



RACE THE SUN

GABRIELLE EVANS

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I dedicate this book to Nathanael—
for being my sounding board and listening to me whine.
I hope you find your forever after.

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CHAPTER ONE

The smooth wood slid easily through his looped grip on the end. The tip connected solidly, sending the cue ball rolling across the red felt to graze the side of the remaining ball on the table. As if in slow motion, everyone watched the eight ball shimmy and teeter before dropping with a muffled thud into the corner pocket.

"Motherfucker!" his opponent growled. "One more game."

"Sorry, friend, I'm out of time, and you're out of money." Jade Blevins scooped the stack of twenties off the side of the pool table and tucked them into his pocket. He touched the bill of his baseball cap and nodded. "It's been a pleasure."

Jade learned early on to bow out while on top. He had been hustling pool tables across the south since the age of sixteen. At twenty-six, he had yet to find anything else in the world he excelled at or loved more.

The other man, a tall, well-built cowboy type, pulled a gold bottle from inside his jacket pocket and placed it on the pool table. "I'll play ya for this," he drawled.

Jade eyed the bottle, calculating its worth. It looked

more glass than metal, even with the gold shine. "What's it worth?"

"Priceless," the cowboy answered.

Jade had no use for it. He hustled for a price tag. He shook his head. "No."

The cowboy glared at him, then glanced back at the bottle on the table. "You could probably sell it for a little over a mil," he finally said. "It's rare. In fact, I don't think there's another like it. I won it in a game myself."

One million dollars Jade understood. Not that he believed a word of it, but it would be worth his time to wipe the smug look off the man's face. "Nine-ball?" he asked. It wasn't really his game, but it would be quick, and he could get the hell out of the smoky bar.

The cowboy grinned, slow and wicked. He set the bottle on one of the circular tables beside them and motioned for Jade to ante up. Jade pulled out his winnings, all seven hundred dollars of it, and dropped it down beside the bottle.

"Best of three?" the guy asked.

Jade nodded. "What's your name, cowboy?"

"What's it matter?"

"I always make it a habit to know who it is I'm fucking." He winked, and the spectators around the table whooped and guffawed.

"Harris Quinton, but you can call me Quinton." He dipped his head. "Remember it, because you'll be screaming it later." The crowd hooted with laughter, and Quinton pulled out the triangle and set to work, racking the balls. "I'll even let you break first, Blevins."

Jade's head whipped around. He studied the cowboy, trying to think of where he may have seen the man before.

"Oh, I know who you are. You've cleaned out a lot of pockets and broke a few hearts in your day." Quinton chuckled darkly, shaking his head.

Jade shrugged. He didn't remember Harris Quinton, but the man obviously held a grudge. He wondered how much he had taken the man for the last time they played.

Twenty minutes later Jade strolled out of the bar with his money and the tiny little bottle. He shook his head and laughed. He could still hear the cowboy cussing and spitting across the room.

Jade didn't know what he would do with the bottle. Upon closer inspection, he doubted its value over a few cents recycled. Oh well, it had been worth it to put the arrogant asshole in his place.

He tossed the bottle onto the bench seat of his pickup through the open window. He reached for the door handle, but jumped back when a big hand slammed against

the side of the truck.

"What the hell, man?" Jade stared at Quinton, cursing under his breath. He did not need this shit. "Look, I'm sorry you lost, but that's how it goes sometimes. Back off and let me go home."

"Come home with me." Quinton pressed up against Jade and ground his erection against Jade's ass.

"Oh, hell no." Jade planted his hands on either side of the window and pushed back roughly. Quinton might have six inches and a good forty pounds on him, but Jade had always been scrappy.

Quinton grunted but didn't step too far away. He spun Jade around and pushed his back to the door. He reached up to cup his cheek and smiled. "Please, baby, just come home with me. I've been thinking about you since Atlanta, and I can't get you out of my head."

And suddenly, Jade remembered. He'd spanked Quinton's ass back to the Stone Age in that tournament in Atlanta. "That was six months ago, dude." He narrowed his eyes and balled his hands into fists at his sides. "Did you come all this way looking for me?"

Quinton chuckled. "I live in Jacksonville, though I admit, I did come here tonight looking for you." He bent his head, his lips a breath away from Jade's mouth.

Jade wrenched away, spinning to break the grip

Quinton held on his arm. "Not interested," he said with more calm than he felt. "How do you know I even like men?"

"Oh, don't be that way, baby. I saw you with that little slut in the alley right after your second round."

"You watched me?" Jade felt sick. He didn't know said slut's name, but he distinctly remembered the cold bricks on his ass and the talented mouth wrapped around his cock.

"You were so beautiful, baby."

"Stop calling me that. Look, I'm going home—*alone*—and I suggest you do the same. Well, go home that is. I don't give a rip who you take with you, as long as it's not me."

Quinton nodded slowly, and his face split into a wide grin. "I'll see you around, Jade."

"No. You won't."

* * * *

Bumping along the gravel road that led home in his old rusted Chevy, Jade smiled to himself. He had more than enough money stashed away to buy a new pickup, but he loved the hunk of metal. It had been his first car, bought and repaired for him by his grandfather. It was all he had

left of the man.

Lost in thoughts of his grandfather, Jade didn't immediately notice the coughing and sputtering coming from his beloved truck. He quickly pulled to the side of the country road, easing onto the grass just as his pickup gave one final gurgle and took its last breath.

"No, no, no!" Jade shouted, thumping his palm against the steering wheel. The thing had been on its last lug nut for months, but Jade had stubbornly held on, refusing to let go.

Perhaps he could have the old girl fixed up, rebuild the engine, a little paint. He had the money, but it would take time. Jade needed something to drive in the meantime. Now, in fact, would be a good time. He estimated he still had another four miles before he reached his destination.

He should have fixed the damn truck months ago; then he wouldn't be sitting on the side of the road, in the cold, out in the middle of nowhere. "Wish I'd have fixed the fucker," he grumbled to himself, dropping his head to the steering wheel.

A soft light caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head slowly, still resting it against the wheel, and frowned.

His newest acquisition, the little glass bottle, glimmered, shining with an amber light as if someone had

lit a fire inside. Reaching out tentatively, Jade placed his fingers on the bottle, surprised to find it warm. He picked it up, bringing it close to his face.

Light flickered inside, like a thousand fireflies. The bottle continued to heat in his hand until it burned. "Ah!" Jade dropped the glass to the seat and stared at it. Rings of silver steam looped and spiraled from the opening.

"What the hell?" Jade backed away, huddling against the door of his pickup. The bottle started vibrating, jumping and bouncing in the seat, until it suddenly popped upright.

"Holy shit." He scrambled for the door handle, getting it open and almost falling on his ass in his hasty retreat.

The bottle bumped and jiggled, rolling out after him to land on the ground, still vertical. It clinked against the gravel, spinning slowly at first, then faster and faster. Jade stumbled backward, his eyes riveted on the unbelievable show in front of him. A huge cloud of silver smoke erupted from the top of the bottle, and Jade coughed, fanning his hands in front of his face to clear the air.

When finally he could see, he moved away so quickly he actually did fall on his ass. The biggest man he had ever seen stood beside his rusted old pickup, mere inches from the crazy bottle. Jade looked up... and up.

Then for a little change of pace, he looked up some more.

The man had to be at least seven feet tall, maybe more. Muscles on top of muscles bulged and strained as he crossed his arms over his chest. His skin looked dark, but creamy like melted caramel. The moonlight ghosted off his long hair—silvery, silky strands that fell down his back to his hips.

The man looked like a Greek sculpture come to life, deliciously naked and all.

"Who the fuck are you?" Jade shouted. His voice cracked twice with fear.

"You summoned me," the man replied in a subtle accent.

"I did what? Where the hell did you come from?" Jade scrambled back a little further, wincing when the gravel dug into his palms.

The stranger looked from the bottle and back to Jade. "You summoned me," he repeated. His body language, the slight sneer on his soft mouth, made it clear his *summons* had been unwelcome.

"I didn't summon anyone."

"Did you not make a wish?" The giant cocked his head to the side, his gorgeous hair flowing over his shoulder.

"A wish?" Jade fumbled in his pocket, pulling out

the night's winnings. He threw it at the man's feet. "That's all I have. Really. Just take it and go. Hell, you can even have the truck if you can get it started."

The guy didn't even glance at the money. "I am bound to grant you four wishes. You wished for something fixed. Did you not?"

Jade nodded slowly. "I thought it was three wishes?" Yes, because that was *so* important in his current predicament.

The man narrowed his eyes and said flatly, "I do not make the rules."

Jade slowly climbed to his feet, his eyes never leaving the man standing beside his truck. "You got a name?"

"Archias of Thessaly."

Jade frowned. "Like Ancient Greece? Achilles and Homer and Centaurs and shit?" He groaned inwardly, but resisted the urge to close his eyes. A normal person would have thought of modern day Thessaly, but not him. He had always loved Greek mythology. If he put a little effort into it, he could possibly be an even *bigger* nerd.

Archias simply nodded, though Jade thought he detected a flicker of surprise on the man's face. Jade felt shocked as well, though he didn't think he hid it as well as the giant. If Archias truly came from Ancient Thessaly,

then that would make him...

"What are you doing here?"

"You summoned me," Archias snapped. Seemed his patience ran in short supply.

"I don't know what you think I did or didn't do, but I certainly didn't order up a naked giant from the value menu. Where in the hell are your clothes?"

Archias shrugged. "Does my nudity bother you?"

"Yeah, a little," Jade confessed. Though he was scared out of his mind, Archias's body had an interesting effect on his libido.

Archias lifted his hand and snapped his fingers. In the next heartbeat a tight black t-shirt and black leather pants covered his body.

"What the—?" Jade blinked several times, his mouth hanging open in awe. "How did you do that?"

No answer.

"Where did you come from?" Jade had asked the question before, but maybe he would have better luck at a response this time around.

Archias glanced down at the bottle again.

No freaking way!

"You're a genie in a bottle?" Jade scoffed. "Right. Try again, pal."

Archias sighed. "Always the same," he mumbled.

"If you do not believe me, make your wish."

"Mm hmm." Jade crossed his arms over his chest. This had to be the most ridiculous conversation he'd ever had, and there had been some doozies. "Okay then. I wish my truck was fixed—new paint, new engine, new tires, all the bells and doodads."

Archias dipped his head in acknowledgement. "Will this suffice?" He motioned behind him at Jade's pickup.

Jade gaped in shock. His truck, his baby, looked incredible. Glossy red paint, shiny white wall tires, the chrome bumper sparkling in the moonlight. "Will it start?"

"Find out for yourself." Archias smirked.

Jade approached slowly, hesitantly, and eased around the mountain of a man to reach inside his pickup and turn the key. The engine roared to life, then idled, purring like a kitten. "Unbelievable," he whispered.

"Do you believe yet?" Archias stepped closer, crowding Jade against the cab of the truck.

"It's kind of hard not to after this." Jade's stomach clenched, and his cock perked up to take notice of Archias's nearness. "So, you said I get four wishes?"

"Three now," Archias amended.

"Oh, right, okay then." Jade climbed into the pickup, and jerked his head toward the passenger door. "You want to get in, or do you have to go back into the

bottle? I guess I don't really know what happens now." He choked down his hysteria and looked as calmly as possible at Archias. Shit like this did not happen, and it definitely didn't happen to him. He didn't even know how much of it he actually believed. Maybe he had fallen asleep on the drive home, and this was just a very elaborate dream. Hell, maybe he crashed into a tree and died.

"I do not have to return to the bottle. My previous masters have preferred it, however." Archias watched him closely. "I will do as you like." He didn't sound happy about it.

"Well, I have some questions, so you better climb in and grab some bench." Jade closed his door and waited for his surly companion to walk around and fold himself into the passenger seat. He pressed the clutch and shifted into first, smiling brightly as the pickup eased onto the gravel road, smooth as you please.

"What would you like to know?" Archias stared out of the windshield, his arms still crossed over his chest. It appeared to be his permanent state of being.

"Tell me more about these wishes. Are there rules, stipulations?"

"You get four... three remaining. I will grant you any wish, though I cannot meddle in love, death, or time. You have ninety calendar days to present me with your

final wish."

"Three months," Jade mumbled to himself. "So, what happens to you at the end of these ninety days?"

Archias looked momentarily surprised, before schooling his features once more. "I will go back into the *pehar* to await a new master."

"*Pehar*?"

Archias held up the glass bottle. "The chalice, bottle, lamp, whatever you would call it."

"Just like that?" Jade grimaced. "So is it nice in there? You know, with little couches and tapestries, lamps, and those things. All decked out like a bachelor pad?"

"No," Archias answered immediately. Jade thought he detected a slight shudder. "It is cold and dark, one endless night."

Jade bit his lip to stop himself from offering sympathies. The beautiful giant did not look as though he'd receive pity well. "So, how long have you been in the bottle this time?"

"I... I do not know." The Greek god shook his head solemnly. "My last master made his final wish on Christmas day in the year two thousand and three."

"Seven years?" Jade gasped. He couldn't imagine living in the kind of hell Archias described for seven miserable years. "But why? You said I had to pass the

bottle on when I have used all of my wishes."

"I only said that I will go back into the *pehar*. Most of my masters are... reluctant to give up the *pehar*. They are convinced they will find a way to summon me again and obtain more wishes. Their greed blinds them. I spent one hundred and forty-three years confined to the dark before one of my masters released me."

Jade decided to change the subject before they both became too depressed. He silently vowed to find Harris Quinton and beat the snot out of him. "You said you came from Thessaly. Have you always been a genie, or well, whatever you are?"

Archias's growl vibrated the cab, low, angry, and feral. Jade bit his lip. He had obviously hit on a sore topic for the man. Before he could take it back, though, Archias began to speak.

"I was a Myrmidon, a warrior of Thessaly. A curse was placed upon me, entombing me in the *pehar* nearly three thousand years ago."

"I'm sorry." It sounded grossly inadequate, even to Jade, but he didn't know what else to say.

"Why are you asking me all of these questions?" Archias didn't sound angry for once, but simply curious.

"Why not?" Jade's brow furrowed in confusion. He pulled to a stop in front of his little farmhouse and cut the

engine. "I imagine we'll be spending a lot of time together for the next few months. You'll need a place to stay, and I'm genuinely curious about you, now that I know you aren't some psycho that's going to kill me." He paused, glancing over at his companion. "You aren't going to kill me, right?"

Archias chuckled. It sounded rusty and unused, but still did strange things to Jade's insides. The smile brightened the man's face, making him appear more gorgeous than ever.

"No, I will not harm you," Archias answered softly. "You are a very unusual man..." He trailed off, arching an eyebrow in question.

"Jade Blevins."

Archias nodded as though he approved of the name. Jade decided he shouldn't feel as pleased as he did about that. "Yes, Jade Blevins, you are strange."

Jade felt his smile slip a notch. Yeah, he had heard that before. He had never been good enough for anyone, so why would an ancient warrior be any different? "So, I've been told," he mumbled.

He pushed out of the pickup and trudged up the creaking stairs of the porch to his front door. He pushed it open and stepped aside for Archias to enter first. "Well, here we are. It's small, only two bedrooms, but you're

welcome to the spare."

"You would have me sleep in your home?" Archias looked confused, shocked, and a little hopeful.

"Well, I'm sure as hell not sending you back into the bottle. You may be cursed to the damn thing, but until I make my final wish, you're free to do as you please."

"You are a kind man, Jade Blevins." Archias dipped his head in respect. "I feel honored to be welcomed as a guest in your home."

"Ah, quit with the mushy stuff. We're just two guys hanging out." Jade shrugged. "Well one guy, and one cursed genie, but ya know...semantics."

Archias tilted his head to the side and scowled. "Maybe not," Jade whispered under his breath. "Okay, so after seven years, I bet you're dying for a shower."

Archias's frown deepened. "I have heard of such things. I have even seen them, but have never used one. Heated water that falls from the wall." He shook his head, a gentle smile on his lips. "It sounds intriguing."

Jade slapped him on the shoulder, the highest point he could reach. Damn, the man was huge. "You'll love it. Come on, and I'll show you how it works."

CHAPTER TWO

Archias groaned as the hot water cascaded over his body. The last time someone allowed him to bathe, a bitterly cold stream served as his bath. This felt like heaven.

Jade showed him how to operate the knobs, turning them just so, to adjust the temperature of the water. *Amazing!* Soap in little blue bottles, another bottle of cleanser for his hair, and something that resembled a fluffy porcupine littered the enclosed space. Archias decided to forgo the porcupine.

Jade Blevins had to be the oddest master he had yet to meet. And he had had some pretty strange masters in his time. Men and women alike, that ranged from greedy and eccentric to plain mad. Jade did not appear to be any of those things.

He did not cower in fear or believe himself superior to Archias. Both of which he had come to expect. Jade was kind and generous, brave and... beautiful. Archias had never seen a more beautiful man.

Though he hated the time he spent inside the *pehar*, he preferred it to the ludicrous demands of the garish and ridiculous masters he had been forced to serve. Now he

found himself reluctant to return to his imprisonment.

Shaking his head, he quickly washed and rinsed his body. It would not do to dwell on things that he could not change. The edict had been clear and precise, cursing him to an eternity of servitude and loneliness.

Archias stepped out of the shower and dried himself, reveling in the amazing softness of the towel Jade left for him. Many things in the room he did not understand. It made him feel foolish and ignorant. Of course, he had seen such things over his many years, but had not felt the need to touch or examine them.

No, his masters had always insisted that he remain inside the *pehar*, hidden away from jealous eyes, or banished to his lamp because his owner feared him.

He shook his head again and opened the door to a wide-eyed Jade. "Oh, sorry," the little man murmured, looking away as his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "I just wanted to know if you were hungry."

"My nudity bothers you." Archias nodded and willed on his previous ensemble.

Jade let out a long breath and turned back to look at Archias head on. "That doesn't look very comfortable. Is that all you ever wear?"

"I normally do not wear clothes. A previous master preferred this look. Do you not like it?"

"I don't care what you wear as long as you wear something." He sounded frustrated, almost angry.

Odd.

"Let's eat and get some sleep. Tomorrow I'll introduce you to the wonders of silk and cotton. Deal?" Jade held out his hand.

Archias took the offered hand, squeezing it gently. A warm tingle started in his fingers and moved up his arm to spread throughout his entire body. "Deal."

After a quick meal of eggs and toast, Jade led him to the bedchamber. He waved a hand at the small bed. "It's not much, but here you are. Make yourself at home and get some sleep. We'll talk more in the morning."

Archias eyed the bed with unease. "I have never slept in one before."

"A bed?" Jade's soft blue eyes seemed in danger of popping out of his skull. "You've never slept in a bed before?"

Archias shook his head slowly. "I have used one to pleasure my masters, but never allowed to sleep there."

"Stop that!" Jade yelled. His face turned red, and his small hands fisted at his sides. "These people were assholes who took advantage of you. No matter what our situation is, you are still a person, and I'm not going to treat you like some fucking animal. I am *not* your master." Jade dropped

his head to rest his chin on his slim chest. "Is that part of your job description? Fucking whoever summons you from the bottle?"

Archias shook his head again, though Jade did not look at him. "No, but some have wished for it. Others have demanded it. I am a servant, a slave, but still a man with needs. Who am I to turn away a willing body?" He shrugged. "Most just fear me because of my gruesome appearance, though."

"What? You are fucking hot!" If possible, Jade's eyes went even wider, and he pressed his lips together so tightly they almost disappeared.

Archias scrunched his brows together in confusion. "I do not feel overly heated." Jade spoke so strangely sometimes.

The smaller man laughed softly. "I meant that I find you very attractive."

Archias considered this for a second, then laughed. Yes, Jade Blevins mystified him. "Thank you," he said softly. "Where I come from, a man of my size and girth would be deemed a monster. It was another part of my curse..." He trailed off, unwilling to travel further into the conversation.

Jade nodded and backed away. "I'm going to crash, man. Make yourself at home, and I'll see you in the

morning."

Archias undressed with just a thought and pulled back the blankets on the bed. He considered turning out the light, but centuries of darkness and isolation crept in on him, making him shudder. Leaving the light on, he crawled into bed, amazed at how soft and comfortable it felt beneath him.

His feet hung over the bottom edge, but it still beat the hell out of a cold stone floor, or worse, living as vapor inside the *pehar*.

* * * *

The first week went by quickly, and Archias slowly acclimated himself to his new, though temporary, life. He dressed simply, his wardrobe mostly consisting of jeans and white cotton t-shirts. Jade seemed to like him in such clothing, and he found he liked pleasing his new master.

When Jade smiled, it did funny things to Archias's groin. His prick jerked and swelled, pushing uncomfortably against his zipper every time Jade laughed.

"Have you thought about your remaining wishes?" he asked one morning as they sat sipping coffee on the front porch swing. Jade had introduced Archias to coffee his first morning free of his prison, and he could not get

enough.

"No, not really." Jade shook his head, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly. "Are you ready to be free of me already?"

Archias choked on his next sip, the coffee burning his throat and chest. "No," he gasped when he could breathe again. "I enjoy spending time with you." He felt his cheeks burn at the confession.

Jade winked. "I like spending time with you, too. I love hearing your stories about Thessaly, and your life back then." He paused, looking out over the field that stretched behind his house. "What do most people wish for?"

"Riches," Archias answered without hesitation.

Jade nodded. "I can see that. I don't really need money though. I have my own, and as you can see," he waved a hand behind him, indicating his home, "I don't really put it to much use."

Archias grinned. Jade's unassuming lifestyle was endearing. "What is it you long for, Jade Blevins?"

"To be accepted," he said. "I want to be good enough for once in my life. I want someone to want me, all of me, without trying to change me."

The tightening in his chest surprised Archias. He did not understand the feelings that bombarded him at Jade's statement. "I cannot make someone love you, Jade,

but I can give you someone who will worship you. I can provide someone devoted, loyal, and generous with her time and body."

"Well, that wouldn't do me any good." Jade smirked. "Unless this woman has a dick bigger than mine, we might have some problems."

"You prefer men?" Archias had guessed as much, but had not wanted to voice his suspicions until Jade confirmed them.

"Yep, since I was about fifteen. Does that make you uncomfortable?" Jade looked as though the answer really mattered to him.

"No," Archias answered honestly.

Jade went back to contemplating the tall grass beyond the porch. Archias went back to pondering the enigma that sat beside him. Jade was unlike anyone he had ever met. He would be sorry to see their time together end.

"I wish I had a bigger house," Jade said, still not looking at Archias. "More room, with a bed and furniture large enough for you to be comfortable."

Archias closed his eyes, the magic zinging through him, the wish granted before Jade finished speaking. Even the swing they sat on grew in size until it accommodated Archias easily. He opened his eyes and stared in shock at the man beside him.

"I am sorry. Once the words are spoken, I cannot control it." Archias felt guilty that the man had wasted one of his wishes on something so unimportant.

To his utter surprise, Jade turned to him laughing. "Why are you sorry? It's what I wished."

"But why?" Archias could not prevent himself from asking. "I will not be here long. Why would you waste one of your wishes on my comfort?" No one had ever done anything so thoughtful and unselfish for him.

Jade just shrugged. "I told you, there isn't much I want or need. If I can make your life more comfortable while you're here, it was worth the wish."

Something tingled in Archias's chest. His heart beat faster, and his stomach fluttered, though not uncomfortably. "You are a good man, Jade Blevins." Archias felt humbled. "Thank you," he whispered.

Jade thumped him on the shoulder with his tiny fist. "What did I say about all the mushy stuff? It's not a big deal, man, but you're welcome."

He stood from the swing and stretched, his lean muscles bunching and lengthening under his clothes. Saliva pooled in Archias's mouth, and he ached to reach out and run his fingers over the smooth skin peeking out below the hem of Jade's shirt.

"Come on." Jade held out a hand to help him from

his seat. Archias reached out hesitantly. He stifled a gasp when their hands met and electricity sprinted up his arm. Jade's nostrils flared and he hissed—the only indication he had felt the connection.

Archias levered himself to his feet and stood towering over the man he called master. "Where are we going?" Not that it mattered. He was quickly beginning to realize that he would follow Jade anywhere.

"I want to see my new wish." Jade bounced like a small child, his bottom lip clenched between his teeth, his beautiful blue eyes dancing with excitement.

