



DRACONIAN MEASURES

J.C. Owens

Loose Id

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Chapter One

Graitaan

The son of a bitch saved my life! How fucking stupid was that?

The moment I could gain my feet, I punched him in the face, hard.

Sadan stood there like the idiot he was, flexing his jaw, perhaps seeing if it still worked, one eyebrow raised at me in that calm, supercilious manner of his that drove me up the wall.

“What in the hells was that for?” he dared to ask, like he did not know.

“*That* was for putting your *life* in danger. The king would have my hide if your precious self came to any harm. I hardly see the point, but *he* seems to think you are worth something.” A growl rumbled in my chest, and my tail lashed with agitation, a sign of my temper that usually had people fleeing.

Not Sadan. He was too full of himself to see the danger, fool that he was. Instead he had the nerve to smile at me. *Smile!*

I whirled on my heel, stalking off the battlefield as best I could with three wounds hindering me, wings clamped tight against my back in a clear sign of my displeasure. Fucking Finnarians. Damn bloodsuckers. They were almost worse than humans. What the king saw in them, I had no idea. I tried to avoid them at all costs because their behaviors grated on me, but this one—Sadan—was something worse than all of them. Darling of the army, loved by all, wanted by all, the bastard had taken it into his head to shadow *me*, of all people.

Anyone could have told him that was not wise in any regard, but Sadan was rash enough to see me as a challenge, no doubt, and thought he could use his charm to bring me to the same state as the rest of the troops.

Fat chance. I snarled under my breath, wishing only for the sanctity of my tent and a chance to lick my wounds.

Finnarians be damned.

* * *

My temper only worsened as the day wore on. The battle had been short, too short for me to work off my energies, and the pent-up aggression seethed within, needing release. We had driven the enemy back more easily this time, and there had only been a few injuries. As for my own wounds, I had waded into the thick of things again, and it had been a surprise when five enemy warriors had turned from their flight and banded together to attack me. That surprise had almost cost me my life. If Sadan had not... I growled at the thought and thrust it away with some haste. The fact that I had been blatantly foolish in my actions did not sit well with me. For Sadan to get me out of it only compounded my irritation and somewhat shamed annoyance.

I had no wish to go to the healers, so I tended my wounds myself. The spear wound on my thigh throbbed, and I flushed it out with what simple medicines I possessed, moaning with the pain, my wings spreading out in reaction.

Fucking gods, that hurt! Both the thigh *and* the wing. The spear wound throbbed in time with my heartbeat, but the tear in my right wing was the worst, stinging like a bitch and out of my reach even when I tried to fold it properly.

Swearing bitterly under my breath, I licked the thigh wound, grimacing at the taste of the medication.

Draconian saliva held healing and antiseptic properties, and usually I would have a sword brother to tend me, to help with those wounds I could not reach. But my last companion had died some twenty years before, and I was alone in this army, the last Draconian present.

We had started off over fifty strong, an impressive gift from our emperor to the Masarian king. Our duty had then been completely with this foreign ruler, and we were forever exiled from our world. It would have been on pain of death had we ever dared to return. One by one, over the years, we had fallen, until only I remained, a curiosity to the human troops, those who were of the generation who had never known us in our numbers, in our true strength. I was hardly enough to represent my kind.

I could scarcely remember my own world, so long had I been here. Perhaps I had blocked it from my mind so that I might endure the isolation, the loneliness. Here there had been no one of my strength since my last companion. Here I was an oddity. Something to be stared at and commented on but never approached. Humans were so damned fragile, and I had never dared take one as a lover.

I would surely kill them.

Therefore my only solace was my own hand and a vivid imagination.

And people wondered why my temper was somewhat uncertain. Let *them* try going without for that long. They would be a little growly too.

I sighed, my anger flagging with my own exhaustion. I tended to a wound on my arm, of less importance and smaller than the thigh wound, licking it slowly, my wings drooping with pain and the need to rest.

I was hungry as the hells too, but I did not have the strength or the will to rise and leave the sanctity of my tent. Here I did not have to pretend, did not have to be strong. Here I could just be myself.

Before I could sink into my usual despair, the flap of my pavilion was swept back and Sadan entered unannounced, a tray of food balanced in one hand, medical supplies in the other, that familiar faint smile tilting his lips.

I froze. I was not wearing any clothing, only a towel over my privates, and I had always been very certain to stay covered around others. I was already a hot topic of conversation, and I had no desire to add more fuel to the fire by showing my body at all.

The embarrassment made my fury rise.

“Shut up, Graitaan,” Sadan said calmly. “I don’t want to hear it. I saw that wound on your wing, and you cannot reach it yourself. I knew you would be too stubborn to go to the healers, so I am offering my services. Not to mention you never eat after a battle, so...here you go. Say thank you, Sadan.”

My jaw dropped open with my outrage. “I will not fucking thank you! You are out of your Finnarian mind, even more so than the rest of your crazy race. Get the hells out of my tent!”

“No.” Just that calmly. *No*, like he was not facing an angry Draconian warrior, wounded, hungry, and ready to kill...at least kill a certain Finnarian, if no one else.

I was speechless. The sheer gall of Sadan always had me sputtering, and it drove me to the edge of sanity. No one else could do this to me. They all avoided me like the plague, especially when I was wounded. I was liable to take their hand off if they even tried.

Did Sadan have a secret death wish I had never known about?

It certainly seemed so.

Before I could form more thoughts, Sadan snarled back at me, only in his refined supercilious way that made every scale on my body stand on end. “I don’t care about your damned sensibilities, Graitaan. Shut up and let me tend you. I need you back in my troops, and that wing is never going to heal properly like that.”

A low growl escaped from behind my bared teeth, but in the end, I could not argue. Duty was everything to a Draconian, and the miserable Finnarian knew that. Trust Sadan to use it against me.

Every other member of the army knew to leave me alone, especially when I was injured, so I was rather baffled by Sadan’s actions. Again the thought flitted by that the Finnarian had a death wish or was at least flirting with the possibility, because he was always in my face, disrespecting me in every way and completely disregarding my formidable reputation.

It drove me to the edge of sheer violence, but always the knowledge that Sadan was one of the king's favorites and *now* had technically become my fucking commander, restrained the actions I longed to inflict upon the bastard and his smirk.

How could the king have done this to me? Had I not served him and his father and his father before that faithfully and well? Had not I—and my companions before their deaths—proven the worth of a Draconian individually and together time and again? The king knew full well that Draconians and Finnarians were ill suited to each other's company. I had made that perfectly clear on numerous occasions when speaking to His Majesty.

So why would said Majesty suddenly assign me under Sadan's command, a lone Draconian in a sea of Finnarians?

All right, so maybe there were only twelve of the bastards, but with Finnarians that *was@* a sea, damn it!

Twelve of them proved more annoying than a hundred humans, maybe even two hundred, come to think of it. Sadan could count for a hundred all on his own.

So they were beautiful...beyond beautiful. So what? Tall, very tall, with angular faces and slanted eyes of brown or green. Well muscled but slim with it, power leashed in grace. Their hair always long, tantalizingly long and, in this group at least, various shades of blond, right down to Sadan's striking silver. Humans revered them, almost idolized them and their talents: blood drinkers, mages, warriors of renown. Fools. The blood drinking was a little off-putting, I had to admit, but they were discreet about it, not flaunting their differences but not hiding who they were either. I had heard rumors of the sexual ecstasy a Finnarian bite produced, and my imagination had gone off course at *that* thought. They went through cycles of rut and bloodlust apparently, though I had never seen them during these times as they often went into seclusion, with their brethren protecting their privacy. All I knew was that energy sustained them—both sexual and blood, though they ate regular food as well, I had noticed. They seemed mysterious and

powerful to me, and they made me uneasy in a way I had never encountered before. Especially their damned leader.

I actually hissed as Sadan approached me. Hissed! I had not made such a sound since adolescence, when I was learning control. What about Sadan seemed to drive me to the edge with so little effort on his part?

It was aggravating and humiliating. I had never encountered this before. Humans were terrified of my size, strength, and temper.

Now Finnarians were my equal in any and all of those things, but they were *not* Draconian. They were *not* my people, *not* my companions, and never could be.

What the king thought he was doing was beyond me. Perhaps the human military units were too afraid of a Draconian to want me in their ranks?

My temper subsided somewhat at *that* gratifying thought. Humans *should* be afraid of a Draconian. It was proper and respectful.

Perhaps the king had not meant insult but had tried to place me with as close to my peers as could be found in this misbegotten world.

My growls slowly died away.

I was alone. That fact was brought home to me on a daily basis, but never so much as when I was wounded. Therefore I was duty bound to accept help from another person in my new unit to ensure I became battle ready as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately it seemed that person would have to be Sadan, as my commander.

Damn it to the hells.

Shrugging as though to brush off the thoughts like troublesome flies, I flinched at the resulting pain. I drew a deep breath and turned my back on him—a sign only given to a sword brother—and held out my injured wing in silence.

As if in answer, he plunked the food tray in front of me.

“Eat while I tend your wing.”

Sadan

I wonder if he has any idea how beautiful he is?

I did not think so, for there was nothing of vanity in Graitaan. He was modest and surprisingly reclusive, and I knew not whether this was typical of his kind or part of his self-imposed isolation, part of his own personality.

I was Finnarian and used to great masculine beauty around me. It was a trait of my people, but the moment I set eyes upon Graitaan when we were first sent to join the king's services eight years ago, I was stunned to speechlessness by his exotic allure.

Discovering anything about the Draconian was almost impossible, except for the facts that he was alone, his last Draconian companion having died twelve years before I arrived, and that he shunned company of any sort. It was hard to divine his sexuality because no one had ever seen him with a lover. Perhaps Draconians were not sexual at all?

I found that hard to believe when I watched Graitaan move. He practically oozed sexual heat, at least to me, who could see it, and I could not believe no one had pursued him.

Of course there *was* his temper, but to a Finnarian, that was a small thing. Our women had fearsome tempers, and their right to choose a mate for breeding made us cautious of them. Breeding took place; then the female withdrew to be with other females, and only when the resulting child was old enough and male would he be sent to foster with his father.

Certainly Graitaan's temper was no worse than that, and having dealt with such things all my life, I found it rather endearing to find it in a male. And such a beautiful male...

How blind and weak were humans that they had not sought to break the barriers around such a treasure long before this?

I would not make the same mistake.

For eight years I had been maneuvering and planning, and now, with the king's blessing, I was finally beginning to make headway, even if only because I was now Graitaa's commander. A position of great respect in Draconian culture apparently, and it went against his nature for Graitaa to openly disrespect me, though at times he could not help himself.

So tonight it led to this, the first time I would be able to actually touch him more than a hand up or a brush of shoulders.

I almost shuddered with anticipation.

It was even harder to resist at this time, since I was in the middle of my rut cycle, where I needed sexual energy, something every Finnarian went through once a month along with a bloodlust cycle, where I would need the energy that could only be had from blood. I had tried to remain apart from Graitaa at these times, fearing my need would overcome my sense.

But now...

I drank in his appearance, my first true look at his body, even if some of the most important parts were covered by that damned towel. He was not quite as tall as I was, which I liked, his body lithe and hard with lean muscle, his shoulders broad, dipping down to a narrow waist. His head was dragonlike, with small scales covering it, his beautiful eyes large and golden with vertical pupils. Small horns crowned his head, curving backward and spiraling slightly. His hands were finer than one would expect, more humanlike, with long, black fingers, scales along the backs only, and small, strong, retractable claws of a pale golden hue. Powerful legs bent backward, totally unlike humans or Finnarians, leading down to long clawed feet, one of the reasons he was so swift a runner. His scales were the most beautiful and elegant black, shading into blue green. The scales were larger across his shoulders and back, smaller across his chest, gradually leading down to black skin

that looked soft across his belly and waist. His wings were enormous, but jointed so that they folded neatly across his back, able to be tucked out of harm's way. I had never actually seen him fly, did not even know if he could. All I knew was that those wings looked so soft to the touch...and I wanted to touch them desperately.

I knew he was tired and sore. I had seen his posture when I entered the pavilion. Those wings were a true indicator of his moods, and they had been drooping sadly when I entered.

His embarrassment at his state of undress was endearing. He would not look at me, and his body posture radiated extreme discomfort at my proximity. I found such shyness utterly captivating because it did not exist in my people at all. Why Graitaan would feel such a thing mystified me. I found him utterly appealing in every regard, and I could not understand his propensity for such extreme modesty as he displayed. Still, I was pleased enough that he continued with it, because I did not want any competition. Several of my Finnarians, my Companions, had been eyeing him, and I had to make it quite plain that Graitaan was off limits. He was going to be mine, and no one had better step in the way of that or they would feel my wrath. Finnarians were quite promiscuous until they found their true mate, and then that was it. No other would do.

I did not know if Graitaan was my true mate, but I had never felt anything like this: a difficulty breathing, a force of heat within me that demanded completion, demanded Graitaan alone. None of my many lovers had ever triggered such depths of primal need before, and I wanted to thoroughly explore it. My heart, I think, already knew. I had not explained this to Graitaan, but he would find out soon enough. He was mine, and that was that. If I had to wait centuries for him, then I would, but I had no intention of going to that measure. My little Draconian would discover the pleasures of Finnarian sex long before that.

My fingers fairly trembled with anticipation as I gently took hold of his wing and stretched it out a little so I could clearly see the damage. I could feel the hard

yet delicate bones of the wings flex with the movement. Then at last I could touch the black membrane that stretched between.

It felt as soft as I had imagined, and I swallowed hard, imagining these wings wrapped around me, caressing my naked skin.

I had to mentally shake myself to bring my attention to the matter at hand.

The tear was close to a foot long and in a possibly sensitive area close to a joint. It would not be easy to repair, and I would have to immobilize his entire wing until it healed.

Still, I had spoken to the healers about this long ago, wanting to know everything and anything I could about my Draconian, including what he would require in case of injury. Hence, I had the supplies I needed with me. I did not want any healer touching him unless it was dire.

My hands alone would touch him, take away his pain.

He made the faintest sound as I flexed the wing, and by that I knew it was very tender. Graitaan was stoic to the extreme. He would make no sound at all if it was not beyond his control.

I made a comforting sound that had him looking at me in confusion, before I gently rested the half-open wing upon the bed.

“Do not move it,” I told him sternly, and he growled a little but obeyed. A step forward indeed.

I took out the strips of extremely sticky cloth that the healers had given me. They had said it was the best way to pull wing membrane together, since stitches tended to tear through and do more damage than the original wound. Carefully I adhered one end above the wound and began to smooth it down, gently taking the torn piece and adjoining it to where it should be.

Graitaan’s body quivered faintly, and I again gave him a purring growl—something that soothed Finnarians, whether young or adult.

It seemed to have a similar effect upon Graitaan, for although he looked at me warily, his body seemed to unconsciously relax. That was promising.

Gently yet as swiftly as possible, I repeated the process until I had brought all the edges of the tear into contact with each other. Then I smeared the opposite side of the wing with salve that would kill any infection that could arise, along with keeping the wound a little moist so it would not pull as it healed. I bandaged the underside, keeping the salve in place and protecting the wound.

Cautiously then, with the utmost care, I folded the wing so the pressure was taken off the torn area. I wrapped a length of bandage around the upper part so that Graitaan could not accidentally move it without thought and retear what I had mended.

By the time I finished, he had finished eating and was half nodding off, so I counted that a victory of sorts. He would not allow himself to show weakness in front of one he distrusted, and despite his antagonism, I think he was beginning to become more comfortable in my presence than he would ever admit.

Gently I touched his arm, looking at the wound there, and he jerked, startled, staring at me with those amazing eyes, wide and bright.

I clucked my tongue at him. "Let me see the rest."

"They are fine now," he growled, but it was halfhearted at best, and I could feel the exhaustion coming off him in waves.

"Sit still," I ordered gruffly, hiding what I was feeling with the ease of long practice, and for a wonder, he actually obeyed. It was a measure of his weariness, no doubt, but I would take what I could get with this one. Everything was in tiny increments, but at least he was not outright pushing me away as he had in the past.

I would count this a victory.

I held my hand just over his arm wound, feeling the heat of his body rise against my palm. Closing my eyes, I let the tiniest of blue flames exit my fingertips, ever so gently touching the cut.

Graithaan jerked, and when I opened my eyes just slightly, I smiled to myself at the look of fascination on his face as he watched the healing process begin, the pain stop. I would not close the small wound or heal it utterly, though I could. It took great energy to do such a thing, certainly more than I could spare, much though I wanted to. If I had had enough, I would have healed his wing, but that was beyond my capabilities right now. I knew my limits, and to exhaust myself for such a thing would be foolishness indeed when we were in the middle of a war. All I could do was lessen his pain.

When I reached for the thigh wound, though, Graithaan leaned back, alarm and something else on his face. I paused for a moment, one brow rising in inquiry. Then I realized the problem and had to fight a smile back.

“Are you afraid of my touch?” I asked, with a smidge of incredulous wonder in my tone, just enough to taunt.

