s done are. Remember, I’m the one who has to kill him and I need to know exactly why he’s dying. Yes, I want revenge for you, your father and Sandrunner, but I also feel what he did to Nightwind should be paid for. His interference with the man’s emotions made him what he became.

“I found those poor children, wandering alone, preferring slavery in the City to being caught in a blackstorm, trapped in a canyon and so very hurt and frightened. That, and however many bands of children didn’t make it, also has to be paid for. So if there’s more, tell me now.”

“He killed a pregnant woman to make her husbands fight with him and his cronies. All three of them, and their unborn child, died. He then murdered their three remaining children. That’s one thing he did. He’s also raping women

from the clans they destroy. He's raped girls as young as twelve."

Tears blurred Storm's vision. "How can a creature like that be my *father's son*? How can a monster like that be *my brother*?"

Flame hugged him close. "You're right, we need to deal with him as soon as possible," he said. "Your father knew which one of you was really his son, until his emotions were twisted. And the idea of that thing being your brother, in anything but an accident of birth, is ridiculous."

Storm acknowledged Flame's remark with a grim smile. "We'll make that the first thing we do." He continued to stroke Flame's soft skin as he thought over all the things they needed to do in the coming months. But the first thing they needed to do was forge their clan into a weapon that could stand up against the power of Dragonwind's much larger Dragon Clan.

*Why couldn't he be a Dragon like me? Then I could have settled this thing on my own.*

But fate hadn't granted him the pleasure of being the one to end Dragonwind's life. That was something Flame would have to do.

*But why are there so many of us Immortals at once? It makes no sense. None at all.*

And while Storm didn't know the answer to that, he suspected that, in due time, the reason would be revealed to all of them.

He held Flame close, relishing the feel of his swordbrother in his embrace. The quiet of their own home.

Their home. The two of them and their young clan. A home they had because of Darksky.

"I've been thinking," he began. "We need a council before our clan gets any bigger. What do you think?"

Flame cocked his head to one side, a sure sign he was thinking seriously about something. "There's certainly enough organizing and planning to do and several minds would be better than just two, no matter how clever we might be. I think you're right. Something tells me we do need to be organized and ready for something, although I have no idea what. I'm pretty sure it's not Dragonwind alone."

"Well there's the idea of a city where clansmen and women can come without fear of being

taken advantage of, and where young people can meet and mingle freely for more than a few days during a Gather. I'd bet more unbonded men will find their swordbrothers that way, and they might just find themselves a wife," Storm replied. "And I've been thinking about this long and hard. I really believe this is the right place for a clan city."

Flame's brown eyes widened and he squeezed Storm. "That's an amazing idea. Star was telling me the canyon is sheltered enough for plants to grow well if she can get some help to irrigate it. She said that with more plants the sand would be anchored and less hazardous during blackstorms." He chuckled. "I think she'd like to plant the whole planet!"

He became serious again. "I also think most clans would prefer to deal with other clanspeople than with the City."

"I haven't talked it over with Darksky yet, but I suspect he'll be amenable to the idea since I've heard him say, over and over, this canyon could shelter several clans or be a good place for longer lasting Gathers.

"Which brings me back to our need for a

Council. I'd like to ask Darksky to head it, if you wouldn't mind."

The look on Flame's face told him his lover wouldn't mind at all. "I can't think of anyone more suitable," he said, "but aren't you the one who wasn't sure about such a notorious outlaw?"

"I didn't know anything about Darksky but the stories. I've talked to him, watched him with our people, and he's among my first choices for our Council. Him and Sword Dancer. They're both intelligent, have good temperaments and are well liked by our people. What other clans might think about Darksky," Storm shrugged, "doesn't matter. It's what *our* people think of him that matters to me."

He patted Flame's shoulder. "You were right, former outlaw or not, he's a good man."

Flame grinned. "Empathy, remember? I knew as soon as I saw him again he hadn't changed fundamentally."

He fiddled with one of the furs covering them for a moment. "You've mentioned two names.

How many are you looking to include on the council?"

"I'd say at least three that way when we vote for or against something we don't have any ties. If the clan gets bigger..." Storm sighed, "correction. When the clan gets bigger we can add more people. I'd also like to delegate some things to a few of the more reliable people in the clan. Like Zephyr, I think he should be the leader of our scouts, once we appoint a few of those. He's very observant, and isn't likely to let the perception of power go to his head.