Archias smiled. His heart felt light and buoyant for the first time in centuries. "Lead the way, Master."

Jade scowled at him. "None of that. You know I hate that shit."

And he did. Archias grinned again and nodded his head. "Lead the way, *Jade*."

The house looked much the same, though slightly bigger. The ceilings reached higher, the doorways a bit wider. The furniture, however, had grown to incredible size. Sometimes Archias forgot just how gargantuan he actually looked.

"Awesome." Jade beamed up at him. He grabbed Archias's hand and tugged him along through the living room. "I want to see the bedroom and the shower." He

pulled a little more insistently. "Get the lead out and move your ass, Archias."

His cock twitched at the way Jade spoke his name. No one ever called him by his given name. The way Jade said it, though annoyed, flowed over him like a soft caress.

"Holy shit!" Jade exclaimed when he walked into his bedroom. "This is fantastic!" He released Archias's hand, ran to the mammoth-sized bed, and dove onto it.

He rolled around, laughing and giggling, then pushed to his feet in the middle of the bed and started jumping. He whooped and hollered, his joy ringing throughout the bedroom. Once again, he held out a hand to Archias. "Come jump with me."

Archias shook his head. "No," he answered. Though he enjoyed seeing Jade happy, he had never done anything so foolish in his life.

"Oh, don't be such a spoilsport. Get your ass up here. It's fun."

"No," Archias said firmly. The only bouncing he wanted to do on that bed did not include clothes or being upright.

"Archias of Thessaly, you are a big coward." Jade stopped bouncing and cocked an eyebrow. "Chicken," he sang. He started jumping again, flapping his arms like an idiot, clucking like a damn hen. "Chicken, chicken,

chicken." Then he clucked again.

Archias tackled the smaller man mid-jump, pinning him to the bed in one swift move. "I am not a coward."

Jade's eyes went wide, and he shook his head quickly. "No, no, I'm sorry. I was only joking."

Archias felt his heart sink at the terrified look on the man's face. He slowly moved off of Jade's body and sat on the edge of the bed, his face buried in his hands. Maybe he should just go back to the *pehar*. He did not fit here, did not belong.

A gentle touch smoothed over his shoulder and down his back. "Hey, what's wrong?" The concern in Jade's voice nearly had Archias sobbing.

"You are afraid of me," he mumbled through his fingers. "I did not mean to frighten you. I would never harm you, Jade."

The hand left his back, and Archias felt more alone than ever. Then suddenly, Jade knelt in front of him. His slender fingers wrapped around Archias's wrists and pulled his hands from his face.

"I am not afraid of you," he said around a smile. "You promised you wouldn't hurt me, and I trust you." He reached up, slowly, tentatively, and brushed his fingers over Archias's cheek. "I just worried that I had offended you." The fingers trailed up to push back a lock of his silver

hair. "You were a great warrior once. I don't believe you have a cowardly bone in your body."

Archias melted into the touch, nuzzling his face against Jade's palm. How long had it been since someone had touched him so openly, with such warmth and compassion? "I was not always this size, though people still feared me," he said without thought.

"How did you become this big?" Jade's quiet words calmed him. He never spoke of how he became trapped and imprisoned. Never.

"It is a long story. A story for another time." He wanted to tell Jade his secrets, but he did not want to lose the sweet touch of Jade's hands on his body. Once Jade learned the truth, he would be disgusted, appalled, and terrified.

"You don't have to tell me," Jade said, continuing to speak soothingly. "Your hair is so beautiful." His fingers combed through it, fanning it out and letting it fall back to Archias's shoulders. "So soft and silky. I love the way it shines in the light."

Archias closed his eyes, his emotions making it difficult for him to speak. "My hair was once as dark as night."

"I think I prefer this." Archias opened his eyes to Jade's smiling face. "And your eyes, they are

mesmerizing." His fingers outlined the bones, softly skirting under Archias's eyes. "I don't think I have ever seen this color blue before. It's almost teal, but not quite. Gorgeous," he whispered.

Before Archias could take in his words, Jade did the most amazing thing. He rose up on his knees, cupped Archias's jaw, and kissed him.

CHAPTER THREE

Jade moaned softly when his lips pillowed against Archias's full mouth. He had been fighting his desire all week, ruthlessly beating it back with the stick of reason. He knew it could never work between them. In a few weeks, his Greek warrior would be gone, and Jade would be alone once again.

When Archias softened, his lips parting on a gasp, and Jade slipped his tongue past the man's teeth, he ceased to care. He had never met another man he wanted as much as he did Archias. Instead of worrying about the future, he would live in the here and now, gratefully accepting whatever the man could give him.

He swept his tongue across Archias's, groaning at the taste. He explored and pillaged, laying siege to the man before him. Who needed happy endings when *right now* felt so damn good?

All too soon, Archias eased away, placing his massive hand on Jade's chest to keep him from following. "This will not end well, Jade." He looked sad, a deep longing in his teal eyes.

Jade understood all too well. "I know. Let's just enjoy each other and worry about everything else when the

time comes."

Archias shook his head. "This cannot be."

Jade closed his eyes and felt his heart fall to his stomach. For once, just for a little while, he wanted to be enough for someone. He wanted someone to take a chance on him—even this three thousand year old magical warrior. "Okay," he mouthed when he opened his eyes.

He rose slowly to his feet and backed away. Something inside the Greek pulled at Jade, tethering him to the man. He didn't understand it, didn't know where the feeling came from. Watching Archias discover things that Jade took for granted every day had him seeing the world differently. Even something as simple as a television made Archias's eyes light up in wonder and fascination.

With each new day, every new discovery they shared, Jade felt himself falling a little more. Maybe he had been alone for too damn long.

"Jade." Archias reached for him. "I admit that I want you unbearably, but it is wrong. I am... dirty, vile... tainted. You are a good man and deserve better than I can give you."

Jade's heart broke as he listened to Archias speak. The man truly believed himself unworthy of compassion or caring. He wanted to say something, anything, to take the pain and dejection from his eyes, but he couldn't.

He swallowed the lump forming in his throat. He needed to get out before the water works started and he blubbered all over Archias like a baby. "I'm going out for a while." Even he could hear the strain in his voice. "I'll be back later."

Jade hurried from the room, grabbed his keys from the table beside the front door, and practically ran to his truck. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed as he sped along the gravel road.

"Lo," a sleepy voice answered.

"Hey, man. I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"No, no, it's fine. I haven't heard from you in a while. What's wrong?"

Jade smiled. Emery always knew. Best friends since he'd beaten the pants off of Jade in a pool tournament six years before, Emery Nicholson had stuck beside him through everything.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. I'm almost to town. You want to grab some breakfast?" Jade hoped he didn't come off needy and desperate. He just wanted a little bit of normalcy after his week of the unreal.

"Yeah, sure, let me get dressed, and I'll meet you at Norma's."

Jade let out a breath in relief. He knew he could always count on Emery. "I'll see you there. Thanks, Em."

Emery grumbled something Jade couldn't make out and hung up the phone.

A few minutes later, Jade pulled into the parking lot of Norma's Café and killed the engine. He strolled into the diner and grabbed a booth near the window where he could watch for his friend. Emery didn't disappoint. Only five minutes after Jade had taken his seat, Emery's black SUV pulled into the space next to Jade's truck.

Jade watched him exit the vehicle and stalk toward the diner's entrance. Six foot three and built like a brick shithouse, Emery exuded power. His dark blond hair brushed against his shoulders in messy waves, and the man had a constant five o'clock shadow that made him look tough and unapproachable.

Jade knew him to be a big teddy bear. The man had one of the biggest hearts on the planet, and Jade felt lucky to call him a friend.

He stood when Emery approached the booth and gave his best friend a brief hug. He normally didn't do public displays of affection, but he needed to feel close to someone, if only for a second.

Emery hugged him back, thumping him on the shoulder, and pulled away. He folded his large frame into the booth and grinned broadly. "What's going on with you, man? You look like someone shot your dog."

"I won a genie at a pool game," Jade blurted. He closed his eyes and groaned. Friend or not, Emery was going to have him committed. He opened his eyes to see Emery gazing at him intently.

"Go on," he said cautiously.

Jade recounted the pool game, the ride home, and the first wish. He waved a hand toward the window and his truck parked beyond for proof. He told his friend everything he knew about Archias, about the second wish, and even the disastrous kiss in his bedroom.

"So, I ran. I called you and here we are," Jade concluded. "Are you going to lock me up now?"

"It sounds crazy, I'll give you that." Emery placed his elbows on the table and folded his hands together, interlocking his fingers. "I believe you."

Jade nearly choked on his own spit. "What?"

"Jade, I have never known you to lie or make up shit. You are one of the most grounded and down to earth people I have ever met. If you say it's true..." He shrugged. "Then I believe you."

"So, what do I do?" Jade felt overwhelmed that Emery trusted him, but that's why he had called the man in the first place.

"Do you care about him?" Straight to the gut.

Jade nodded. "More than I should after only a

week."

Emery laughed. "Who said there's a time requisite on love? My dad told me he fell in love with my mother the moment he laid eyes on her, before he had even spoken a single word to her. He asked her to marry him two days later." Emery smiled fondly. "She said yes, they married within a week of meeting each other, and were together for forty-two years before Mom died."

Jade still remembered how frail Emery's mother looked during her last days before the cancer claimed her. The doctors said a stroke killed Mr. Nicholson less than a year later, but Jade knew the man had died of a broken heart. "That's a great story, and you know I loved your folks, but I'm not in love with Archias. I feel sorry for him. I like him, yes, but it's not love." Jade sighed. "I just want to help him. You should hear the way he talks about being trapped inside that damn bottle."

"Then wish him free," Emery said simply.

"Can I do that? I mean, if that were possible, wouldn't he have told me?" Jade felt dumbstruck. Could it really be that easy? He doubted it.

"I don't know. That's how it works in the books. You could ask him."

"I want him to be free, but at the same time, I worry about him. He doesn't know much about the world. He's

been stuck in the dark, literally, for thousands of years. He almost jumped out of his skin when I flipped on the garbage disposal the other day." Jade shook his head and smiled at the memory.

"You said you have two wishes left?" When Jade nodded, Emery said, "Then use one to make sure he has what he needs, and the last to set him free. It doesn't sound as though you really want the wishes anyway."

"I don't. I have what I need, and material things don't have much meaning to me." Jade laughed at the absurdity of it all. "I have to be the only person on the planet to find a genie and not want fame, fortune, and sex slaves."

Emery joined in his laughter. "Yeah, you probably are, but that's what makes you special. It's not a bad thing, Jade."

Jade waved a hand. "Oh, I know, but you have to admit it's funny."

Emery nodded. "So, do I get to meet him?"

Jade hesitated. Emery looked like every gay man's wet dream. Though he didn't exactly know if Archias leaned that way, he certainly hadn't rejected the kiss Jade had bestowed on him. He didn't know if he wanted to compete with his best friend for Archias's attentions.

Jade looked down at his thin chest, his scrawny

arms resting on the table. He had always been small. No matter how much he worked out or how much he ate, he just couldn't gain weight. Everything about him screamed *ordinary*. At five foot ten, he stood at average height. His hair fell limply to his chin, a boring, dull brown. He thought that maybe his eyes were kind of nice, but nothing to write home about.

What did it matter? Once he wished Archias free, he couldn't keep the man prisoner in his home. Archias would meet someone and forget all about Jade soon enough. "Want to go now?" he asked his friend.

"Hell yeah," Emery said excitedly. His smile made him even more handsome, and Jade's insides shriveled. Of all the men that he could have befriended, why did it have to be the only sexy gay man in the room that day?

Jade nodded and climbed out of the booth. His stomach grumbled, reminding him that they had ushered the waitress away without even ordering coffee. He wondered if Archias had found something to eat. Hell, he hoped the man hadn't burned his house down.

The idea of something happening to Archias quickened Jade's steps. "I'll meet you there," he called over his shoulder. "If there is still a *there* to meet you at," he added under his breath.

* * * *

Archias jumped up from the sofa when he heard Jade's pickup pull up in front of the house. He had to see him, to know that Jade was okay. He had berated himself repeatedly for letting him leave in the first place.

Jade's taste still lingered on his lips, and he ached to feel the man's mouth against his once more. It made him a selfish bastard, and he knew it. He had no right to want someone as pure and gentle as Jade Blevins. Perhaps he should return to his prison until Jade summoned him to grant a wish.

Archias threw open the door and froze. A low growl rumbled in his chest, all thoughts of the *pehar* forgotten. A large man walked toward Jade and slung his arm around his shoulders. He smiled and laughed, leaning much too close, his lips mere inches from Jade's delicate ear.

The man laughed again at something Jade said and leaned even closer to kiss him on the cheek.

Archias saw red.

He leapt off the porch and reached the stranger in three strides. Jerking him away from Jade, he held him off the ground by his shirt collar. "You do not touch him," he snarled.

"Whoa! Hey man, what the fuck?"

Jade's hand landed on his chest, and his soft voice penetrated the fog of rage. "Archias, put him down. He is my friend."

Archias looked between the stranger and Jade. He slowly lowered the big man to the ground and stepped away. "He should not touch you in such a way."

Jade turned his head away, but Archias saw the corner of his mouth turn up in a smile. "Probably not, but that's just how he is." Jade turned back to him, his eyes bright and shining. "This is my best friend, Emery Nicholson." He looked at his friend. "Emery, this is my genie, Archias of Thessaly."

Both men nodded and looked each other up and down. Deciding to ignore him, Archias returned his attention to Jade. "Have you eaten?"

Jade shook his head. "Nope." He took Archias's hand and led him back into the house. "I'll make us some breakfast, and we can talk."

Emery followed them inside, but kept a respectful distance. Archias liked him more already. Jade pushed him toward one of the kitchen chairs. "Pancakes sound good?"

He nodded, though he had no idea what pancakes were. He would eat anything Jade cooked for him. "Thank you," he said just loud enough for Jade to hear him across the room.

Jade turned and blessed him with a dazzling smile. "No problem, big guy. Is there anything you like in particular? I'll make you anything you want."

Archias shook his head, ridiculously touched by the sentiment. "Pancakes are fine."

"Gag," Emery coughed in his hand.

He turned to glare at him. "You do not like pancakes?" The man would not get away with his rudeness to Jade.

Emery smiled at him. "I love pancakes, and Jade makes the best. I was simply referring to the goo-goo eyes you two are making at each other."

Archias did not know what that meant, but it sounded dirty. "You will not disrespect him."

Emery held up his hands in surrender. "No, I won't. Jade is my best friend, like a brother, and I think a lot of him. I would never hurt him."

Archias considered him before nodding. He could not doubt the truth in the man's voice. "Then we have an understanding."

"You two quit growling at each other." Jade rolled his eyes as he set two mugs of coffee down in front of them. "Two sugars and lots of cream," he murmured to Archias. "Just the way you like it."

Emery snorted, and Archias turned to glare at him

again. "Do you have something to say?"

Emery shook his head and did not speak.

Archias sat in silence as well, watching Jade move around the kitchen, his mouth watering from the sweet smells that wafted to him. Jade brought him a plate and a bottle of some thick, brown liquid.

"Eat up." He popped open the lid on the sappy goo and poured it over little disks of bread. He used a fork to cut off a side of the stacked bread. Spearing it with the tines, he brought the dripping concoction to Archias's mouth. "Open up."

Archias opened immediately and let the utensil slip through his lips. He closed his eyes and groaned at the first taste of sugary goodness. He had never tasted anything as wonderful, other than maybe Jade himself.

"It is delicious." He moaned in pleasure. "These are pancakes?"

Jade nodded happily. "Pancakes with maple syrup." He handed over the fork and went back to bring another plate to his friend.

Archias felt a little jealous that Jade had not made the special treat just for him. He knew Jade was a generous and giving man, though. It would be rude not to feed his friend, and Jade did not behave rudely.

Jade sat down next to him at the table with his own

plate, and the room fell silent but for the sounds of forks clinking against the plates.

Archias would miss this. Breakfast, sipping coffee with Jade on the swing, showers, beds, daytime drama on the television, and all of the other marvelous things Jade had shared with him.

Of all those things, he would miss the man sitting next to him the most.

CHAPTER FOUR

"I wanted to ask you something," Jade said, pushing his food around on his plate.

Archias smiled a little. In the four weeks he had spent with Jade, all important conversations had been held in the kitchen. He assumed this would be no different. "Yes?"

"Can I wish you free?" The words came in such a rush that he nearly missed them.

No one had ever wanted to give up a wish to set him free. Warmth spread through his body, but the cold quickly returned. As much as he longed to be free, it would not be as simple as a wish.

"Yes and no," he answered finally. "Yes, you must wish me free, but it must be done out of love." Archias did not want to talk about this in front of Emery, and it seemed the man never left anymore. He felt not quite such animosity toward him any longer, but he still did not much like the guy.

Jade seemed to pick up on his distress because he turned to Emery and nodded toward the doorway. "Get lost."

"I'm gonna go see if the game's on, anyway." Emery

stood and left the room.

Jade turned back to Archias. "Go on."

"I killed many people as a Thessalian warrior," Archias began. "I did not enjoy killing, but nor did it cause me sleeplessness." He paused, fighting back his grief and guilt. "One night, I caught my sister in the arms of a satyr. I believed them to be filthy beasts, undeserving of affection, and unworthy of my sister's attention. My sister begged for my understanding, saying she loved the creature."

"You killed him," Jade said.

"Yes," Archias whispered. "It was an easy fight, and I felt justified at the blood on my hands." He closed his eyes, remembering the tears on his sister's face, the way she fell upon her lover's body and wept. "The satyrs called upon their god, Dionysus, to avenge their fallen brother."

He opened his eyes and looked into Jade's beautiful face. "Though I had slain her lover, my sister pleaded for leniency. I was bound to the *pehar*, cursed as immortal. The god decreed that I would live out eternity bringing others happiness, but never finding my own. Only a pure, unselfish heart could set me free with a wish, and by their love."

"You said you were changed?" Jade spoke softly, his eyes shimmering with tears.

"As further punishment, and because it humored

him, Dionysus transformed me into a giant." Archias chuckled darkly. "After all, who could love a monster?"

"What happens if someone wishes you free, but doesn't love you?"

"I will be trapped inside the *pehar* forever."

Jade moved slowly, rising from his chair and positioning himself to stand between Archias's knees. He held Archias's face in both hands and looked him in the eye. "You are not a monster, Archias of Thessaly. You are beautiful. You have paid long enough for your sins." He dipped his head and pressed their mouths together.

Archias's arms shot out instinctively and wrapped around Jade's slim torso. He dragged the man closer, devouring his mouth, until Jade straddled his thighs. For weeks after the first kiss, he had kept his distance and steadfastly denied his desire for the smaller man. All of his pent-up lust came rushing out, and the sweep of Jade's tongue inside his mouth fueled his passion.

He broke away, gasping for breath, and rested his forehead against Jade's. "Oh *draga*, how I want you."

"Then have me." Jade kissed his lips again, soft and sweet. "I want you, Archias. I've wanted you since the first night you popped out of your little bottle and tricked out my truck."

"How could I deceive your vehicle?" Archias

mumbled around Jade's lips.

Jade laughed softly, his breath fanning over Archias's face. "Never mind," he said, then went back to nibbling at Archias's lips. "Please."

"You do not fear me," Archias said in awe. "You would have me?"

"Oh, you can't imagine the ways I've fantasized about having you." Jade licked down his jaw and along the column of his throat. "I'm not afraid of you. I find you very attractive, Archias. You are the sexiest thing I have ever seen."

Archias groaned, his prick filling quickly, begging to be touched and stroked. Jade's small hands slipped under his shirt, caressing the skin on his stomach. "Let me touch you," he whispered into Archias's ear.

"Yes," he breathed. "I want to see you." He pulled Jade's soft cotton shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor. "Beautiful," he murmured reverently. Leaning forward, he pressed his lips to the soft skin over Jade's heart. His hands roamed, mapping the lean muscles, learning the dips and valleys of his lover's body.

Jade fumbled with the buttons on Archias's shirt, growling in frustration. He smiled at the man's eagerness and decided to take pity on him. Archias closed his eyes and willed his clothing away.

Jade gasped. "Can you do that with mine?"

Archias grinned. With just a thought, Jade's clothes disappeared as well. "My magic is limited. I can do simple things such as this, but nothing elaborate unless you wish it."

Jade gave his hips a sharp swivel, grinning mischievously. Archias hissed when his naked cock rubbed against Jade's leaking erection. "This will do," Jade said with a wink. "God, you're gorgeous."

He quickly set to work, torturing Archias with his mouth and hands, licking, touching, sucking, and biting every inch of skin he could reach. He latched on to one of Archias's nipples, flicking his tongue across it and nipping it with his teeth.

"Have you ever been with a man before?" Jade asked around the pebbled nub.

Archias couldn't think. His skin burned, his mouth felt dry as the desert. His balls ached, and his prick jerked with every touch of Jade's tongue. "Yes," he finally managed to grunt.

Jade's hand slithered between their nude bodies, and his elegant fingers wrapped around Archias's needy shaft. "Yes," Archias hissed again. His head dropped back on his shoulders, and soft whimpers escaped his mouth. "Many masters have required I please them. Some even wishing

it."

Jade's fingers stilled, and he sat up to look at him. Archias opened his eyes and swallowed hard. Jade's eyes narrowed, and he leaned up until their noses almost touched. "I am not your master, and you do not have to *please* me," he growled. "If you don't want to be with me, I won't force you."

His little man had quite the temper. Archias smiled to himself. "Do not worry, *draga*. I want you terribly." Jade did not look pacified. Archias sighed. "I did not want to be with those other men. I have never preferred males."

"And now?" Jade's eyes narrowed further until they were almost slits.

"I prefer you."

* * * *

"Good answer," Jade whispered around his grin. His grip tightened on the enormous rod in his hand, and he stroked Archias slowly, rewarding him.

Archias growled, the sound sexy and dangerous. Jade's cock jumped, leaking clear drops of pre-cum over Archias's rippled stomach. As much as he wanted the stunning man beneath him, he wanted this first time together to be perfect for the warrior.

Sliding down Archias's massive thighs, Jade slipped to the tiled floor, kneeling between his lover's legs. *Hot damn!* The prick in his hand looked good enough to eat. So thick, the crown a perfect mushroom shape, engorged and weeping. Thick veins ran along the impressive length, pulsing with the giant's rapid heartbeat.

"What about your friend?" Archias asked uncertainly.

Jade's heart tried to crawl up through his throat. His worst fear had come to life. For three weeks, Emery had been spending more and more time around Jade's place. He had not caught any indication that Archias wanted his friend in that way. For a moment he had hoped, just this once...

"I'll get him," Jade mumbled, his nose burning with the effort to hold back his tears. He started to rise to his feet, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"I do not want Emery," Archias said vehemently. "I did not want him to walk in and find us in a compromising position."

Jade's heart slowly descended to where it should be and picked up in rhythm. "I don't care." To emphasize his point, he dove forward and wrapped his lips around the head of Archias's jutting cock.

Archias roared, his hips jerking forward, pushing

his dick to the back of Jade's throat. Jade quickly backed off and wrapped his hand around the base to keep from choking. He worked the slippery shaft like a pro, moaning around the turgid flesh like a ten-dollar whore.

He used his other hand to cup Archias's balls and give them a light squeeze. Archias's guttural cry echoed around the kitchen. His muscles tensed and locked as he unloaded into Jade's mouth.

It had to be the shortest blowjob in history, but also the most satisfying. Jade loved that he had made the huge warrior lose control so quickly. He licked the man clean before he sat back to admire his work.

Strong arms wrapped around him and lifted him to the table. Archias's lips crashing down on his quickly muffled Jade's cry of surprise. Archias took his mouth hungrily, roughly. His hands held a bruising grip on Jade's hips as he rocked his still hard cock against Jade's throbbing prick.

Long, warm fingers wrapped around his shaft, stroking him, boiling his blood and pushing his desire to a fever pitch. Jade moaned into Archias's mouth, reaching out blindly to find something to hold him to the earth. His head spun, and his balls drew up tight to his body. Sweat beaded across his skin, and electricity rocketed down his spine to pool and burn in his sac.

"Come for me, my *draga*." Archias panted against his lips. His mouth moved down Jade's neck, and he bit roughly at the tender skin between throat and shoulder. "Let me feel your pleasure."