“I fear nothing and no one,” he growled instantly, halting his initial reaction by force of will, his eyes lighting with fire and weak temper.

“Then you will be sensible and let me tend it...as your commander.” That title always seemed to put me in a different category in Graithaan’s mind, and I would use it mercilessly if it got me what I wanted.

He let out a huff of breath that seemed to contain faint swearing before he looked away, jaw working as he consented to my touch.

Victory, sweet victory.

I pushed between his legs, feeling the heat of his right thigh against my back. He froze utterly, breath held, and I could feel his shock at my intrusion of his personal space in such a blatant way.

I sat cross-legged, calmly pulling the items I would need to tend the wound closer to hand.

The hard muscle of that right thigh trembled ever so faintly against my back, indicating the extreme tension he was under.

As for me, I silently luxuriated in the heat of his flesh against me, even if my tunic was annoyingly in the way. I had been told Draconians radiated heat, but this was my first true experience of it, and I loved the sensation. My own race tended to gravitate to any heat they could find, since we lived in a northern climate and warmth was a precious commodity.

Yet another reason to get him in my bed. War in winter was a foolish and draining thing, yet here I was with my men by orders of my king. If I found someone to warm my tired and sore body from the chill, who could blame me?

Seeing the position of the wound, I could not prevent the faintest of smiles from tilting my lips.

It cut down over his hip and mercifully had avoided his groin, cutting more deeply into the upper thigh and angling down more shallowly into the inner thigh. *Ah, thank you, gods.*

I leaned closer as if to see more clearly, letting my shoulder brush over that annoying towel.

Graithaan shivered; I could clearly feel it, and heat pooled in my groin at even so little a reaction. Dear gods, I had it bad. I wanted to turn my head and brush away the towel, discover exactly what Draconian males were built like. I wanted to taste him, make him moan with want and need, and...

I reined in my lust with a firm mental shake. Now was not the time for foolish moves. Mind you, if the opportunity presented itself, I would also not be so foolish as to refuse it.

Graithaan

Oh my dear gods, how in the hells had I gotten myself into this predicament? I could feel Sadan's beautifully cool flesh through his tunic where he pressed against my leg, and I was literally frozen in place, shocked by the touch of another after so

long. I found myself staring down at his hair where it splayed over my thigh, silver flowing over the blackness of my skin. My fingers twitched with the sudden mad urge to touch the silken mass to see if it felt as soft as it looked.

When his shoulder accidentally brushed my shaft as he leaned forward, I almost came from that sensation alone and near swallowed my tongue trying to prevent myself from grabbing him and flinging him to the floor to fuck his brains out.

I shuddered at the image, slowly clenching my hands into fists as I fought for control, wondering wildly what could possibly be wrong with me. I had taken no blow to the head that I could remember.

My gaze flew about my small tent, desperately seeking distraction, landing on the now empty tray Sadan had brought with him.

Food! That was it. I was merely light-headed with only recently appeased hunger and somehow it had affected my thought processes so that I, for some damned reason known only to my shaft, found Sadan attractive.

Not that the bastard was unattractive—oh no. As I said before, the whole bloody army wanted him. Tall and well muscled, broad shoulders...very broad shoulders. His entire body was coated with powerful muscle, come to that, yet when he walked, it was with the grace of a bloody dancer, drawing your eye even when you did not want to watch. Long, strong legs and that ass...

I actually bit my tongue this time, shocked at the path my thoughts were taking. Gods above, I could *not* be lusting after my commander. I could *not* be wanting a fucking Finnarian!

Somewhere along the line, I had obviously lost my mind.

I swallowed the blood in my mouth, closing my eyes against the sight of him. What I could not see I could not want, right?

A whimper almost made its way out of me as that damned shoulder brushed me again, more firmly this time. My shaft came out of its sheath completely and

leaped to instant hardness, stupid, mindless thing that it was, unaware of the thousands of reasons this was a *very, very bad idea*.

Sadan's fingers gently touched the area of my thigh where the cut was deepest, and I almost sighed with relief at the pain. "*Pain is good; pain centers you, grounds you. Use it. Do not let it use you,*" my old martial instructor used to drill into us as adolescents. I cannot say I missed the miserable, sadistic old bastard, but his words had rung true down through the years, and certainly at this moment, I was grateful for that knowledge.

As my thigh muscles twitched, Sadan made that odd noise again, as though in some sort of comfort. My head tilted unconsciously as I listened. What *was* that sound? It was odd, like a rumbling purr, and it had the strangest effect on me. I could feel my body relaxing every time he made it, and that reaction confused the hell out of me, not to mention wondering why Sadan was making the noise in the first place.

It was like he was almost trying to soothe me or comfort me in some fashion I could not comprehend.

It was so long since anyone had tried to comfort me.

Chapter Two

Graitaan

Draconian culture was not known for its kindness.

I had always been very conscious of my size, of the fact that I seemed smaller than the norm for my people. It marked me as different, and different could be fatal on my world. Perfection was desired if not demanded, and newborns were regularly killed or left to die if any sort of illness or weakness was detected.

I knew little of my roots, of my bloodline, and this also marked me as an undesirable. As far as I knew, I had no kin to claim me, mark me as one of them, one of their clan. Clans provided safety and honor. Only rogues wandered alone.

Most likely I would have been branded as rogue myself if I had not been so ridiculously young.

I remember my birther very vaguely—more a sense than a picture. Warmth and security...a time when I was not hungry. She had never mentioned my sire, not that I could remember, and certainly I had no male presence in my life as a youngling. Why she had no clan to defend her or keep her in security I never learned, and she had never spoken of any kin to me. Perhaps she had been rogue herself, having a brief sexual encounter with another rogue. I do not know, nor ever shall. All I knew was that when I was quite young, even before the teaching of the ancestral memories, she died. I had no idea what killed her. Disease maybe. I did not remember violence, so...

I had vague memories of staying by her side in our small home, of emitting the piercing, chirping cries of a youngling in distress. People came eventually and took

her body away, and although I waited for one of them to claim me, thinking perhaps they were kin, no one ever did. They brushed me aside if I tried to approach, snarling if I persevered. They took over the little house and shooed me like a bothersome animal into the dangers of the streets.

I had little memory of the early times—perhaps a blessing of sorts. There was nothing within me that wanted to remember. There was only hunger and cold and beatings from other rogues as I tried to steal bits of their food. I learned to eat castoffs from people's garbage, too young to even think of disease or pride. There was only survival. I thought perhaps that hunger and deprivation made me the size I am, though I did not know for certain. Perhaps my kith and kin were this size anyway, but I thought not.

Still, the years of scrabbling for survival, of living on the very edge of death, made me tougher, my small body taut with muscle. I learned to be fast as I dodged claws and teeth, and agile as I escaped up walls and fences, my little claws able to grip the tiniest of handholds.

I do not know what would have become of me, only that the odds were stacked against me ever reaching adulthood.

Then came Marind.

Captain of the City Guard: huge, powerful, born of an influential, wealthy family. He was everything I was not.

By law he probably should have killed me. At the time, I wished he had.

He caught me stealing food on Market Day, his quick eye detecting my stealthy approach to a merchant's stall. When his large hand came down on my shoulder, I took him by surprise with my swiftness and nearly escaped, but he cornered me in a high-walled alley.

Even then, I was climbing a seemingly impossible-to-scale stone face that my immature wings could not lift me over, when he jumped and caught my foot, pulling me down into a painful heap upon the garbage-littered ground.

I fought like the small animal I was, terrified.

When at last I lay shivering, utterly exhausted and no closer to escape, I glared up at him, defiant, unable to give in even in the face of death.

He held me down with one massive, clawed hand, an eyebrow slowly rising as he watched my foolish inability to surrender.

He bared his teeth.

I bared mine back, small as they were in relation to his adult fangs.

His lips curled back, and I thought at first he was snarling at me, a precursor to a blow, but then his chest shook and I realized he was laughing.

Fury rose in me that he should mock my terror, and I tried to slash at him with my small claws. He picked me up by the crest on my neck, and I went limp as a youngling should, but my eyes burned with the hatred I felt.

He held me there, eye to eye with him, and then with a huff, he tucked me under one arm, pinning me securely so I could not fight, and walked off in a calm, unhurried pace, as though I were nothing at all.

I was utterly outraged, and squirmed and wriggled as much as the unbreakable grip would allow, but it was completely useless, and I soon realized it. Instead I went limp, conserving my strength.

Marind made a chuffing sound of approval, something a parent does to their young, and I froze, staring up at him with wide, unblinking eyes. I had not heard such a sound directed at me since my birther died.

He looked down at me, and was it my imagination, or were his eyes less hard than they had been before? Confused and frightened, I stayed still, waiting for a chance, even a small one, of escaping.

There was no trust within me as to his motives, and I never took my eyes from his face, ready for his violence.

It was sure to come.

He took me to the guard station, ignoring the questions flung at him by the other enforcers as he took me into the back sections of the building, where the cells

were. At the end of the row, slightly apart from the others, was a smaller cell, and there he placed me. I scrambled away the moment his grip loosened, a snarl contorting my mouth.

He merely grinned at me, closing and locking the door behind him as he left. I huddled against the farthest corner, my eyes darting to the other cells, where various adult Draconians watched me, viewing me as the prey I was.

I curled up tighter, wrapping my wings totally around my body to block my view of them. With the ease of long practice, I shut out their comments and taunts, closing my eyes, shivering as I apprehensively wondered what in the hells was going to happen to me now. With no kin, no protection, Marind could do anything he wished with me. Rogues had absolutely no legal protection whatsoever. The scope of what could happen made me shake with terror. I had managed to avoid rape on the streets by some miracle, but now I was caught, trapped among adult male Draconians. If any of them were so inclined...

I gritted my teeth against weak tears. Tears had never availed me anything at all.

I had fallen into a light doze, my senses still alert for danger. On the street you never really slept, and I had learned that lesson far too well to ever let even exhaustion drive me into deeper slumber.

* * *

The sound of footsteps and voices brought me to full consciousness swiftly, and I furred my wings, watching with wide and wary eyes as the guards brought plates of food to the prisoners. My stomach growled with need, and I felt disappointment as none approached my little corner. Receiving food for free would be the only positive outcome of my capture, and now it seemed like not even that much was going to come my way.

I tensed as Marind came back into view, trying to make myself smaller in the corner. He unlocked my cell, and the moment he took a step inside, I darted forward, fast as thought, in a desperate escape bid.

He caught me easily, of course, his own warrior reflexes as fast or faster than my own, and once more took me by the crest, stilling my struggles immediately.

I hung in his grip for long moments, hoots and catcalls echoing from the prisoners as they waited for a show of some sort.

Marind did not even deign to acknowledge their existence. He simply tucked me under his arm again and left the cell area. He spoke briefly to several of the guards as he passed through the main office but did not stop, and soon we were back in the sunshine. I did not struggle; it was hard enough to even breathe properly under the weight of that massive arm.

We traveled steadily up the hill toward the rich part of the city, and I stared in astonishment as we passed through massive gates into a world I had never encountered.

Carved stone facings and intricate mosaics lined the painfully clean streets. Each structure towered over us, sprawling across vast areas. The people were well dressed, adorned with jewelry worth enough to feed me for months. They addressed Marind respectfully, looked at me with disdain, and continued on their way without ever asking why I was there.

I began to tremble with more fear than I had felt even in the cell.

I now knew Marind could do anything he wished to me and nobody would interfere. I was worth even less here than on the street.

Finally in what seemed the very center of the rich quarter, we approached a truly massive and ornate dwelling. The huge double doors of the entrance swung open at our arrival, and several well-dressed guards saluted Marind with respect and reverence.

I might as well not have existed.

I watched the great gates close behind us with a kind of futile despair. Given the height of the smooth walls that surrounded the place, I doubted I would find escape. My immature wings could not lift me that high.

Marind continued on, occasionally speaking to a servant or two but never stopping entirely.

At last we entered an open space beside what seemed to be a training yard. Here he put me down, holding on to my skinny arm with an unbreakable grip. Without pause, he marched me over to an area by one wall where I could see pipes, and there he reached down and locked something around my ankle.

I stared down at the metal cuff in horror, then back up at him, too terrified to even think of useless struggle.

Marind then reached over to something on the wall and pressed it. To my horror, water began to cascade down over me, and I yelped and tried to jerk away from his grip.

He released me, but I could not retreat. The chain that held me was short, trapping me within his radius.

He pressed something else and took some substance into his hands before turning back to me, a gleam in his eyes. I backed as far as my bond would allow me, ready to fight, but he simply grabbed me again and pulled me closer, smearing the substance over my skin.

The smell that rose to my nostrils made me freeze in confusion. It seemed made of some musky, masculine scent that was pleasing to the nose, clean in some indefinable way.

Marind began scrubbing me, and I watched in fascination as bubbles started to form. Soap, I realized with some wonder. No one had soap in the poor quarters. No one bathed, for that matter.

I shuddered under the warm water, unsure what to think of the sensations, too stunned to even fight back.

Marind washed me with brisk efficiency, and his touch was neutral, nothing of sexual intent behind it, nothing threatening in the least. He washed and then rinsed and then washed again, signaling to me to wash my private parts.

I did so warily, but it was better than him doing it, so I clumsily attempted to clean myself, secretly rather liking the feel of being without the filth that had always coated me.

He encouraged me with that chuffing sound once more, and I stared at him before continuing, less resistance in me. That sound was so reassuring, so wonderful to a child that had almost forgotten it.

By the time we were done, I was shivering uncontrollably, no doubt looking even scrawnier than usual.

Marind stared down at me, ignoring his own soaked clothing. “You have a choice, boy. You can walk on your own and be obedient, or I will carry you again. Which will it be?”

I could not believe he had even given me a choice in the matter.

“Walk,” I finally whispered. I barely knew how to talk. There was little use for it in my life. Who would I have communicated with?

He nodded and unlocked the cuff.

“There is no way out of this place for you. Do you understand that?” The deep, rumbling bass voice held no mockery, only truth.

I finally nodded, seeing little use in being defiant at the moment. I would have to wait for an opportunity to escape. Opposition at this point would only see such chances lessened. I could be patient. I had learned such a skill well on the streets.

“You do as I say, and there will be no need for chains.” His dark eyes bored into mine, but there seemed to be no malice there, only a certain determination.

I nodded again, and when he turned away and gestured me to follow, I did so in silence, my wings clamped close to my body.

We passed farther into the house, and then he stopped just outside a certain door, looking at me for a moment before pushing the door open and entering. I peeked around the corner first, then slowly followed him within, my heart beginning to pound with fresh fear.

It was a small bedroom.

My gaze shot up to his, and I curled my hands into fists as I tried to be brave.

This then was why he had taken me from the cell.

Marind shook his head as though divining my thoughts. "This is your room now. I will send food up because you will not be ready yet for the communal table. Sleep. I know you did not at the guardhouse, but it is safe here." He grinned a little at my blank look of incomprehension. "Do not leave the room until I come for you. The other people here can be protective of me, and they do not know you yet. It is best you keep to yourself until they learn of you."

He did not respond to my disbelieving look in the slightest. Instead he simply ruffled my crest for a moment, then left, closing the door softly behind him.

I stood in silence for long moments, then backed warily into a corner, staring at my surroundings in stunned wonder.

It was only when the food finally arrived a short while later, left on a little table near the window, that I began to believe, in some small part of me, that maybe, just maybe, this could be a good thing.

* * *

Marind ran a large household, and he was married to a beautiful Draconian female by the name of Alysia.

"He is beautiful," were her first words to me, and from that day forth, I would willingly have done anything for her. Her gentle, kind nature was a balm to a needy youngling such as me, and when she drew me to her and hugged me, I was utterly lost.

"Thank you, my love," she said to Marind, tears in her eyes. "He will be our son."

They could have no young, apparently, yet Marind refused to set her aside as would have been custom.

Instead he brought me home.

I was skittish and untrusting, but my dim memories of my mother drew me to Alysia like a moth to flame.

For her part, her gentle acceptance of my past and patient teachings of manners and acceptable behaviors gradually eased me into being a responsible member of society instead of the little ruffian I had become.

When I had been with them but a month, Marind took me into a central room of the house, where all members had gathered to watch. He had prepared me for this day, but still I shook as he grasped me, drew me to him, and bit deeply into my shoulder, marking me.

I endured, and those watching were pleased with my bravery. Although my shoulder throbbed unmercifully, I looked up at Marind with pride as he gently ruffled my crest.

I had been claimed. I bore the mark that would see me accepted. No longer just rogue, I had kin.

From that day forth, I strove with all my might to bring honor and pride to Marind and Alysia.

I hoped I had done so.

Certainly as I got older, I followed in Marind's footsteps, training for the guard and practicing the martial arts long and hard. Because of my size and background, I felt I had a lot to prove, and I was never satisfied with my performances, with my abilities. I always felt I could do better, give Marind's family more honor.

Marind himself never pushed me, never indicated he felt I was not worthy in any fashion. The ghosts of the past drove me—and an inner fear that someday they would see me as I truly was—unworthy, born of rogues.

That fear of rejection formed the core of my life, and even with all the love and care I received from those who had taken me in so unselfishly, I could never quite cast that shadow aside.