"Then there's Greycloud, he's one of the best wagon drivers I've ever seen. He's damn good at getting the control yokes on the workbikes set so they work at peak efficiency and don't pull unevenly. I'd say he should hold the title of Wagonmaster in our clan, despite the fact he's unbonded and younger than either of us."

Flame nodded. "Can I suggest either Star or Spring for our third council member? I'd have said Windspinner but he's not quite as stable as his bondmates when it comes to his power. Plus he worries *too* much."

"That's been my observation. He's a great guy,

and one of the most powerful mages I've ever seen, but he's emotionally fragile. I'm hoping it's something he'll mature out of," Storm said, "but it will take time for that to happen. I'd say Star is our best choice. Having a woman on our Council would set a good example for the girls in our clan, and it would show we feel women are equal to men."

Flame smiled and snuggled against him. "I agree." He chuckled. "And I'm willing to bet she's the undisputed queen of their bonding."

Storm returned his lover's smile. "No doubt of that. Star rules their camp with an iron fist. Reminds me of the women from the She Bear clan. Star is a very no-nonsense woman, and that's what we need in a Council member."

"Of course Eagle Bookman is in charge of the school and everything pertaining to the education of the children and the adult reading and mathematics program. Purity has organized the wives and unattached women and the older children into work groups all on her own without any guidance. She's got them cooking, doing dishes and cleaning the public areas of the caves,

and there's one group that is busy sewing clothing for our group of newly adopted orphans." He cuddled Flame close. "We've got good people, Flame. Really good people."

"I have to agree with you there, Storm," Flame said quietly. "I don't think it's just luck either. Somehow I think fate is taking a hand in the affairs of this clan. Just think about how we've found the right people at the right time almost as if by chance. I don't think that's coincidence."

"I hate to admit it, but I'm starting to think you're right about that. What worries me is why we've collected so many powerful mages and skilled people. I'm sure there's a reason, and I want to hope it's because of Dragonwind and nothing more, and yet, I can't bring myself to fully believe that's the entirety of it," Storm admitted. His brow was furrowed with concern. "Bad as Dragonwind is, it wouldn't justify this much power in a single clan, but what else could it be?"

Flame took a deep breath. "I think immortals were born at this time for a reason too. Chances are Dragonwind was supposed to help you but his lust for power got the better of him so I was



born. We're here for some purpose which is why I'd dearly love to talk to a reputable soothsayer."

He was silent for a moment then asked, "Do you remember anything about that vision you had in the City?"

Storm frowned. "All I remember is seeing fire. Something large burning." He rubbed his eyes and tried to recall what he'd seen, but other than the fire and the vague sense that something large was burning, he didn't know what he'd seen that day in the City.

"What did I say to you? Do you remember?"

"You told me the City was burning," Flame said quietly. "That wouldn't be at the hands of any clan. They rely on the place too much. If your vision was prophetic it means we will have to face an enemy other than your old clan."

Storm's brows drew downward, his gaze hardened. "I wish I remembered what I saw, but the only thing that's stuck is the impression of a huge fire. I guess that would be the City, but why it would be burning," he shrugged, "that I don't know."

Flame shook his head. "Nor I. But you see

now why I want to talk to someone who *can* see the future.”

“And there’s only one person I’ve ever heard of who can do that, Speaks to the World.” Storm ran his hand down Flame’s arm, and hugged him close. “And how we’re going to find him, I have no idea.”

Flame gave him a sly smile. “The way fate has led everyone else we need to us, I don’t think it will let us down on Speaks to the World. Trust in our fate, Storm, it hasn’t let us down so far.”

“I trust in nothing I can’t set my hand on,” Storm replied. He hugged Flame again, “You I believe in, but something as tenuous as *fate* I can’t trust.”

Flame ran a hand through Storm’s braids. “I think you will, given enough time. I also think it won’t be very long till we meet up with Speaks to the World. He may well be at one of the Gathers immediately after Storm Season is over.”

“Maybe.” *Why is he so certain there’s some special fate for us? For our clan? And what exactly was that vision I had? Was it even a vision?* He

couldn't believe in that either. It was too vague, too insubstantial for him to put any trust in it.

Yet, Flame believed, so how could he do any less?

Flame shifted about in the bed and came to rest with his head on Storm's chest. "So, we have a council settled and you're not *too* disgusted with my belief in fate." He yawned widely, covering his mouth with a hand as he did so. "Do we need to discuss anything else tonight?"