Archias stroked him faster, sucking at the skin behind Jade's ear. "Let me burn with it. Now."

A swift twist around the head of his cock, and Jade erupted. He yelled his release, his body shuddering as his seed blasted from his slit to paint his chest and stomach. He sagged back onto the table, too weak to move. "Amazing."

"I am *so* not cleaning this shit up." Emery's voice came from the far side of the kitchen.

Archias moved at lightning speed, turning to Emery and shielding Jade's nude body from view. Jade sat up slowly, wrapping his legs around Archias's thighs and his arms around the man's lean waist. He peeked around the heavily muscled torso and smiled at his best friend.

Plates, food, silverware, the saltshaker, a couple of cups, and even the butter lay scattered across the floor. Jade didn't even remember hearing the plates shatter.

Noticing Emery's gaze had drifted to Archias's groin, Jade quickly cupped his man's privates in his hand and glared at his friend. "If you like having your balls fully attached, I suggest you look elsewhere."

Emery lifted his eyes slowly and grinned at Jade.

"I'm still not cleaning this shit up."

* * * *

"You don't want to grip it too tight. You want it to slide smoothly through your hands. Yeah, just like that." Jade beamed at his lover.

Kitchen cleaned, a quick shower, and change of clothes, and Jade itched to get a little chalk on his hands. He had been so busy with Archias, he hadn't played a game of pool since the night he won his hunky warrior.

So, they made their way down to Jade's basement, which doubled as a game room—pool table, darts, television, and even an old-school pinball machine. Jade watched Archias set up his next shot. He muttered instructions to him, moving his hips and adjusting his grip, but really just looking for any excuse to touch the man.

The cue ball went wide, amazingly missing every other ball on the table, and sank into the corner pocket. Archias groaned and straightened to his full and impressive height. "Why do you like this game?"

Jade continued to smile. "It's really fun once you get the hang of it. You just have to practice."

"Why haven't you signed up for the tourney over in Jacksonville?" Emery yelled from across the room, his eyes

still glued to the flat screen.

"Oh, hell, when is that?" Jade couldn't believe he had become so engrossed with Archias that he completely forgot about the biggest pool tournament of the year.

"Four weeks."

"When is the entry fee due?"

"Tomorrow." Emery finally looked at him and smiled. "You in?"

"You know I am. Why the fuck didn't you remind me sooner?"

"Slipped my mind, bro." Emery shrugged innocently.

"Yeah, uh huh, you just didn't want me to enter because you know I'll kick your ass this year."

"Dream on." Emery laughed. A shiny red apple came sailing across the basement toward Jade's head.

Before he could even react, a huge hand shot out in front of him, catching the apple and squeezing it until juice burst from inside it. Archias glared at Emery, grinding the apple in his hand to a pulp.

Emery rolled his eyes. "Dude, I was just playing. It wouldn't have hurt him. Much," he added after a short pause.

"Jade, why on earth do you insist on befriending this barbarian?" Archias dropped the apple to the floor and

wiped his hands on his jeans.

"Oh ho," Emery called, climbing to his feet. "You're one to talk!" He pointed to the apple mush on the floor. "Eat any children lately?"

"Enough!" Jade shouted. "You." He pointed at Emery. "Go watch the game and stop being a dick." He turned to Archias. "You, come with me."

Archias grumbled, but followed Jade obediently up the stairs. "He should show you more respect."

"He's not being disrespectful," he said with a sigh. "Didn't you have friends in Thessaly? Did you guys rough each other up? Joke around or make fun of each other?"

"This is different."

Jade decided to let it go. "Come on, we're going to run in to Jacksonville so I can lay down the money for the tournament next month."

"Why do you need to enter the tournament? Do you not have enough money?" Archias looked concerned.

"Yeah, I have plenty of money, but that's not what this is about for me. I just love to play. I want to be the best. You have to beat the best to *be* the best."

"It makes you happy."

"Yeah, it makes me happy." He grabbed his keys and yelled back down the stairs to let his friend know they were leaving. "Maybe we can grab something to eat and

catch a movie while we're there."

Archias bit his lip, looking concerned again. He nodded slowly. "If that is what you want."

Jade stepped in front of his lover and placed a hand on his chest. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"I do not know much about your world. I do not want to embarrass you," Archias admitted.

Jade melted. He pushed closer to Archias and motioned for him to lean down. Nearly two feet shorter, Jade couldn't even stretch his arms up and around the man's neck without a little assistance. When Archias bent, Jade pressed their lips together and sighed.

"You could never embarrass me." And he meant it. He had debated over Emery's suggestion to wish for Archias to know more about modern day America. Ultimately, Jade enjoyed teaching Archias about the world, watching his big man's face light up.

He pulled away and just stared. Archias looked otherworldly in his beauty. The huge, godlike creature should be the one embarrassed. No one that gorgeous should have to be seen with someone that looked like Jade. "Can you change the way I look?"

Archias stood straight and frowned at him. "Yes, if you wish it, but why?"

"Well, look at me." Jade moved his hand up and

down his thin torso. "I'm nothing to look at. And you, well you're breathtaking. I just want to be good enough for you."

Archias's eyes softened, and he kissed the top of Jade's head before cupping his cheeks in both hands. "I adore the way you look. Everything about you makes me burn and leaves me hard and aching. I want you how you are. Please, do not ask me to change you, *draga*."

"Okay." Jade's throat clogged and tears blurred his vision. "Thank you."

Archias kissed his forehead. "So selfless in your wishes. Do you not desire anything for yourself?"

"Maybe," Jade said as he smiled. "I'll think about it." He could only think of one thing that he really wanted for himself, but he wasn't ready to ask for it.

* * * *

"Hel-lo," Jade sang into the phone. Spending time with Archias always put him in a good mood. Once he had cut through the macho façade, he quickly found that Archias had a very sweet side to him. He held a childlike wonder about the world, and Jade loved introducing him to new things.

"Hey, baby. I've missed you."

Jade's mood instantly plummeted. "What do you

want Quinton? And how the hell did you get my number?"

"I asked one of the guys at the bar," Quinton replied calmly. Jade guessed it was plausible, but he seriously doubted it. He gave his number out to very few people.

"Okay, so what do you want?"

Quinton sighed softly. "I just want to talk to you. I know I can come on a little strong, but when I see something I want, I go for it with both hands. And I want you, Jade."

Some of Jade's anger faded, replaced swiftly by suspicion. "Does this have anything to do with Archias?"

"Who?" Quinton sounded confused and a little annoyed.

"The bottle I won off you the other night. The genie's name is Archias. Didn't you ever ask him his name?" Now, Jade was annoyed.

"No, I didn't. I'm sorry. You're right, I should have asked."

"So, is that why you're calling? You know he can't grant you any more wishes."

"No, no, I know that. I don't care about the bottle. I just wanted to get to know you." Quinton sounded sincere, but Jade still had his doubts. "Will you have dinner with me? We can talk about your genie. I'm sure you have questions."

Jade thought it over for a minute before answering. "We can have dinner, but that's it. I do have some questions. Where do you want to meet?"

"I can come get you," Quinton said, sounding hopeful.

"No, I would prefer to meet you. Just tell me when and where."

Quinton named a place about halfway between Jade's house and Jacksonville. "Can you meet me tonight around eight?"

"Yeah, I'll be there." Jade flipped his phone shut.

* * * *

"What would you like to eat, baby? Anything you want. It's on me." Quinton peered over his menu and smiled brightly.

"I'm not hungry. I already had dinner with Archias. What I want is for you to stop calling me baby." Ten minutes into their... date, and Jade already knew it had been a mistake.

Quinton nodded slowly and lowered his menu. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Yeah, coffee sounds great." Jade waited silently while Quinton waved the server over and ordered two

coffees. "So, what did you want to talk about?" he asked once the server left.

"If I'm not mistaken, you're the one with the questions."

"Why the leather, dude? I mean, you really get off on having him parade around in that getup?"

Quinton's brows drew together, and he frowned. "I didn't force him to wear leather. In fact..." He trailed off, leering at Jade. "I preferred him naked."

Jade's jaw almost hit the table. "Did you fuck him?"

"Don't be silly." Quinton waved a hand in dismissal, but his eyes held a wicked glint. "He fucked me."

Jade felt his insides boil. He wanted to dive across the table and attack the man like some animal straight from the Discovery Channel. He wanted to pin Quinton beneath him, whip his dick out, and compare sizes. He wanted to snarl and spit, and scream, "Mine!"

He did none of those things. He didn't know where the feeling came from, and furthermore, he didn't care to examine it. He had only known Archias for little more than a month. He held no claim to the man. Even if he did, he certainly had no right to feel jealous over someone from the warrior's past.

"So, why didn't you pass on the bottle after your last wish?" he asked calmly. He gave himself a mental pat on

the back for not letting on to his mini-breakdown.

"He's special. Though my time with him was short, I can't deny that. I didn't trust anyone to take care of him. Then I met you, and I knew you would be the one."

"*Him* has a name, you know." Jade scowled. Damn, and he'd been doing so well.

"Whatever. Enough about the genie." Quinton reached under the table and squeezed Jade's knee. "Come home with me."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, not this again!" Jade shoved Quinton's hand off him and yanked his leg away. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I came here to find out more about Archias, but it's blatantly obvious that you never took the time to get to know him."

He started to rise from his chair, but a hand on his arm stopped him. "Don't go. I'm sorry. I'll be nice and keep my hands to myself. It's just hard to control myself around you. You have no idea how much I want you."

Jade looked pointedly at the hand still on his arm. Quinton smiled and removed it slowly, letting his fingers trail over Jade's skin. "Just sit down and have coffee with me."

Jade blew out an irritated breath, but remained seated. "Quit fucking with me, and just tell me what you want."

"I already told you what I want."

"And I don't buy it. Not to stroke your already inflated ego, but you're an attractive guy. Men like you don't go for guys like me."

Quinton looked honestly confused. "What do you mean? Jade, I think you're sexy as hell. Why won't you give me a chance to prove it to you?"

Why not?

Quinton was cocky, often crossing the line to obnoxious. They had very little in common. They didn't really need to talk to heat up the sheets, though. Other than the impromptu affair in the kitchen the other day, it had been a long dry spell since that blowjob in Atlanta.

Still, something held him back. Jade didn't have to search too long to figure out exactly what it was. *Something* came in the form of a huge Greek warrior, with rippling muscles, silver blond hair, and dreamy eyes.

"I'm done." Jade stood from his seat and pulled out his wallet. He laid a five on the table and turned to leave.

"That's it? You're just leaving?" Quinton threw down another bill and hurried to catch up.

"Yep," Jade said over his shoulder. "There's nothing left to say." He made it out of the restaurant and turned to face Quinton. "Look, I don't know what you're after, but I'm not the guy that's going to give it to you. Don't call me

again."

He left the cowboy standing in the parking lot, staring after him.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Archias, let's go!"

Archias walked out of Jade's private bath and frowned. "No need to yell. I am ready." He held his arms out and turned in a circle. "Do I look presentable?"

Jade's mouth fell open, and he took an involuntary step forward. Archias's dark, painted on jeans and charcoal button-down over a simple black t-shirt caused Jade's prick to stand up and take notice.

"Yum," he said appreciatively before he could stop himself. Two weeks since their little episode in the kitchen, and they had done nothing more than a lot of kissing, petting, and stroking each other off.

Archias continued to spend the nights in his own room, leaving Jade to sleep alone. He didn't know how much more he could take.

"You approve?" Archias asked with a wicked gleam in his eye.

"Oh yeah." Jade crooked his finger. "Come here, you."

Archias complied, stalking toward him, smirking the entire way. "Is there something I can do for you, *Master?*"

"You can get out of those clothes and fuck me into tomorrow."

Archias's eyes widened and his nostrils flared. He jerked back and turned his head away. "We need to leave."

"Why!" Jade yelled. "I want you, and I know you want me. Why won't you touch me?"

"I do touch you," Archias said.

"I want you to take me to bed and fuck my ass so hard that I feel it for weeks. I know you want the same thing. I can see it in your eyes every time you look at me." Jade's voice dropped to a whisper. "You said I was good enough."

"Look at me!" Archias roared. "I am a monster, a freak of nature! I am double your size, and I could crush you without thought. I promised I would never harm you." He breathed heavily, his chest heaving, but in his eyes, Jade could see the terror.

"You won't hurt me," Jade said with conviction. "You could never hurt me."

"I could."

Jade shook his head. He began undressing, moving backward toward the bed. "Come to bed with me."

"No," Archias said flatly.

Jade stripped his shirt off of his shoulders, kicked off his shoes, and began unfastening his jeans. "You think

too much, Archias. No more thinking. I just want you to feel."

"No," Archias said again, but with less conviction. Jade could see the man's willpower crumbling.

He pushed his jeans to his ankles and stepped out of them. Crawling to the center of the bed, he sprawled out, spread eagle. His eyes never leaving the Greek warrior, Jade took his heavy erection in hand and stroked it slowly. "I'm waiting."

Archias stood his ground. "I will not do this."

Jade shrugged. "If that's the way you want it."

"It is the way it must be."

"Emery!" Jade shouted.

"What are you doing?" Archias demanded.

"I find I'm in need of a little stress relief before the party. Since you don't want to help me out..." He lifted an eyebrow and smirked.

"You rang?" Emery stepped into the room. His grin slid from his face, and he looked in danger of swallowing his tongue. "Need some help with that?" His grin came back full force, confident, bordering on conceited.

Archias shoved Emery from the room roughly and slammed the door in his face. He turned back to Jade, his gaze predatory. In a flash, his clothes disappeared, and he prowled toward the bed. "No more, Jade."

Jade gulped. His body tingled, and he almost came from the purely possessive tone. He gripped the base of his shaft to stave off his orgasm as he watched his lover crawl onto the bed and hover over him.

"You are *mine*." Archias batted Jade's hand away and swooped in to envelop the leaking prick in one swallow.

"Oh, hell!" Jade's hips arched up into Archias's mouth, pushing the crown deeper into the giant's throat. Archias squeezed him with his throat muscles, then dragged his lips back up the oversensitive pole.

"You will come for me. Now," he demanded, his voice feral. He took Jade to the back of his throat once more, burying his nose in Jade's pubes.

Jade had no choice but to obey. He threw his head back, his body stiffening as he spilled his pleasure into Archias's waiting mouth. He opened his own mouth to yell, but the power of his orgasm robbed him of breath. Only a strangled croak came from his parted lips.

Archias's mouth came down on his, their tongues dueling, and Jade tasted his seed mixed with the unique flavor of his lover. Archias stroked his skin, touching him everywhere as he tongue-fucked his mouth.

"I will have you now," Archias breathed heavily into his ear.

"Oh fuck yes!" Jade's cock strained and leaked once again. His balls pulled tight to his body, and electricity coursed through his blood. *More, more, more* he chanted inside his head. "Please," he whimpered.

Archias hesitated. "We need to prepare you to accept me."

Jade wiggled and squirmed until he could stretch enough to reach the lube inside his nightstand. He presented it to his lover, almost throwing it at him. "Hurry," he pleaded.

* * * *

Archias warred with himself even as he used his middle finger to caress the tight ring of Jade's asshole. He fought between what he wanted and what he knew to be right. He would need to be careful or he could do serious damage to his much smaller lover.

Running his hand down Jade's slim torso, he cringed inwardly when he noticed it covered the man's entire chest. His cock throbbed and leaked against his thigh, reminding him why he could no longer deny this gorgeous creature.

Desire, lust, passion, and a feeling much deeper settled into Archias's soul. His heart and his aching groin

urged him to take what he needed. Right now, he needed more of Jade Blevins.

He slithered his tongue over Jade's inner thigh, loving the salty taste of his skin, the smooth silkiness against his lips. The sweet whimpering noises coming from his lover made Archias feel more like a king than a monster.

He slipped just the tip of his finger through the outer ring of muscles, and Jade came up off the bed, panting. "More."

Archias obliged his man, pushing his finger in to the second knuckle. He continued lavishing kisses to Jade's body as he worked his finger in and out of the snug opening. "Ready for another, *draga*?" The endearment rolled off his tongue without thought.

"Please," Jade begged.

Adding another dollop of lube, Archias pushed in a second finger alongside the first, sawing them in and out of Jade's clenching channel. His fingers grazed over a smooth walnut-sized lump, and Jade cried out, his head thrashing against the pillow.

"Oh shit! Do that again!" Archias curled his fingers, raking over the gland again. His little man went nuts, moaning and writhing against the mattress. "Now, Archias," he demanded.

"Shh, little one, you are not ready to take me, yet." Archias quickly inserted a third finger, twisting and stretching the muscles. "Just one more, Jade." He pushed in with four trembling fingers.

"Stop teasing and fuck me already! I'm clean, and I'm guessing you don't get sick."

Archias tilted his head to the side. "Clean?"

"Yeah, sickness, diseases, I don't have any."

Archias nodded his head. "Immortality was my curse. Human frailties do not affect me."

"Good, then fuck me like you mean it."

Archias gripped his demanding prick and lined it up with Jade's enticing entrance. He dribbled more of the slick oil over the head of his cock, unwilling to do anything to hurt his lover. Pushing in slowly, he watched Jade's face for any signs of discomfort.

Jade's eyes closed, and a sweet moan of pleasure escaped his lips. Encouraged, Archias pushed in a little further, torturing himself, shaking with the effort to refrain from ramming his length into Jade's welcoming body.

"So tight, my *draga*. So incredibly hot. Do you feel how I throb for you?"

"Oh, Archias!" Jade lifted his hips, taking more of Archias's hard shaft into his body.

Archias groaned, his eyes rolling back in his head

when Jade's inner muscles clamped down around him. He rose up to his knees, gripping Jade's hips in both hands, and levering him off of the mattress until only his slim shoulders remained.

Archias stilled, stunned when he felt his sac press against the rounded cheeks of Jade's ass. "You were meant for me," he said in awe, amazed that Jade could take all of him.

"Move," Jade whispered. "Make me yours."

The control that Archias struggled so vehemently to hold on to snapped at Jade's softly spoken words. He shoved his hips forward, grinding his pelvis against his lover's ass. He pulled out of the velvet lined inferno until only the head remained, then pushed back in swiftly, growling at the intense pleasure that shot up his shaft and straight to his balls.

"More," Jade cried. "Give me more. You feel so good."

Archias wrapped his arms around Jade, lifting the man into his lap. He continued to drive up into him, pulling Jade down onto his cock with each push of his hips. Jade's arms locked around his neck, and his mouth found Archias's, locking them together in a passion-fueled kiss.

Archias used the same rhythm with his tongue as he did his hips to thrust into Jade's moist mouth. "You taste

exquisite."

"Almost," Jade warned. His head fell back, and Archias could not resist the inviting allure of Jade's smooth throat.

He clamped his mouth around the soft skin, sucking up a mark so everyone would know that Jade belonged to him. Crossing his arms behind his lover's back and crushing him close, he plunged wildly into Jade's clutching hole.

"Come for me, *draga*. Make me feel it. Milk me dry." Archias loosed his hold just enough to slip one hand between their sweat-slicked bodies and squeezed Jade's heated shaft. He stroked quickly, taking his little man's mouth in another bruising kiss.

Jade wrenched away, throwing his head back and screaming out his release. Scorching ropes of pearly cum exploded between them, covering Archias's hand and chest.

The smell, the heat, the snugness of Jade's channel sent him barreling over the edge and into his own euphoria. Archias roared loud enough to shake the windows. Jade's muscles clenched and released in waves, milking Archias's prick, wrenching his orgasm from him. His body jerked and shuddered as he pumped through his release, blasting copious amounts of scorching seed into his lover's depths.

Jade sagged in his arms, resting his head on

Archias's shoulder. "You could never hurt me."

Archias smiled into Jade's mousy brown hair, content to just sit for a while. "You are mine," he whispered tenderly.

"Yours," Jade agreed sleepily. "Need a nap."

"We will be late, my *draga*." Archias reminded Jade of their plans for the evening.

"It's just a birthday party, and no one there even likes me. Tell Emery to go without us."

Archias kissed the smaller man's sweaty temple. "I will tell Emery to meet us there. A quick nap, and then we can go celebrate with your friends. Yes?"

Jade leaned back far enough to look into Archias's eyes. He smiled, so sweet and gentle, it reduced Archias to a pile of mush. "Okay, big guy. We'll be fashionably late." He leaned forward and kissed Archias, nibbling at his lips and caressing the seam with his tongue. "Maybe really late."

CHAPTER SIX

The party had just started to wind down when Jade and Archias strolled in. Jade couldn't bring himself to feel guilty. He doubted anyone had even noticed his absence.

Everyone, however, noticed his entrance. As always, though, no one really saw him. All eyes stared riveted at the tall, masculine god beside him. Men and women alike gawked openly at Archias as though he were a succulent chunk of meat.

Calvin Alexander sauntered up to them, his eyes slowly undressing Jade's date. "You're late." Though he didn't look at him, Jade knew the man spoke to him.

"Sorry," he said. "Happy birthday, Calvin."

"Yes, indeed." Calvin leered at Archias. "And you have brought me a splendid gift, Jude."

"Jade," he corrected him quietly.

Calvin waved a hand in dismissal. "Yes, yes, whatever." He stepped closer to Archias, insinuating himself between Jade and the big warrior. He reached out boldly, caressing Archias's chest with the tips of his fingers. "I am more interested in your name," he murmured seductively.

"Archias," Jade's lover answered neutrally. To

anyone else, Archias appeared calm and dispassionate. Only Jade could see the anger flash in his eyes, the way his muscles bunched and tensed.

"It is my extreme pleasure to make your acquaintance, Archias." Calvin stepped even closer until his chest brushed against Archias's. His hands drifted down over Archias's midsection, sliding over his hips before coming to rest against his zipper. "I am sure we will be *very* good friends."

"Jade," Archias whispered. Though barely contained fury simmered in his eyes, he also held something else below the rage.

Jade watched him, pondering what emotion Archias tried to convey to him.

"I do not want to embarrass you." Archias's words from weeks before came to Jade, and realization slammed into him. Archias had no interest in the pompous jerk that currently felt free to let his hands roam over what belonged to Jade. He just didn't want to do anything to embarrass Jade in front of what Archias believed to be Jade's friends.

"You could never be an embarrassment," Jade assured him softly. He didn't want anyone to get hurt, but he also didn't want the slime ball feeling up his man either.

"Of course you are not an embarrassment." Calvin snorted. "Jade is the one that should be finding a nice rock

to hide under. His very existence is humiliating to anyone that knows him."

Jade saw it a split second before Archias snapped. With a loud growl, his huge hand shot out with lightning speed and wrapped around Calvin's throat. He lifted the smaller man from the floor and held him above his head.

"You will apologize," Archias ordered coldly. "You are unworthy to even kiss the ground Jade walks on." He shook Calvin like a rag doll in his one-handed grip. "Apologize!"

Jade watched in horror as Calvin's face began to turn a magnificent shade of red, his eyes bulging from their sockets, his mouth working frantically, but making no sound. He jumped to Archias's side and wrapped his arms around his lover's lean waist.

"Archias, baby, he can't apologize if he can't breathe." He rubbed his hands over the small of Archias's back, nuzzling his face against the soft fabric covering the big man's chest. "Let him down, baby."

Archias trembled, a soft rumble vibrating his chest. His upper lip curled into a snarl, and he flung Calvin halfway across the room with a flick of his wrist. Calvin crashed into one of the catering tables, bounced off it, and landed in a heap on the hardwood floor.

Archias wrapped Jade up in his arms, lifting him

until they were nose to nose. "You are a good man, Jade Blevins. I would not have been so merciful."

"I kind of got that, big guy." Jade rubbed their noses together and sighed. "He's not worth it, Archias." He lifted his head and peered out at the sea of shocked and gaping onlookers. With the exception of Emery, none of them had ever treated him any differently than Calvin.

"None of them are." He spoke loud enough for the entire room to hear him. "Well, maybe one." He nodded at Emery, smiling when his friend dipped his head in acknowledgement and winked.

Archias tapped Jade's chin, pulling his attention back to him. He kissed Jade's lips, slow, sweet, and sensual. "No, they are not," he agreed softly. "Let us go home."