It made for a lonely existence. I never really developed trust in any others besides Marind and Alysia. It was not that anyone treated me poorly, and I certainly received much respect for being Marind's adopted son, but...

It seemed as though my scarred heart held only enough room for those two and could expand no further for any other.

As I grew into adulthood, I did well in the guard, but I never rose as high as I could have, for I refused to leave Marind's family. If I had been willing to be promoted to other places, I could have gone further, but that held no interest for me. My new family meant everything. Status meant nothing.

If I thought holding no political aspirations would keep me safe, I was terribly wrong.

Marind's position as captain of the City Guard and his unfailing service had been noted, and shortly after I reached maturity, he was promoted to captain of the Royal Guard, a high honor indeed. I thought they were damn lucky to have him, a rock of goodness and honesty in the sea of vipers the court was reputed to be.

It brought me into more contact with the nobility, and they were anything but happy with the knowledge of what I had been.

Their tiny minds and cold hearts had no room for anything different, and behind Marind's back, they sneered at me, cast slurs upon my birth. I ignored them for the most part. They seemed little different to me than the rogues upon the streets, if perhaps a little more vicious.

So ignorant of their good fortune, they were never content with what they had, always seeking more: more money, more status.

I did not understand, did not seek to understand. They were less than gnats to me.

Gnats with the ear of the emperor.

The emperor respected Marind deeply; he would not have given the promotion if he had not trusted and liked him to begin with, but he had the courtiers on his

back, and there was the concern that eventually, upon Marind's death, as his son, I would inherit the position.

Apparently the emperor did not hold the same trust and liking for me as he did my adoptive father.

Or perhaps he was under a lot of pressure from the vipers that whispered in his ear.

Whatever it was, when the group of fifty warriors was assembled to be given to a foreign king on an alien world, my name was on the list.

Marind and Alysia were devastated.

They knew all too well that I would never be allowed to return. The gate would be closed behind us, and there would be no contact.

I bore their grief with stoicism; I think some part of me had been expecting this to end, that no such happiness could be mine.

I knew Marind had an audience with the emperor, begged him to reconsider, but the ruler stayed firm in his decision. In some ways I respected him. His solution, though terrible in its import, was probably more merciful than what would have happened to me if I had stayed in court.

Marind even tried to resign his post, hoping if he went back to his former job, the bigotry would end. I spoke with him at length, made him see there would be no end to this. The dogs had found their prey, and they would pursue me until the kill. There was no way to shake them.

I would not let my ill fortune bring dishonor to my kin. I stayed adamant about that, and I told Marind that he must allow me to follow this new path to where it would lead so that no stain should ever be brought upon them by my refusal.

Marind wanted to fight it, I could see that in his eyes, but he knew too well how Draconian society worked: what it allowed, what it did not. He had trod the edge by bringing me into his family. To go against the emperor was to put all his kin in jeopardy.

I knelt at his feet that night, told him how I would take the honor of my adoptive kin into a new world and see it flourish. I had been brave and never let him see my fear of what was to come.

He knew, I thought. But he let me have my pride and dignity, let me be an adult even though I hardly knew what it meant.

On the day that we left, among pomp and ceremony, fifty of us in full Draconian regalia, armed with the finest of the empire's weapons, resplendent in new armor, the emperor's banner snapping in the wind, I saw only Marind and Alysia's faces watching me with solemn pride.

We had spent our grief in private, but I spoke of a bright future, a new world, new beginnings. It had seemed to ease them, give them hope.

As we stepped into the portal, my adoptive parents were the last thing I saw.

My love lies with them still.

I blinked, and I was back in my tent, back with Sadan kneeling before me. Not since my adoptive parents had anyone stirred such great emotion in me as this Finnarian did. Even if it was with anger, he had roused me from the depths of depression time and again with his constant badgering.

The return of feeling anything terrified me. I had been so long in a cocoon of self-absorption that a return to the world around me was overwhelming.

What he hoped to achieve, I could not begin to guess.

Chapter Three

Sadan

Graithaan's tension had gradually subsided as I worked on his thigh, and I could feel his thoughts drift away, giving me free rein in my touch. Weariness was evident in his posture, which began to slump as he grew used to my presence.

My poor little one.

There were so many ways to see that he slept properly and deeply.

I grinned at my own thoughts, feeling the need to exercise the beginning of my claim on him. I needed my scent all over him, a clear warning to others to keep their distance.

Having finished dressing the wound, and finding him still introspective and open with it, I took my chance.

I simply reached up and pulled the towel away. I caught my breath and grasped my prize: his shaft. What a shaft it was.

Fully as dark as the rest of his body, it was slick and moist all along its length, standing thick and proud from where it protruded from its sheath. The difference between us was fascinating and utterly delightful, and I did not hesitate before simply opening my mouth and guiding the shaft inside.

Graithaan jerked, and I looked up from my treat to meet stunned golden eyes, wide with shock.

I smiled, careful with my fangs, which had begun to drop with my excitement and need.

I thought he was too shocked to move, because he did not shove me away as I half expected; he only gaped at me.

His shaft was not so disbelieving. It jumped under my handling, began to engorge even farther. The moisture pearling on its tip was sweeter than I would have expected, and I hummed with pleasure at the taste.

The head was huge, with more of a flare than I was used to, and that flare seemed to move, expanding and then contracting, and I realized it must be a physical adaptation so that when a male Draconian was breeding a female, his shaft could not be easily pulled free. It would hold him tightly within her until breeding was complete.

The thought made me groan with need, and he shuddered at the extra stimulation, his shock beginning to wane into a sort of stunned acceptance. I watched every nuance of expression that crossed his face, and when I licked the underside of that flare, I could not have asked for more of a reaction.

He moaned, a breathy, reluctant sound, as though it were torn from him, something he had desperately tried to keep back. I smiled around the length between my lips and began to use my long, powerful tongue to advantage.

Certainly none of my lovers had ever complained about the talents of my Finnarian tongue and its ability to wring pleasure from even the most stoic of partners.

I saw his hands fist in the covers of his bed as though he sought to deny himself the need to touch me, to make this more intimate.

I wrapped my tongue around his length, lapping up the taste of him, rubbing hard against the underside. I could feel his heartbeat against my tongue—swift and throbbing—and knew he would not last. He had been too long without this release, too long since he had last been touched in such a manner. I had only ever seen him alone and needing—me.

That it was me who could give him this, me who would drink his seed and take it within me, was a blessing I had waited far, far too long for.

His hips flexed involuntarily, and another moan ripped from his throat, his expression holding a hint of reluctant pleasure that only added to my triumph. Even as I watched, strange things began to happen.

My suckling seemed to open something within Graitaaan, because he began to make a low keening sound that went straight to my shaft, speaking to the primal being that lay so thinly disguised within my own body.

It was a sound so erotic that I nearly came from that stimulus alone. As if that was not enough, his skin began to change color, to become lighter until it resembled pale charcoal, a lovely satiny sheen to it that was beyond beautiful in my eyes. Ear frills that were normally tucked tightly against his head began to extend, and to my utter astonishment, they began to change, to display a pattern on their surface—a gorgeous tracery of charcoal and shades of crimson and deepest scarlet. The same began to happen upon his chest, and I watched in utter fascination, the patterns beyond beautiful. They called to me in some fashion I could hardly conceive, and I growled around my prize, my fangs elongating despite my own efforts to the contrary. I could feel my eyes beginning to glow, the heat easy to sense, something they rarely did even in these circumstances, and my body tightened with the need to claim...to mark Graitaaan irrevocably.

Mine, my inner beast howled, struggling against my wish to take this slowly. *Take him now*, it cried, *before another tries to*.

My growl vibrated through the pulsing shaft I held, and it seemed to tip Graitaaan over an invisible edge. His keening reached a crescendo and then cut off abruptly as his hips thrust against me, his claws shredding the bedcovers as he arched, eyes wide and startled.

The first pulse of hot seed spurted into my eager mouth, and I drank it down, moaning at the taste. My mate...mine...

It was enough to finish me utterly.

I cried out around his shaft, my own coming making me draw back to breathe, my body arching against him as I came in such spontaneity as I had not encountered since I had been but a youth.

Graithaan's eyes rolled up, and he simply slumped backward to the bed, unconscious before he hit the covers.

I licked him gently, cleaning him thoroughly, relishing every moment I could continue to touch him. His shaft slowly began to shrink and withdraw into its sheath, and I watched the process with utter fascination.

I knelt there, slowly regaining my breath, still shaking from the swiftness of my coming, disbelieving the force of it. I had never had this happen with another lover. Just sucking someone off had never been enough to bring about my own release. What power this little Draconian held, even if he was completely unaware of it.

I gently arranged him more comfortably on the bed, listening to his deep, even breathing with a sense of great satisfaction. My Finnarian senses could tell he was only sleeping. There was nothing sinister about his collapse, only exhaustion and an overload of sensation.

My little one...

I smiled and carefully covered him up, stroking his face gently and feeling a lump in my throat when his face turned into my palm with unconscious trust. I laid a kiss upon his forehead before gathering my things and the food tray. I stood close to him, motionless as my people often were, watching every rise and fall of that precious chest. The markings were gone now, faded as though they had never been. The ear frills had also returned to their place, markings once again invisible. His skin color had changed back to its beautiful ebony, and I drew a deep breath, wondering.

Somehow I knew those markings and their appearance to me was of great importance, but I had no way of knowing how.

I would have to ask my little Draconian later, if I could catch him again. I had the feeling he was not going to handle this well.

I grinned, my fangs pulsing with my thoughts.

Whatever he tried, my little one was not going to be able to erase what had happened. The courtship had started.

I knew now, every instinct roused.

Graitaan was my true mate, and there was no escaping that.

Graitaan

I woke with a start, wondering what in the world that hideous noise was.

It took a few moments for my brain to realize it was the morning horns blaring out, the signal for the army to wake. I lay there, blinking, trying to get my mind to function properly, wondering how I had overslept. I always woke early, too early, unable to sleep for the lack of Draconian companions around me, giving me a sense of safety.

Since my last companions had died, I had never slept with any depth, even in sleep aware of solitude and a lack of protection.

How then had I slept so well last night? My last memory was of tending my wounds, and then Sadan had arrived.

I shot up in the bed, breath suspended, staring at the wall of my tent with dazed eyes.

By the gods, I could *not* be remembering such a thing.

It must be a dream, only a dream.

I ran shaking fingers over my face, cursing myself. Why in the name of Azrun, the Draconian god of fate, would I even conceive of such a thing as Sadan...doing...that?

I fell backward onto the bed with a groan. I must have fallen asleep as he was tending me, and somehow I had transferred his touch into something sexual. I could only pray he had not noticed.

How was I going to face him with these images burned into my mind? Of all the people to insert into a dream... I growled at myself.

Finally with a disgruntled huff, I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes before standing in the chill air and crossing the tent to where a pitcher of water sat upon a small table. I poured some into a basin and dipped a cloth in, wringing it out before wiping my face, trying to chase away the thoughts that plagued me.

After as thorough a cleansing as such a small water source could supply, I dried myself off and turned to begin armoring up. I pulled one of my padded gambesons on, wrinkling my nose at the smell. I needed desperately to wash them, but there never seemed time and I had no underlings to take care of such tasks. Perhaps at the next camp.

We were supposed to be up and moving the whole camp just past midmorning. The troops, including me, would advance after the retreating enemy, so we had no idea where the camp might be set up next. Days could pass before I saw the sparse comfort of my tent again. The thought of that much time spent in company with Sadan and his Finnarians made me shudder.

I *had* to get those images out of my head.

I stepped out of my tent, fully armored, sword at my hip, spears in hand. All around me was organized chaos as people collapsed tents and packed them away in the carts that would follow the army to the next set-up point.

People were waiting for me to leave so they could take my tent down, and they shied nervously away as I appeared, no doubt looking rather impressive in full Draconian regalia.

I looked down upon them and grinned—that show of teeth making them even more nervous.

In a much better mood, I headed to the kitchens, where all the warriors would be eating. I felt famished, more so than usual. My light mood lasted until I entered the great tent where food was being served to the warriors. Being late, I had little choice as to where I would sit once I got my food, and it was tradition to sit with one's group. It would be commented on if I did not sit with Sadan and the others.

With typical bad luck, the only seat available was right next to Sadan.

I paused, and several heads rose to view my actions questioningly. I growled under my breath and forced myself forward to take that seat at Sadan's side.

I kept my eyes on my food, grunting a response as my Finnarian troop greeted me. I was scarcely aware of their voices but became hyperaware when Sadan's voice joined them.

"A *very* good morning to you, Graitaan."

His tone was so exceptionally good-tempered that I could not resist glaring at him suspiciously. He met my eyes with a smile plastered across his face and amusement evident in his eyes.

My own eyes narrowed. Sadan was never this pleasant. What...?

My nostrils picked up a faint odor drifting from him, and although it took a moment to identify what I was detecting...I froze in shock, eyes widening in horror.

He reeked of sex. I could faintly smell seed upon him—his own and...

Mine.

No. Not possible. It had only been a dream...hadn't it?

A slow grin spread over Sadan's lips, the faintest hint of fang showing, his eyes telling me things I did *not* want to know.

I tore my eyes from him and tried to focus on my food, though my appetite had completely fled. I ate mechanically, using it as a cover for my jumbled emotions.

Dear gods, that had really happened? Sadan had... I drew a sharp breath. My own commander's mouth had been... I wanted to die a thousand deaths right there,

sink into the earth and never ever reemerge. I wanted to beat my head against the thick tabletop until blessed unconsciousness enfolded me.

I gave silent thanks that my dark skin did not allow me to blush as humans did, or surely everyone at the table would be able to discern my embarrassment. Still, Finnarians had amazing senses of smell, at least as good as my own.

I refused to look up, refused to see if any of them had picked up the scent as I had and whether they had realized the connection.

I made myself breathe evenly, focusing entirely on each bite, trying to push all thought of what had happened out of my mind. I really didn't think I did a very good job of it.

How in the name of Azrun was I supposed to retain my dignity when I had to spend days in his company?

Again, I wanted to thump my head on the table. It would be a long, long, horrible day.

Sadan

He was so cute in his distress. So charmingly embarrassed and uncertain with it. I had not known if Draconians would have as good a sense of smell as Finnarians, but evidently they did if Graitaan's reaction was anything to go by. I thought he might try to dismiss it as a dream or imagination, so I had not washed this morning, wanting him to come to his own conclusions without me having to say a word.

He had definitely come to a conclusion...a mortifying one if his expression was anything to go by. I would find it interesting to see where he went with this, how he tried to hide from it. That he would I did not doubt. He was nowhere near ready to accept this, but with time and patience, he would come to the understanding that he was mine and that that was *not* a bad thing at all.

I grinned. It was going to be a wonderful day.

I gathered my Finnarians together, watching Graitaan follow in their wake with a brooding, gloomy expression that was entirely endearing. I did not force him closer, knowing now I needed to give him some space before attempting another step forward in our relationship. This was beyond stimulating, and I very much looked forward to the next step in our game of cat and mouse. My little mouse needed to regain his composure.

The chill air hovered in small clouds before our faces. My men and I donned light cloaks, as much to keep the dampness off as for any warmth. Most of the humans around us wore heavy winter gear, but Finnarians were far too used to true cold; this was not even close to the temperature our own lands endured. Graitaan wore no cloak at all, immune to the cold by the simple fact of his inner heat.

Very delicious inner heat.

I grinned again, whistling under my breath and feeling Graitaan's angry scowl center on me at the cheerful sound.

We found our place in the ranks, and after an annoying delay of milling about by the humans, the army began the march to follow in the wake of our retreating enemy.

The day was gentle upon us, not too hot, thank the gods. There was little moisture in this part of the land, and we each had to carry water. We were reaching the foothills, and beyond their gentle slopes, the mountains towered, challenging us. It would be a day of strenuous marching, no doubt. Here at least there were trees, sparse and twisted. I could only hope the sun did not become too cruel before we reached the coolness of the mountain passes.

The Masarian army was in high spirits, for we had finally routed the foe yesterday after heavy fighting. That the stalemate was broken at last after several weeks was a boost to morale, and we marched briskly, glad to gain ground when for so long we had been held at bay.

The enemy was learning the true cost of attempting to conquer one of Masaria's colonies. They had been so confident in the beginning, so sure that Masaria's distance from her new lands would be the deciding factor in the conflict. They had not counted on Finnarian involvement and the power of our mage talents. To portal such a distance might greatly tax the resources of human magery, but it was of little trial to a Finnarian. That our king had decided to become involved, when Finnarians so rarely showed themselves to humans, was not for me to question. He would have his reasons, and if it was needful for me to know, I would be informed. If not, I obeyed his orders.

It was only the curious part of my nature that cried out to know why. That very curiosity had gotten me into scrapes with my father and others of my family far too often. Ever must I know the why of things, when the rest of my race seemed so very uncurious. Most Finnarians had no interest in anything beyond their own borders and their own concerns. Humans feared us and avoided our lands, so there was little in the way of conflict between the two races. I had only ever met two humans before our assignment to the Masarian army, and I had had to spend time with the Masarian king to learn of their ways before my people could be allowed to mingle with the masses. Otherwise my warriors and I would have killed dozens of our so-called allies on the first day, seeing their words and actions as unforgivable insults.