"No. Everything else can wait until morning," Storm conceded. "You sleep, I'll be right here beside you. Fate or no fate, we belong together, and nothing and no one will ever change that, and that's my promise, Flame."

Flame lifted his head enough to stare at Storm. "Aren't you going to sleep?"

"I will, eventually. But right now I just want to lie here with you in my arms and take in the pleasant realization that you *are* mine, and that we're going to be together for a very long time," Storm admitted. "I'm still trying to get use to the idea that we're Immortals. It's.... hard for me

to get my mind around, even though I know it's true."

Flame nodded before resting his head against Storm's chest again. "I know the feeling," he agreed, "and the time span is hard for me to get my head around too. I can't imagine living for centuries and yet it seems likely I will."

"It *is* one of the things I'm trying hard to believe. It makes me wonder about the future of our clan too. I mean, how long can we rule it before people get tired of us and want some other chiefs? And if that happens, what will we do? I've been trying to recall the Legend of the First Dragon, and all I remember is that he rode off one day and never returned. Does that mean he's *still* out there somewhere?"

*Flame will live forever with me so long as Dragonwind doesn't kill him. And maybe that's the real reason for 'fate' bringing us all these powerful mages. They're to help me keep Dragonwind busy so that Flame can kill him without difficulty.*

*Or maybe there really is more to it than Dragonwind.*

Dragon & Fenyx 5: Darksky's Home

*Why would the City be on fire? Is it some sort of accident, or is there more to that vision of mine?*

*I don't know, and only time will provide an answer.*

END

Watch for more books in the Dragon and Fenyx series from Shadowfire Press

## Auburnimp

The pen name of Tracy Boyall. She is the author of two successful series *Fallen Angels* and *Sweepers* and the co-author of the *Dragonhope* books.

She has been writing since she was fifteen but it is only in recent years that she decided to see what publishers thought of her work. Her characters are always strong, feisty and often impetuous enough to get into dangerous situations rather like their creator.

She has recently become a partner in a e-publishing house, *Shadowfire Press*, where she is responsible for finances and customer service.

She has been a knife-thrower's target, an exotic dancer, a drummer, a homeless wanderer and many other things due to a desire to go wherever life takes her.

She now lives in a small house in a large English city with four resident cats and one frequent visitor.

She is female and has blue eyes; anything else is often subject to change without notice.

## About the Authors

### Links

author site

[www.auburnimp.net](http://www.auburnimp.net)

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[www.livejournal.com/auburnimp](http://www.livejournal.com/auburnimp)

newsletter/chat group

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## Michael Barnette

Michael Barnette grew up in the wilds of Miami, Florida where he enjoyed the nightlife and wide variety of cultures, but not the late night driveby shootings. Deciding on a change of pace, Michael moved to Athens, Georgia where he lived for several years before migrating west. He misses the ethnic food in Miami, he doesn't miss the driveby shootings.

The last two years he was in Miami, Michael went from being a poet to writing short stories. One of the short stories he wrote, *Zoner*, was also the first gay erotica he'd ever written. Set in his cyberpunk world setting--which takes place in a future variant of Miami--and using characters established from an unfinished novel he was working on, he submitted the story to Circlet Press. The story was published and has been well received in the gay community, garnering a Gaylactic Spectrum Award nomination in 2003, while the anthology, *Wired Hard #3*, was a finalist for the Lambda Literary award that same year. He has since been nominated for the Gaylactic Spectrum Award five more times, both for novels and short stories.



## About the Authors

Seeing the popularity of erotica-- and finding it much easier to sell than poetry-- Michael changed his writing focus in 2003 and started researching the types of erotica popular with readers.

The rest, as they say, is history.

You can visit Michael and find out about his worlds at the following places on the net.

Website:

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<http://mbarnettemuse.blogspot.com/>

## Book Excerpts

Following are some excerpts of other hot m/m erotic romance titles from Shadowfire Press.

If you are enjoying the *Dragonhope* series *Dragon & Fenyx* by Auburnimp and Michael Barnette you might enjoy Auburnimp's *Angels and Demons* series which begins with *Red Sky in the Morning*.

*Angel and Demon must work together.*

Lucifer, advised by the Balance within him, insists on having some of the high-ranking demons attend the angels' councils. This leads to Sandalphon meeting Nybbas, Prince of Trickery and Magic, and being attracted against his better judgement.