Home. Jade liked the sound of that. Possibly, he liked it too much. He knew he needed to resist his growing attachment to the big warrior. In only a few short weeks, Archias would be gone, lost to Jade forever.

His brain knew. His heart, however, still needed to catch up.

* * * *

They rode home in comfortable silence, their linked hands resting on the seat between them. Archias's

possessive, although violent, behavior had a direct effect on Jade's overactive hormones. He couldn't wait to get the man in his bed again. One taste of the passion inside him, and Jade knew he would never get enough.

He pulled up behind a familiar pickup and groaned inwardly. Bathed in the soft glow of the porch light, Harris Quinton sat on the top step in front of the door. Jade's plans for the evening did not include a confrontation with the lanky cowboy.

"Do not worry, Jade. I will take care of him," Archias said determinedly.

An appealing idea, but Jade shook his head. "Let's just find out what he wants." He looked over at Archias and winked. "Then you can hurt him."

Archias laughed softly. "I will do as you say."

Jade jumped out of the truck and marched toward Quinton. "What the hell are you doing here?" Another, more important, question came to him. "How do you know where I live?"

Quinton unfolded himself from his perch and looked at Jade with puffy eyes. "I followed you the other night. Please, don't be mad. I just wanted to make sure you made it home safely."

Jade softened at Quinton's strained voice, the red-rimmed eyes, and the tear tracks that stained his cheeks.

"Why are you here?"

"I didn't know where else to go." Quinton stuck his hands in his pockets and dropped his head. "My m-momma d-died today and I just d-didn't want to b-be alone," he sobbed brokenly.

"Oh, Quinton, I'm so sorry." He rested a hand on Quinton's arm in sympathy. "Do you have any other family?"

The man shook his head. "No, it's just me now."

"Come inside, and I'll make you a drink." Jade led them inside and motioned for Quinton to have a seat on the sofa.

"Can you give us a minute, baby?" Jade murmured to his lover. To his complete surprise, Archias nodded and kissed his forehead.

"I will wait in bed," he said against Jade's temple, then pulled away and disappeared down the hallway.

Jade went to the kitchen, grabbed two beers from the fridge, and hurried back to his distressed visitor. He handed a bottle to Quinton. "Sorry, I don't have anything stronger."

"No, this is good. Thank you, Jade." Quinton took a long pull and sighed. "I'm sorry for just dropping in on you like this."

Jade took a seat in the armchair beside the sofa.

"Don't worry about it. Do you want to talk about your mom? How did she die?"

"Stroke," Quinton answered in a subdued tone. "I don't really want to talk about it, yet. I just didn't want to be alone."

"I understand." He did. After his grandfather's death, Jade didn't want to talk to anyone for weeks. He didn't want to be alone either. Emery had been there for him, camping out on his couch, but never forcing conversation on him.

Suddenly, Quinton dropped to the floor, insinuating himself between Jade's spread thighs, and latched onto him around his middle. He cried against Jade's stomach, big racking sobs that shook his lean frame.

Though startled, Jade quickly composed himself and patted the man's back in comfort. "Hey, it's okay, man."

"I just needed to come see you, baby. You always make me feel better. I've missed you so much."

Jade didn't know what to say. He didn't want to come off as insensitive, but he didn't want Quinton to misinterpret his actions either. Before he could come up with a suitable response, Quinton released his death grip around his waist and grabbed Jade's face in both hands. He pulled Jade to him roughly, tilting his head, and crushing

their mouths together.

"Oh, baby, I need you," he said between kisses. "Let me make love to you. I just need to forget for a little while. You can make me forget."

Sensitivity be damned. Jade shoved the cowboy away roughly and raked his shirtsleeve across his mouth. "Look, I'm sorry about your mom, but I can't do this. I think you need to leave."

"Don't make me leave. I need you, Jade. I need to feel you." Quinton reached for Jade's belt, licking his lips.

Jade slapped his hand away and sprang up out of his chair. "Get out."

Quinton's heartbroken expression changed into an evil grin. "You want me, baby. I know you do. We belong together."

Jade took a step back, coldness filling his belly. "Did your mom really die?" he asked suspiciously.

"Yes." Quinton nodded. Then he winked slyly. "Four years ago."

"Get the fuck out," Jade replied coldly. "You make me sick. If you ever come near me again, I'll call the police and slap a restraining order on your ass."

"You don't mean that." Quinton's hands shot out, gripping Jade's hips, and reeling him in. He buried his face in Jade's crotch, inhaling deeply.

Jade shuddered in disgust. He shoved at the cowboy's head, his shoulders, trying to break his hold. "Get the fuck off of me and get out of my house!"

Quinton jerked back and glared up at him. He pushed to his feet slowly and nodded. "We'll talk later." He swooped in and kissed Jade's cheek, jumping back quickly to avoid Jade's right hook. He strolled calmly to the door and pulled it open.

"The genie won't be around forever, Jade. I'll give you some more time, but you belong to me. Don't make me wait too long." He spoke without turning, then stepped outside and closed the door quietly.

Jade wanted to hit something. He wanted to rant and rave, and throw things. Not because Harris Quinton was a certifiable prick—although he was—but because a small voice in his head told him the cowboy had a point. Archias would be gone in a few weeks, and Jade would be alone once again.

* * * *

Archias stepped from the shadows of the hallway and cleared his throat. It had taken every ounce of willpower to not storm into the room and rip Harris Quinton apart with his bare hands. He knew Jade could

take care of himself, but that did not stop him from wanting to protect the smaller man.

Jade turned and walked into his arms without a word. Archias held him there, swaying gently from side to side. "Talk to me, *draga*," he whispered.

"I can't believe he used his own mother to trick me." Jade's words sounded muffled against his chest.

"He is a lonely man. He does not have people in his life who care for him as you do."

"You're defending him?" Jade looked up at him in shock.

"No, Jade. I do not defend his actions against you, but I pity him. He has been alone for a very long time, even before he summoned me."

"I think he's freakin' nuts."

Archias chuckled. "He would have made a fine warrior. He takes what he wants and does not apologize for it. How can I fault him in his pursuit of you?" He nuzzled his chin against the top of Jade's head. "You are a fine prize, Jade. Any man can see that." He growled softly. "That does not mean that I will allow him to take what is mine, though."

His breath came out in a rush when Jade punched him in the stomach. The blow, though playful, caught him off guard. "I am not some bone for you two to fight over.

I'm not a piece of property, or the last cupcake in the pan."

Archias laughed. "I know, *draga*. Come to bed with me."

"Mm hmm," Jade hummed happily.

Once in bed, Jade snuggled in close and kissed Archias's chest. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"How did Quinton use his wishes?"

Archias went very still. He did not think his lover truly wanted to know the answer to his quandary. "He wished for a great sum of money."

"And the other three?"

When Archias did not answer right away, Jade pushed closer to his side and kissed his chest again. "I know you had sex with him. I just wondered if he wished for it, or if you volunteered."

Archias closed his eyes and squeezed Jade gently. "It was his first wish, and his third. I did not touch him otherwise. His second wish was for riches."

"Holy shit," Jade whispered. "What was his last wish?"

"Why do you ask these questions?"

Jade shrugged. "I'm just curious."

Archias did not believe him for a second. "Why do you lie to me?" he asked.

Jade sighed loudly. "I'm just trying to figure him out. There's something not right about Quinton. I don't know why he's so obsessed with me."

"You are kind and generous, not to mention beautiful. Why would any man not want you?"

"You're a little biased." Jade chuckled softly. "Now, cut the crap and just tell me."

"When I did not return his interest, Harris Quinton wished that no man or woman would be able to resist him. The fact that you do not desire him is very odd."

"I thought you couldn't make people fall in love."

"Not the same thing, *draga*. People desire him, lust for him, but none love him." Archias kissed the top of Jade's soft brown hair. "Sleep now. We will talk more in the morning."

"You bet your ass we will," Jade mumbled sleepily. "This is insane." He yawned loudly, cuddling in under Archias's arm. Within minutes, he was snoring softly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jade's truck lurched forward, stuttered, and died.

"Motherfucker!" Archias bellowed, slapping his hands against the steering wheel.

Jade stared at him in shock. "Where did you learn that word?" He knew he had a foul mouth, but he didn't think it had gotten that bad.

"HBO," Archias said sheepishly. His cheeks tinted, and he smiled shyly. "Is that not the appropriate sentiment? Should I have chosen another?"

Jade couldn't help but laugh. "No, I think that's a pretty good one. It's just strange to hear you say it." He placed his hand on Archias's where it rested between them on the seat, and guided it back to the gearshift.

Archias shook his head. "I do not think this is going to work."

"So, you're quitting? Just like that, huh? I thought you were a great warrior." Jade sighed dramatically. "I guess even legendary Myrmidons have to retreat sometimes."

Archias glared at him. Jade sat calmly, staring back expectantly. He squeezed his lover's hand around the leather knob and smiled. "One more time, baby. For me?"

Archias let out a long breath, and his entire being softened toward Jade. "That is not fair. You know I cannot resist you. Especially, when you use that strange endearment. I am not a child."

Jade snorted. "I don't see you as a child. I call you baby because you are special to me."

"You are the special one, *draga*." Archias leaned closer and kissed Jade's forehead. "One more time."

"Great!" Jade bounced a little in his seat. "Remember, it's all one smooth motion. Press lightly on the gas at the same time you slowly release the clutch."

Archias grumbled a little, but he looked determined. He started the truck and grasped the steering wheel and the gearshift in a white-knuckled grip. Jade laid his hand over Archias and squeezed encouragingly.

"First gear," Jade said as he put a little pressure on Archias's hand. Archias shifted into first. "Now give it a little gas," he coached. The engine roared. "Ok, now very slowly, ease off of the clutch, but keep your foot on the gas."

The pickup jumped a little, shuddered and rocked, but it didn't die. After a rocky start, it coasted smoothly down the gravel drive to Jade's house.

"Great!" Jade smiled excitedly. "Okay, now try second gear."

Archias's head whipped around to stare at Jade in disbelief. "You mean there is more?"

Jade chuckled. "Yeah, this part is easy though." He placed his hand back over Archias's on the knob. "Let off the gas, press in the clutch, and move the stick down and to the left."

Archias's brow drew together in concentration. The truck slowed as he released the gas pedal, and Jade helped him shift into second gear. "Okay, now same as first gear. Release the clutch slowly and press a little on the gas."

The truck continued forward with barely a hiccup. Archias looked astonished but very pleased with himself. "I did it!"

Jade couldn't contain his excitement. "Yeah, you did. I knew you could do it, baby." He knelt on the seat and kissed Archias's cheek. "You are doing fantastic. Ready for step three?"

His lover nodded, his tongue stuck between his teeth. He looked adorable.

"Okay, press in the clutch, then tap lightly on the brake."

Archias head tilted, and he looked down at his feet. "Which one is the brake?"

Jade smiled against Archias's neck. "The one in the middle."

He nodded once and moved his foot off of the gas pedal. The truck jerked to a complete stop, throwing Jade into the dashboard. "Oh gods," Archias yelped. He reached out to grab Jade, apparently forgetting all about the clutch. The pickup jumped forward and died, throwing Jade into the dash again.

Jade giggled as he pushed himself back into the seat. "I'm fine."

Archias grabbed him roughly and pulled him against his chest. "I am so sorry, my love. Are you alright?"

Jade couldn't stop laughing. "I'm fine, Archias. Don't worry about it." He nuzzled into the warm, sweet smelling skin in the hollow of Archias's throat. "Your landing needs a little work, big guy."

Archias held him close, rubbing his cheek over the top of Jade's head. "I do not want you to be hurt again."

"Don't worry so much." Jade kissed Archias's neck. "Mm, you smell good. Wanna lick you all over."

"The things you do to me." Archias's soft sigh tuned to a heated growl when Jade's roaming hand found the straining erection trapped behind his fly. "You are needing," Archias said as his lips ghosted over Jade's ear. "You want me... *need* me. Tell me what you want, my *draga*, and it is yours."

Jade's body thrummed with his arousal. His dick

pushed painfully against his zipper, hard enough to cut glass. "Fuck me," he breathed. He thrust his tongue through the full pink lips and plundered the depths of Archias's mouth.

Archias groaned, his tongue meeting Jade's halfway, slipping and sliding, dueling for dominance. Jade happily relinquished control, turning his pleasure over to the massive warrior in his arms.

"We need much more room for what I have planned for you, *draga*." Jade agreed, but he still could not stop the whimper when Archias pushed him away gently and climbed down from the cab of the pickup.

Instead of following, Jade crawled to the edge of the driver's seat and began fumbling with Archias's jeans. He managed to unbutton them with shaking hands, pushing the fabric down Archias's hips until his impressive erection sprang free.

Jade's mouth watered as his eyes zeroed in on the velvet wrapped steel rod. "Wanna taste you." He didn't wait for a reply, but leaned down, engulfing the head and dragging his lips down the shaft as far as he could.

Archias hissed and stumbled back half a step. The motion caused Jade to lose his balance, and his face smashed into Archias's lower belly, pushing the monster cock to the back of his throat. He swallowed convulsively,

his eyes watering.

"Oh, gods!" Archias roared. He pushed on Jade's shoulders, arching his hips away until his cock slipped free of Jade's mouth with a naughty slurp. "I have little control, and I want to be buried deep inside your tight body when I come."

That was a plan Jade could get behind—or in front—whatever. "Oh, hell yeah," he said hoarsely. He wiggled around until his ass hung over the edge of the seat, struggling to remove his jeans. "Archias, get these off of me."

His clothes instantly vanished along with his warrior's. Jade wasted no time hooking his arms under his knees, pulling them back to his chest, and presenting his needy hole to his lover.

Archias's eyes darkened with his lust, but he shook his head. "I am too big to take you without lubrication to ease the way." He reached out for Jade. "Come inside, *draga*. I will take care of you."

Jade didn't want to go inside. He didn't want to move. He wanted Archias to fuck him right there in front of the house, in his truck. He wanted Archias to throw him over the hood, up against the cab, down in the bed. He wanted the big man to take him in the grass, against a tree, hell, even in the dirt.

He couldn't explain it, but the idea of Archias taking him, dominating him, especially outside where anyone could drive up and see them, sent his pulse racing, and his dick screaming. He knew he wouldn't be able to take the huge phallus without the slick though.

"Please, love," Archias insisted.

Jade sighed and sat up in the seat. He looked down at his raging hard on and bit his lip. "Can we come back out after we get the lube?" He didn't look at Archias, afraid of what he might see in the teal blue eyes.

"You want to make love out in the sun?"

Jade nodded, still looking away. A gentle touch brought his chin up, and soft lips covered his own. "I would be honored to worship your body anywhere and in any way you want." Archias's kissed his nose, his cheeks, his forehead, and back to his lips. "You only ever have to ask, my love."

"I wish you could just read my mind." Jade's cheeks heated. He had never been very good at asking for the things he wanted. He had a gorgeous man willing and able to fulfill every one of his fantasies, and he couldn't even open his mouth to voice his desires.

Could he be any more of a loser?

"You are not a loser, Jade," Archias said firmly. Then his eyes widened, the shock on his handsome face

echoing Jade's own surprise.

"How did you..." Jade trailed off, his eyes going wide, and he slapped a hand over his mouth. "Oh shit," he said through his fingers.

Archias grimaced. "I am sorry. Once the words are spoken, I cannot take it back."

Jade shrugged. "It will take some getting used to for both of us. I have nothing to hide from you, Archias. I'm only sorry that I put this burden on you."

Archias smiled sheepishly. "There are many times I have watched you and longed to know what you are thinking."

Though it had been an accident, Jade only regretted that he had wasted a wish. He did not have anything to hide from the man. Well, maybe one thing, but he really hadn't decided on that yet.

"What have you not decided on?" Archias smirked at him.

Hmm, it seemed a distraction was in order. Jade reached out and cupped Archias's now flaccid cock. He squeezed gently and winked. "Let's get some supplies so we can start our carnal adventure."

* * * *

Archias carried a blanket and a large bottle of lube as he followed Jade's fine ass back out into the waning light of day. He watched his lover's hips sway, the subtle flexing of his muscles with each step. He felt insanely blessed to garner the attentions of such a man as Jade.

"What first? Maybe something romantic and slow under the shade tree. Or maybe we could finish what we started in the truck." Jade's thoughts pushed into Archias's mind.

He had to bite back a groan. His cock began to fill rapidly as he put images to Jade's inner wonderings.

"I just want him to throw me up against the truck, hold me down, and fuck me like he owns me. I can't ask for that though. He probably already thinks I'm a slut."

Archias did groan then. He snatched Jade up just as they reached the bottom of the porch steps. With three long strides, he reached Jade's vehicle, tossed the folded blanket on the hood, and pushed his lover onto it roughly.

Jade yelped, his feet scrambling for purchase on the front bumper, putting his ass at just the right height. He began to wiggle, humping his hips against the blanket, silently begging for Archias's touch. Well, not so silent. His thoughts screamed inside Archias's head.

"Oh yes, fuck yes. Oh please, please, please. Don't let him stop."

Archias grinned and slapped one of the perfect globes. "Do not move," he ordered.

Jade stilled instantly, though his breathing became fast and shallow. Archias slicked his fingers with the lube, leaning over Jade's small body to place the bottle in his hand. "Do not lose this," he whispered into his lover's ear.

The only sign that Jade heard him came from the clenching of his fingers around the small bottle.

Archias ran his slippery fingers down Jade's crease until he found the sweet little rosette he sought. He ringed the twitching muscles, smacking Jade's ass again when the smaller man tried to push back into his touch.

Jade whimpered. "Please."

Archias decided his sweet *draga* needed a reward. He slipped his middle finger into Jade's waiting hole. Leaning over, he breathed feather-light kisses across his lover's back, pumping his finger in and out of Jade's slick heat.

"Oh, hell!" Jade cried out, his hips jerking involuntarily. "More. I need more!"

The pressure built in Archias's balls, his erection leaking freely, pulsing with every beat of his racing heart. He pushed in two fingers alongside the first, stretching Jade almost roughly.

"Now," Jade said, panting. "Need you now,

Archias."

Lust raged rampant through his body, fogging his brain, and rushing to burn in his groin. Archias ripped the oil from Jade's hand and dribbled it generously over his shaft one-handed. "Tell me you want it, *draga*. Tell me how much you want me."

"Yes," Jade hissed. "I want you so bad I fucking hurt. Please, baby, oh please!"

Archias slipped his fingers from Jade's channel and lined up his slick cock. He pushed in slowly, gripping his lover's hips tightly. "Beautiful," he murmured reverently, watching Jade's greedy ass eat up his prick.

"Oh yes, yes, please, please, please. So full, so fucking good. Not going to last." Jade's thoughts were frantic and desperate.

Archias kept going, feeding his cock to the hungry hole until he bottomed out. "Hold on, Jade," he warned. He pulled out until only the flared crown remained, then rammed back in roughly.

He slammed into his lover repeatedly, pushing on Jade's lower back to encourage him to arch his hips. Archias amped up his relentless pace, pulling Jade back into him with every thrust. All too soon, he felt the tingle in the base of his spine, the clenching in his lower abdomen. Sweat dripped from his body to land on Jade's smooth

back.

"Come for me," he ground out through clenched teeth. "Come on my cock. Drain me dry, *draga*. Touch yourself."

Jade shook his head violently. "Can't. I'll fall."

"I have you." Archias slid his hand beneath Jade's body and pressed it flat to his chest, pulling the smaller man back and down onto his cock as he continued to pound in and out of him.

Jade wasted no time in gripping his prick and stroking it quickly. He braced his feet on the chrome bumper, using it as leverage to push his ass back, meeting Archias thrust for forceful thrust. "Gonna," he said harshly.

"Yes, Jade. Now!"

His forehead fell forward to rest on the hood of the truck. The muscles in his back and shoulders rippled and coiled, flexing and straining. His inner walls clamped down on Archias, and Jade spilled his load onto the blanket.

Archias let himself fall, pumping through his climax, throwing his head back to roar Jade's name to the darkening sky.

When he came down from his high, he noticed Jade's body sagged back against his chest, his head lolling against Archias's shoulder. He began to panic until he heard Jade's soft snore.

He chuckled, wrapping his arms around Jade's chest and holding him gently, his cock still buried in his *draga's* body. His sweet little man had passed out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"You do not want me to go?"

Jade bit his lip to stop his smile. His fierce giant looked and sounded more like a petulant child.

"I need to concentrate. This is a big tournament for me. How do you expect me to focus with your sexy ass in the room?" Jade crawled up in Archias's lap where he sat on the edge of their bed. He kissed his lover's stubble-covered chin and smiled.

"I would not distract you." Archias pouted. "I will worry if I cannot see you."

Jade's heart melted, and his eyes actually misted a little. "I'll be just fine. Emery will be there with me, and I'm actually able to take care of myself, believe it or not. I like that you feel protective of me, though."

"I would protect you with my life. I still do not like to be away from you."

"It's only for one day, baby. I'll be back before you know it." Jade climbed out of his warrior's lap and went to his closet to retrieve his secret weapon. Maybe he should be ashamed, but he was not above bribery.

He held the gift behind him and walked back to stand before Archias. "I got something for you."

Archias glared at him. "You cannot persuade me with treasures and baubles."

Jade smirked. He held up the first two seasons of *True Blood* on DVD.

Archias's eyes lit up, and his hand twitched in his lap. "Is Eric in the first two seasons?"

Jade rolled his eyes. "I guess you'll just have watch and see. You're only a few shows into season three. This will get you caught up." He pulled the boxes out of Archias's reach. "Only," he added, "if you promise to stay here and not worry about me today."

Archias thought it over for all of three seconds. "I swear." He snatched the DVDs out of Jade's hand and kissed the top of his head. "Thank you, Jade," he called over his shoulder as he raced down the hall to the living room.

Jade chuckled and shook his head. Archias really could be cute as hell when he got excited. Not that he would ever say that out loud.

"I heard that!" Archias yelled from the living room. "I am not cute!"

Jade laughed harder, clutching his side. Oh, he adored the man. He heard the front door open, and his best friend stomp into the living room. Jade pulled his boots on, grabbed his lucky baseball cap, and headed out to meet

Emery.

"Ready?" he asked as he walked into the room. Archias had already snuggled down in the cushions of the sofa, remote in hand, and an excited look on his face.

Jade walked up behind the couch and pulled at Archias's long locks playfully. When his lover turned to look at him, Jade took the opportunity to place a quick kiss on the man's lips. "Be good today. There's leftovers in the fridge, so be sure you eat something. I showed you how to use the telephone, and I left my cell phone number on the fridge."

Archias smiled and nodded, but his eyes kept darting back to the television. Jade grinned indulgently and kissed his lover's lips again. "Watch your show. I'll see you tonight, baby."

Jade followed Emery out of the house, pausing to lock the door before he climbed into his truck and started it up. Emery slid into the passenger seat and thumped the dashboard. "You tell him yet?"

"Tell him what?"

"That you're in love with him." Emery held up his hand to halt Jade's denial. "You are. You're different with him... happier. It's a good look on you. I think you should tell him."

"I'm not ready yet. Just drop it." Jade couldn't deny

that he had strong feelings for Archias, but he wouldn't admit it either. He still had reservations about his feelings. How could he be sure what he felt was really love?

No one ever noticed him. No one paid attention to him. The few relationships he'd managed to hold on to for longer than it took to get off had ended in disaster. They all wanted to change him. The only men that wanted him were a three thousand year old warrior genie who only got laid once every century or so and an obsessive, self-important prick who viewed Jade as a challenge to his impervious charms.

Though he thought he loved Archias, how could he be sure? He had never been in love before. What did the word even mean? He knew he felt something for the big man, something strong enough that he couldn't risk wishing him free. In a normal relationship, maybe it wouldn't matter as much. If he misjudged his feelings, there might be a messy break-up, some hurt feelings, even a broken heart. If he misread his feelings for Archias, the man could be stuck inside an endless abyss until he went mad.

He wouldn't risk it. Not yet.

* * * *

Jade lounged against the wall, beer in hand,

watching the game in front of him. Harris Quinton ran the table—dominated—owned it. He was good, but Jade was better.

He sailed easily through his first two opponents. He controlled the tables, sank every shot, but found no joy in his victory. His heart felt heavy in his chest, and his mind swirled with indecision.