Humans were so oblivious to nuances of tone and body language. They used only their basic senses to observe their world and left their inner knowledge to go to waste. It was puzzling and unnerving to our small troop at first, but we had gradually learned it was like dealing with children; their behaviors could be irritating in the extreme, yet for the most part, it was often done with a strange type of innocence in the way they were perceived by others. Like children, they were so engrossed with self that they could not understand how their actions affected others.

They were a strange race. Although I had learned to tolerate them, in some cases even enjoy their company for short stretches, I would be glad to return to my lands and be among those whom I understood.

Humans were far too complicated.

Like the children I had named them, I could hear the humans beginning to sing as they marched, and their good humor buoyed my own spirits even higher. Naive they might be, but the human troops displayed a joy in life that sometimes seemed lacking in us as immortals.

I found a smile forming on my lips once more, knowing my warriors were sure to notice my high spirits and my scent, along with Graitaan's overly foul mood. They were far too intelligent not to put both together and come up with a logical explanation.

My smile widened. When I returned to my people, I would be bringing a new addition to their ranks. One that would be sure to liven things up and raise a few eyebrows.

I laughed out loud at the thought, drawing a questioning look from my second in command, Nasir, and a growl from my mate to be.

Graitaan

I trudged in the wake of the precisely rank-and-file Finnarians, cursing under my breath, scowling at their perfect formation and their stupid commander. *My* stupid commander, much though I wanted to deny it.

I closed my eyes for a moment, pondering how, after so long in solitude here, I should be thrust into this conundrum.

Sadan was my commander, first and foremost. I could not just kill him as I so wished to. That would be a stain upon my kin's honor, something I had fought long

and hard to maintain in spotless perfection, even in my exile. For the sake of my own sanity, I could not attack him, could not even injure him for personal reasons.

The sheer scope of my predicament was beginning to become horribly clear to me.

My only hope would be that it had been a moment of sheer devilry on Sadan's part, a furtherance of his constant teasing of me. Surely it could not be more than that. There could be no attraction on his part. Draconians were another species entirely, strange to Finnarian eyes, ugly even.

Sadan was so...beautiful. There seemed no other word for him, even if he had proved to be an ass and deserved to die in lakes of his own blood.

To my horror, just thinking of him was awakening my body. I half stumbled in my shock, catching myself swiftly and straightening my posture as Sadan glanced over his shoulder, his keen hearing catching the shift in my pace.

I cast an initial glare at his questioning look and then turned my eyes away, knowing my discomfort was giving him no end of entertainment.

Was it only yesterday that I had been thinking my life was becoming a round of utter boredom?

Azrun had obviously heard me and dumped this mess upon my oblivious head.

Draconian gods had a very, very twisted sense of humor. I swallowed the next curse before it left my tongue, hoping a short bout of good behavior might shift heavenly attention away from me and save me from further misfortune.

* * *

I sighed with heavy impatience as we sat on the lee side of a rock cliff that towered above us, waiting for the humans to rest.

I found myself pacing, looking to the west where the enemy army had fled. If it was up to the Finnarians and me, we would have caught up with them by now, but humans were painfully slow.

I had even jogged up ahead several times, scouting, then reluctantly looping back, frustrated with the snail's pace we moved at. It gave the enemy troops, who were not human at all, far too much time to regroup, to plot an ambush, or to stop and rest before meeting us head-on.

But it was a human king we served, and his word was our command.

I growled in frustration, my tail lashing with my thoughts. Between the ridiculous pace of the army and my own troubled obsession over what had occurred with Sadan, it had in no way been a pleasant day. It had become quite evident that we would be sleeping in the open tonight, and for short times only. It was the only way to continue to make any progress at all.

The Finnarians showed no signs of impatience, not that I could truly tell. They always seemed so damn calm, so poised, and it was impossible to read if that was a mere mask on their part or true lack of passion. They sat in various poses, motionless as though barely breathing.

All I knew was their attitude emphasized my own rising frustration. Draconians were not calm, not poised. They showed their emotions clearly for the most part, although not in the same undisciplined way of the humans.

Sadan sat on a huge boulder that overlooked the large plain below, his gaze lazily scanning the land, his attention seeming very far from where we waited. He had tied his long hair back, but the ends danced in the breeze, brushing over the golden skin of his arms visible between the pieces of armor. He had flung his cloak back over one shoulder, obviously too hot despite the altitude we were currently at. His legs were drawn up, his arms wrapped around them, and his expression appeared slightly pensive as though his thoughts were far from here.

When I realized the intensity with which I viewed him, I jerked back as though stung, cursing myself roundly. I could not understand what could possibly be going on in my head that caused me to act in such a manner.

Could it be you want more of his mouth? A malicious voice whispered in my head, a note of mockery in the tone. I growled in answer, deliberately turning my

back and pacing as far away as I could in our limited area. I found no way to truly refute that cursed little voice.

Sadan's action seemed to have woken something in my body, something that had been perfectly content to be chaste. Now it howled with need, and my skin twitched in irritation at the sensations.

How could one tiny bit of sex do this?

Mind you, that had been a pretty talented mouth.

Shut up! I chastised my inner voice. I am in enough trouble as it is without you putting your two bits worth into the mess.

I stopped my pacing, wishing I could just put my head down into my hands. Great, now I was arguing with myself.

I drew in a sharp breath and straightened my posture. I was Draconian, I reminded myself. I was strong. I was the last representative of my kind here. Damn it to the hells, but a single Finnarian would not put me into a position of self-doubt. He had no power over me at all.

None.

Really.

Chapter Four

Graitaan

The route we took down the mountainside was steep and treacherous, covered with scree, making the footing less than stable.

I was having a bit of trouble with the descent, for my legs did not handle such a steep degree well. I was cautious, my uninjured wing half spread in anticipation of a fall, my attention solely on my footing.

I swear it was not my fault.

One of the humans behind me lost his footing and fell, starting a mini rockslide as he went. I heard his yelp but did not turn quickly enough. I took his warning too late. He smashed into my legs, and I barely managed to avoid crushing him as I fell. Of course, my greater weight made me slide faster, even as I dug my feet into the scree in a desperate attempt to slow myself.

I could scarcely see for the dust that was thrown up from my precipitous descent, and then dimly I saw someone in the way, hitting him at considerable speed.

I heard a pained grunt before I had a Finnarian on top of me. In pure reflex, I wrapped my arms around him to balance us both. I could faintly hear a Finnarian curse before we stopped abruptly, and I saw the glow of magic around us.

I went limp with relief, trying to still my panting breaths.

“You hardly need to go to such lengths to get my attention, Graitaaan. I am more than ready should you desire my services.” The low, smooth voice held tremendous amusement at my expense once more.

My arms spasmed at the swiftness with which I snatched them away from the Finnarian who lay on my chest.

I did not open my eyes, and I stayed silent, much though I wanted to curse and rave.

Of course... Of all the Finnarians I might have tried to kill in such a manner, it had to be Sadan I hit.

A gentle kiss landed on my nose, causing my eyes to snap open, and for brief moments, I could smell him, that tantalizing scent he always exuded driving me to distraction.

Sadan lifted his weight off me much too slowly, then offered a hand, the amusement in his expression grating on my nerves as ever.

I wanted to reject his seeming kindness, sneer at him, but I knew my balance would be precarious at best, and with my luck, I would knock him over again or slide the rest of the way down the mountainside. Never did I have this curse of clumsiness except in Sadan’s presence. I was beginning to believe he somehow caused it—perhaps some particular magic he could use against me. I refused to believe it had the slightest thing to do with me. Clumsiness had never been a problem before.

Restraining the urge to growl, I took his hand and allowed him to pull me up. I wanted to jerk away as his other hand grasped my waist, steadying me, ensuring I found my balance.

Eyes twinkling, Sadan dusted off the armor at my hip.

“We will have to find a place for you to bathe tonight, Graitaaan. I am sure that you have grit inside your gambeson. We would not want your skin rubbed raw.”

I nodded curtly, unable to truly detect if he was giving the common courtesy of a commander seeing that his troops were battle ready, or if that comment held innuendo I did not completely want to understand.

Pulling back to regain a respectable distance, I brushed the dust off with distaste, flinching a little as I discovered several small cuts from the sharp rocks. Sadan took a step closer, his gaze fixed on a slice in my forearm, just above my bracers. Before I could protest or even realize what he intended, he took his forefinger and gently scooped up a little of the blood that dripped from the wound.

I watched in speechless and horrified fascination as he brought it to his lips and licked the blood off with a sweep of that long tongue that had...

I must have looked like an idiot gaping at him like I was, but I could not move as I saw an expression of deep pleasure cross his features at the taste. Sadan's eyes opened to stare at me, something hot and possessive in their depths.

"You taste as I imagined..." His voice was half growl, something that made me shiver, feeling hunted.

I swallowed hard, beyond knowing how to respond. I knew he was Finnarian, knew what that meant to a point, even knew humans willingly gave themselves to supply blood, saying it was a pleasure of such degree that it could not be described. Never before, though, had I truly seen him as the predator he was, and those eyes were fixed upon *me*.

I took two unthinking steps back and almost fell again, my gaze on his fangs as they dropped at the taste of blood.

He smiled, and it was not a gentle smile. "Never have I tasted blood such as that. You are truly unique, Graitaaan...in so many ways."

My hand inched toward my dagger, but he laughed then, and his fangs slowly disappeared, his eyes becoming simply amused again. "Do not worry, my Draconian friend. You will know when I come for you, and it will not be on the side of a mountain with an entire army behind us. I would have it be much, much more intimate than that."

He chuckled at my stunned look, then turned and signaled to his Finnarian troops, most of whom I now realized watched us with grins and much talk.

I glared at them, my fingers tightening and loosening spasmodically upon the hilt of my dagger in clear warning.

They just grinned more broadly, turning to follow their commander.

I walked with surly outrage in their wake, wondering why, just once, I could not come out the clear victor in my encounters with Sadan.

I refused to even think of the words he had uttered. They were only something said to rile me; I was sticking to that theory and no other.

Sadan

My little one was having a bad day.

I gave thanks to the gods above for their aid in supplying such an intimate encounter. The taste of his blood... I had near come from the surge of pleasure that ripped through me when I tasted it upon my tongue for the first time.

It was all I could do to tame my inner beast and not take him there and then, claiming him upon that mountainside in full view of all the troops around us. Then they would know in no uncertain terms who Graitaan belonged to. My beast longed for the conclusiveness of such a taking.

But my little one was more precious than that. Our mating would take place in solitude as he deserved, coaxed and eased into the role he would play, discovering who and what he was to me.

I could not wait for the privilege of that first feeding, that first true intimacy that would seal us as truemates forevermore. The mere thought of it kept me occupied all the way down the mountain. The images that danced behind my eyes involved exploring every inch of that delectable body. So innocent of his own

attraction. I would make his body sing, show him what it meant to fly in pleasure, to achieve a higher state that went beyond body and into soul.

I finally had to cease my fantasizing, for my hardened, throbbing shaft rubbed uncomfortably against my armor. I longed for freedom of movement and to be clean once more. My promise to Graitaan loomed in my thoughts like paradise.

I grinned a little as we finally, thankfully reached level ground on the plain below. I wanted a spot for the night that held a river or stream.

My fastidious Draconian would not be able to resist.

Graitaan

I wore myself out from useless worrying and wondering, not from the ridiculously short trek we had accomplished that day. My energy was still too high when we reached the area we would sleep in for a few hours. The humans, fit as they were for their own kind, sank down onto bedrolls with relief, many of them falling asleep instantly, not even waiting for food to be prepared.

I snorted in disgust. I wished for my companions in all their strength. We could have gone ahead and won the battle by ourselves. We did not need humans to complicate things.

By myself, however, I was no proper representative of my race.

A weary sort of despair weighed me down. What was I doing here? I could make no real difference as one lone Draconian. I was nothing but a curiosity, my people, my world far away, a place I could never return to. Why was I struggling? There was no one to care if I carried my family honor, no one to report back that I had been less than perfect, less than worthy of my kin. Kin who were not my true blood.

The issue that had haunted me for so long seemed especially strong at that moment, and I was not in the frame of mind to push it aside.

I could not bear to be in the presence of others right now.

I picked up my extra gambesons and headed for the river that ran alongside the camp. Once I had retreated from the sound of the army, my tension began to fade and a long sigh of relief sounded in the sudden silence. For the first time, I began to wonder if I should leave this place. I was of little use here, by myself. I could not go home, but I could go elsewhere.

I stopped dead, stunned. I had never thought of this. Had I not discharged my duties properly? Had I not spent half my life obeying the orders of my emperor, who had no doubt long since forgotten my existence? Once this war was over, what was to stop me from leaving, finding solitude in some distant part of the world?

I could finally be free, finally be...

Alone.

I swallowed hard, then chastised myself. I was far more alone in this army than I would be by myself. And without all the irritations...

I looked up at the full moon overhead, setting my jaw.

This was it then—the end of what I had been sent to do. No more. After this, I would return to being truly Draconian, not have to try to fit in with humans.

I closed my eyes in a surge of relief so strong it near sent me to my knees. There was hope at last—an end to this nothingness I endured day after day.

Freedom.

I felt almost giddy with liberation, and my step lightened, my head rose higher, buoyed by my thoughts.

Farther upstream from the camp, I found a place where the river gentled; its swift waters were limited to half the river, while the other half was sand and gravel bars, the waters about them shallow and almost calm.

I took my two extra gambesons and laid them in the water to soak, weighing them down with a fair-sized rock. Then I stripped from my armor, leaving it on the dry gravel and removing my gambeson, taking it to join the others in the water. It

would mean they would take several days to dry, but I had a semiclean one left at the camp, and even the extra weight of carrying wet washing would be worth it just to have clean clothing sometime soon. I stood in the darkness, reveling in my nudity. Privacy was rare indeed, and I would not squander such an opportunity as this. After wading into the gentle waters, I found a deeper area and slipped into the slow current, letting the soothing wetness engulf me. I lay on my back, scudding lazily with my arms, letting my body relax utterly. Such pleasure as this was a precious commodity, and I resolved to enjoy every second of it. I would gladly do without sleep rather than rush this moment.

The dry irritation that always made my scales itch eased away, and I sighed out loud, my body relaxing further. Draconian scales needed constant attention and should have oil applied to them in drier climates such as this particular area. Having no Companion to aid me, I could only oil what I could reach, and the rest often drove me half-mad with the constant itching that made me want to tear at my own skin.

This ease would be temporary, I knew, but I had learned to take each small pleasure on its own terms. I never knew when such things might come again.

Floating made me slip into a doze, and I took pleasure in the relaxation, so rare in my existence. I could stay like this forever.

Eyes closed, I drifted...into something. As I looked up, I realized with shock that it was *someone*.

Sadan stood there, grinning, hands on lean hips, in all his naked glory.

And glory it was.

I yelped as I sank, half drowning myself in the process, feeling Sadan grab my arm and haul me to my feet with an ease that impressed me despite my disgust at the situation.

He always seemed to see me at my worst.

That thought fled as Sadan pulled me against him so we were pressed together, wet body melding with wet body. The feel of his naked skin made

something flare within me, something that terrified me utterly, as if I wanted this, needed this in some way I could not truly fathom.

I tried to jerk back, but his hold was as iron, and he bent his head to me, a long supple tongue coming out to lick over my muzzle.

I gasped, and he took advantage, plunging his tongue into my mouth and nipping at my lips with a feral growl that resounded within me.

Fear spiked, and I tried to regain my footing to fight, but then he hummed deep in his throat and began to nip just below my ear frill.

I would have gone to my knees if he had not held me so firmly.

How in the hells had he known my weak spot, my erogenous zone? Touch there and I was utterly helpless. Only another Draconian should have known that—not an adversary like Sadan, another species entirely.

His long tongue flicked out and traced over the area with exquisite slowness and pressure, and I arched against him, my hands spasming on his shoulders even as my mind screamed to push him away.

“So beautiful, so sensitive...” Sadan’s words whispered over my skin like silk, and I shuddered at the sensation, unable to help the faint whimper that escaped my lips. I floated in his hold, helpless to even struggle, my eyes widening as I felt one of his hands trail down my body and stroke softly beneath my tail, circling ever closer to the entrance.

I gasped and flailed weakly, unable to escape even though he held me with only one arm. His strength—greater than I had imagined—far surpassed my own. Fear began to find a foothold.

“Sssh, my little one. I would never hurt you.” His whisper made me shudder; his touch made me twist—into him, not away like I wanted, needed. My body had a mind of its own, and it wanted him desperately.

So long without touch, so long without the completion brought by a lover. I cried out, half a gasp, half a wail, as one of his long fingers, slick with the water, slid slowly within me, breaching my body in the most intimate of ways.

My cry choked off, my eyes wide with sensation as the finger slid impossibly deep, stroking over that place so long neglected.