When one of the angels protests at the inclusion of demons and makes plans against Lucifer and the other angels, it leads to all sorts of problems.

## Book Excerpts

Here is a short excerpt from *Angels and Demons 1: Red Sky in the Morning*.

Sandalphon stared at him in shock. “I could never destroy a fellow angel yet you’re suggesting we destroy your brethren.”

Nybbas put his mug on the coffee table with a snap as his temper rose. “But you sat in judgement on one, didn’t you? Your twin no less, not that I’m saying he didn’t deserve it, I’m just pointing out you had a hand in it.”

Sandalphon groaned. “I did. I deliberately stayed away from Raphael’s trial but the only one who abstained at Metatron’s was Nathaniel. We’re no better than demons, are we?”

Nybbas took pity on him. “Whether you voted for or against would have made no difference. If Samael hadn’t killed him and given us his soul we would have done the job ourselves.”

“I wondered about that,” Sandalphon said. “Why did the demons hate Metatron?”

“There were various reasons. Some hated him for forcing Lucifer and Samael to leave Heaven.

## Book Excerpts

They were far more dangerous to some of our plans when on more earthly planes. Others loathed him for his hypocrisy. He was the Archangel of Purity and he lied, cheated, pimped out his Cherubim and nearly destroyed a Legend. No wonder Arioeh became complacent. Metatron was doing his work for him."

Sandalphon placed his empty mug on the table. "I've thought for some time we were descending from perfection into hypocrisy. I believe the Legends are unable to lie and most of the Archangels would never consider doing so, but my brother changed all that and brought about the Fall from Grace of all of us, not just the so-called Fallen."

Nybbas leaned forward. It was time to stop teasing the Archangel. "Sandalphon, believe me, I'm almost certain that everything played out the way it was meant to in order for the Balance to be restored in the right host. I don't think for one moment our work is over though. I just feel something isn't right in the arcane and that could easily impact on just about everything. But I would far rather kiss you than engage in such gloomy discussions."

## Book Excerpts

Sandalphon jumped to his feet. “I don’t think I’m ready for anything else, Nybbas. I should be going.”

Nybbas shook his head. “Remember what I said to you. No further than you’re prepared to go.”

He rose to his feet and approached the angel in the same way he would approach a nervous horse. Sandalphon held still but Nybbas could see him shaking. “I promise.”

He reached the anxious angel and drew him into his arms. Sandalphon gave a final shudder before returning the embrace. Nybbas leaned forward and kissed him.

Sandalphon returned the kiss with a little gasp that delighted Nybbas. He teased the angel’s lips until they parted and allowed his tongue access to the warmth behind. He expected Sandalphon to start struggling but the angel seemed to like kissing. Emboldened he ran his hand up and down Sandalphon’s back. Gasping the angel pulled away from the kiss. “Teach me, Nybbas. Show me what delights Nathaniel, Raphael and Gabriel so much.”

## Book Excerpts

You might also like *Swordbrothers 2: Four Winds* by Auburnimp and Michael Barnette.

*Magic never lies.*

Summerbreeze Warmwind is ostracized because of his blue hair. He never expects to find anyone to love him.

Sword Dancer is a wealthy weaponsmith who lacks for nothing, except a swordbrother to love him.

Trueflight Woodbender is a well known bow maker who isn't looking for love... until it finds him.

Zephyr Northernwind is the son of a camp whore, despised and living his life on the fringe of clan after clan. What man could ever love someone like him?

When the bond of swordbrothers unites these men to one another their lives change. But is it for the better?

## Book Excerpts

Here is a short excerpt from *Swordbrothers 2: Four Winds*.

“I’m going too fast for you, aren’t I?” Sword questioned. His blue eyes were hot with lust.

They barely knew each other, yet the call of their magic, the pull of the bond, could not be ignored.

It could, however, be tempered with willpower which Sword seemed to possess as the smith took a deep breath, then gently pushed Breeze away. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let the magic and the bond get the better of me.”

Breeze let out a whimper of frustration and need and watched sadly as the wind and colors dispersed. He stared down at his hands, wondering if he’d imagined the magic due to his desire for Sword. It was very obvious the man didn’t want him after all. “It’s all right,” he managed to say after a moment, “there’s no reason for you to apologize.”