What would he do when it came time for Archias to leave him? Would he drift slowly back into his life of solitude? He had lived more in the few weeks with the Greek than he had his entire life. Would he forget how to enjoy life and return to living in shades of gray?

Maybe he needed to put a little distance between them before he found himself in too deep. He wouldn't cut Archias's freedom from the bottle short, but a little separation sounded good.

Jade watched Quinton call his shot—eight ball, left corner pocket—and line up the cue ball. He sank the shot easily and rose, smiling widely. He shook his opponent's hand, then turned to pin Jade with his gaze.

Jade gulped. He couldn't mistake the heat in Quinton's stare. He just didn't know what emotion darkened the man's eyes. He pressed further into the wall when Quinton tipped his hat to an admirer and strutted toward him.

"Jade Blevins," he drawled, extending his right hand. His voice came out low and gravelly.

Jade took the hand, shaking and releasing it quickly. "Harris Quinton," he returned cautiously.

"So, I guess you'll be playing against me next round. I know you've been watching me. What do you think of your chances?" His smile came quick and confident.

"I'm comfortable with my chances." Thankful that he had misread the look in Quinton's eyes, Jade began to relax. Maybe the cowboy had finally gotten the hint. He took a long drink of his beer and nodded his head in dismissal.

Quinton didn't get the hint. He moved in closer, invading Jade's personal space. "We have an hour. I've missed you. Why don't we finally get to know each other a little better?" The back of his hand drifted up Jade's arm.

Jade brushed the hand off. "I don't need to know your life story to beat you."

Quinton smiled, lazy and wicked. "Maybe we could pursue less *conversational* activities." His eyes moved over Jade's body, slowly undressing him.

"Just what did you have in mind?" Jade kept his face expressionless.

Quinton leaned closer until his lips almost touched

Jade's ear. "You are so fucking hot, and you don't even know it." His hand came up to stroke Jade's throat. "I want to shove my fat cock through those pretty lips and fuck that dirty mouth until I lose my load down your throat."

Jade shivered involuntarily, clear down to his dick. The naughty words, the hot breath that fanned against his face, the soft caress over his skin, all combined to leave his head spinning.

Quinton straightened and moved to shield Jade's body from curious eyes. His big hand travelled down Jade's torso to scrape over his zipper. He squeezed the half-hard cock, and Jade jumped like a startled colt.

He slapped the man's hand away and pushed roughly against his chest. "Do not touch me." He hated himself for even the flicker of interest that had passed through his muddled brain.

Quinton held his hands up and took a step back. "Come on, Blevins. Just a quick little romp in the bathroom." He winked, the bastard. "It might loosen you up. You look a little tense." He laughed huskily.

"Fuck off," Jade said with a huff. Juvenile, but he couldn't come up with anything better at the moment.

Quinton shook his head, some of the cockiness leaving his visage. "You really don't get it, do you?"

"Guess not, but I don't need you to spell it out for

me." Jade pushed away from the wall and pulled his phone from his pocket. "Be ready to lose," he tossed at Quinton before strolling away.

He dialed quickly and waited with his breath held.

"Hello?" an uncertain voice answered.

"Hey, it's me." Jade sighed. He felt relief course through him immediately. "How you doing, baby?"

"Hello, my *draga*. It is very odd to hear your voice but not see you. How is the tournament going? Will you be home soon?" Archias sounded excited to see him. Something Jade could definitely get used to.

"It's going great." Jade calmed further as he outlined some of his more difficult shots. "Oh, it was priceless. You should have seen his face when I jumped his three ball, banked it off the cushion, and kissed the eight ball into the corner pocket."

Archias laughed. "I do not understand anything you said, but I am happy that you are happy."

"So, how's the show going?"

"Eric has long hair in these." Archias sighed dreamily. Jade bit his tongue to hold in his chuckle. "I will miss this when I must go back to the *pehar*," Archias added sadly. "There are many things I will miss, but this I will miss most."

He would miss television the most. Not Jade.

"Yeah." He felt his mood plummet rapidly. Jade didn't know what else to say. He would miss Archias more than he could say. "I gotta go, baby. I have one more match, so I should be home before you go to sleep. I'll see you then."

"I will wait up," Archias assured him. "Good luck, Jade."

He hung up and pushed the phone back into his pocket. Amazing how he had gone from scared to annoyed, to happy, to depressed in the span of ten minutes. Only a few more weeks, and Archias would be gone. Jade needed to find a way to let him go.

"Why the long face, sweetheart?" Quinton appeared out of nowhere. His long fingers reached out to trace Jade's jaw. "You look like you lost your only friend."

Jade jerked away. "You can't get in my head, Quinton. Just give it up."

Quinton sighed and shook his head. "I don't care about the damn game, Blevins. I've been watching you for years. The way you move, the way your eyes shine with excitement when you play." He smiled crookedly. "The way those skin tight jeans stretch over that sweet ass. You have no idea how many times I've wanted to bend you over a pool table and make you forget everything but my name."

Jade's heart threatened to climb out of his throat.

His palms slicked with sweat, and his groin tightened, blood rushing to his cock and filling it. He somehow managed to keep his face impassive. "And you just decided to tell me all of this a few weeks ago? You just admitted that you've basically stalked me for years, but you just now make your move. What exactly is it that you want?"

"Baby," Quinton said, "you have no idea how much I want you. God, you have the sexiest mouth."

Jade sucked his lower lip through his teeth, and Quinton groaned. The sound sent heat pooling in Jade's balls. Quinton looked like sex personified, and his sensual voice washed over Jade like a caress.

No. He couldn't do it. As much as he craved the attention the big cowboy directed toward him, he had a man at home that would be devastated.

A man who will be gone in a few weeks. A man who will forget about me as soon as I make my last wish. The voice inside Jade's head sounded like a whiney whore.

"Come out to my truck," Quinton practically pleaded. "Just want one taste of you." He reached down and ran his palm over the prominent lump in his jeans. "It's going to be pretty distracting playing with a raging hard-on." His voiced dropped lower, his eyes shining with barely restrained lust. "Please, baby."

Jade's body burned, his cock throbbed, and the

slutty voice in his head argued that Archias wouldn't be around much longer. They hadn't declared their feelings for one another or promised fidelity or anything else. He had already decided to put distance between them, so why not with Quinton? The man obviously wanted him—had been begging for Jade's attention for weeks.

"Move your ass, cowboy," he said before he could change his mind. It might be nice to have a *special friend* once Archias left. He didn't feel anything for Quinton, but he didn't enjoy living as a monk either. God, he just wanted everything to stop—no thinking, no worrying—and just let go.

Quinton led the way out to the parking lot, his gait a little swift, but casual at the same time. Jade followed the bigger man to his pickup, parked in the shadows off to the side of the parking lot. He had just reached Quinton when the cowboy grabbed Jade and pinned him to the cab of the pickup with his big body.

His mouth crashed down on Jade's, and he thrust his tongue through his lips, demanding a response. Jade lost himself, moaning and rubbing his straining cock against Quinton's denim-clad erection. His mind went blissfully blank as the blood in his body rushed to his groin.

Quinton's seemed to have eight hands. He touched Jade everywhere, stoking the flames and making them burn

hotter. His breath grazed Jade's jaw. "What do you want, baby? Tell me what you want."

Jade's head reeled, and the words spilled out. "I want to suck you."

Quinton pulled back and quickly undid his pants, pulling his long cock out and presenting it to Jade. "Yes, oh, please, baby."

Quinton's cock was a thing of beauty—long, but not too thick, and weeping freely from the slit. The head flared into a perfect mushroom, and the skin looked smooth and silky. Jade reached out tentatively, groaning when his fingers wrapped around the heated flesh.

"That's it, baby," Quinton encouraged. "Please." He groaned, rocking his hips and sliding his cock through Jade's loose grip. "Or let me suck you. I will take you any way you want, baby. Just ask."

The words snapped Jade out of his haze of desire. He released Quinton's dick and stumbled back as if the man had slapped him. He had heard—not those exact words, but similar—from a gorgeous Greek warrior that thought Jade hung the moon and stars.

Everything clicked into place, and Jade knew. He didn't want Quinton. He didn't want anyone, except Archias. He had been an idiot. He hadn't been confused about his feelings. He had only been denying them.

He needed to get home.

"I can't." Jade tried for apologetic, but he didn't think he pulled it off.

"What?" Quinton's eyes rounded, and he started touching Jade everywhere again. "No, baby, please. I've waited a long time for this. Don't go, baby."

"I'm not your baby, and I'm leaving. Congratulations on winning the tournament. I quit." Jade made to walk around Quinton, but a bony fist caught him in the jaw, snapping his head back.

"Fuck you, Blevins." Quinton stuffed his cock back into his jeans and put himself to rights. Then he gave Jade one last withering glare before turning and stomping across the parking lot.

Jade rubbed his sore jaw and shook his head to clear some of the disorientation. He pulled his keys from his pocket and sprinted across the parking lot to his pickup. He dialed Emery's number as he drove and told his friend he would need to find other means of transportation.

The closer to home he got, the more guilty and ashamed Jade felt. His only solace was that he hadn't actually gone through with it. He had come pretty damn close, though. Would Archias forgive him? Or did the big warrior even care? Maybe Archias didn't give a shit what Jade did. He could just be another warm body to pass the

time.

No, he had to believe that Archias cared about him.
Now, he just needed to figure out what to do about it.

CHAPTER NINE

Spending the day alone, Archias had much time to think. He did not like being alone. He did not want to spend his time with just anyone either. He wanted Jade. His heart swelled, and he felt warm just from the man's presence. Though their time together had not been long, Jade had come to mean everything to him.

He did not set out to fall in love with the man, but that was exactly what had happened. Against his better judgment, he had gone and fallen in love. It would not end well. He had said it from the beginning.

For three millennia, he never harbored ideas of escaping his prison. Now, however, hope blossomed. Jade would have to love him back, of course.

Archias had caught brief glimpses of Jade's thoughts over the past few days. They were twisted and snarled, confused and uncertain. They all contained the same central theme, however—his feelings for Archias.

A vehicle skidding up in front of the house interrupted his thoughts. He quickly stood, barely making it to his feet, before Jade burst through the door. He took two running steps and threw himself into Archias's arms.

He caught him easily, one hand holding Jade up by

the ass, and the other cradling the back of his lover's head. Jade's body shook, and he held on to him for dear life.

"*Draga*, what is wrong? What has happened to you?" Archias stroked and smoothed, speaking softly, trying to soothe his distressed lover.

Jade shook his head, but no words came out. He buried his face more insistently into Archias's neck and locked his legs in a vise grip around his hips.

Archias walked them to the sofa and sat. It took a little doing, but he managed to pry Jade away from him enough to look into his red-rimmed eyes. He searched Jade's face, trying to determine why his lover seemed so upset.

Jade's left jaw appeared swollen and bruised. He reached up and cupped the injured flesh gently. "I will kill him," Archias growled without thought. No one would lay their hands on his man and live to tell about it.

Jade shook his head, but continued to remain silent. "Tell me who did this to you," Archias demanded.

Images of an attractive cowboy chased each other around Jade's mind. Dark green eyes, a chiseled jaw, hard, tightly packed muscles showcased inside impossibly tight jeans. Then came snatches of conversation, the cowboy's hands roaming over Jade's body, his face much too close.

The pictures switched. The cowboy kissed Archias's

lover—their mouths crashing together in hunger and passion. The man bared his naked erection to Jade, whispering words of desire and longing.

Archias did not delve further. He tossed Jade from his lap, to the cushions beside him, then jumped up from the sofa. He raced through the still open front door, and made it to the bottom of the stairs before his stomach heaved, and he expelled its contents.

As a warrior, he had been cut, whipped, burned, and stabbed. Nothing could have ever prepared him for the debilitating pain that lanced through him in that second. He heaved again, his stomach twisting and cramping painfully.

"Archias," Jade said softly from the steps.

"Why?" Archias asked brokenly. "Did I not give you everything you desire? Am I not enough for you, Jade Blevins?"

He pushed to his feet, his back still to his silent lover. He felt ashamed at his show of weakness. Embarrassment leaked into the shame, because he had foolishly believed that Jade cared for him. Just as quickly as it came, both emotions drained away, leaving only the heartbreak of betrayal.

"I'm sorry, Archias. I screwed up—"

Archias lifted a hand to halt Jade's words. The warmth seeped from him, replaced by cold and darkness.

He could not do this. He closed his eyes and willed himself to the only place he knew Jade could not follow—his *pehar*.

* * * *

"I promise nothing happened. It didn't go any further," Jade whispered. "I couldn't do it. I felt dirty and ashamed, and I just wanted to come home to you. I dropped out of the tournament."

He had whispered the same words repeatedly for two days. He guessed he probably looked like some crazy drunk, wandering around his house, caressing and talking to a little glass bottle.

He didn't know what else to do. He had pleaded, cried, begged, and demanded. Nothing could coax Archias from his hiding place. Jade briefly considered tricking Archias out by saying he wanted to make a wish. It wouldn't be right though. The big Greek deserved better.

"Baby, please come out. I just want to talk to you. I know you can hear me. Just hear me out, then I'll make my last wish and you can be free of me forever." It killed him to say the words, but he also knew he meant them.

When he received no response, Jade placed the bottle down gently on the coffee table. He paced the room,

wracking his brain for some way to make this better. He knew he didn't deserve Archias's forgiveness.

"I'm so fucking sorry," he whispered. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Why?" The deep, wounded voice behind him made him jump. He spun around grinning like a fool.

"You came back."

"Why?" Archias asked again. "Is he the reason you asked me to stay away that night?"

Jade hurried around the sofa and wrapped his arms around Archias's waist. "No, baby, no. I didn't plan for that to happen. He was just so insistent." Jade shook his head, struggling to find the right words. "I just kept thinking about how you would be gone in a few weeks, and I would be all alone again. It's a lame excuse, and I'm so sorry."

Jade took a deep breath and shook his head again. He continued to hold on to his lover, though Archias made no attempt to embrace him back. "We made it out to the parking lot, and things got a little out of control. Before it went any further, though, I told him I couldn't do it, and he punched me in the face."

"Why?" Archias repeated the word for a third time.

"Because he wasn't you." Jade took a deep breath for courage and laid his heart at the warrior's feet.

"Because... I love you, Archias."

Archias gasped softly. His arms wrapped around Jade and pulled him closer. Neither said anything for a long time.

"I love you, my *draga*," Archias said into Jade's hair. "Never again, love. My heart will not survive."

"Never," Jade promised. "I don't want anyone else." He chuckled quietly. "My aching jaw proves that."

Archias pushed him away and held his face in both massive hands. "I would be lying if I said I was not pleased that you suffered some." He smiled a little sheepishly and shook his head. "I have missed you, Jade. I want to take you to bed and make you forget every other man in the world."

Jade nodded eagerly. He could get into that plan in a hurry. "I could use a little Greek loving right about now."

"I strive to please."

* * * *

Jade woke to a warm body pressed against his back. He smiled, his eyes still closed, and sighed in contentment. Archias loved him.

Their lovemaking the night before had been slow and sensual, tender and sweet. Each kiss, each touch, each stroke of Archias's body inside his, a silent promise of love

and devotion.

Jade wiggled, loving the pleasant ache in his ass. He cuddled back closer to his lover, pressing his butt against Archias's morning wood. Archias's arms tightened around him, stilling his movements.

"Be still, my love. Did you not receive enough of my attention in the night?" His voice held a smile. His lips brushed across Jade's neck causing him to shiver. "Are you needing again so soon?"

Jade squirmed until he turned in Archias's arms to face the big man. "Always need you." He ground his own erection against Archias's hip as if proving his point. His lips nuzzled the warm skin of his lover's collarbone. "Love you."

"Mm, love you." Archias moaned softly. His hand wrapped around Jade's hip, tugging him closer, and mashing their cocks together. "Love how you feel, how you smell, your taste, your mind, and your soul."

Jade felt tears prickle his eyes at the heartfelt words. "Make love to me, baby. Let me feel you."

"Are you not too sore?" Archias held Jade's gaze, his eyes filled with concern.

Jade bit his lip. True, his ass felt like he had been pounded into the mattress repeatedly. Which he had. He reached up and ran a finger over Archias's lips. "Perhaps

there are other ways."

Archias tilted his head as much as their positions would allow. "Do you not want to make love to me? In all this time, you have never asked. Do you not enjoy being inside another's body?"

Jade closed his eyes and whimpered pathetically. Prying open his lids, he caressed Archias's jaw. "Believe me, baby, I want to be inside you in the worst way. I just didn't think that you would be... accepting." He kissed his genie's lips and smiled. "I don't need it. I love feeling you inside me, your big body wrapped around mine. You make me feel safe," he admitted.

"You will always be safe with me," Archias swore. "But I will never deny you anything." He captured Jade's mouth, delivering a soul-scorching kiss. "Make love to me," he said huskily.

Jade pulled away and stared into the warrior's eyes, searching for the truth. "Are you sure, baby? We don't have to."

"I am sure," Archias assured him. "I want to feel what you feel when I take you. I want to know what it is that puts that look on your face when I slide into your welcoming heat. Please."

Jade nodded and rolled to reach for the lube on the nightstand. "Hands and knees would probably be best for

your first time." He paused and considered his lover. "This is your first time, right?"

Archias grinned and nodded. "Only my *draga* would I trust with such vulnerability."

Jade fell in love all over again. "Okay then, hands and knees, baby."

Archias shook his head. "I want to watch your face. I want to see your pleasure when you take me. I want to look into your eyes and know that you belong to me as I belong to you."

Jade didn't think his heart could hold any more joy or love. He helped Archias get into position on his back and moved his feet up close to that perfect ass. He spread his lover's knees to either side and groaned when his cheeks parted, revealing his sweet pink hole.

"Wanna taste you," Jade said mostly to himself. He crawled between Archias's thighs and laved his tongue over the heavy sac, sucking one ball and then both into his mouth. He adored Archias's groan of pleasure.

Working his way further down, he licked at his lover's taint before flicking over Archias's tightly clenched hole. "Relax," he breathed against the opening.

Archias moaned, spreading himself wider to Jade's questing tongue. Jade set to work, ringing the muscles, sucking and biting lightly. He moaned against the abused

flesh, pointing his tongue, and pushing inside Archias's body. His man tasted damn good.

Archias moaned and whimpered. He squirmed on the bed, writhing beneath Jade's ministrations. His muscles tensed and relaxed, his cock jerking and oozing pre-cum against his abs.

Jade felt like a king.

Grabbing the lube, he slicked his fingers quickly and pushed his first finger deep inside the silky heat. At the same time, he grabbed Archias's prick in his other hand and swallowed the head.

Archias growled, his head thrown back and a fine sheen of sweat covering his bronzed skin. "Jade! Oh gods, oh gods!"

Jade smiled around the turgid flesh in his mouth, sawing his finger in and out of his lover's body. When he felt Archias relax, he added a second finger, pumping into the hungry hole, searching.

His knuckles grazed over the smooth gland, and Archias thrust his hips up wildly, calling out Jade's name to the ceiling. "Found it." Jade chuckled.

He continued to torment his warrior, stroking his prostate with his fingers, and working Archias's cock with his mouth, tongue, and lips. He slipped in a third finger, twisting his wrist, and spreading his fingers to prepare his

lover.

Jade felt Archias's dick swell inside his mouth, pushing heavily against his tongue, and knew his man was close. Pulling off with a pop, he squeezed the base of the shaft and gently removed his fingers. "Don't come," he commanded.

Archias growled and whined, thrusting his hips, and trying to get friction from Jade's grip on his pole. "Not very good at taking orders are you, baby?" Jade chuckled softly and slapped Archias's rounded cheek. "Are you ready for me?"

"Yes!" Archias yelled. "Fuck me. Please fuck me before I lose my mind!"

Jade couldn't deny his need any longer. He hissed as he lubed up his straining erection, lingering a bit and letting his balls burn with his pleasure. He lined up the flared head with Archias's virgin entrance and pushed forward slowly.

Archias groaned, his fingers twining in the sheets and gripping them desperately. Jade ran his hands down his lover's abdomen, comforting him. "Are you okay?" he asked shakily. His control dangled precariously by a frayed thread. "Relax, baby."

Archias took a deep breath and released it slowly. His muscles relaxed marginally, and Jade slipped in a little further. He worked forward, inch by torturous inch, until he

felt his balls brush against the coarse hairs on Archias's ass.

Jade stilled completely. Partly to give Archias a chance to adjust, and partly because he felt like he would blow in any second. "Ready?"

"Move," Archias demanded.

Jade gripped Archias's thighs and began a slow and smooth rhythm. He groaned and shuddered, grimacing in pleasure. "You are so hot, baby. So damn tight." His strokes increased, spurred on by his lover's continuous shouts of ecstasy.

His hair plastered to his face with sweat, and his heart felt like it would burst from his chest. His balls drew up tight and burned with liquid heat. He reached out blindly, grabbing Archias's bouncing prick and stroked it to the pounding of his hips.

"Come for me, baby. I want to feel this pretty ass strangle my cock. Do it now," he ground out.

Archias roared. His back arched, and his massive thighs locked around Jade's hips. His inner walls gripped Jade's shaft as sticky ropes of spunk shot from the slit of his cock to cover his chest, stomach, and Jade's hand.

Jade thrust once more, twice, then stilled, pushing as far into his lover as he could. He growled out Archias's name, rocking his hips against his ass, and coating Archias's channel with his seed.

He slumped forward, falling to his giant's chest, feeling like he'd just shot his brain out through his dick. "Damn, that was good."

Then he jerked up, hissing when his softening cock slid from its wet sheath. He ran his hands over Archias's face and neck, and down over his chest. "Are you okay, baby? I wasn't too rough?"

"You were incredible." Archias smiled. "I do not have words to describe the sensations. I could quickly become addicted to this."

Jade mirrored his smile. "Not too addicted. I love having this huge cock pounding into my ass. Don't go all power-bottom on me."

Archias frowned in confusion. "Power what?"

Jade laughed, carefree and full of happiness. He crawled up his warrior's body and snuggled in, wrinkling his nose a bit at the sticky fluid between their bodies. "Let's get cleaned up and find something to eat. I want to go by Emery's place and check on him. He hasn't returned any of my calls." He was beginning to worry about his friend.

Archias kissed the top of his head. "I will start the water." He wiggled out from under Jade and headed to the bathroom.

Jade watched his ass bunch and sway, and licked his lips. Oh yeah, he could become just as addicted if he didn't

watch himself.

* * * *

Archias walked into the living room just as the front door banged open. He instinctively slid in front on his lover, pushing the small man behind him.

Emery stomped inside. His eyes flashed with rage, and he breathed like a wounded elephant. "Where is he?"

Jade stepped out from behind Archias and crossed his arms over his chest. "Where the hell have you been? I've been trying to call you! I was worried about you."

"You," Emery said coldly. He strode across the room and gripped Jade's shirt collar in both fists, shaking him roughly. "Didn't worry too much the other night when you just left me! I had to calm down before I talked to you so I didn't kill your sorry ass! What the fuck is your problem?"

Archias growled in warning. Jade stood calmly, reaching over to pat his arm. He looked up at him and shook his head. "I don't have one, but you're going to if you don't get your hands off of me." Jade spoke as though the whole situation bored him.

Emery released Jade, shoving him away forcefully. Archias caught his man when he tripped backward,

steadying him on his feet. He glared at Emery, but Jade remained between him and his friend.

"You just fucking left! You walked out on a quarter million dollar pot and didn't even bother to stick around to make sure I got home." Some of Emery's ire drained away, replaced by hurt.

"I'm sorry," Jade said, and he sounded it. "It's a long story, and one I don't feel like getting into right now." He cast a quick glance at Archias before he continued. "I just couldn't stay. Did you find a ride home?"

"I took the bus!" Emery roared. "Seventeen miles with some drunk drooling on me, you piece of shit. Please don't tell me that having this ape's dick up your ass was more important than your best fucking friend!"

Jade flinched, and Archias wanted to rip Emery's head from his shoulders and cram it up his offended ass. "Watch yourself."

"Oh, fuck off," Emery groused at him. "This is between me and Jade. So, what was so damn important that you walked out and left your best friend stranded?"

Jade bit his lip, and his shoulders sagged. He looked up at Archias pleadingly. Archias melted under the look and nodded his head. "All is forgiven, *draga*. Tell your friend."