Sadan hummed against my neck, his tongue pressing more firmly. I shook in his hold, sensations overwhelming me above and below, more than my stunned mind could take in at once. I wanted to struggle, to push him away, but my body yearned for touch, longed for feelings it had all but forgotten.

I could feel a flush start on my chest, bringing half-forgotten memory to the fore, something Marind had told me once.

My eyes widened in disbelief; I stared into space in shock.

No...it could not... My body had to be confused, desperate. That was all.

That flush, that heat—my mating marks rising to the surface of my skin, my intensely private display intended only for my mate.

Sadan was not...

I arched with a choked gasp as another finger broached me, reminding me of how pleasurable such an intimate caress could be. My body woke to fiery need, beginning to pulse until I writhed with the heat of it.

I felt my ear frills begin to move, to flare outward in display, and again dim memory rose. Had I done this unconsciously when Sadan had swallowed me the other night? How could my body identify him so wrongly as a mate?

My only consolation in this mess was that he had no idea what the display meant.

Sadan growled against me, and I felt the brush of his fangs against my frighteningly vulnerable neck.

I groaned, tried to move away in a feeble attempt to resist, but he did not bite, only scraped his fangs softly over my sensitized skin, fear adding a tang to the need

I felt. He shifted me then, holding me into the current so that I half floated in his hold, my tail moving between his legs as I faced him. The water pushed me into him; I could feel his hardness now pressing against my entrance, nothing at all separating us.

I tried to speak, to protest, to stop what was imminent, but it was as though I had lost all reason, all ability to move or even voice my thoughts.

The large head pressed firmly, and although I tried feebly to clench against the intrusion, the pressure won through, and I whimpered as it slipped within my defenses, thick and hot inside my overstretched entrance. So long chaste, my body burned and throbbed at the intruder's great size, and my fingers clenched upon his shoulders.

I looked up, trying to gain enough presence of mind to demand he stop, but once I saw his eyes, I was lost.

They were totally red, totally alien, his face narrower and sharper as his fangs dropped fully into position. His expression was hard, fierce with possession and need, nothing there that was going to withdraw, nothing that was going to let me go. Any protest left my mind, and when his lips slanted down over mine, I found myself responding, my body arching in mute pleading. He murmured something, and I found my hands rising to clutch at him. His fingers curled up over my shoulders from behind and began to draw me down onto my impalement with inexorable power.

My body parted reluctantly, stretching over the thick shaft that forced its way deeper. I writhed, panting, trying to escape the reality of the fact that Sadan was *in* me, taking me. This would change our relationship forever, and I wanted nothing to do with him, but something in me—something I could not name—overrode my horror. It welcomed the feel of his pulse within my body, the fierce power that lay within me like another beating heart. That instinctual part seemed to howl in my mind that this was right and good, and it made my body limp and pliant, complicit in its own taking.

Sadan watched me without blinking, taking in every nuance of my expression as his shaft surged deeper, impaling me mercilessly.

He leaned back down, bathing my ear frill with that long tongue, making me arch and twist in reaction, causing the thickness within me to press ever deeper with each movement.

At last I felt his heavy testicles rest on the tender base of my tail, signaling that he was fully seated within my body.

I gasped for breath, eyes wide at the sensation of Sadan nestled so intimately, his shaft hard and throbbing.

I stared into those red eyes, watching with a sort of dim fascination as his lips drew back in a snarl, his visage utterly primal.

“Mine,” he growled, sounding completely unlike his normal controlled self. “My mate.”

He thrust, hard and deep, his thickness pressing with perfect pressure over that spot that made all thought scatter, all reason and resistance flee.

My initial panic over his words bled away swiftly as my thoughts became little more than random impressions, need and response taking all my abilities.

He was no gentle lover, and my own wildness rose to meet him, my teeth baring in sudden challenge to his force as my claws appeared, surely leaving bloody welts upon his perfect skin. I found my legs wrapping around him, gaining control over my lower body as I pulled myself into each impalement, harsh grunts of pained pleasure issuing from my throat as he thrust hard and fast, further than I had ever been taken, depths that became exclusively his.

One part of my mind was shocked and horrified by my actions, but something more would not let my mind take control. It wanted this, needed this with a force that would have terrified me if I had been able to fully comprehend it.

The howl in my mind intensified, responded to Sadan’s words with satisfaction and a sense of completion I had never felt before.

Sensations seemed to intensify as though I were on the edge of something, and I instinctively turned my head, presenting my throat in utter submission.

“Yesss,” Sadan hissed, his eyes glowing ever brighter, and he leaned forward, pinning me in place with both arms as he opened his jaws over my throat. My rational mind gibbered in terror, seeking to flee, but the primal side held me in submissive pliancy.

Those needle-sharp fangs pierced me, a moment of intense pain. Then I screamed as pleasure—so sharp and clear it was almost agony—swamped my very being. I was his. I was part of him, part of everything around me. I could smell and sense things I had never experienced before, even with my heightened Draconian abilities. It was as though the world around me came into sudden, vivid focus, and I was stunned with the beauty of it, the sense of belonging with it and to the one who thrust into me with force and power beyond my imaginings. I could feel Sadan—glimmers of his thoughts, but mostly his emotions, bright and fierce, his need for me, his sense of me as beyond beautiful in his eyes. The shock of it brought tears to my eyes; how could I be what he envisioned? I was only Graitaaan—born of rogues, a singular and unimpressive member of an alien race, far from Sadan’s own beauty and grace.

But his thoughts were clear and concise, his need and passion for me undeniable.

The sensation of his mouth upon my neck, of my blood being drawn into him was so exquisite, so passionate that I moaned...and came...with no more stimulation than that. I felt the hard pulse of my seed as it arced from my straining shaft, joining the flowing waters around us.

I went limp with the force of the release, but Sadan was nowhere near finished. His arms pulled my body with swift jerks onto his shaft, impaling me hard and deep with each thrust of those lean, muscled hips.

I grunted helplessly, pinned upon his shaft and his fangs both. My head began to swim. Then he slowly withdrew his teeth, licking his lips with a growl as he

stared down at my boneless, sated form. He licked the wounds with long sweeps of his tongue, making my shaft twitch and begin to fill again.

The heat in my chest and ear frills began to intensify, and I felt so hot and flushed it was a blessing that I lay in the cool waters of the river to control the inner fire that seemed to flare ever higher as Sadan continued his possession of me.

I could see Sadan's eyes tracing those markings I could not control, and he suddenly grinned, sharp and fierce.

"You want this mating." His eyes seemed to gleam with sudden understanding. "Those are mating marks. You have submitted to me as your mate, Graitaan, and you cannot back away from that. This is of your free will now, and you cannot make that go away afterward." The deep satisfaction in his tone made my rational self snarl in rage, but my body purred in agreement, making those damn marks stand out even more brightly.

He laughed then, triumph in the sound, and his hips began to snap in a short, forceful rhythm that left me helplessly clinging to him as though in the midst of a storm.

And storm it was. I cried out as he grasped my hardening shaft and began to stroke it harshly, almost painfully.

Even that seemed right, and my hips began to buck against him, my eyes half rolling back as the force of the heat rose within me, making me shake, my breath seeming harder and harder to find.

With a roar, Sadan slammed me into his hips one last time, and I felt his shaft throb within me, hot seed pulsing deep, marking me in a way I could never erase from memory.

His grip tightened, and I came a second time, body bowed in an almost painful arch, mouth wide in a silent scream. It seemed forever yet only a moment, and when I returned to myself, I felt only grief as Sadan slowly pulled out of my body. It was as though he had cast me from warmth and comfort.

I lay in his arms, both of us panting and shivering with reaction. Then Sadan gathered me against his chest and carried me from the river with a strength that I could scarcely conceive of. I had known he was more powerful. The thought had been annoying and somewhat intimidating before. Now it felt like protection, safety. I lay limply against him, mind too stunned to begin to comprehend what had just happened.

His body became the only comfort against the sudden chill that seemed to come from deep within me, and I made no effort to struggle; indeed I curled closer, head against his chest. I closed my eyes slowly in response to my body's sated lethargy, and I slipped into sleep with a trust I would never have imagined before.

Chapter Five

Graitaan

It was hard for me to wake. The warmth that surrounded me kept me in thrall, and I snuggled down under the blankets with a groan of protest as I felt movement beside me, and then the comfort of another form left my side.

My eyes snapped open, and I froze in utter disbelief.

Another form...

I took a deep, shuddering breath as harsh memory returned with brilliant images I would rather have refuted. By the gods, what had I done?

I wondered with desperation if I stayed under the blankets, would the army move on without me? I could just stay here, die of embarrassment. It would be so simple.

I could hear the Finnarians up and about around me—not all of them yet. If I was going to move, it had better be now, or I would have to face the whole lot of them, and wouldn't they just be amused? I had slept with their commander. The very one I had persistently reviled, disdained for all the time I had known him. They would find that something to mock me with for the rest of eternity.

How could I have been so foolish as to do such a thing? Not that I remembered having a whole lot of choice. My inner voice laughed at me, hinting at the fact that I could have resisted, could have protested.

Fool! I chastised myself harshly. How could you go from hating Sadan completely to letting him fuck you?

He must be feeling smugly triumphant in his conquest. I had been the unattainable, the chaste and mysterious Draconian. No longer. Did Sadan even now share the details with his men, crowing of his prowess?

The thought made me shudder in revulsion and shame, and I sat up, desperate to escape.

Sadan was kneeling next to the fire, stoking it with more wood for those who were waking. There were only two other Finnarians awake—one bringing wood to Sadan and the other kneeling next to the feeble flames, looking totally chilled as he curled his arms around his body.

I froze as Sadan turned his head, immediately aware of my movement. His eyes met mine, and the heat there made me cringe. That look was utterly possessive, utterly self-assured, and I growled under my breath. He must have heard, because he began to smile, a slow tilting of lips that made my anger rise in proportion. Arrogant ass. I flung the blankets off, only belatedly remembering my nudity. I snatched them back, my fury growing at the wider smile Sadan now displayed.

I looked around for my clothing, realizing with a sinking feeling that I had left it by the river.

Clutching the blankets to me like a hysterical virgin, I wondered with increasing horror how I could traverse the camp in nothing but a blanket. My dignity and reputation for ferocity was never going to survive this.

My frenzied musings were cut short as a bundle dropped onto my blanketed lap.

My clothing.

I looked up into warm green eyes. Sadan slowly folded his arms over his chest as though waiting for something.

I wanted to look away but refused the weakness. Damn it to the hells, I was not going to back down from him. The bastard would think I was submissive or some stupid thing. Instead I glared up at him.

"This is not what you think," I snarled in low tones, trying not to wake the still-sleeping Finnarians close by.

His brows rose in silent question, the amusement in his eyes deepening. It took every bit of my courage to continue to look at him.

"You mistakenly think that I wanted...that. I did not."

Sadan's lips quirked. "*That?* You mean the sex?"

"Sssh," I hissed, clenching my fingers more tightly around the blanket I held like a lifeline. "Do you want everyone to hear? Lower your voice."

"I would shout it to the heavens with great pride. I want everyone to know what you are to me."

I stared at him in horrified fascination, like he had become a madman—or more of a madman than he had been before.

"I am nothing to you. I am one of your men, and this should damn well never have happened."

Sadan shrugged with nonchalant grace. "Of course it was going to happen. You are my destined mate. It was time."

I leaned back, feeling my eyes widen. I thought he had said those words in the heat of passion, not with any truth behind them. Dear gods, what was this maniac brewing in his little mind now?

"I am not your fucking mate!" I hissed, my entire body tensing with the need to attack him. Bloody, fucking hells! What great evil had I perpetrated in another life to have this crazy bastard forced into my presence?

Sadan just smiled, the ass. Smiled! Like I was not going to launch myself upon him and rend him limb from limb. If he thought this "mate" shit was going to stay my hand, he was sorely mistaken. The bastard would learn at his own cost.

"I was not alone in this, Graitaaan." Sadan's smooth voice purred over my name as though he possessed it now. "Your mating marks were clear indicators that your body, if not your mind, knew full well who I was and accepted it completely."

"It had nothing to do with you." I wished my words held as much conviction as I wanted to project.

He tilted his head slightly, smile growing. "So those marks come out for any lover?"

I wanted to lie, but I had never really learned how, and now that lack held me pinned, wordless, beneath that hawklike stare.

"I thought so," he said with deep satisfaction that galled me to the very core of my being. "I *am* your mate, Graitaan. Your body knows. Now we just have to work on your mind."

"I am never going to accept you as my mate, so do not get any fucking ideas," I snarled, my claws extending from my fingertips, indicative of my fury.

The damn Finnarian did not even have the decency to flinch or look the least bit intimidated. "I know you are shy." He ignored the way my jaw dropped at the ludicrous statement. "I will give you time to adjust to the thought of being mine. When you are ready, we will have a true ceremony to make it clear to everyone else."

"Like fucking hells." I fairly shook with fury, groping for my sword, dagger, anything sharp at all.

Sadan smiled at me with soft affection that grated over my senses like burrs. "You will come to terms with this in time, my little one. I am a demanding lover, true, but I am not without my gentle side. I will give you space to come to the understanding that you crave me as much as I crave you." He turned on his heel and strode back to the fire.

I trembled with emotion. *Little one*? I would gut the bastard, leave him out in the sun for the carrion birds. I would...

Sadan

I strode back to the fire with such joy in my heart that it needed expression. I wanted to have the king's messenger spread the word throughout the camp, wanted to shout at the top of my lungs that Graitaan was mine, that we had sealed our bonding by the most intimate of acts. I did not really think Graitaan could survive the embarrassment of either wish being granted.

He was so shy, my little one. It was absolutely adorable. And his fierceness—so cute. The way his body tensed, his eyes blazed... My body tightened just at the thought.

I took a deep breath, trying to bring myself under some form of control. All I wanted at this moment was to repeat the experience we had shared in the river. Oh my gods, the heat of him encasing my pulsing shaft. The taste of him... I closed my eyes, licking my lips as though his blood still lay upon my tongue. It had been unbelievable—the impact of that taste upon my body, mind, my very soul. It was as though Graitaan had flowed within me, as though his essence had joined with mine to form a whole. I was no longer a single entity but half of a whole, something I had never experienced before. A melding of self into something greater, something I could never lose without being bereft and grief stricken.

He was mine. He bore my mark upon his neck. This first bite would scar; I had not healed it with my saliva as I would every other from now on. He would bear that mark for the rest of his life. My mark. My mate. The link forged could never be broken.

I grinned. *Despite his reluctance...*

I fought down my exuberance and tended to the fire. Soon we would eat a cold meal of leftovers and resume our pursuit of the enemy. My grin turned wolfish. I so loved to watch my little one fight. The joy he took in it, the fierceness that radiated from him made me hot and bothered, and I often had to chastise myself to pay attention to my own fighting, lest I end up injured and unable to protect my men and Graitaan. He was so damn distracting.

I managed to keep my eyes away from where my little one was dressing, and I noticed my companions were obvious in their avoidance of that area. They knew, then, what had taken place and were respecting this new bond.

Indeed each one laid a hand on my shoulder as they arrived, their murmured congratulations only adding to my sense of completeness. My companions, my mate...there was nothing else I wanted in this entire world or any other.

The sun rose, and we began to armor up. It was a new and glorious day.

The harsh growl from the direction of my new mate's bedroll made me smile just a little wider.

Graithaan

If I had thought the previous day seemed endless...

This one by far surpassed it. I trudged heavily behind the Finnarians, eating dust and grinding my teeth at each twinge from my well-used ass. The pain brought home exactly what had happened the previous night, and I was not allowed to forget, even for a moment, that my commander had fucked me long and hard.

My eyes narrowed upon that broad back striding with such self-assured ease at the head of our unit. I distracted myself by imagining various tortures visited upon Sadan by my hand. It was all that kept me sane at the moment. The true impact of what had occurred had not yet sunk in. I knew that in some part of me, but I desperately wanted to remain in oblivious comfort.

Raising a hand to my neck for the thousandth time, I felt again the raised weal of the bite that throbbed like a second heartbeat. Was it not enough that my ass ached with each step, but that bastard had to leave a mark that stood out like a bloody beacon to everyone's eyes?

I had no idea where my baggage was in the intricacies of the camp since we had not set up our tents, so I had nothing to cover the mark with. I could only snarl and glare at anyone who dared to stare at it, dared to seem as if they would ask.

None of the Finnarians had. They had taken one look and turned away discreetly, though I caught the edges of smiles that were hard suppressed.

Bastards.

I wanted a fight in the worst way, but everyone trod carefully around me, and I had no damned excuse to start one.

The king's discipline among his troops was harsh, as it should be. I had no desire to be on the wrong end of it simply because of Sadan. That would be the final humiliation. I prided myself on self-discipline, and by the gods, I was not losing that reputation too, even if the rest was in tatters.

Was it only days ago that my life had been in line, if tedious? How could things have gone so wrong in so short a time?

I glared harder at my nemesis. The bane of my very existence.

Mate, my ass.