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*Why would any warrior want me after all, sorry excuse for a man that I am?*

Fingers stroked through his hair, smoothing it from his eyes, a spark of desire, a breath of wind followed Sword's touch in a second, feather light caress. "I want you as my swordbrother. I want it *very* much, but I also want to be sure it's what you want. It won't be said of me that I took advantage of *anyone*. So tell me, Breeze, do you really want this with me, or do you want to think it over?"

Sword's words, and the feel of the wind as well as his touch, made Breeze look up again, hope stirring in his chest. "I still think I must be dreaming," he said. "I'm no great catch as a swordbrother. I'm an adequate hunter, and a reasonable cook. I can skin and make good leather but that's nothing compared to your skills and talents. I'm not very good with people and I don't understand how you could possibly want me."

Sword's sensual mouth curved sharply downward. His dark brows pulled together, and the man frowned at him. The look lent Sword a seriousness, a very manly expression that only

made the heat in Breeze's flesh, the ache in his groin worsen.

"The magic decides, Summerbreeze. We aren't a pair of men taking one another as lovers. This is the real thing, true love forged by magic and the power of our very souls." Sword brushed his thumb across Breeze's cheek, the power of the bond rising at the touch of skin on skin. A puff of wind moved through Breeze's hair, a tingle flowed through the contact into him.

All of the hurt and pain Breeze felt, after years of slights over his bizarre appearance and gentle nature, was expressed in his cry of, "Then why did you push me away?"

Strong arms wrapped around him, pulled him close, held him tight. "Not to hurt you. By the Ancestors, I never wanted to hurt you! Not you, Breeze." Warm lips touched his, the kiss gentle, soothing. A stronger wind tugged at their clothes, flickers of blue, ribbons of magical energy rose from Sword's body, from his body too.



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Sword ended the kiss, gazed into the beautiful gold of his soon to be swordbrother's eyes. "You're precious to me, Breeze. Don't you realize that? I've searched for my swordbrother, my true love for ten years and never found him. Not until I found you." he explained, and showered gentle kisses on Breeze's face, his throat.

He wanted the young man, had wanted him since he'd first set eyes on the fall of his odd blue hair, the sharp curve of his cheek, the sensual form of his lips.

By the same token, he didn't want to force the issue. He didn't want to rush the younger man into his bed. He could tell Summerbreeze was uneasy, nervous as a virgin girl on her marriage night. He didn't understand it, but suspected that, like so many among the clans who were different in appearance, Breeze had been all but shunned by his own clan. He'd seen things like it before. Recalled how he'd seen other young men treated over some small difference. And blue hair like Breeze's was hardly a *small* difference.

Sword stopped kissing Breeze, the younger man breathless, cheeks flushed with what Sword hoped might be passion. It could just as easily

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be embarrassment. The two of them were in the middle of camp surrounded by people, some of whom were watching surreptitiously, while pretending not to pay them the slightest attention.

Not a few of them were young unmarried women. Sword sighed. *No wonder he's nervous. All these people watching us, if I had any sense I'd be embarrassed too. Time for a change of scenery.* "Why don't we take the food inside? You can cook our meal and we can talk about anything you like. How does that sound?"

He received a breathtaking and obviously grateful smile in thanks. Breeze gathered up his pot of tubers and the rack of meat and carried them into his tent. He placed them over the fire pit and got the firestones going underneath them before looking up and saying, "Thank you for being so understanding."

"Not a problem," Sword replied, giving the younger man a sheepish grin. "I should have done more thinking with my upper head, rather than letting the lower one get the better of me." He sat down beside Breeze, and favored him with a big smile. "Feeling the pull of the bond,

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and seeing how beautiful you are was too much for me, I'm afraid."

He touched the soft blue hair, twisting a lock around his finger, letting it slide up the digit, marveling at the color. "You're one of a kind, Summerbreeze. And I'd be pleased to have you as my swordbrother. That is if you'll have me. I really am sorry for making an ass of myself, but at my age I had given up on the idea I'd find my swordbrother."

Or you might also like *Plague Dance* by Michael Barnette.

*A plague ravaged the world. Cory and Deshawn survived. But can they survive Roderik, the man who would be King?*

After a mutated strain of Ebola ended the world as we know it, Staff Sergeant Deshawn Roberts finds himself alone and longing for companionship.

Cory Wilson, one time office worker, finds

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himself a captive of Roderick, King of the Lone Star Empire. It's a life of slavery worse than death, and Cory escapes to find himself on the run.