"I cheated on Archias right before my last match,"

he blurted. "I couldn't stay."

Emery looked like someone had slapped him. He looked Jade up and down, and his eyes narrowed at the bruised jawline. He turned his wrath on Archias, stepping closer, and crowding him. "Did you do that to him?"

Archias shook his head, his respect for the man growing. "I would never lay a hand on him in anger. He is safe with me."

"Then who did this?" He gripped Jade's chin and turned his head to get a good look at the abused flesh. "Someone worked you over pretty good, huh man?"

"Just one lucky punch," Jade mumbled. "He didn't take it well when I told him I couldn't go through with it. Considering I had his dick in my hand at the time, I think his reaction was fairly mild."

Emery whistled low and shook his head. "It's still fucked up that you left me, but I understand." He thrust his hand out toward Archias. "Sorry, man. I didn't mean to accuse of you of shit. I just get a little overprotective of my man here."

Archias released Emery's hand and grunted. He pulled Jade to him, holding him close. "My man," he said, sneering.

Emery just laughed. "Yeah, yeah, I know." He waved a hand in dismissal and walked out of the room and

into the kitchen. "What's for breakfast?" he called.

Jade laughed, the sound muffled against Archias's chest. "Crisis averted," he said. "Let's feed him so we can get rid of him."

CHAPTER TEN

The next two weeks flew by in a whirlwind of bliss. Archias could not remember a time he had been happier. Even in his mortal life in Thessaly.

Just watching Jade doing mundane chores about the house gave him such a sense of peace. Jade insisted on teaching Archias to read, and though it was hard, he enjoyed the time he spent with his man. He could read a few words and even a sentence here or there. The progress thrilled Jade.

Since Archias was all for anything that made his little man happy, he did not grumble too much and tried hard to learn the foreign script. He could not remember exactly when his *pehar* had landed in America, but he did remember being shocked that he understood the strange language.

He assumed it was part of the curse. How would he grant wishes if he could not understand them? What did it matter? If he had not been able to comprehend English, he would have never found Jade.

"Who taught you to read?" Archias asked one night while they lay in bed, Jade snuggled up to his chest, reading aloud from one of his favorite romance novels.

Jade set the book down slowly and turned to face him. "My kindergarten teacher," he said sadly.

Archias didn't understand why that should upset his lover. "Is that not the job of a teacher?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Most kids knew how to read before they went to school though. Their parents taught them. Usually their mom." Jade bit his lip, and he would not meet Archias's eyes.

"Why did your mother not teach you then?" Archias's own mother had died when he was a small boy. He had longed for her for many years, but over the centuries, he had slowly forgotten her. He had barely known his father.

"My parents didn't like me much," Jade confessed. "They were more interested in flying around the world, rubbing elbows with the rich and famous. They couldn't be bothered with a son like me."

"You are a wonderful man, Jade Blevins. Any parents should be proud to have a son like you."

Jade snorted. "Yeah, well tell them that. Not that you can. They died when I was twelve."

"I am sorry for your loss," Archias whispered. He still had trouble expressing his emotions.

"Don't be." Jade shook his head. "I barely knew them. They never took me with them, and they were rarely

home. I stayed with my grandpa." His face lit up, and his eyes took on a tender look. "He was great. You would have loved him. I miss him a lot."

"I am sure I would have liked him very much, *draga*. If he loved you, I would have adored him immediately."

"Oh, he did, and I loved him more than anyone. He bought me my first car, took me fishing, taught me how to be a man." Jade sniffled and wiped at the moisture in his eyes. "He left me this house and an exorbitant inheritance when he died. Though, most of it came from my parents," he added as an afterthought.

"My poor *draga*." Archias kissed the tears from Jade's eyes and held him more securely. "When did he die?"

"Just after I graduated." Jade chuckled wetly. "I think the old buzzard hung on until then so that I wouldn't have to become a ward of the state." He looked up at Archias and grinned. "I didn't turn eighteen until three months after I graduated from school. Children aren't considered adults until after their eighteenth birthday."

Archias just rocked the man in his arms. "Thank you for sharing him with me. I would have liked to know him."

"Thank you for giving me someone to share him

with. I love you," Jade whispered.

Archias closed his eyes and swallowed around the lump in his throat. "I love you, too."

He did not want to leave Jade, or go back into the dark. He did not want a new master. He wanted to stay with Jade forever.

When Jade told him that he loved him, Archias's soul filled with hope that Jade would set him free at last. Only twelve days remained, and Jade had not spoken of any such thing. Archias did not know why the idea hurt him so deeply.

As if reading his mind, instead of the other way around, Jade whispered into his chest, "Tell me again about how you can be set free."

"You must wish it," Archias answered just as quietly. "It must be done out of an unselfish act of love."

Jade's arms tightened around him. "Then... it's impossible for me to wish you free."

He rested his chin on top of Jade's head and blinked away his tears. "I thought you loved me." His voice broke twice, embarrassing him.

Jade rose up and looked him in the eye. He cupped Archias's cheek and kissed his lips tenderly. "I do," he said, pulling away, "more than anything, baby. If I wish you free, it will not be an unselfish act. I want you too much for

myself."

Archias cursed under his breath. One more way for the gods to screw him. "We will find a way, little one. I will not give you up."

"I can still wish you free, but I would have to let you go." Jade hiccupped cutely.

Archias smiled and turned off the bedside lamp. He snuggled down under the blankets, holding his lover to his heart. "We will find a way," he repeated. "Things will be clearer in the light of morning."

Archias prayed he was right.

"What were the Centaurs like?" Jade asked sleepily.

"Ah, shall I tell you a bedtime story?" Archias teased.

Jade bit his nipple in reprimand. "Don't be a jerk. Were they really all savage like the books say?"

"Centaurs were very intelligent, wise... mystical. They saw things, understood things that no one else could. They looked to the heavens for answers." Archias smiled fondly. "The Centaurs were beautiful, every bit as lovely as you." He tickled Jade's ribs, loving the sound of his lover's giggles.

"They were fierce warriors, skilled marksmen, and very gifted musicians." Archias winked at the confusion on Jade's face. "They were not blood thirsty killers, Jade. They

were gentle, peaceful creatures, but fought bravely to defend their lands."

"So, you liked the Centaurs, but not the Satyrs? Isn't that a little hypocritical?"

Archias sighed. "I did not like the Centaurs. During my mortal life in Thessaly, I did not like anything or anyone. The Centaurs were just filthy beasts to me, but I respected their skills on the battlefield."

He could still hear the soft music that rolled over the hills and through the trees to his camp. The melodies floated on the summer breeze, the sound both beautiful and sad.

"Did something change your mind?"

"I was granted to the Centaurs as a gift. I spent many years with them, before my *pehar* landed in the hands of an invading army."

"You fought the Centaurs?" Jade sounded awed.

"Yes, my king sought to take their lands. We fought many battles against the Centaurs."

"Oh, wow, so you were like a general?"

Archias shook his head slowly. "We were commanded by Achilles. I traveled to Thessaly with my sister when I was sixteen, and—"

"You weren't born in Thessaly? Where were you born? You went on some epic journey when you were

sixteen? You seriously knew Achilles?" Jade spoke quickly, firing off questions without giving Archias a chance to answer.

"Do you intend to interrupt me every time I speak?" Archias smirked when Jade bit his lip and nodded.

"Sorry. It's all really interesting. I just want to know everything." Jade smiled innocently, and Archias could not help but smile in return.

"My sister and I were born in Thrace. We traveled to Thessaly after our father's death, just before the Macedonian army burned our village to the ground." Archias fought back a wave of anger at the memory. "It was not an easy trek, but hardly an epic journey." He paused, rolling his eyes at his lover's words. "And, yes, I truly knew Achilles. He was a brave and noble soldier. He taught me much."

"I'm sorry about your dad."

"It happened a very long time ago. I barely remember him or my mother. I still dream of my sister though," he added quietly.

"What was her name?"

"Appolonia," Archias answered around a small smile. "She was very beautiful, with hair like the sun, and eyes as green as the summer grass. I failed her." His throat constricted.

"Shh, love, don't cry." Jade swiped away the stray tear with his thumb, and kissed Archias's trembling lips. "I love you." He wiggled closer, kissed Archias's chest, and sighed. "Sleep now."

Archias closed his eyes, but it would be a long time before sleep claimed him.

* * * *

"So, he can really read your mind?" Emery shook his head. "I bet it's annoying as hell."

Jade broke the neat triangle Emery had just finished racking and shrugged. "Not really. He knows what I want before I ask for it. I know I can't lie to him so I don't even try. I think it's kind of neat actually. I just wish I could get inside his head, too, sometimes."

He would see Archias brooding often and want desperately to know what troubled the big man. He would ask, of course, but Archias would just smile and distract him in delicious ways.

Jade didn't really need to hear Archias's thoughts to know what was on his lover's mind. They were the same worries that plagued his thoughts since admitting his feelings for the Greek. What would they do when their ninety days were up?

"So, why haven't you wished him free?" Emery always read him so well.

"It's complicated." Jade grimaced. "It must be wished out of unselfish love." He sighed. "I love him too much to let him go. If I wish him free, it will be for completely selfish reasons."

"What if he didn't want to be with you?" Emery asked. "If you love him wouldn't you still want him to be free and live a happy life, even without you?"

"Of course," Jade answered immediately. He frowned when his next shot went wide, but didn't comment.

"Then it's not completely selfish."

"I can't risk it. If I screw this up, he'll be trapped inside that damn bottle for the rest of forever. I won't do that to him." Jade nodded in finality.

"That sucks." That was Emery—always the philosopher. "It might be worth it though. Talk to him about it." He walked around the table, contemplating his next move.

"I can't. I won't hurt him that way. If it doesn't work, and he gets trapped inside that bottle, I will never forgive myself." Jade smiled a little to himself. "He's afraid of the dark, you know."

Emery's eyebrows shot to his hairline, and he missed the cue ball completely. "I wouldn't think the big

lug could be scared of anything."

Jade nodded, chuckling softly. "Yeah, he doesn't really freak out, but he gets very tense when it's dark. I bought a nightlight the other day. I told him it was so I could see if I needed to go the bathroom in the night."

"So, I guess I'm sworn to secrecy? I can't tell him the real reason? That would be so much fun." Emery sighed wistfully.

Jade laughed. "Be nice, Em."

Emery grabbed at his chest, right over his heart. "I'm crushed." He mock pouted. "I'm always the perfect gentleman."

Jade snorted in derision.

"So, where is your nocturnally challenged knight?" Emery looked around the basement as if he expected Archias to appear out of thin air.

"Out walking." Jade lined up his shot, sinking the twelve ball. "He does that a lot. I think he misses the sunshine and the fresh air."

"Must be hard to come by inside a coke can," Emery mumbled. "How long do you have?"

Melancholy descended over Jade, and he missed the shot. "Six days."

"Ouch," Emery sympathized. He sank the nine ball and grinned. "So, what are you going to do when he's

gone?"

"I don't know." Jade rested his cue stick against the wall. He didn't feel like playing anymore. His game was completely off anyway. "I don't want to think about it."

"Well, at least think about what I said." Emery dropped the eight ball into the side pocket and grinned. "I win."

* * * *

Jade hung up his phone with shaking hands and stared into the space in front of him blankly.

"Who was that?" Emery asked around a mouthful of spaghetti.

"Do you ever go home?" Archias grumped as he walked into the kitchen.

"And miss your shining face and sparkling personality?" Emery smirked. "Never."

Archias must have noticed Jade's dazed expression, because he hurried to his side and wrapped him in his arms. "What's wrong, Jade? What happened?"

"It was him," Jade said without emotion.

A picture of Quinton flashed through his mind from the tournament. Archias growled and clutched him closer. "He wants a rematch." Jade's heart hammered until he felt

like it would crack his breastbone.

"Do not go," Archias whispered.

"I'm not." Jade turned and wrapped his arms around Archias's waist. His big man worried too much. "I told him no."

"Are you kidding me?" Emery choked. "He won the pot! How much did he put up for a rematch?"

Jade shrugged—a difficult action with Archias squeezing the life out of him. "I didn't ask. I told him I'm not interested. I have what I want, and I don't need to prove anything to him or anyone else."

"Did you tell him that?"

"Yeah."

"How'd he take it? Quinton has a reputation for his temper." Emery shoved in more of the pasta and motioned at Jade's jaw, looking completely unconcerned.

"He said he'd make me an offer I couldn't refuse. I hung up." Jade didn't worry about the big cowboy. Nothing the man could offer him would change his mind.

"Watch your back," Emery said seriously. "He's a crazy fucker."

"Do not be concerned for Jade's safety," Archias rumbled. "I will protect him with my life."

"You may not always be around," Emery pointed out.

Jade closed his eyes and squeezed Archias. He didn't want to think about goodbye. It would come soon enough.

Six days to be exact.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Special delivery," Emery called from the front door.

Jade waltzed into the living room and started laughing. "Oh, Emery, why, you shouldn't have," he said in his best southern bell impression. He batted his lashes and reached for the large vase filled with white and red roses.

Emery handed them over and sniggered. "I didn't. Someone sure likes you though. There are two dozen roses here. I checked."

"You stood on my front porch and counted roses? Seriously?"

Emery punched him in the bicep and headed toward to the kitchen without a word. Jade searched through the beautiful flowers until he found a small envelope. Pulling it out carefully, he extracted the card and frowned.

The tiny card came preprinted with the words, 'Thinking Of You,' but nothing more. No message. No name. *What the hell?*

Jade knew he should probably throw them away, but he really didn't want to.

"Why not?" Archias asked from behind him.

Jade spun around and glared. "Do not sneak up on

me like that." He touched the soft petals with his fingers and sighed. "Because they're pretty."

"Then keep them." Archias left the room without further comment.

Jade hoped he hadn't upset his lover. The roses held no sentimental value to him, though he had an idea of where they came from. They were nice though, and no one had given him flowers since his graduation. Still, he should toss them just on principal.

Archias's head popped back around the doorway, and he smirked. "I am not upset, and I would pick you an entire field of flowers if you wish."

Jade laughed and shooed him away. "Go beat up Emery or something."

"My pleasure." Archias's grin widened, and his eyes lit up as if he had found the lost city of Atlantis. "Atlantis is not lost," he called over his shoulder, disappearing again.

"Wait!" Jade took off running after his lover, flowers forgotten. "Atlantis was real? Archias! Archias! Get your ass back here!"

* * * *

Jade slapped at his alarm clock. He didn't remember setting the damn thing. He had no reason to be up so early.

He opened his eyes, blinking sleepily, and noticed the LCD display on his cell phone lit the room.

He reached for the phone and flipped it open without checking the ID. "Lo," he mumbled.

"Have you reconsidered my offer, baby?"

"Quinton?" Jade sat up in the bed and wiped his hand over his face. He glanced at the clock and groaned. "It's four o'clock in the morning. What the hell do you want?" Jade looked over at Archias, pleased to find him still fast asleep.

"I'm so sorry I hit you, baby. I just got so worked up and then I thought maybe you had someone else and that's why you didn't want me. You know you belong to me."

"I do have someone else, Quinton. Someone I love very much. And I do *not* belong to you." Jade slid out of bed and slipped quietly from the room. He knew things were about to get loud, and he didn't want to wake his tired lover. He smiled inwardly at the reason for Archias's exhaustion.

"Surely you don't mean the genie," Quinton scoffed.

"That's not really important."

"Baby, don't be that way. I'm sorry I hurt you. Just give me another chance. We can work this out. Did you like my gifts?"

The gifts that had been mysteriously arriving on his

porch were from Quinton. The roses, a bottle of champagne, and just that morning, he received a set of genuine ivory billiard balls. He knew, but had secretly hoped he was wrong. Of course, that would just create an entirely new set of problems.

Jade shuddered at the man being so close to him without his knowledge.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he yelled. "There is nothing to work out! I had a weak moment and almost blew you in a parking lot. That's all that happened. There is nothing to work out. I don't belong to you. There wasn't a first chance, so how in the fuck do expect me to give you a second one?" Jade paced the living room as he ranted. Harris Quinton was seriously off his rocker.

"I'm going back to bed with the man I love. Don't call me again, Quinton." Jade flipped his phone shut and turned to go back to his room.

Archias leaned against the hall entryway, gloriously bare and mouthwatering beautiful. "Quinton," he said.

Jade nodded. "Yeah. I don't think he'll call back, though." He sauntered closer and rubbed himself against Archias like a cat in heat. "Take me back to bed," he whispered seductively.

"No need for bedrooms." Archias smiled mischievously. He dropped to his knees and pulled Jade

forward by his hips. "I have everything I need right here." He licked his lips.

Jade watched mesmerized. His cock stood up proudly and waved hello, begging for the same attention Archias showed his own lips.

"Suck me, baby." The words slipped from Jade's mouth before he made the conscious decision to say them.

Archias's teal eyes flashed with heat and darkened. Jade wanted to fist his hands in all that beautiful silver hair and fuck Archias's mouth until he lost himself in the pleasure.

The big man gripped Jade's prick and pulled him closer. "Take what you want, *draga*."

Lightning zoomed up his spine and shorted out his brain, until Jade did just that. He tangled his fingers in Archias's long strands and pushed his hips forward. Archias parted his lips immediately, allowing him entrance.

Jade let his head drop back on his shoulders and moaned like a slut. Hot, moist, wonderful, Archias's mouth felt like heaven. Losing complete control of himself, Jade rocked his hips, fucking into his lover's mouth almost as hard as he would take the man's ass.

Damn, how he burned for the man in front of him. Everything about the Thessalian made him rock hard and mushy all at the same time. He didn't want to ever live

without him.

Jade took his frustrations and uncertainty out on Archias's slurping mouth. His sac grew tight, the electricity buzzed in his lower belly, and his dick swelled inside his warrior's mouth.

"I love you, Archias," he whispered inside his head. He pushed to the back of his lover's throat and grunted his release. His essence poured down Archias's throat, and he received some small satisfaction that he had just branded the man.

Archias gulped him down hungrily and licked every inch of him clean. "You are my heart," he said simply.

Jade promised himself then that he would do whatever it took to set Archias free. Even if that meant living without him.

* * * *

"It's so big," Archias exclaimed.

Jade chuckled quietly. "Yes, it is. You're going to love this movie." He cuddled up next to his lover's side and kissed the spot just over Archias's heart.

"It's outside." Wonder colored Archias's voice. "How do they do it?"

"For once, I'm not sure." Jade kicked his boots into

the floorboard of his truck and tucked his legs up under him. "Blanket?" He yawned. He was so tired, but he wanted to make his last night with the big Greek memorable. There were so many things he wanted to show the man. Too many things he wouldn't get to experience with his lover.

Archias retrieved the blanket from behind the seat and spread it over Jade, tucking it around his shoulders. "Okay, my love?"

Jade nuzzled Archias's chest and purred. "Perfect."

The movie started and Jade dozed to the soft laughter of his lover. His cell phone chirped in his pocket, but he ignored it. Nothing could get him to move.

The fourth time the phone rang in ten minutes, Jade quickly rethought his position. He growled, digging his phone out and flipping it open. "What?"

"Are you ready to play, Jade?" Quinton's voice drifted over the line, grating on Jade's nerves.

"Goodbye, Quinton."

"Uh, uh, I wouldn't do that, Blevins. I have something that belongs to you. Something that you will want back."

"What could you possibly have of mine?" Jade asked exasperatedly.

"Jade? Man, you gotta get me out of here. This guy

is nuttier than a Payday." Emery sounded calm, but Jade detected the note of unease in his friend's voice.

"Emery!"

"Midnight." Quinton rambled off an address. "Do not be late, and don't even think about bringing the police." The line went dead.

Jade scrambled into the driver's seat and started the engine. They had twenty minutes until midnight. "Hang on tight, baby." He pulled out of the parking lot and skidded onto the main road.

"Jade, what the hell is going on? Why are we leaving? Where are we going?"

"Quinton has Emery. I think he's going to hurt him. We have to save him." The panic ate away at Jade's calm façade. This was entirely his fault.

"Stop," Archias admonished. "None of this is your fault. Harris Quinton is a madman." He folded his hands in his lap and tilted his head to the side. "Why do you not just wish your friend free?"

Jade shook his head at once. "I'm still trying to figure out how to use that wish to set you free. Besides, Quinton wants to play. I can beat him."

Archias took his hand that rested on the gearshift and caressed the knuckles with his thumb. "If it looks as though you are going to lose, I want you to use that wish to

save yourself and Emery." He turned Jade's hand over and placed a soft kiss on the palm. "Promise me, *draga*."

Jade swallowed hard. "I guess I can't set you free if I'm dead, so I promise. But only if I see no other way out." He squeezed his lover's hand and glanced over at him. "I love you. No matter what happens, don't forget that."

Archias smiled and nodded. "I know, Jade. I love you as well. I am not afraid of the *pehar*. I will have my memories of you to last me for eternity."

"No," Jade said gently but firmly. He retracted his hand from Archias's grip and placed it on the steering wheel. "No goodbyes, baby."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jade pulled up in front of a big colonial style house and parked in the driveway beside Quinton's pickup. He shuddered as memories of his last meeting with the extended cab assailed him.

"Stop that," Archias said softly. "Put your game face on." He smiled brightly and winked.

Jade laughed in spite of himself. "Where did you learn that?"

"Poker After Dark."

Jade laughed louder. "You are full of surprises." He took a deep breath to steady his nerves. "Let's do this."

They climbed the stone steps together, and Jade rang the doorbell. The heavy wooden door opened almost immediately, and Quinton stood just inside smiling like a maniac. His gaze drifted over and up to rest on Archias, and his smile slipped from his face. "I see you brought your genie. How *sweet*," he sneered.

Jade rolled his eyes. "Yes, this is Archias. Are we going to play or what?"

Quinton snorted derisively and turned away.

Jade started to follow, but instead ended up face down on the porch when Archias pushed him roughly and

leapt over him. He reached Harris Quinton in one long jump, tackling the man to the floor and plowing his knuckles into the asshole's face.

Jade winced when he heard the crunch of Quinton's cheekbone shattering beneath the massive fist. The cowboy's eyes rolled back in his head, and he slumped to the floor unconscious.

Jade shook his head in disbelief, gaping at his lover as he climbed to his feet. "Not exactly what we discussed, but effective nonetheless."

Archias looked at him over his shoulder and shrugged. "You said to find out what he wanted, and then I could hurt him."

Jade arched an eyebrow, and the corners of his lips twitched. "I said that weeks ago."

His lover shrugged again. "My plan was more efficient and did not involve you getting hurt." He jerked his head toward the living room. "We need to find Emery quickly."

Jade nodded and stepped over the prone figure blocking the entryway. "I'll look down here. You take the upstairs." He waited for Archias to nod his understanding, then turned and raced through the house.

"Please, God, let him be okay."

Jade searched everywhere, yelling for his friend. He

passed through the swank living room, dug through the pantry of the stylish kitchen, and tore apart every bedroom and closet he came to. "Emery! Where the hell are you?"

Damn it! A sudden thought plagued him, urging him to hurry his steps. Maybe Quinton didn't have Emery in the house. Which meant he could be anywhere in the city. The fear and strain that tinged his friend's voice during the phone call troubled Jade even more.

He stepped into Quinton's game room, rolling his eyes at the overstuffed sofas, ridiculously expensive pool table, and not one, but two, flat screen televisions. The man certainly lived the highlife.

Still, he found no trace of his best friend.

Shit, shit, shit! He had no doubt that Quinton had done something painful to Emery. Jade didn't know the extent or severity of the injuries, but he worried that if he didn't find his friend soon, it might be too late.

Hoping his lover had garnered better results, he set out to find him. "Archias!"

He rounded one of several floor to ceiling pillars in the living room and smacked into a wall. Well, not a wall, but close enough. Archias's arms shot out, wrapping around Jade's waist, and steadying him before he could fall on his ass. "You are most clumsy, *draga*."

Jade glared at him, but otherwise ignored the slight.

"Did you find anything?"

Archias shook his head. "I did not find Emery, or anything that will lead us to him."

Jade ran his fingers through his hair, pulling at it roughly as he paced. "I didn't see a door for a basement. What about the attic?"

Archias looked at him in confusion.

"Did you find a door in the ceiling or a door with only stairs on the other side?"

Enlightenment dawned, and Archias shook his head. "I did find such a room, but no signs of your friend. I am sorry."