If he tried to touch me again, I was going to make him a one-handed fighter.

I was so bloody thankful when we finally caught up to the enemy that I could have wept. Finally someone to fight, someone to bear the weight of my wrath with legitimate reason.

I waded into the fray with a roar of joy that had my opponents wide-eyed and trying desperately to get out of my way.

It was as though my face displayed my rage. Certainly something made them fear me more than usual.

I could go no farther once I reached the line of their best fighters. They were hardened, experienced soldiers, and here at last I got the conflict I so needed. Here were worthy foes indeed.

My body moved without thought, flowing through the movements that were as ingrained within me as the act of breathing. I compensated for my bound wing, so I was not quite as nimble as I normally was, but it made little difference when paired with my anger.

It was strike and parry, advance and retreat, and I was barely aware of the Finnarians of my unit who had joined my advance with roars of their own. I had well learned if there is anything a Finnarian enjoyed, it was battle. In that, they were on par with Draconians, much though I disliked the comparison.

Still, I could not ask for better fighters at my side, and they were my unit, after all. There had to be a certain loyalty.

I scarcely felt the myriad cuts and blows that began to appear on my less protected areas. I was all focus and fury.

It was only a cry of pain to my left that brought me out of my inner haze and back into reality.

One of the Finnarians of my unit had fallen to his knees, a spear piercing his armor just below his chest, his eyes wide with disbelief. Nothing should have been able to get past the magic protections that made Finnarian armor invincible.

I stared in shock, almost getting hit myself, before I moved to intercept the creature that held the spear. It was a dreaded Hanashtar, the largest of the enemy troops, and was usually only fought against with numbers, but he had just taken down one of my unit, and that brought the Draconian out in me.

The Hanashtar was huge, easily twice my height and broad as well, massive in form. Its head was long and thin in contrast, a mouth full of teeth gleaming as it began to pull the speared Finnarian toward him as though he were little more than a fish on a pole.

I shut out the scream of agony that escaped the Finnarian, a snarl curling my lips, my sword sweeping down to sever the spear haft. Then I stood in front of my injured companion, teeth bared, wing half spread. The being stared for a moment as

though startled. Then it grinned and dropped the useless end of the spear, only to draw its sword.

It also was like nothing I had seen before, long and curved slightly, with serrations along its length like the teeth of a shark.

I took the first blow upon my upraised sword, and I staggered with the force of it. This creature was unbelievably powerful, with a hint of magic about its aura as though perhaps it was being controlled by someone or something else. If magic was involved, that would explain the spear being able to pierce Finnarian armor.

I had no time to consider the implications. I was too busy darting in and harrying my opponent, distracting him enough that perhaps others would see the predicament we faced and come to aid us. I truly did not think I could win against this newcomer, not from what I had seen so far.

My speed helped, but not enough. My foe got in multiple glancing blows that were so forceful, they began to sever smaller bits of armor and get past my guard. I could feel blood trickling down my body from several slices, and knew it was only a matter of time before he got me in a more debilitating way. Taking a chance, I dropped and rolled just as he extended himself for a mighty blow. I got him on the inner thigh, not as high as I was aiming but close enough.

He roared with pain, and I let a grin curl my mouth in response as I regained my feet. Some places were just tender no matter what manner of being you were.

If I had thought such an injury would slow him, I was sadly mistaken. It only prodded him into a fury that rained blows upon me. He drove me back with the ferocity of his attack, and I forced myself to hold my ground, protect my fallen companion.

Sweat poured down me, and I gasped for breath, fear beginning to get a foothold. This being was nothing I could defeat—that was obvious enough. I darted to the right and flinched as something struck my side with such force that my feet went out from under me. I hit the ground and tried to roll but could not. I seemed to

be... I looked down dazedly to see the strange sword through my side, just under my ribs, right through me and pinning me to the ground.

But there was no pain.

I blinked, still not completely comprehending, then looked up into the victorious sneer of my foe.

He said something in a language I did not understand, but the triumph was clear enough.

To my shame, I screamed as the sword was withdrawn, the finally awakened agony indescribable, then lay there, unable to move as my lifeblood poured from me and my enemy raised the bloodied sword for a final sweep.

I snarled at him, refusing to even close my eyes. I would face my death like a Draconian should—with courage.

I saw a flash of light, and the Hanashtar staggered backward, expression startled for a long moment, a certain amount of fear seeming to grip him. Before I could comprehend what was happening, Sadan appeared in front of me, and he glowed...brilliantly.

I blinked in wonder.

Sadan's eyes were fully red, his braided hair whirling about him with each movement, and he swirled and spun and struck with such speed and force that I was stunned. I had watched him fight for years, and I had never seen him display this ability before.

He was unstoppable, literally cutting his opponent slowly to pieces before my eyes. The magic aura of his foe proved to be no barrier whatsoever. To my blurred thoughts, it seemed little time at all until the Hanashtar fell, its eyes dazed as though it could not understand what had happened, how this could have occurred.

The sounds of the battle raged around us, but it was like we were in a covering of protection, because Sadan turned, his eyes maddened and wild, and knelt by my side.

My senses began to fade, but I felt his hand upon my face, even turned my cheek into that touch, the last I would feel. My breath came harshly, and it was so hard to think...so hard.

Sadan

Never had I felt as helpless as I did then. Torn between the two of them—my mate and my Finnarian companion Thank the gods my second in command, Nasir, appeared at my side. Between us we tried to stabilize them both, but despite all we could do, I felt my Companion, Melan, slipping away. Grief and fury both rose within me. Finnarians were immortal. This was not supposed to happen. I should be able to heal him. This felt wrong, all wrong.

Yet he died.

Later I was to discover the spear, magic based, had simply destroyed everything it touched within Melan's body. There was nothing left to save.

Yet guilt still lived within me, for I felt I paid more attention, put more effort into my Graitaa and his injuries than I did Melan, whom Nasir did most of the work on. Nasir disputed this and made it very clear that nothing at all would have saved Melan.

I had no idea how I was going to inform Melan's family. We Finnarians rarely died. It had happened, yes, but rarely. We were immortal but not completely invulnerable. And he had been under my command, one of my men, my friends.

As to my little one—I could not describe the horror I felt as I saw him go down. I had never moved so fast, yet I was almost too late. That moment stood in stark clarity in my mind, something I could never forget. I fought as a madman, discovering inner strength and a well of magic I did not even know existed within me. There was no mercy in me for that creature.

Even my magic, my gift of healing was almost not enough. It took everything within me to stabilize Graitaan, and I feared it would not work. I was not familiar enough with Draconian physiology to be able to ensure Finnarian healing would even work upon him for the terrible extent of his wound. He was not immortal, though Draconians were extremely long-lived. He could well have died beneath my hands.

By some miracle that I thank the gods for, he survived, but barely. His life force had been so very weak under my touch, so very close to being extinguished forever. I thought I would have willingly followed him, would have faded if he had been taken from me. I had just found him, just discovered the joy of being complete. To have that taken from me so swiftly and so brutally before I had even been able to discover the depths of such a joining would have been more than I could have borne.

The gods were kind—yet another indication that our bond was gods given, god blessed. Despite how close to death Graitaan had been, he did not cross over; he did not leave me.

The magic-based healing I used upon him kept him alive, but the extent of his injuries, the destruction within his body, could be healed nowhere else but my homeland. Now that my energies were within Graitaan, he held some Finnarian abilities, and his healing would only be complete once we were on Finnarian soil.

The war was over.

The Masarians had won.

That much was good. And the king had commended us for our part, paid us well.

I could only be thankful we were free at last. He wished us to stay, but I was done with war and conflict among humans. It had cost me dearly. I had done as *my* king wished, completed his command, and now I could return to him proud in our accomplishments.

I would return with a mate. Not one that anyone, including me, would ever have expected.

A Draconian among Finnarians.

This should liven the place up.

Chapter Six

Graitaan

I woke with the most gods' awful headache I had ever had. It felt like my skull might split from the force, and I moaned faintly, a soft, gentle sound in respect of the pain.

My mind slowly managed to move past the agony enough to realize my body lay on something very comfortable, very thick, and I was moving. Whatever I reclined on seemed to rock somewhat.

The confusion engendered made me moan again before I began to feel a surge of nausea that had me tensing.

Suddenly, knowledgeable hands were upon me, and I was turned to heave helplessly into a large bowl held steadily before my face.

The mere movement of being sick made my head throb to the point that tears rose in my eyes beyond my ability to contain.

When I was done, those same hands laid me back down and arranged what felt like pillows behind me, propping me up slightly. The changed angle seemed to help, and the nausea faded somewhat. I slowly became aware of intense pain radiating from my side, throbbing in time with my head.

Long fingers cupped my skull, ignoring my whimper of protest, and I heard soft chanting, mere whispers.

Soothing warmth seemed to engulf my head, and to my everlasting gratitude, I felt the sharp, stabbing pain gradually dim to a dull, sullen throb that was bearable at least.

The hands left my head, and one finger gently wiped away the tears of pain that streaked my cheeks.

I should have felt shame at someone seeing such a weakness in me, but my thoughts were too scattered to feel much of anything at all.

I tried to imagine why I was here, tried to trace my memory back to what had happened, but everything was muzzy and confusing, and I subsided, just focusing on the fact that I could breathe again now that my head did not feel like it was going to fall off my shoulders.

Ever so slowly, I cautiously opened my eyes, afraid light would make my headache even worse, if that was at all possible. To my relief, my surroundings seemed dim and shadowed.

Those gentle hands stroked along my jaw, and I blinked dazedly, finally managing to focus on the face hovering over mine.

It was Sadan...but not. I wondered if I was fully conscious, for his hair was *dark* in color. I tried to bring up my hand to touch it, feeling a strange pang of sorrow as though something in me missed the bright glory of that pale hair. Despite my effort, I could not lift even a finger. My eyes widened, a hint of panic rising in me, but before I could react more strongly, Sadan put a hand beneath my shoulders and propped me up, then offered a cup of liquid.

I could not even protest or turn aside. He presented it to my lips, but at the initial taste, cool upon my tongue, my body craved it desperately. I gulped the first mouthful and half choked, whimpering when he almost removed the cup.

“Sssh, my little one. Gently now, drink slowly. You may have more, but slowly.”

I clung to that voice, to Sadan’s presence, the only solid thing in my bemused thoughts. I obeyed, letting the moisture trickle over my tongue this time, then

swallowing small amounts. The mere act of swallowing made the pain in my side flare, and I flinched, shuddering with the intensity of it.

“Drink more, Graitaan. It will help take the pain from you.” The tone sounded soothing and calm, and I listened in a way I would never have considered if I had been fully aware. For now, I complied, swallowing with more determination at the thought of the mixture easing my pain.

It took all my strength to even accomplish that, and fear of this strange weakness rose again. Perhaps Sadan saw it in my eyes, for as I finished the cup, he set it aside and bent over me, his lips against my forehead. Gently he stroked down my crest as I lay propped against him, provoking a primal response that made me go limp despite my unease.

His soft words and gentle touch soothed me in some fashion I could not quite comprehend.

“Sleep, my love. I am here. I will not leave you. You are safe now.” The calm tone, filled with certainty, followed me down into a drugged slumber I could only be grateful for, the pain fading away into blessed oblivion.

Sadan

So long a journey home, never ending in my eyes. Normally we could have portaled, but an injured person was often influenced negatively by such travel, and I had so little knowledge of what would affect Graitaan adversely that I had no wish to risk it. Thus we were reduced to human horses and carts—a painfully slow mode of transportation. I sent two of my warriors ahead through a portal to announce our arrival and what would be needed, both in the case of Melan’s body and of my injured, newly bonded mate.

I could only hope my father would forgive me. This way of discovering he had a new member of his family would not please him, and he was rigid in his views of propriety. He would not think well of my failure to even mention Graitaan to him,

much less suddenly show up mated with a complete stranger—and one of a foreign race, no less.

I was not looking forward to the “talk” we would have.

At least he would wait until my little one had healed. I hoped.

That Graitaan would get better was a determination and prayer in one. We had been keeping him sedated as much as possible, except for that one time he had regained a degree of consciousness.

That was when we discovered Draconians seemed to have quite a resistance to drugs that would have knocked out a Finnarian for a week. We had had to adjust accordingly, and even then once or twice he had come close to the surface again. I did not want him to feel pain, nor to understand exactly what was happening. I had the feeling that Graitaan was not going to be happy once he discovered he would be within Finnarian borders—and unable to escape.

Our borders were closed. No one, not even a Finnarian, could pass over them without the express permission of our king. They were an impenetrable barrier, and I knew my fierce Draconian would see them as imprisonment, not protection from outside.

It would be a challenge to get him to the point where he might accept his stay here as less than captivity and more as a home. The positive side of the matter was that he would be kept close to my hand, where I could woo him properly, make him see me as his mate, not his foe.

I had no illusions that such a task would be easy. My Graitaan never made anything easy, and perhaps that was why I had fallen for him so hard.

My father had always said I was completely perverse in my wants and needs, always having to strive for the unattainable.

He was going to be proven right, and although that galled me to an extent as the rebellious son I was, I would willingly admit defeat to my father if it meant I would have Graitaan as my beloved.

What a beautiful thing to be able to say. Beloved. My lips curled into a no doubt fatuous smile, judging by the look of amusement Nasir threw my way.

Besotted, he had called me, and I could not deny it.

The smile slowly died with the return of reality.

First Graitaan must be healed and we must be home.

I cursed the ponderous pace we moved at.

It was another half day before we arrived at the border. The two men I had sent ahead were waiting with a contingent of Melan's family—come to accompany the body home in reverence.

Letting the horses go free and abandoning the carts, we passed through the open barrier, and I let out a long shuddering sigh of relief as I watched it close behind us. We were safe at last, separate from the outside world, separate from the chaos that humans engendered.

I wanted to weep suddenly for the sense of release within me. Only now did I understand the stress I had been under all these years among humans, responsible for my warriors. I felt as though a load had been taken from my shoulders that I had not even realized I was carrying.

That release felt like betrayal as I walked forward to kneel in apology before Melan's father. Tears rose to my eyes, and my voice choked. I spoke of Melan's bravery, of his constant and loyal presence at my side. I looked up as I finished, expecting condemnation, only to be drawn up by large hands upon my shoulders.

He hugged me then, and we both wept. I could not contain my guilt, and I told him all, needing him, wanting him to hate me as I so deserved.

But Melan's father was no fool. He had served beyond the borders in times past, knew what we had faced. He stopped my self-hating words with a gesture of his hand and held my shoulders steady as he met my eyes.

"The gods give and take where they see fit. There was a reason for Melan's death, even as there is a reason why your mate has finally come to you. We do not

have the understanding, the overview to be able to question the gods' actions. We can only accept that there *was* a reason and let that give us meager comfort in our loss. My son knew the dangers beyond our lands. He went willingly."

I drew a deep breath and met his ancient, wise eyes. "Forgive me," I whispered. "Please forgive me."

He cupped my cheek, smiling through his own tears. "I freely forgive you for what you perceive as a guilty act, Sadan. But in the end, you will have to forgive yourself, and that is hardest of all. Be gentle with yourself, my boy. Do not let this haunt you for ages. It would not be what Melan would want, would it?"

I finally shook my head, and Melan's father put his arm around my shoulders and turned me round so we walked together.

"Now tell me of your mate."

* * *

The pace was swifter now since my father had sent Finnarian *Vasleia* to bear us home. It was a solemn procession we made. Melan's family rode first, with Melan's body in state in a covered carriage. We were next, with my father's own carriage bearing Graitaan and me. Healers had also been sent, and they worked with me to stabilize Graitaan further.

Their surprise at my mate being Draconian was well hidden, and I appreciated their discretion. I had not the strength to explain to others what race Graitaan was, though certainly none of my people had ever encountered a Draconian. It was bound to raise a few eyebrows, but the healers, many of whom I had grown up with, were unflappable in their poise, focusing only on what needed to be done.

We spelled my little one deeper into sleep so that pain from the ride would not even exist in his deepest thoughts.

Only then could I draw a deep breath and look around, my heart and body singing with the sheer joy of being home. So different from the other side of the barrier, where the land had been marginal, destroyed by man's hand—here it was

rich and verdant, rain from the mountains bringing lush growth and productive fields. Thick forests surrounded us for this first leg of the journey home, and I closed my eyes, feeling the land, the creatures that abounded here, and the song of the water, the life force of my home. I felt renewed, reborn almost, and I prayed I would never have to leave again.

My senses could truly open without encountering the loud and invasive sound of human thought, the force of their emotions that battered upon an empathic mind. So long we had had to be closed, guarded. This freedom of self was renewal and release both.

Home.

Graithaan

I woke in slow degrees, conscious of something unpleasant awaiting me in the true world. It was faint smells first: a rich, thick scent that teased the senses. Then sound—birds singing softly and the faint sigh of a breeze. Finally unable to prolong the moment any more, I opened my eyes.

It became immediately evident that I was not anywhere that I knew.

The ornate ceiling above me showed a tasteful luxury I had never seen before, not even in the palace back upon my home world. I stared at it in dim wonder, surmising that perhaps I could be dreaming and not awake at all.