Brought together by chance, can these two men survive in the harsh reality of post Collapse America, and will they find the love they both crave?

Here is a short excerpt from *Plague Dance*.

A torrent poured forth from the darkened sky, the pounding drops intermingled with the chattering sounds of hail against the windows. Bursts of lightning shattered the night, bright as explosions in an embattled city.

Deshawn Roberts stared out at the fury of nature, wondering who else might be out there witnessing the storm. Wondering if he might be the only one left after the outbreak of Ebola tore through the country leaving millions dead.

Millions that included almost everyone else on the base where he'd been stationed.

Other than himself he didn't know who else

## Book Excerpts

might have survived the pandemic that had swept the US— the entire world— and left more people dead than living.

The barracks where he'd lived with the rest of his platoon was empty, the rest of the men he'd liked, and those he'd tolerated were dead. Their mortal remains lay in the mass grave he'd managed to dig with a backhoe from a construction site, a subdivision that would never be finished.

There was no one left to do the work, and no one alive to buy the half finished houses anyway.

Of the hundreds of people who'd lived at the base, he was the only one left.

Him alone with the echoing silence. He'd never understood that term, 'echoing silence' until he experienced the utter quiet of a place so devoid of life that seeing a bird made his heart fill with joy.

He braced his forearms against the window sill, stared out at the raging storm.

Lonely.

He craved the sound of a human voice. The camaraderie of other soldiers, of men he knew,

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missed, wished he could talk to one last time. Share a beer and off color jokes, stare at the TV and hear laughter and angry words exchanged.

To hear any voice break the plague of silence that ate at him day after day the way the plague of the body had eaten away at the people he knew until all that remained was the dust of the grave.

*Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.* The words mocked him. Taunted him with the promise of a release from loneliness he was unable to take.

A few others *had* survived, a couple men from a different platoon, one of the officers from his own command group. But they'd gone to find their families and no one had tried to prevent it. Not after captain Ferrel had killed himself in the bedroom of his home, surrounded by his Ebola murdered family. There wasn't much point in saying anything to them about duty or remaining to guard the base. Not after the government collapsed.

That's what the media had begun to call it in the last few struggling days of the United States. The Collapse. The end of civilization as everyone knew it. Even then the reports of warlords rising



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to power were coming in. Men— women too— carving out a niche in the plague shattered land.

He wondered if any of the men he'd known reached their homes. Wondered if they'd found anyone alive if they had.

Deshawn sighed, gaze riveted on the wild night, the storm torn riot beyond the glass and came to a decision.

At first light he would load up a Humvee with supplies and head out. There wasn't any reason to remain at the base, no one left to care what he did or whether he remained loyal to his oath as a soldier.

With no government he had no one left to be loyal *to*, so his oath meant less than the rain hammering the base.

Sooner or later other survivors would show up. Survivors he might not want to meet. People like the warlord types the last few newscasts he'd seen reported about. He'd heard a few radio broadcasts after that, the station running on a generator for a few days. The last disc-jockey left for hundreds of miles talking himself hoarse, passing on any information he received,

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broadcasting rumors about the self-proclaimed King of the Lone Star Empire. A king who the rumors said was some former military guy named Roderik who'd raised an army and sent them rampaging around the countryside capturing the few people alive. People he forced to work for him, women he turned into servants fit only to cook and clean, the prettiest ones forced into lives of slave prostitution.

Then the station went silent. Either out of fuel for the generator or silenced by one of the warlords. Deshawn didn't know and he'd probably never find out.

In the long run it hardly mattered.

The world had gone from a thriving global economy, from civilized high-tech and instant communication across the globe to a barbaric age of savagery in the span of less than a month.

There *were* some really bad customers out there, prowling the post-Collapse landscape. People he had no desire to meet. Nor any desire to join in their egomaniacal quest for power.

"Rain, rain go away," he murmured to himself

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before turning from the hammering of hail and rain to try and get some sleep.

Deshawn climbed out of his bunk the next morning, loaded up the Humvee and rolled out into the new world created by the Hand of Fate at a wink from Old Man Death.

You can buy *Angels and Demons 1: Red Sky in the Morning* by Auburnimp, *Swordbrothers 2: Four Winds* by Auburnimp and Michael Barnette and *Plague Dance* by Michael Barnette along with other fine m/m erotic romance, gay romance and yaoi titles from:

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