Jade couldn't breathe. The idea that Emery resided somewhere outside the house screamed louder inside his head. He glanced around Archias at the prone body on the floor. How were they supposed to beat Emery's whereabouts out of Quinton when the man remained unconscious in the doorway? Judging by the rapidly swelling cheek and utter lack of movement, he wouldn't be waking up soon, either.

"I am sorry." Archias dropped his head to stare at the glossy hardwood floor. "I did not think that you would need to interrogate him. I should not have been so hasty in my actions."

"I don't blame you. I just..." Jade trailed off, going

over a list of rooms in his head. "Garage!"

He took off running like Satan himself licked at his heels. He skidded into the kitchen, scanning the room, wondering why he hadn't thought to check the garage when he'd been there before.

The answer came swiftly when he realized none of the exits led to the garage. Panic bubbled inside him. "Where the fuck is it?"

Archias motioned toward the backdoor. Jade wanted to growl at him, but hurried across the room and wrenched open the door he had ignorantly assumed led to the back lawn. Instead, he found a small mudroom and... yes... the service entrance to the garage.

His excitement ebbed when he noticed the padlock. "The key. I need the key." Quinton would have the key on him. Jade turned to leave the room, but Archias stopped him with a hand to his chest. Without a word, he nudged him aside and kicked open the door as if it were made of cardboard.

The lock snapped, falling to the floor with a *clink*. The wood splintered, and the door burst open, banging loudly against the wall.

"God, I love you." Jade rushed inside and almost fell to his knees. He clutched at his stomach as bile rose in his throat, burning the soft lining of his esophagus.

Emery hung from the exposed rafters, metal clamps around his wrists and his feet dangling off the floor. Jade barely recognized the beaten man. Emery's face held a myriad of bruises and abrasions. Three particularly deep cuts bled heavily, dripping blood down his neck. His head hung limply, his chin resting against his chest.

"That bastard!" He ran to his friend, his brother, fighting back a wave of nausea as his boots slipped in the puddled blood on the cement floor. Running his hands over Emery's naked body, his anger grew as he inventoried the man's injuries.

"Please, get him down." His stomach heaved when he came to a particularly nasty cut just above Emery's hipbone.

Archias wrapped one arm around Emery's hips and used his other to yank the chain from the ceiling. He gently lowered him to the floor and looked at Jade expectantly.

"Check his pulse." Jade dug his cell phone from his pocket and quickly dialed. He watched his lover, his heart beating wildly against his sternum when Archias frowned.

"He is alive."

Jade sighed in relief. The 911 dispatcher came over the line, and he quickly outlined the situation and rambled off Quinton's address. "Help is on the way."

* * * *

Jade paced the waiting room, clenching his fists at his sides and mumbling to himself. It had been hours and still they had heard nothing on Emery's condition.

"Jade," Archias called to him softly. "Stop torturing yourself. He is important to you. Save him."

Jade's heart seized in his chest, and he felt the tears pool in his eyes. He shuffled toward his lover and knelt between his powerful thighs. "He is important to me, but so are you. I won't let Emery die, and I will use my last wish if I have to, but I want you to be free. Even if that means you can't be with me." He rested his forehead against Archias's knee and sobbed. "I love you."

Archias stroked his head gently, soothingly. "I will always love you. We were doomed from the beginning, though. Do not hold out for miracles."

How did Jade choose between the two people he loved more than anything in the world? Emery had been like a brother to him since their first meeting. Archias, however, held his heart in a way no one ever would again.

He had only three hours until sunrise—three hours to make a life-altering decision. He literally raced the sun.

A man dressed in blue scrubs walked into the waiting room, looking at them expectantly. Jade jumped to

his feet and rushed to him. "How is he? What's going on?"

"Are you Jade Blevins?"

Jade resisted the urge to shake the man. "Yes."

The short, pudgy doctor said a lot of words Jade didn't understand, but he did catch on that Emery's vitals were falling and he relied heavily upon the machines to keep his heart pumping and oxygen flowing.

"They're moving him to ICU. He is in a GCS three coma, with little hope of recovery. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but you will need to make a decision, Mr. Blevins." The doctor spoke sympathetically, while remaining professional. "Someone will be out shortly to talk to you more about Mr. Nicholson's condition and explain your options."

"What are his chances of recovery?" Jade fisted his hands behind his back to keep from fidgeting.

The doctor looked at him wearily. "Honestly?"

Jade nodded.

"Mr. Nicholson suffered severe brain trauma as well as a massive amount of blood loss. His chances for survival are maybe twenty percent." He shook his head solemnly. "The chances that he will survive without acute brain damage are almost non-existent." The doctor patted Jade's shoulder and shook his head again before leaving the room.

Once he left, Jade resumed his position, kneeling in

front of Archias. "If I make that wish now, will you have to leave immediately? Or can you stay until the sun rises?"

Archias stroked his cheek. "I must go back into the *pehar*." He leaned forward and kissed Jade's forehead tenderly. "Save him, *draga*."

Tears streamed down Jade's face, and he sniffled audibly. "I'm so sorry, but I can't let him die." He rolled his forehead against Archias's leg. "I need to think." He rose to his feet sluggishly and padded down the corridor to the elevators.

His chest hurt, his stomach boiled, but the rest of him felt numb. He rode the elevator to the ground floor and made his way out into the night. Why couldn't he have them both? Why did he have to choose? Whatever justice remained in the world was apparently on backorder.

Jade didn't know how long he walked or even where he trekked. Eventually, it began to rain, a warm summer rain that seem to wash away some of his misery. By the time he wandered back to the hospital, he had a plan firmly in place.

He only prayed that it worked.

Jade left a trail of water as he padded into the waiting room and walked directly to his lover. Archias stood and opened his arms without a word. Jade stepped into the embrace eagerly, clutching at Archias's waist, and

battling back his despair. He had one last thing he wanted to do before he revealed his plan. If everything worked out, he could postpone the goodbyes.

He pulled Archias to the elevators, down, and out into the parking lot. They settled into Jade's pickup before either of them spoke.

"Where are we going?" Archias asked.

"You'll see," Jade answered, his voice subdued.

"What will happen to Harris Quinton?" Archias changed the subject, respecting Jade's privacy.

Jade shielded his thoughts, not wanting his lover to catch a glimpse of his plan. "The police will decide that. I'm sure they'll have more questions to ask me tomorrow."

"They asked so many already." Jade smiled at the disbelief in Archias's voice.

He drove the rest of the way to his small farmhouse in comfortable silence. Once he had pulled to a stop, Jade turned to Archias and took the warrior's big hands in his own. "I have an idea, but I don't know if it will work. Just in case..." His voice trembled, and he had to swallow before he finished. "Just in case, I want to make love to you one last time."

"Anything for you." Archias's voice sounded as shaky as Jade's.

He reached for the door handle, but Jade stopped

him with a slight pull on his hand. "We started in this truck, and I want to finish here. Every important thing that ever happened to me in my life happened in his pickup."

Archias nodded, the corners of his mouth tilting up slightly. "Come here."

* * * *

Archias helped his lover into his lap and cupped the back of Jade's head to pull him in for a deep kiss. He would miss him more than he had words to express. "My beautiful *draga*," he breathed over Jade's lips.

"We don't have much time." Jade rose up on his knees and shimmied out of his jeans, standing on the floorboard to push them past his knees.

Archias unfastened his own pants, slipping them down his thighs until his hard cock bounced free. He held open his arms, beckoning his lover to him.

Jade reclaimed his position in Archias's lap, winding his arms around his neck and mashing their mouths together again. A tiny bottle of lube made its way into Archias's hand, and he took his time slicking his fingers and searching out his lover's waiting entrance.

He stretched Jade slowly, one finger at a time, until three slid easily in and out of his man's body. Jade drizzled

more lubricant over Archias's leaking prick, stroking him slowly until his pole was slick and glistening in the moonlight that filtered through the window.

No words were spoken as Jade hovered over Archias's turgid shaft, lining up the purple head, and impaling himself slowly.

Their mouths met once more, their tongues joining and tangling as Jade rose and lowered himself on Archias's cock again and again. Sweat and tears mingled, each man clutching the other with a desperation born of love and loss.

When Jade found his release, Archias followed him only a heartbeat later, whispering words of love as he filled Jade with his essence. They clung together, letting their breathing ease and heart rates slow.

"I have to save him," Jade whispered.

Archias knew his lover was right, but it did not make it hurt any less. "I know."

"I'm going to give the bottle to Emery when he wakes up. We can still see each other, and we'll have a little more time to try and find a way to set you free." Jade kissed Archias's sweaty forehead and sighed. "We need to get cleaned up and go back to the hospital. There isn't much time."

Archias's nostrils flared, and he struggled to hold on to his emotions. He would give anything for just one more

day with Jade.

Unfortunately, they were out of time.

* * * *

Jade watched the sun peek over the horizon through the hospital window and bit his lip to keep it from trembling. He turned his back to the offending ball of fire and faced his lover.

"I will get you out of the dark as soon as I can." He wrapped his arms around Archias's narrow waist and nuzzled against his giant's chest. "I love you, baby."

"I love you." Jade could hear the pain in Archias's voice.

He took a step back and closed his eyes. He couldn't watch. "I wish for Emery to live, to heal quickly." He breathed the words, his voice catching.

Jade stood that way for a long time until the sunlight pouring into the small waiting room warmed his face. Blinking open his eyes, he sobbed openly at the empty room. He crawled into one of the chairs and wrapped his arms around his knees, weeping like a child.

When he felt like he had exhausted his reserve of tears and could finally pull himself together, he pushed through the double doors of the ICU and wound his way to

Emery's room.

Two women stood huddled together, a doctor and a nurse judging by their uniforms. They whispered excitedly to each other, their heads bent close together. Jade couldn't hear what they said, but he assumed they had good news for him.

"Mr. Blevins," the doctor said with a small smile on her lips. "I have some very good news for you."

Yes, I'm sure you do.

"I don't know how it's possible, but he's recovering." Jade tried to dredge up a smile for the pretty woman, but he couldn't quite conjure one.

The doctor nodded briskly. "His vitals have stabilized and it looks like the antibiotics are working their magic on the infection. Mr. Nicholson's temperature has dropped to a normal range, and his heart rate is steady. He's not out of the woods yet," she warned, "but I think he's going to make it. Of course, we won't know the extent of the brain damage until he wakes up, though."

"Thank you, Doctor. Is it okay if I sit with him for a little while?"

"Sure. He probably won't be awake for some time though. His body is still fighting, still working to heal itself. So don't be alarmed if it's several more days before he opens his eyes."

Jade was alarmed, but not for the reason the doctor thought. He assumed his wish would be instant, that Emery's recovery would be swift, almost immediate. It *should* have been.

He didn't know much about comas, but he imagined it to be much like the hell Archias endured while in his *pehar*. His chest tightened painfully as he thought about the men he loved, trapped inside their own minds, imprisoned in the dark.

He pulled a chair up beside the bed and slid his hand through the railing, gripping his friend's wrist and squeezing it gently. Emery would be okay. Not one of Jade's wishes had failed yet. He had to believe it, because he couldn't lose them both.

Reaching into his pocket, he curled his fingers around the neck of Archias's bottle. One hand on his love, and the other on his brother, Jade closed his eyes and prayed they would come back to him soon.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jade sat at Emery's bedside every minute of the day the staff would allow. By day four of his vigil, he started to grow anxious. Emery still had not awakened. Jade fought the urge to shake his friend and demand that he open his eyes. He needed him to wake up, to say something stupid, and give him that special Emery smile, so Jade knew he was okay.

He still worried about his warrior, carried him in his pocket like some Hollywood starlet and her pint-sized pooch. Though his man had to be miserable, Jade knew he was safe.

The doctors continued to assure him that Emery's vitals were climbing daily, and he had no reason to worry. Apparently, it was perfectly normal to be in a coma.

Jade didn't buy it. He second-guessed himself, going over his wish in his head, looking for a loophole he hadn't covered.

"I wish for Emery to live, to heal quickly," he repeated under his breath, over and over. "What am I missing?" The answer made his heart sink.

Nothing.

Emery lived, and he continued to heal at an

extraordinary rate according to the hospital staff. Jade hadn't thought to qualify exactly how he wanted his friend to live.

"No, no, no!" This could not be happening. He ceased his pacing and marched up to Emery's bedside. "Wake up right now!" He slapped lightly at his friend's cheeks. "Wake the fuck up!"

Nothing happened.

Jade's throat felt raw and constricted as he battled back his tears. "I need you, Em. Please, wake up."

Still, nothing happened.

"You are being a selfish prick." Jade's nostrils flared, and the tears he'd been fighting welled in his eyes. "You can't leave me here alone, Em. I don't know what to do without you."

Emery's eyelids fluttered, a barely imperceptible flicker. Jade's heart stopped beating, turned over in chest, and restarted. He took his friend's hand and squeezed. "That's it, Em. C'mon. Open your eyes for me."

His hand twitched inside Jade's, and his head turned marginally on his pillow, but his eyes remained closed. "Ja'e"

Breath exploded from Jade's lungs in a whoosh. "Yeah, I'm here. How're you feeling?"

"Tire'."

Jade used the back of his hand to wipe the moisture from his eyes, and chuckled. "Okay, man. You sleep, but not for so long this time."

"So...rry," he slurred. "I... di'n..."

"What are you sorry for? You didn't what?" Jade's brow crinkled, and he frowned in confusion. He waited several seconds for an answer before he realized Emery had fallen asleep again.

* * * *

The next day, Emery opened his eyes and spoke a few words. He still seemed disoriented and didn't make much sense, but Jade figured it was progress. On the sixth day, however, Jade walked into Emery's room to find the man sitting up in his bed, grinning like an idiot.

"Hey!" Emery strained his neck as if trying to see around Jade. "Where's your shadow?"

"Gone," Jade said dully. "You've been out for a few days there, man. It's good to see you fully awake." He went to the bed and embraced his friend carefully, but with all the emotions he'd kept bottled inside.

"What are you talking about? Didn't you wish him free?" Emery pulled away and looked at Jade as though he had grown an extra head and antennas.

Jade shook his head. "I used the last wish to save your skinny ass."

Emery huffed indignantly. "My ass is not skinny."

"No, honey, you have a very lovely ass. Not in the least bit skinny." He rolled his eyes and snorted, taking his customary chair beside the bed. "So, I saved your life, and now I need a favor."

"So, you're the Godfather now?"

"Shut up, asshole, I'm serious. I need you to get Archias out of the dark. I can't imagine the hell he's going through in there." His voice dropped to a whisper and tears threatened to clog his throat. Now that he knew Emery would be okay, his focus and concern shifted to his lover.

Emery shook his head. "Find someone else. I so do not want that responsibility."

"He saved your ass. You don't have to be responsible for him, just get him the fuck out!" Jade stood from his chair and leaned over Emery, growling.

"Whoa! Ease up on the crazy, dude!" Emery held his hands up, palms out.

Jade stepped back slowly and pinched the bridge of his nose. His anger deflated, and he sighed. "Sorry. I haven't had much sleep. I've been worried about you, worried about Archias. I guess it's just catching up with me."

Emery nodded. "Understandable, but I still don't want that responsibility."

"What responsibility?" Jade felt his irritation return. "I'm not asking you to shack up with him and have little genie babies. I just want you to get him out of the bottle."

"I'm not talking about him." Emery stared at him pointedly. "I can't wish him free, and I don't want to be the one that breaks your heart again."

Jade sighed. This emotional rollercoaster left him exhausted. "I know. I don't know how to free him, but maybe with a little more time, I can come up with a plan."

Emery didn't look convinced. "Why should I? You and your little boy toy almost got my ass killed."

Jade jerked back and stared in shock. "How do you figure that? Did you add two and two and come up with Jello?" His friend made no sense.

Emery bit his lip, not meeting Jade's eyes. "If Quinton didn't want you so much, he wouldn't have come for me in the first place."

He hadn't even thought of that. Man, he was a shitty friend. "I'm sorry, Em. I really am, but Archias had nothing to do with it. He saved you. Knocked Quinton's ass out cold." Jade cocked his head to the side and frowned. "How did Quinton get to you anyway?"

Emery still wouldn't meet his eyes, and he chewed

on his bottom lip with such vigor, Jade feared he'd draw blood. "Emery?"

"Let me think about it."

Jade's shoulders slumped in defeat. His friend could be one stubborn asshole when he wanted to be. He leaned over the railing and kissed Emery's forehead. "Please. I know you'll do the right thing. I'm glad you're okay, but I need you both."

Emery closed his eyes and said nothing.

"I have some things to do out of town, but I'll be back in a few days." When Emery still didn't reply, Jade turned and left the room, casting one final glance over his shoulder.

He hadn't lied. He really did need to go out of town. Hustling pool in seedy bars had brought him in contact with some less than reputable characters in his younger days. Blizzard had been the scum of the scum, but Jade needed his expertise.

Blizzard got his name from the ability to make everything disappear. He'd come in and clean house, wiping away any trace of existence, just like a whiteout. Jade didn't need anything to disappear, but he did need to create a new identity.

He made a detour by his house, grabbed the suitcase he had set by the front door and the small briefcase, and set

off for Shreveport.

* * * *

It took longer than Jade had planned to find Blizzard and talk the man into giving him what he needed. He didn't know how many bars and pool houses he had searched, how many miles walked, games played, or beers drunk.

It didn't matter. Four days later, and he had what he wanted. Jade plopped onto his hotel bed and pried open the manila envelope in his hand. He dumped the contents on the bed beside him and smiled.

Birth certificate, passport, social security card, driver's license, and even a bachelor's degree in history, scattered across the ugly floral comforter. Jade rolled his eyes and snorted. Blizzard had a strange sense of humor.

He picked up the state ID and smiled down at Archias's handsome face. He had taken the picture in his living room, demonstrating how to operate a camera. He thought Archias would jump out of his skin when it flashed at him.

Archias Stefanos, age thirty-one, born in New York City, New York.

Jade beamed and hugged the little plastic card to his

chest. Some would see it as presumptuous, but Jade was nothing if not optimistic. He wanted to be prepared. Once they found a way to free Archias, he wanted to start living their lives together.

He wanted to take Archias around the world, maybe back to Thessaly and Greece, Macedonia, everywhere. Archias needed proper identification for that to happen. Screw what anyone else thought. He knew Archias would understand.

Now, he had to go convince his best friend to release the love of his life.

* * * *

"Where the fuck is he?" Jade screeched.

"Mr. Nicholson checked out this morning, sir. I assure you I did not release him, but I cannot keep him against his will, either." The doctor put her hands on her hips and glared at Jade.

"Are you serious? He just got up and walked the fuck out?" He turned on his heels and marched out of the hospital room, leaving the doctor sputtering behind him.

He'd driven all night from Shreveport, not stopping to rest, and coming straight to the hospital. He wanted food, sleep, and coffee in no particular order. He did not want to

be running all over the damn county looking for his shithead best friend.

Jade called Emery's cell phone, but as expected, it went straight to voicemail. He drove to Emery's house, beating on the front door until his knuckles were raw and bruised. He tried every one of his friend's usual haunts and came up empty.

He even called a few of Emery's friends. No one had seen or heard from him.

After hours of searching, Jade had to give up and get some sleep. He was running on fumes and could barely keep his eyes open. When he found Emery, the man had better pray for his soul, because his ass belonged to Jade.

Trudging through the front door of his little home, Jade stopped and blinked. Emery sat lounging on the sofa, feet kicked up on the coffee table, the remote in hand.

He turned when he saw Jade and grinned widely. "Where you been man?"

Jade snarled low and vicious. "Do you have any idea what the hell you've put me through? I have been everywhere looking for your stupid ass! You do not just check yourself out of a hospital and leave on your own accord. It's not fucking rehab!" he screamed.

"Hey!" Emery raised his hands and stood. "I'm fine, really. I don't know exactly what you wished, but I'm

healthy as a horse, and you know hospitals give me the creeps. I didn't mean to make you worry."

"Worry? I've been going out of my mind. The least you could have done was call so I knew you weren't dead in some ditch. Why didn't you answer your phone?"

Emery blinked. "I don't even know where the damn thing is."

Jade grabbed his friend and hugged him, thankful he was safe. "So, what are you doing at my house? Why didn't you go home? I almost kicked your door down, man."

Emery laughed. "Well, thank you for not going all kung fu phooey on my door." He stepped away and tilted his head to the side, quirking an eyebrow. "I thought you wanted my help."

Jade's jaw dropped open. "Just like that? What happened to you needing to think about it, and it's too much responsibility?"

Emery rolled his eyes. "That was five freakin' days ago. I came. I thought. I conquered. Now do you want my help or not?"

* * * *

Emery held the bottle almost reverently when Jade

handed it to him. He looked at Jade and then down to the glass in his hand. "What do I do now? Do I rub it or what?"

"I don't really know," Jade admitted. "I just wished for something, and he popped out in a cloud of smoke, all mystical like."

Emery's deep laugh turned into a cough. "Damn, that hurts." He groaned. "Don't make me laugh. I'm still on the mend, ya know."

"Okay, okay, wish for something already."

"Don't get your panties in a bunch. I'm thinking." Emery stared at the little bottle, his brows drawing together in a shallow V. "I can't wish him free, Jade. I can only give you guys a little more time together." He spoke quietly. "I'm sorry."

Jade touched his friend's shoulder and smiled. "I know, Em. A little more time is enough. Thank you."

Emery nodded and set the bottle down on the kitchen table. "I wish I had a ten inch dick." He smirked.

Jade doubled over in laughter. "Seriously?"

"Sounded good to me." Emery shrugged.

The *pehar* glowed brightly, and Jade knew if he picked it up, it would be warm to the touch. His heart tripped into a gallop, his breath coming in shallow pants.

"Hurry up, hurry up." He bounced from foot to foot, wringing his hands together in nervous anticipation. It had

only been a week, but it felt like an eternity.

Silver smoke curled from the mouth of the bottle and floated toward the ceiling. The glass shook and vibrated, bouncing around on the table, and Jade rolled his eyes. "Enough with the theatrics, Archias. Get your ass out of there."

Archias appeared instantly, completely naked, and hands on his hips. "You are most impatient, Jade Blevins."

Jade launched himself at his love, forcing Archias to catch him. He locked his legs around the man's waist and buried his fingers in all that silky silver hair. He attacked Archias's mouth, moaning and whimpering. Tears of relief and joy streamed down his face as he held tightly to his beautiful warrior.

He pulled away reluctantly when Emery cleared his throat. He didn't look at his friend, though. Instead, he looked into Archias's beautiful teal eyes and grinned. "I love you," he whispered. "Missed you like crazy."

Archias returned his smile and kissed his nose. "Love you more than anything. I could hear you." He tapped a finger to Jade's lips. "You really should not swear so much, my *draga*."

Jade laughed happily. "I'll work on it, big guy." He let his hands roam over Archias's bare chest. "As much as I like this look on you, I think maybe you should get

dressed."

Archias nodded and a white cotton T-shirt and soft faded denim covered his body. "Acceptable to you, love?"

"Excuse me," Emery said impatiently. "Why is my dick not bigger?"

Jade fell into more peals of laughter. "Archias, the man did make a wish."

Archias winked at Jade, and they both turned to look at Emery. The look on his face was priceless. His mouth hung open in shock, and he gripped his crotch as though his prick might fall off.

"I felt it grow," he whispered in awe. He quickly undid his pants and pulled his limp cock free, petting it and stroking it like a beloved family pet. "Holy shit! This is fucking awesome!"

Jade didn't know if he would ever be able to stop laughing. He slid down Archias's body and nearly fell to the floor. He clutched his sides, more tears streaming down his face. His cheeks hurt, and his head spun from lack of oxygen.

"I'm going to go play with my new toy and let you guys have some alone time." Emery stuffed himself back in his pants, and headed for the front door. Archias followed.

Jade managed to rein in his mirth and followed as well. "Where are you going?"

Archias grimaced. "I must stay with Emery now that he is my master."

"Kinky," Emery quipped.

"You're moving in," Jade informed his friend. No way would he be separated from Archias again. They had a fresh new set of ninety days, and he intended to make the most of them.

"The hell I am." Emery crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Jade.

"Em, please!" Jade was not above begging. "It's just for a little while."

"Why can't you move in with me?"

"Because you live in a studio apartment, dumbass."