After a long while of staring, it became clear that this could be no dream at all, for my side woke to dim pain when I moved slightly.

I sucked in a breath, cautious then as I turned my head.

Green eyes stared into mine, and I blinked slowly, trying to make my mind process thought.

It was a young Finnarian—quite young—with tousled golden hair that grew just past his shoulders. He stared at me with the same bemusement with which I viewed him.

After a moment, he scowled, wrinkling his forehead fiercely. I had to bite back a weak grin. He was cute, this one, like a dragonet trying to hiss for the first time.

“Why are you here?” The voice, though young in pitch, held the same smooth, melodic tones as the other Finnarians I had encountered.

I tried to answer, but my throat was dry and nothing came out.

“You can’t have my father.” The boy’s voice held determination and anger both.

I blinked at him in confusion, wondering again if I was just dreaming this encounter, for it was making little sense to me.

“Vlar.”

Both the boy and I turned our heads to meet Sadan’s stern gaze as he stood in the doorway.

I blinked again, disappointed in some fashion. Sadan’s hair was still dark. I had not imagined it, then.

The boy stiffened beside me, then slumped a little, a guilty pose if ever I saw one.

“Did I not tell you to stay out of this room? Graitaaan should not have been woken.”

The boy, Vlar, bowed his head in contrite apology, but I could see the faint rebellion still brewing in his eyes.

“I am sorry, Father.”

My ear frills flared with astonishment.

Father? Sadan had children? In that case, why in the hells was he calling me mate? He must already have one. The thought made me grit my teeth. If the bastard was using me to cheat on her, I was going to have his balls for breakfast.

Sadan's face might be stern, but he ruffled Vlar's hair with great fondness once he stood over the slumped boy.

Vlar looked up with such love evident in his expression that it half choked me for a moment. It seemed so reminiscent of the way I had viewed Marind and Alysia that homesickness washed over me, a longing for the only ones who had ever loved me, with all my blatant faults. A reminder that I would never see them again—something I had kept repressed within, trying to forget how alone I had become.

I turned my head away, closing my eyes against the sight of their love, for love it was, the emotion clear in Sadan's eyes as he looked down upon his son.

I envied them that relationship more than I could even express.

Vlar's words now made sense. He thought I would come between him and Sadan. He could not have been more wrong. There was absolutely no emotional bond between his father and me, despite Sadan's misconceptions. And certainly there would be nothing considering Vlar had a mother. Sadan might have a wife.

I did not examine the tightness in my chest that arose from the thought of Sadan being possessed by another.

So caught up in my thoughts, I flinched when Sadan stroked my face, jerking back to look at him wildly. The boy was no longer in the room, and we were alone.

"Sshhh, Graitaaan. You are safe here."

Again I tried to speak, and Sadan immediately reached beside himself to retrieve a cup of water. He held me up, soothing me as the pain pulsed in my side, and offered the cup to my lips.

I drank greedily, and the act of swallowing did not seem as painful as it had before, in dim memory.

When at last I had quenched my fierce thirst, Sadan put some pillows behind me, propping me up so that I could meet him on a more even level.

"Where exactly is 'here'?" I questioned hoarsely, frowning at the roughened state of my voice.

Sadan sat back down, his green eyes becoming serious. That alone made me tense up. Something was not right here. This was not anywhere I knew; even the energy around me felt different, more powerful, more invasive to my senses.

“Do you remember being wounded in the battle?”

I thought for a long moment, then drew in a deep breath as images began to come to mind, stark in their meaning.

“Yes,” I finally answered. “Not everything, just...” My eyes widened, and I tried to reach out to touch Sadan. “Melan... He went down and I tried...” My voice faltered. “That being...”

“Yes.” Sadan’s voice was flat, his expression pained, and I knew before he even said the words.

“Melan died.” I could literally feel Sadan’s pain at the words, at the loss of one of his companions. Melan, who had always been the easiest to get along with, who had always had a sense of humor to lighten dark situations.

“I tried,” I offered lamely, but Sadan took my hand in his and stroked the back with his thumb.

“It was in no way your fault, Graitaaan. If anything, it was mine for not being able to heal him.” The guilt there was evident, and I frowned, hardly even realizing my hand turned to hold his in a comfort I was not used to giving others.

“Nasir tries to tell me that it was beyond hope, but I should have been able to do something.” Sadan gave a harsh little laugh, with nothing of humor in it. “So much for being a healer.”

“You healed me, didn’t you?” My question halted his self-abuse, and he looked down at me with a deep breath.

“I managed to get you stabilized enough to move. That was all I could do.”

I shrugged. “Then you saved me. Are you disappointed that I lived and Melan did not?” The question was relevant, I thought, but it made Sadan pale.

“How could you even think that? You are my mate. You are everything!” The sad look had thankfully fled, replaced by outrage.

Outrage I could handle. Sorrow and guilt I could not.

“I am not believing this ‘mate’ nonsense now I have met your son. You did not tell me you were already mated.” I was proud of the steadiness of my tone.

Sadan looked quizzical for a moment. Then he smiled, his eyes glinting. “I am not mated, Graitaaan, except to you. You do not need to fear competition.”

My nostrils flared, and I growled faintly under my breath, the best I could do in my current state of weakness.

“The boy has no mother, then?” I almost regretted my harshness to Sadan. He had not indicated he had lost a prior mate.

“Of course he has a mother, but she is not my mate. That is not the Finnarian way.”

I blinked in confusion.

“Finnarian females are a force of their own. It is very rare that they consent to mate with a male for life. I can think of only four or five instances that I have ever heard of. They are fierce and independent, and only come to males when they are ready to produce young. They choose the father, and if the male knows what is good for him, he will not refuse.” A small smile came and went over Sadan’s lips as though such a thought brought humorous memories. “Woe betide the male that gets on the wrong side of a Finnarian female.”

I stared at him for a long moment. “Sooo...Vlar’s mother chose you for mating. Then she just left?” The concept seemed foreign and completely cold to me. In my world, for the most part, males and females bonded for life and had the serious and devoted job of raising their younglings. What kind of society denied younglings one parent?

Sadan nodded, completely at ease with what, to him, was normal.

I tried to focus on this bizarre concept. "So any female can choose any male, and he has to breed her?"

Sadan grinned a little. "It is not usually a hardship, Graitaaan. Our females are very beautiful." His smile widened. "Though usually it is best to admire them from a distance."

I pondered his words for a while, trying to make my mind work properly. "Vlar is your only child?" I was beginning to have a bad feeling about this.

"No, I have currently one hundred fifty-seven children."

My jaw dropped. Surely I had to have misheard. "One hundred fifty-seven?" I whispered, leaning back into the pillow as though I could escape the mere thought. I knew he was immortal, but still.

"Most are grown now," Sadan stated proudly.

"Good gods," I whispered, staring at him in horror. "What in the hells do you need me as a mate for then? You get plenty of sex. Too much by the sound of it." A thought intruded. "How were you gone for so long if you had all these children to take care of?" I glared at him, ready to accuse him of child abandonment, if not outright abuse. Did Finnarians not value their young?

"Not all my offspring stay with me, Graitaaan." Sadan was amused, his tone light with the smile that curled his mouth and drew my eyes unerringly to those lips.

I cursed silently and yanked my gaze back up. How could I be thinking these things about someone I hated, and a terrible father at that?

"If the child is female, she will stay with the female. I rarely see my daughters, and they have no interest in me. They will never be part of my life. The sons, on the other hand, are raised with the female for the first ten years or so, and then they are given to the father for raising and the female wants nothing more to do with the child."

I was horrified, and Sadan must have read my expression because he shrugged, even that movement elegant. “It is the Finnarian way. Males bond with males, females with females. Believe me, by the time the child comes to his father, he is happy to be among males. It is where he is comfortable and belongs, surrounded by his male siblings, half siblings, and older relatives, including his father. In time, upon maturity, he will begin to find lovers outside his circle and eventually a mate. The young ones are cared for by all, not just the father. His whole family takes it upon themselves to educate and teach the young one what it is to be Finnarian. He is never alone and never without caring. The whole family group takes on the raising of a child.”

I was silent for long moments, turning the concept over in my mind. The segregation between male and female was so total, so foreign to my people, yet Sadan had turned out strong with such a childhood, as had the others of my unit. None of them seemed scarred by such strange upbringing. They appeared confident and rather balanced in themselves, even though they had had no true female influence past a certain point in their development.

But my mind kept coming back to that horrible number. One hundred fifty-seven. Good gods.

“So how many sons do you have?” I braced myself for the answer.

“Roughly half are male, so I have seventy-nine sons.”

I blinked. “And you want me to become your mate? You are out of your Finnarian mind.” My voice might have been a whisper, but it was completely and totally heartfelt.

No fucking way was I becoming a parent to seventy-nine children. I had no idea how, and I wanted no child to suffer from my twisted background.

What was I thinking? Beyond that, I was not ever, in any way, going to be Sadan’s mate.

Problem solved.

Chapter Seven

Graitaan

All I knew was if I ever regained my strength, I was going to kill Sadan. That was a priority. I was obviously not serious enough before, but now I realized he was deaf and a crazy person to boot and the only way to eliminate his influence upon this world was to kill him. Slowly.

It has been a long and painful road of healing for me, even with those so-called amazing energies Sadan spoke of. The wound on my side was healing, true, but it caused pain to flare each time I moved, and I was losing patience. My stupid wing was being very uncooperative and taking its sweet time also, and I wanted to be well now. Enough already. I needed to be strong now. I needed to escape now.

I had learned today, several weeks after my arrival, that I could not leave without the Finnarian king's say-so. And since Sadan was his fucking *son*, there was little likelihood of *that* happening. Prince. Sadan was a bloody prince. Figures. He was arrogant and snotty enough for one. If he thought I would give him respect because of some title...well, he was sorely mistaken. That information—of his elevated position—proved to me more than anything else that he was just playing with me when he spoke about me being his mate. Like a prince would want me. I was nothing to him but a diversion, a curiosity. Fucker.

I was a prisoner. To a mentally challenged, completely mad Finnarian prince who had a death wish. He had brought me here without my permission, without my knowledge, and had since, with totally false finality and sincerity, told the whole godsdamned world that I was his mate.

I fought him, swore at him, threw everything I could reach at him. He just smiled in that fatuous manner that made me wish for my sword to hand. He was completely crazy. If that was what having 157 children did for you, I was never having a child. Not that I really wanted a child, but still.

I had met a plethora of his sons. Some little younger than him, down to Vlar, who was currently the youngest. They all had his beauty, his grace, and his godsdamned polite and charming veneer that hid a truly evil soul. Seventy-nine copies of him running around. Gods help us all.

Vlar and I had reached an agreement. He would come in and yell at me, tell me he hated me and I was not taking his father away, and I would nod and agree with him solemnly. Then he would stride from the room in a furious miniature version of Sadan and not be seen for the rest of the day.

I expected him each day at approximately the same time.

He was the only worthwhile thing here, this little fireball. Him I could understand. Sadan was never present during these clandestine visits, and after the first few days, I formed a suspicion that he made himself scarce on purpose to allow us to interact on our own. I was beginning to think he had an agenda in all this, but I was too stubborn to ask his reasons. Vlar livened my day. He was so familiar in his fierceness, just like the younglings at home. He relieved my homesickness and my boredom both.

I was careful never to smile in his presence but to be completely somber and listen to what he told me. I had not responded yet, but perhaps today I would. I loved to watch him bristle. So Draconian, this one. Stubborn to a fault, fierce, and brave with it. He was worthy of my people. Rather like his fath—

My mind shied from *that* thought, and I was angry that it occurred to me at all. Sadan was nothing but a pain in the ass, and that was all he would ever be. Bastard brought me here against my will, because it *would* have been against my will if I had been conscious, and he knew it. I never in a million years would have

agreed to coming to his home, where he held all the cards and I was unsure and potentially vulnerable because of that.

Well, he would find out how resourceful Draconians could be. I would find a way out of this godsforsaken place, and I would leave him in the dust. There had to be a way out, and I would damn well find it.

Then I would never have to see the ass again. I pleated the bedcovers restlessly at the thought.

Fortunately Vlar chose that moment to appear, and I turned my attention upon him with some degree of relief.

The boy came in and stared at me for long moments, his lips drawn tight, before he moved to the chair by the bed and flopped into it, his face creased in a scowl.

I raised an eyebrow. This was different. Usually he just stood near the bed for the yelling. He had never sat down since that first day I saw him.

I let him have his silence, and he swung his legs furiously as though venting his feelings through motion rather than words. He had his pride, this one, almost too much for such a small body. I understood pride and how difficult it was to move past that sometimes. He obviously had something more on his mind today than the usual harangue.

The leg swinging stopped, and I saw him peer at me through the fall of his hair, out of the side of his eye.

I looked back with no expression, simply waiting.

“So you are a Draconian?”

My eyebrow rose higher. This was not what I was expecting. The tone was angry, but the words held something more, almost curiosity. So it had come to this, had it?

I nodded but said nothing. Silence fell, and he swung his legs again, though the scowl was a little less pronounced than it had been.

His eyes skittered to me or, more correctly, my wings before pulling away.

I grinned inwardly.

“So you have wings?” This time true curiosity laced the words, probably despite how casual he wanted them to sound.

“I do.” The sound of my voice made him jump slightly, the roughened tones causing him to view me wide-eyed for a moment as he heard me speak for the first time in his presence.

He swallowed hard, then jerked his chin up, looking at me head-on.

“I want to see how big they are.”

I merely met him look for look, not moving.

His gaze wavered. “Please,” he half snarled, as close to polite as he could come at this moment. “Could I see your wings?”

I snapped my left wing out past his startled form, missing him by inches, before more slowly opening my healing right wing, careful not to overstretch it. Vlar was small in their shadow, and his eyes were wide with wonder rather than fear. He was almost too brave, this one. He would have to learn caution. It only proved how well he had been cared for that he knew nothing of fear. Sadan’s words of love and caring for younglings must have been true if Vlar was any example.

I saw his long fingers uncurl from fists, and he shifted restlessly before glancing my way, his anger submerged beneath curiosity.

“May I touch them?” There was more eagerness in his voice than he would have wanted me to hear, but I merely nodded, holding back my amusement.

He reached out tentatively, fingertips touching the slender bones before sliding to the membrane stretched between, his eyes wide with discovery and a certain fascination.

“It is soft,” he murmured, half to himself. He saw the bandage on my right wing and shot a look at me full of question.

“Spear,” I clarified.

His eyes grew round with excitement, and he touched as closely as he dared to the wound. "You are a warrior then, like my father."

I nodded while I looked him up and down. "How far are you in your weapons training?"

His mouth dropped open, and he was speechless for long moments. "I am too young to train yet. Father says it will be several years until I can start."

I snorted. "In my world, you would already be training with blunted weapons."

He stared at me, eagerness in every line of his body. "Have you trained young people in your world?"

"I have. It was one of my duties in my household."

Vlar was silent for long moments, digesting the information with a look of inner contemplation as though his mind was churning.

"Would you train me?" The eagerness struck me as cute, and he became a handsome boy when his face was not creased into a scowl. His eyes were darker green than Sadan's and his hair more golden, less silver toned.

"I could." I tempered his immediate joy. "Your father would have to agree, and you don't want me speaking to him."

His face fell. Then he frowned, thinking furiously. I had to bite my lip to prevent a smile from escaping.

"Well," he finally answered, striving to appear casual. "You could speak to my father. I mean, you can be friends. You just can't be his mate."

"I totally agree," I answered.

He twisted to look at me, confusion rife in his expression. "What do you mean?" he asked slowly.

"I don't want to be your father's mate, and I have made that very clear to him."

Vlar stared, a frown creasing his brow as though he suspected a trick. "But everyone wants him," he said slowly, watching me with a keen stare.

“Not me. I want to leave here as soon as I am better, and I want nothing to do with your father.”

Vlar straightened in the chair, a look of outrage eerily similar to Sadan’s appearing on his countenance. “Everyone loves my father.”

“Not me. I just want to be free of this place.”

“But that would sadden him. He has already claimed you. You cannot do that to him.” Vlar was perched on the edge of his seat now, anger beginning to show.

I shrugged.

His fists clenched. “You can’t leave. I won’t let you. You are not going to make him sad.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I thought you would be the first one to help me leave. You don’t want me taking your father from you? Remember?”

He gritted his teeth, glaring at me with fervor. “That was before I knew you did not want him. I won’t help now. I won’t. You have to stay. I will tell Father.” He jumped to his feet, growling at me before almost running from the room.

I lay back on the pillows. Baiting him was almost as much fun as refusing Sadan. Not quite with the same intensity perhaps, but still...

I closed my eyes with a little huff of laughter. The boy was as perverse as his father. Lead him one way and he would be bound and determined to go the other, out of bullheadedness as much as anything else.

Cute.

Sadan

I stood in the doorway for a long time, leaning on the woodwork and just watching Graitaaan. He must have fallen asleep at some point, not meaning to, because he was slumped on the pillows, his body half sprawled.