"Oh, this is bullshit. I did not sign on for this." Emery groused and grumbled, stomping about the living room like a caveman.

"Like you don't practically live here already. What's the difference?"

"What if I want to bring someone home with me?"

"Then bring them. You can have the spare bedroom." Jade really didn't see the issue.

"Spare room, my ass," Emery mumbled under his breath.

"I'll show you your ass," Jade shot back.

Emery stopped and gaped at him before he doubled

over in laughter, clutching at his wounded chest and gasping for air. "What the hell does that even mean? You're going to show me my ass?"

Jade shrugged, but laughed along with his best friend. "I don't know, but it sounded good at the time."

Apparently, Archias did not see the humor. He scooped Jade into his arms and threw him over one very nicely defined shoulder. "You will stay," he growled at Emery. "You," he slapped Jade's ass hard, "will come with me."

"Oh, hell yeah." Jade lifted his head and pointed a finger at Emery. "If you set foot outside of that door I will skin you. Clear?"

Emery shooed them away with a wave of his hand. "Fine, fine, go play already. You two are grossing me out with all the lovey shit."

Jade wiggled his ass on Archias's shoulder and pulled his lover's hair a little. "You heard the man. It's playtime."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Archias carried Jade into the bedroom and flung him onto the bed. He willed their clothes away and crawled up Jade's body, peppering kisses up his lover's creamy skin until he reached Jade's lush lips.

"Oh, how I have missed you."

"Was it bad?" Jade asked in concern. "I tried to get you out as soon as I could."

Archias smiled against Jade's throat. "Not so much as usual. I knew I would see you again soon, and I had memories of our time together. I could even hear your voice." He sat up and chuckled. "Did you really obtain fake identification for me?"

Jade's cheeks reddened, and he shrugged. "Yeah. I guess I should have asked first."

"Oh, my *draga*, I am very pleased." Archias set to work showing Jade just how pleased. He nibbled and licked his way down his lover's body, stopping to suckle on the copper-colored nipples. He flicked his tongue across the hardened nub, biting it lightly.

Jade hissed, arching his back and pushing his chest closer to Archias's mouth. "It's been too long, baby. I need you now."

Archias could not agree more. He mapped out Jade's body with his hands, caressing and groping, relearning every inch of the man he adored. He brushed his knuckles across Jade's perky erection as he swirled his tongue over his prominent hipbone.

"You have lost weight," he said worriedly. "Are you ill?"

"Didn't feel like eating lately." Jade dismissed his concern, thrusting his hips toward Archias's lips in a silent request for more.

He would speak to Jade about taking better care of himself... later. His need clawed at his control, urging him to take his little man and *now!*

Jade slid his hand under the pillow and brought back the bottle of lube. He thrust it into Archias's hand and pulled his knees back to his chest, spreading himself open to Archias's view.

Archias gasped. "What did you do to yourself?"

Jade's chuckle turned to a strangled groan when Archias pressed his fingers against the squishy base of the object lodged inside his lover's ass.

"Butt plug," Jade panted. "I wanted to be ready for you, so I put it in before Emery made his wish."

"It is safe? It does not hurt you?" Archias gripped the plug and wiggled it a little. He stared in amazement as

Jade's shoulders came up off the bed, and his prick leaked copious amounts of clear liquid.

"Oh, hell!" Jade cried. "Feels good, but I really need that big cock of yours." He held open his arms, and Archias dove into them, bracing himself on the mattress, and devouring his lover's mouth. "Make love to me," he whispered breathlessly.

Archias carefully slipped the plug from Jade's hole and tossed it to the floor. He slicked his aching prick, then used three of his slick fingers to delve inside Jade's quivering entrance.

"Are you ready for me?" He pumped his fingers, twisting his wrist and brushing his knuckles against Jade's sweet spot.

"Now." Jade rose off the bed and pushed Archias onto his back, crawling up to straddle his hips. "Tease."

Jade gripped Archias's throbbing shaft, manhandling it, stroking him to a fever pitch. Then he lined up his opening with the deep red crown and impaled himself to the hilt in one swift movement.

He cried out, throwing his head back, his muscles convulsing around Archias's thick cock. Archias echoed his cry, holding his lover's hips hard enough to leave bruises. He remained perfectly still, grinding his teeth into powder with the effort not to thrust up into Jade's hot body.

Jade wiggled a little, finding his leverage, and began riding Archias fast and hard. Sweat dripped from his face, his skin flushed and heated, his fingers digging into Archias's pectorals.

"More," he urged like a man possessed.

"My pleasure," Archias answered back just as gutturally. He planted his feet on the mattress and held onto Jade's lean hips as he thrust wildly up into his tight ass. Jade's prick bobbed, smacking Archias's stomach with each thrust. "Touch yourself and come for me," he demanded.

Jade did not hesitate. He wrapped his elegant fingers around his long shaft and stroked twice before screaming out to the ceiling and shooting strings of hot cream onto Archias's chest and stomach.

Archias pulled Jade down to him, thrusting his tongue into the smaller man's mouth, laying claim to him as he erupted inside Jade's tight channel.

They sprawled together in an exhausted heap, Jade covering Archias like a human blanket. "So tired," Jade said with a yawn.

Archias rolled him to the mattress and kissed his sweaty forehead. He hurried to the adjoining bathroom, cleaned himself swiftly, and brought back a warm, wet cloth to wash his lover. Tossing the cloth into the bathroom when he finished, he slipped under the blankets, curling

himself around Jade's warm body. He drifted into the first peaceful sleep he had experienced since his last night with his *draga*.

* * * *

"Archias, dry your dick off and get out here!" Emery yelled as he pounded on the bedroom door. "I want to make another wish."

Archias groaned, wiping the sleep from his eyes. He frowned at the door and then down at his lover's sleeping form. He really did not like Emery sometimes—most of the time—ever.

He willed on a pair of cotton sleep pants and plodded to the door. He cracked it open and glared at the man on the other side. Forty days had passed since Emery's last wish. Why did the man need to wake him before the sun even came up for this one?

Archias yawned. "What?"

"I want my second wish," Emery said simply.

"And it had to be right now?"

Emery had the decency to look properly chastised. "Sorry, I got a little excited."

Archias waved a hand and stepped out of the room, easing the door closed behind him. "Coffee," he said,

leading the way to the kitchen.

"Already made some," Emery informed him as he followed.

Archias poured himself a cup and doctored it, grunting his thanks to his lover's friend. "What is your wish?" He had no need to beat around the bush.

"Can you still read Jade's mind?"

Archias frowned but nodded. "I did not think I would be able to once my ownership passed to you, but yes. I can still understand his thoughts."

Emery nodded as though he were confirming something to himself. "Okay then. I wish that Jade could hear your thoughts as well."

The wish was granted before Archias could even argue. He stood gaping at Emery, trying to make his mouth form words. "Why?"

Emery laughed. "Because, it is only fair. Jade likes that you can read his mind. Now, he can do the same with you." Emery's smile slipped from his face, and his eyes narrowed. "Why? Do you have something to hide?"

Archias shook his head. "No. I have no secrets from Jade. I am only shocked that you would use a wish so unselfishly." He tilted his head to the side and studied Emery. "You two are much alike."

Emery chuckled. "I guess. We don't need much out

of life."

"I thought you would wish your scars away," Archias said softly.

Emery's wounds had healed, but three soft pink, puckered scars ran down the left side of his face from temple to jaw. Archias grudgingly admitted that Emery remained beautiful despite the flaw, but most men would not want to live with the imperfection.

"Naw, I don't want to waste a wish on this ugly mug." Emery gestured to the marred side of his face. "It's kind of cool. Looks like I got in a fight with Wolverine."

He grinned widely, but Archias saw straight through the lie. The humor did not reach the man's gray eyes. He noticed that Emery rarely left the house anymore, and he had not been in contact with any of his friends other than Jade.

"I have another wish," Emery announced.

"So soon?" Archias smirked, but his insides fluttered with panic. If Emery used all of his wishes so quickly, Archias would be condemned back to the *pehar*, and his time with Jade cut short.

"Relax man." Emery sighed. "I'm not going to use my last wish until the ninety days are up. I wouldn't do that to Jade."

Archias nodded his head in acknowledgement of the

gift he had just been given. "Thank you."

Emery waved away his gratitude and took a seat at the kitchen table. "I wish for money. Not a fortune, but enough to live comfortably and buy the things I want for the rest of my life."

"Very well." Archias sat in the chair across from Emery and smiled. "Your wish is granted."

Emery looked around the kitchen and back to Archias. "Where is it?"

"In your bank account." He scrunched his nose. "Is that not where you keep your earnings?"

Emery laughed long and loud. "Yeah, but I didn't know that you understood about banks or anything like that."

Archias felt his cheeks heat and stared into the steaming cup of brown liquid on the table. "Jade has taught me many things."

"You really love him," Emery whispered.

"More than my life."

* * * *

The next five weeks flew by in a hurricane of activity. When Jade and Archias weren't eating, sleeping, or fucking like overzealous bunnies, Jade tried to cram as

much of the modern world as possible into the short time they had together.

They talked ceaselessly, desperately trying to find a way to keep them together. With only a week remaining, Jade had finally admitted defeat.

"We can't do it," he said sadly. Losing Archias this time would be more painful than the first. This time he wouldn't be coming back. "I don't know how to let you go," he admitted quietly.

Archias cuddled him closer, pressing his naked body along the length of Jade's back. He kissed the top of Jade's head and then rubbed his cheek over his hair. "You must, *draga*."

"You know if you weren't such a dick to Emery, maybe he would love you and wish you free." Jade glared at his lover as though it were Archias's fault.

Archias wrinkled his nose. "Emery is a douchebag." He called Emery a few other choice names inside his head, and Jade elbowed him in the ribs. He still couldn't get over being able to hear the man's thoughts.

Though he didn't think it was possible, he laughed. "You watch way too much television, baby." He kissed the underside of Archias's chin and snuggled down further under the blanket.

A soft knock on the door made him groan. "What,

Emery?"

"Can I come in?"

"Hold on," Jade called. He climbed out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweats. "Get dressed," he told Archias quietly. He walked to the door and unlocked it, easing it open for his friend. "What's up?"

Emery pushed his way inside, ignoring Jade and looking right at Archias. "I want to make my last wish."

"No!" Jade yelled. "I still have one more week with him! You can't do that!"

Archias climbed out of bed and stood staring at Emery, cool and collected as always. He nodded his head, meeting his fate with a calm courage that Jade couldn't seem to imitate. No way could he be as stoic about the situation.

"Emery, why are you doing this?" Tears blurred his vision, and he swiped at them roughly.

Emery continued to ignore him. "Trust me," he almost pleaded with Archias.

Archias eyed him suspiciously but nodded. *"I love you, Jade. Trust in your friend."*

Jade heard the words inside his head, but he couldn't think past his anger and sense of betrayal to answer his lover.

Emery took a deep breath and finally turned to look

at Jade. "I wish Archias free."

Cold terror seized Jade's heart, and he swung out, his fist connecting with Emery's jaw. "You stupid bastard. What the fuck have you done?" He leapt past his friend and wrapped his arms around Archias. Maybe if he held on tight enough he could keep Archias with him. "I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so damn sorry. I love you. I love you so much. Don't go, oh God, you can't go!"

The *pehar* began to glow from its place on the nightstand. Soft golden light filled the room and a hollow knocking began as the bottle bounced on the wood.

Jade watched without relinquishing his hold on Archias. The bottle spun, picking up speed until the smoke spiraling above it looked like a small twister rising from the mouth. The light grew brighter, and Jade had to squint to see.

Then suddenly everything stopped. The bottle teetered on the edge of the nightstand, still rocking, and fell over the edge to shatter on the floor.

Archias dropped to his knees, his arms wrapped around his midsection, screaming at the floor in what Jade could only imagine was agony.

* * * *

Archias felt his insides burn. Not the good kind of heat he felt when he touched Jade, but a blazing firestorm ripping through his body and scorching him from the inside out.

He screamed again and again, dropping to the floor and rocking his body from side to side. His head felt as though it would explode, his muscles and bones melting from the onslaught of the flames that consumed him.

He didn't know how long the pain lasted, but when it finally subsided, he found himself face down on the floor, gasping for breath. Jade knelt over him, petting his hair and looking at him strangely.

"Are you okay, baby?" Jade's voice came out raw and strained.

"I am fine, now," Archias assured him, still trying to catch his breath. "A little weak, tired, but no more pain." He pushed to a sitting position and noticed that he did not have to look down nearly as far to see into Jade's eyes.

He held his hands out in front of him, turning them one way and then the other, marveling at their smaller size. Gripping his hair, he pulled it over his shoulder and gasped at the black strands.

He looked back to Jade, trying to judge his lover's reaction to his new—uh old—appearance. Would Jade still want him like this?

Jade fingertips feathered lightly under Archias's eyes. "Your eyes are still the same. I guess that fake ID was a waste of time."

"Do you like the way I look now?" Archias could not stop himself from asking.

"You are just as gorgeous as ever. It will take a little getting used to, but I don't love you for how you look." Jade kissed his lips sweetly and smiled. "I'm just glad you're here."

Before Archias could answer, another blindingly white light filled the room. When he blinked away the spots dancing before his eyes, a tall figure stood beside the bed, smirking down at them, and holding a bottle of wine by the neck.

"Who the hell is that?" Jade yelled.

Archias jumped to his feet, pushing his lover behind him, and motioning for Emery to join Jade. "Dionysus."

Dionysus took a long pull from the bottle in his fist and grinned widely. He held the bottle out to his side and bowed low. "I thought that would have been obvious."

"What do you want?" Archias's fingers inched to wrap themselves around the god's neck and choke the life from him.

"Don't." Jade grabbed Archias's wrist and held him firmly.

"I have come to offer my congratulations." He bowed again.

"But why did it work?" Jade asked stepping to Archias's side.

"Your friend is very clever indeed. Only an act of unselfish love could free Archias." Dionysus giggled like a child. "Tricky of me, but I could not help myself."

"But Emery doesn't love Archias."

Emery snorted sardonically. "Understatement of the century."

"No, but he loves you, silly!" The god danced around the room, drinking his wine. "He had nothing to gain from setting the barbarian free. He just wanted to see you happy." Dionysus tossed his bottle in the air where it vanished without a trace. He clapped his hands together, jumping up and down.

"That dude is a total power bottom," Emery whispered, shaking his head.

Archias had to agree. The exuberant god, with his long golden waves and obscenely short toga, was the epitome of every gay stereotype he had ever heard or seen.

"That still does not answer why you are here." Archias's patience ran thin.

"I have come to offer a gift, of course." The god waggled his finger, looking very put upon.

"You have given me enough gifts to last for an eternity," Archias sneered.

"Not you. Your tiny little lover here." Dionysus pointed excitedly at Jade.

"Me?" Jade squeaked. He cleared his throat and tried again. "What exactly do you want to give me?"

"Immortality," Dionysus said somberly, then burst into more gales of laughter.

"No thanks," Jade said immediately. "I look forward to growing old with Archias."

"But, but," the god sputtered. "I must give you something! I have come all this way." His bottom lip poked out, and he crossed his arms over his chest, pouting.

"Change me back," Archias said.

"Are you mad? You were horribly large. Not at all a flattering look, my dear."

"Jade liked the way I looked." Archias took Jade's hand and squeezed it in his own. He had heard Jade's thoughts before their visitor arrived. Though Jade honestly did like the way Archias looked now, he missed the silver hair and the enormous size. It made him feel safe and protected.

"And I want him to keep that little power of willing our clothes away." Jade slapped a hand over his mouth and blushed furiously.

Dionysus laughed excitedly and threw his arms wide. "Done! And I will even throw in a few extras." He winked at Jade and wiggled his fingers. "Tootles!" Then he vanished.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jade stared in shock at the empty space where Dionysus had just been. Either a real, honest to goodness, Greek god had just appeared, then disappeared, in his bedroom, or he had finally slipped over the edge and into madness.

"You are not mad. He really was here." Archias laughed.

"Hey, you can still hear me!" Jade turned to look up at his lover and grinned brilliantly. "Yum."

Archias stood beside him, all seven feet four inches, silver hair, and muscled perfection of him. The reality hit him, and he sucked in a deep breath. "We did it." He looked from his lover to his best friend and felt his grin strain his cheeks. "We did it!"

He pulled Emery into a fierce hug, squeezing his best friend with everything he had. He then pushed the man roughly away, crushing his cheeks between his palms. "Thank you, Em!" He swooped in and pressed a hard kiss right on Emery's lips.

"Uh, you're welcome," Emery managed to get out through his smooshed cheeks and puckered lips.

Jade laughed loudly, pushing Emery away by his

face and ushering him toward the door. "Get the fuck out." He beamed brightly at the man that had just given him everything. "I have some celebrating to do." Then he slammed the door in his best friend's face.

He turned, took a running start and threw himself at Archias, knocking them both to the floor. He straddled his lover's lap, peppering kisses over his bare chest, touching him everywhere he could reach.

"Love you, love you, love you," he chanted after each kiss. "You're mine now. Never going to leave me. Never have to let you go."

He tugged at Archias's sleep pants, growling in frustration. He needed skin. "Pants off," he said roughly. In the next beat, they were both wonderfully naked. "Awesome!" He sighed in satisfaction.

"Wanna fuck you, baby. I'm going to drive my cock so far into your tight ass that you can taste me. Wanna lose myself in you forever."

Jade felt like an animal, rooting and grunting. His brain shut down and primal instinct took over. He wrapped his fingers around the base of Archias's thick cock and guided it to his mouth, not bothering with teasing or preliminaries.

Moistening his lips with his tongue, he sheathed his lover inside his mouth. He moaned at the taste, sucking and

licking, raking his teeth over the smooth flesh in each upward stroke.

The big Greek went wild, moaning and whimpering, writhing beneath Jade's touch. He thrust his hips, driving up into Jade's waiting mouth. Jade relaxed his throat and encouraged his lover to take what he needed.

Lube. Need lube. Jade didn't want to move to find the slippery liquid.

Archias tapped a finger on top of Jade's head and held out a small plastic bottle to him. Jade could definitely get used to his lover's newfound abilities.

He took the bottle, slicking his fingers quickly, and used his middle finger to circle the tight ring of his warrior's anus. He pushed in, increasing the suction on the hard flesh in his mouth.

Archias roared, grabbing Jade's head and shoving his prick to the back of his throat. His huge thigh muscles tensed, and his ass contracted around Jade's finger. He humped inside Jade's mouth, spilling his seed over his tongue.

Jade swallowed him down, not missing a drop. "So good," he said breathlessly. He sat back, inserted a second finger, working it in and out of Archias's fluttering entrance. "Can't wait."

Removing his fingers, he lubed his cock, lined it up,

and pushed in almost roughly. The pleasure came instantly, causing him to jerk forward, seating himself even deeper.

Archias cried out, lifting his hips off the floor to meet Jade's thrust. "Fuck me!"

So, Jade did. He slammed into Archias's tight hole, pushing the warrior's knees back to his chest and changing the angle. He knew he hit the man's prostate when the delicious sounds from Archias's mouth grew in volume.

With pure animalistic need, Jade reamed Archias's ass, filling the room with the sounds of flesh slapping against flesh. "Touch yourself," he ground out.

Archias stroked his renewed erection, pumping furiously. His head fell back, the chords in his neck straining, and his inner walls sucking hungrily at Jade's prick.

Heat pooled in Jade's groin, and he couldn't hold out any longer. "Come with me. Now!"

As though waiting for the order, the top of Archias's cock exploded, shooting hot ropes of sticky cum between them.

Jade's mind went blissfully blank as euphoria settled over him. He slammed into Archias and froze, emptying his balls into his lover's body.

He slumped forward, slipping from the twitching opening and collapsing on Archias's chest. "Mine," he

murmured.

"Mine," Archias repeated sleepily.

* * * *

Jade cocked his head to the side and listened to Emery's conversation on the back porch. He grew angrier at every word he heard.

"It is not polite to eavesdrop, my love." Archias's voice slipped into his mind, making him grin.

"Hush, and mind your own business, buster." He looked over his shoulder and winked at his lover, then pressed his ear to the backdoor again.

"Jade, how many spaghetti noodles do I prepare?" Archias spoke aloud.

Jade waved his hands frantically. *"Would you be quiet?"* He jumped away quickly when he heard heavy footsteps across the wood porch. He scrambled across the room and practically threw himself into his seat.

Emery stepped through the backdoor and closed it quietly.

"So, who was that?" Jade couldn't stop himself from asking.

"Dr. Rankin's office," Emery replied cautiously.

"The cosmetic surgeon? Was it about your

appointment next week?"

"Yep." Emery didn't offer anything further.

"Is there a problem, or were they just calling to confirm?"

"Everything is fine. Don't worry about it, Jade." Emery sat in his chair on the other side of the table. He wouldn't look at Jade.

"Why the hell did you cancel?" Jade blurted. Subtlety had never really been his strong suit.

"Drop it," Emery insisted with a scowl.

Jade looked over Emery's head and met Archias's eyes. His lover nodded once and silently left the room.

"I'm not going to drop it. Tell me what's going on." He reached across the table and took his best friend's hand in his own. "Talk to me, Em."

Emery finally looked at him. His eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and his throat muscles worked to swallow down his emotions. "I deserve this."

Jade squeezed the hand he held as he fought back his own tears. "No, you don't. You don't deserve any of the things that happened to you. As you said in the hospital, this was my fault. If I had dealt with Quinton instead of ignoring the problem, nothing would have happened to you."

"Yes, it would have." Emery reached up and

gingerly fingered the scars on his face. "This happened before you even got the phone call. I was a dick before. I didn't want to admit that I screwed up, so blamed you, but it's not your fault, Jade."

Jade didn't know what to say. His friend looked so miserable, so sad.

"I went with him," Emery said quietly.

"What? What do you mean you went with Quinton?" Jade couldn't hide his shock.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know what happened. He came into the bar, and started coming on to me. The next thing I knew, I'm pounding him into the mattress. Then I woke up chained to the damn ceiling." Emery broke down completely. He pulled his hand from Jade's and covered his face.

Jade hurried around the table and wrapped his arms around his friend. "It's not your fault, Emery. He's irresistible. I mean that literally. He wished for it."

Emery shook his head vehemently. "I knew better. The entire time, I knew I shouldn't do it. I knew he was using me to get to you." He turned in his seat and wrapped his arms around Jade. "I let you down, man. I'm sorry."

"Enough."

Jade whipped his head around to see Archias walk back into the kitchen. He held a hand up, stalling Jade, and

took a seat beside Emery.

"We all have our scars to bear, brother. These..." he cupped Emery's ruined cheek gently, "...are not yours. You have to forgive yourself, Emery."

Emery surprised them both by lunging forward and wrapping his arms tightly around Archias's thick neck. "Thank you." He released his hold and stood. "Take care of him, or I'll kick your ass."

Archias smiled and nodded. "I swear to you on my life."

Emery smiled back and nodded. "I'm going home." He turned and gave Jade a chaste kiss on the cheek. "I need a little time. I'll call when I get my shit together."

"Or, if you need me," Jade added hurriedly.

Emery only nodded and left through the backdoor.

Jade immediately crawled into his lover's lap and kissed him under his chin. "Is he going to be okay?"

"He will be fine, *draga*. Just give him some time." Archias held him closely. "Love can tame the monster in all of us."

Jade smiled and burrowed in closer. He had never met a monster, so he couldn't confirm his warrior's words.

They were silent for so long that he jumped a little when his lover's quiet voice startled him. "What do you think will happen to Harris Quinton in prison?"

Jade started to laugh and couldn't stop. He rocked from side to side, holding his ribs, and gasping for breath.

"What is so funny?" Archias held him by his shoulders, staring down at him as though he were crazy.

"Oh, he's going to be very popular," he said through his laughter. "He's irresistible, remember?"

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabrielle Evans grew up in a small town in southern Oklahoma. We are talking one red light that may or may not work depending on the day of the week. She married her high school sweetheart and the rest is pretty much history. They have two very active boys and one high-strung wiener dog that keeps her constantly on the go. For now, she parks her car in north-central Texas, but who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Gabrielle believes in love at first sight, falling hard and fast, taking chances, and grabbing your happy-ever-after with both hands. She also believes that a great cup of coffee can cure anything.

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