I could not help smiling. He looked so young that way, so peaceful and calm—a complete contrast to the fiery being he was when awake. I entered quietly and pulled a chair closer to the bed. Sitting there in silence, I watched him breathe, still caught in wonder that he was mine, that fate had been so kind as to gift such a mate to me. Once again, as I had so often lately, I thanked the gods for their generosity. If I had searched all the worlds, I did not think I could have come up with anyone as perfect for me as Graitaan was. There would be difficulties; I had no doubt of that. He was a foreign race that I knew little of, and with my standing as prince, I knew there would be dispute over the legitimacy of this mating. Graitaan himself would fight this tooth and nail, but whether it be Graitaan's reluctance or the protests of my own people, I would never give him up, not even if I had to step down from my inheritance.

The conversation I had recently had with my father had been tense on many levels, and I could only hope he would get to know Graitaan before condemning him as an unfit mate for me.

I smiled softly as I leaned forward and traced a fingertip over Graitaan's brow ridge. He stirred slightly, murmuring, his head turning into my touch. I drew a deep breath at this unconscious gesture of trust, feeling truly blessed. He was mine—my mate—and I would show him what it was to be loved. Truly and deeply in a fashion that I felt he had not yet experienced. Not with the hard wariness he showed everyone around him. It seemed my fierce one had known all too little kindness and love in his life, and I was determined to show him a far different way of being.

After gently putting one hand behind him, I lifted him slowly and pulled the pillows away so that he could lay full length in comfort.

He sighed and went to curl onto his side, giving a soft whimper of pain when he encountered his healing wound.

I lay down beside him, enjoying his warmth and the scent of his skin, feeling a surge of pride as he rolled back toward me, his long forehead nestling against my

chest. Pulling a pillow beneath my head, I closed my eyes, a chuckle rising in my throat.

Graithaan would not be pleased when he awoke in this position...

He would have to get used to my proximity, because I had no intention of ever sleeping alone again.

* * *

I woke slowly, slitting my eyes to meet golden ones staring back, confusion and anger clear in their depths.

I yawned and stretched, scratching my chest where the weight of his head had been resting during our nap.

"I was *not* cuddling, and you have no right to be in bed with me." Graithaan did not believe in waiting to get his word in.

A shame. It would have been nice if we could have been peaceful together for a moment upon waking, but still, perhaps that would come in the future. For now he was unsure and growly with it.

"I was tired and decided to lie down for a while to keep you company, and there I was, innocent, and you turned to me and cuddled. What was I to do but let you have your way? I would hardly be one to reject your advances, my mate. Indeed I am glad you are beginning to see how our closeness can be an advantage."

Graithaan drew back, snarling, lips curled to display sharp teeth. I leaned forward and kissed his snout.

He sputtered, and it was all I could do not to laugh out loud as I rolled out of the bed.

"Come, my love. It is time you get out of this room. You will not be able to walk far, but I could carry you if you wish."

He hissed, eyes glittering with complete outrage, tail lashing beneath the sheets. I wanted to kiss him again, but his claws were out, and I felt he was sufficiently riled to slash at me. I did not want another injury to come between us. I

was only waiting for Graitaan's side and wing to heal before I moved into all-out courtship. This was only play, to keep his mind off his pain. When I was serious, he would have no chance at all.

"I hear Vlar is angry at you because you do not want me. You should not tease him like that. Sooner or later, he will realize how much you love me, and then he will believe you deceived him."

Graitaan threw a pillow at me, followed by the glass on the small table by the bed, followed by the table. I caught them deftly and placed them carefully back just inside the door, turning to wait for more projectiles. My fiery little mate kept me on my toes, always trying to get my attention.

If he only knew he already had it. He did not need to resort to such dramatic gestures. I was his.

Only time would convince him of that fact, and I was willing to be patient. He would settle once he knew I would be faithful and true to him, that our relationship was forever and not something short-term.

He was very sweet though, needing me.

"Careful, my love. Don't injure that side. I would not want you to be confined to bed again. Though it could be more fun now that I have the time to devote to you." I leered at him, hiding my amusement as he shot out of the bed, holding the covers to him like a lifeline.

So modest, so cute.

"Your clothes are in the bathing room. Did you need help dressing?" I thought my tone held just the right amount of caring and none of the lustful images that coursed through my mind's eye, but he clutched the covers tighter and backed away in the indicated direction, teeth bared.

I shrugged as the door slammed shut behind him.

It seemed I would have to demonstrate my lovemaking abilities more strenuously. He was resisting my overtures with far too much frequency and resolve.

We would have to work on that.

Chapter Eight

Graitaan

If I had not wanted to get out of that damned room so badly, I would have made more effort to straighten Sadan out. His idiocy was reaching new heights and would have to be dealt with soon.

His asinine statement about me loving him had almost driven me to violence. So close had I been to slashing that smirk right off his face...but then I thought of Vlar and how he would react to seeing his father hurt.

Damn it. Now the stupid kid had made an impact on me. Was it not enough I had to deal with the father? Now the son hated me and had begun dictating my actions. The seesaw of emotions that Finnarians engendered within me was so wearying and so beyond my experience that I felt lost, left wondering how it all could have gone so terribly wrong.

What had I done to draw Sadan's interest? That, above all considerations, made me morosely ponder how I could have avoided this torture.

Now, as if that were not enough, I was trapped within an impenetrable border with an entire population of the bastards.

Before, I had been certain that Sadan had to be toying with me, prodding me to see a violent reaction. But now I could not be so certain, and that terrified me more than anything. If he were just toying, he would never have brought me here among his own people and claimed to be my mate. This was becoming far, far too real.

I had to find the words to convince him that this in no way could happen. Somehow I had to speak to him rationally for long enough to gain my freedom.

We left the room after I had dressed, discovering with a certain amount of relief that Sadan must have brought my things from the baggage train of the army. Not that I had all that much, but there were items I had brought from my home world, and I would have been saddened if they had been lost.

That discovery also made me realize that he had known even then that I would not be returning to the Masarian army. He had made that decision for me, and I was not pleased by the fact. The sheer arrogance...

I seethed as we walked, determined to retain silence in his presence since talking to him only brought out my anger. He was not worth the effort of arguing.

Sadan seemed fine with my ignoring him, which only made me seethe more. I could tell there would be a lot of seething during my stay here; Sadan just seemed to have that effect upon me without even trying.

My pace was slow, and it took time for me to manage stairs. Sadan seemed to have gained some wisdom at last, because he retained an arm's length between us, and although he watched intently as I made my way, he gave no offer to aid me. He obviously knew how such a move would be received.

I was so bloody relieved to finally exit the confining walls of the palace. Yes, the palace. Of course, the bastard had turned out to be a prince. A bloody prince. Now I resided in his private wing of the vast complex. I dreaded meeting his father, the king. I could only imagine what an ass he had to be if his son was an indicator.

The ornate halls had been empty, and I saw no other Finnarian during our painful trek to the courtyard. I found that odd, seeing as the sheer size of the place meant there had to be many occupants, not to mention servants. Still I was grateful for the reprieve. It had been humiliating enough to know my unit believed me to be Sadan's mate. I could not endure the grins and leers of strangers as well. Damn Finnarians. And one in particular...

The courtyard we entered was very large, and its carefully tended garden was lush and thick, beautiful trees towering over us, and flowers... I had never seen so many flowers growing naturally. There were vines twining up the trees, and every vine seemed to be competing with others to produce the most blooms. A carpet of thick grass felt soft under my feet, welcome respite from the hard mosaic floors that lined the palace.

The soft trickle of water led me to an artfully arranged waterfall, the rocks perfectly simulating nature. I sank down on a bench near the water, trying not to admit how very exhausted I was from even that small a walk. The weakness within me was almost frightening in its intensity. I had always had a hard time accepting weakness in myself, and the fact that this time I was alone among a foreign race made the feeling even worse.

My chin rose. I would not give Sadan even a hint of my thoughts. He would use any chink in my mental armor mercilessly, of that I had no doubt whatsoever. He was a skillful hunter, that one, and I knew I was his prey, for whatever twisted reason was lurking in that scheming mind of his. I would not let him get to me.

My nemesis sat down a short distance from me, on the other end of the carved wooden bench, his face turned up to the sun, an expression of calm contentment upon his features. His darkened hair ruffled in the breeze, long strands flowing over his shoulders. The color, I had discovered, was a sign of his mourning for Melan. After I found myself staring, missing the silver his hair had been, I snatched my gaze from him and tried to focus upon my surroundings. Sadan was in the forefront of my thoughts far too often, and it was beginning to become disturbing in the extreme.

He was nothing to me but a pain.

The palace loomed over us, vast from what I had seen within, and the buildings from this perspective seemed to go on forever. They were ornate, carved stone in gentle nature-oriented patterns, some of the designs so delicate one could only marvel at the sculptor's talent. The tallest area was four stories high, the rest

often only two, and the entire effect was one of a place at harmony with nature itself, part of it rather than dominating it.

It surprised me. I had thought Finnarian architecture would be fortresslike and stern, not this light-filled beauty.

The wind shifted, the breeze strengthening, and the mist from the waterfall drifted over my face. The smell of the myriad blooms was stronger in the damp air, and I breathed deeply, drawing strength from the beauty around me. I had never done well encased within stone walls, and it was sheer relief to be free, even if it was within the containment of this created garden.

It was so different here. Different from my world, certainly. Our lands were often dry, with only a few oases scattered here and there, enough to support my world's small population.

The area my Draconians and I had come to in this new world had been more fertile, with fields of grain and other crops as far as the eye could see, leading to the war over its possession. I had thought that place was rich and beautiful—until now.

I could see through the gates of the huge complex from here, and also over the great walls, which were some distance away. Over their heavy boundaries, massive trees towered, giving a sense of frailty to the creations of the Finnarians. It was very evident that the garden I sat in was not an anomaly created within these walls and only existing because of Finnarian interference. It was simply an extension of the verdant land beyond the gates.

The air itself was thick with scent, not only of flowers but of the earth itself. The energies of this place swirled around me more strongly now that I was free of the confinement of walls, and to my surprise, they were easier to bear now, less strange and almost frightening as they had been earlier in their intensity. Either I was becoming used to them, or it was gentler here in this place of respite.

Sadan did not speak, did not break the silence that had fallen over us, and I was grateful for his forbearance. I needed this, needed a little time to become used to the huge changes that had come upon me, most of them without my knowledge or

consent. It was hard to find the strength to fight against anything at this moment, much less to understand *what* exactly I was fighting against.

I had wanted to change my life, had even decided this last battle would be the end of my servitude to the human king. Wearily I reminded myself that one should be careful of thoughts and wishes that could be picked up on by the gods themselves. Their sense of humor was often twisted, or perhaps their view of eternity in all its complex patterns made them indifferent to mortal concerns. They only moved us as pieces in that grand plan. Our protests meant little.

This may not be what I had planned, but it had achieved my desire for change, to leave the strife of human conflict behind and be free of their strange and intense energies.

If only the entire thing did not include Sadan.

What god-driven plan had come up with such a strange thread of fate as to even consider pairing us in any form?

Sadan was a creature of magic and the earth. He sensed energies and used them in a fashion that I had no true comprehension of. His powers and his inner strength of purpose were almost frightening to me, who existed merely as a tool for others. I had never taken my life into my own control, and now here was this being offering something I had little understanding of.

He seemed so confident in what he spoke of, seemed to truly believe our pairing was meant to be and was beyond our ability to choose. How could he know?

I felt adrift. This was such a strange place, and I was trapped here with no recourse but to try to gain an understanding of who Sadan was and why he had so mistakenly grown to believe us to be mates.

I shook my head irritably, wishing I had the strength to be more vigorous in my denials of his advances.

Whether it was the wound itself, or whether the weariness I felt was from years of denying any sort of emotion or self-gratification, I could not tell. I felt strangely numb, and my small outbursts at Sadan were the only reality I could

actually feel. Even those seemed pathetic shadows of the fierce, bright Draconian flame I had once possessed within me.

At this moment I truly did not know who or what I was.

I could only pray my bewilderment and weakness was not evident to Sadan. He would be utterly ruthless in using it to his ends, of that I had little doubt.

I shot another glance at him, wondering anew what he could possibly want with me. He was surrounded by such beauty, each Finnarian I had met possessing a grace and physical splendor that I could never match. How could he even consider bonding with someone who must seem very odd and even ugly to these people? I had never been worth anything to my own people, excepting Marind and Alysia. Why would Sadan suddenly find more within me?

I held no magic, no connection to this world that would enable me to sense energies. Indeed when Sadan had taken me in the river, it had been the first experience I had ever had that gave me a glimpse into a Finnarian state of being, and it was beautiful, powerful in a way I could never match.

I was only me, a Draconian warrior of no particular merit, of no breeding whatsoever that might make me an equal. I held no charms of personality that would explain Sadan's pursuit, and my prickly responses to his advances would have driven any sane person far from my presence.

It all boiled down to the fact that Sadan was an insane example of his people. Perhaps there was inbreeding in his line or some mental deformity from childhood. Certainly something had to explain his determined claims of our mating.

I lifted an uncertain hand to the raised mark on my neck. From the moment of its creation, all others had seen it and known what it meant.

Was I the only one who did not understand and did not accept?

I refocused upon my surroundings, only to utter a humiliating squeak as I found myself lost in green eyes that were far too close, even as strong arms lifted me from the bench and laid me upon cool grass.

“You worry far too much, my little one. The hows and the whys of it all will be understood in time, but all that is important now is us. All we need to do is explore each other, learn of our wants and needs, and the rest will fall in place. Too much thought just complicates things.”

He licked along my lips, and I was frozen, letting him do it, not even struggling in the slightest. Indeed my body even seemed to lean toward him, expressing its need in a way that totally humiliated the part of my mind that was screaming to resist, to...

By the gods, he was a good kisser. I had to give him that, even if reluctantly. Our physiology was so very different, yet it held him back not at all. He licked along the length of my lips, his tongue darting inward to run over my sharp teeth, teasing the sensitive gums with the gliding pressure. I did not clamp my jaw shut against him, but let him have his way. It all seemed part of my strange weariness, this compliance that was so very foreign to my nature.

In some part of me, it felt good to be touched, to be wanted, and if there was no real truth to it, perhaps I did not want to know at this moment. Perhaps I just wanted to let it all go—absorb another’s touch into my lonely being.

Whatever the reason, I did not resist, and whether Sadan realized my compliance gave him full rein in his conquest, I do not know. I only noticed that his eyes lit to fire and a low growl rumbled from his chest that caused me to shiver, making me wonder if he was in rut cycle.

His larger frame loomed over me, and for once I felt no sense of competition or resistance. Something within me rose to the surface, became submissive in a way that I would never have believed possible.

His lips moved to the bite mark of our so-called mating, and fire spread through my veins at the touch. I arched, gasping, startled by the sudden surge of sensation, the intensity of it.

Perhaps that mark meant far more than I had realized. Certainly its effect upon me was instantaneous and wild.

I could feel the flush upon my chest, knew the mating markings were suddenly present in all their glory, but with such speed as I would never have believed. His tongue lapped over the mark again; then his lips closed upon it, and Sadan sucked his target with gentle skill. My ear frills snapped open and I was helpless to prevent it. My thoughts were so tangled and senseless that I let them go, letting my body rule my mind in a way so totally unlike me that it should have been terrifying.

I hardly noticed. I became all sensation and need, as though that marking was a direct line to everything within me that wanted closeness, wanted to know I was not alone anymore.

The sheer release of submitting to my body made me moan with relief, and Sadan purred in response, his eyes slowly turning to lust-filled red. I could feel his shaft hard against my thigh, straining the rich material of his clothing, a symbol of his desire for me.

For me. For once it was heady, that thought, not terrifying or completely irrational as it usually ended up. For once I desired him back.

I arched against his body, pressing upon his shaft and enjoying the hiss of surprise that action forced out of him.

He pulled back slightly, staring at me for only a moment before he dipped his head again to nip along my chest, working his way down to the sensitive, less rigid scales that slowly melded into the soft skin of my belly.

Once his tongue touched that skin, I was lost. I would have been humiliated by the mewl that left my mouth if I had truly recognized it, but it was a vague thought at best. There was only that talented tongue swirling upon my skin and clever hands that began to divest me of clothing with a speed and dexterity I could only be grateful for. My own hands rose, with a tremble in them that was bothersome, as I tried to reciprocate. I think my extended talons did terrible things to the cloth in more than one place, but I could not seem to retract them. My desire kept them extended, and I growled with irritation. I would have to work on this, for I wanted to touch his bare flesh, to give pleasure, not to give harm.

I took a deep breath and focused, willing my talons to subside back into their sheaths, and for a wonder it worked.

My job was easier then, and eager little puffs of air escaped my lungs as I exposed each piece of Sadan.

His groan of release as I pushed the heavy cloth over his hips and drew forth his shaft from its imprisonment was sweet in my ears. It was not just me in this sensual thrall. I would be a participant in this dance.

Sadan hummed as he licked my skin, seeming to appreciate my taste. My need spiraled as that tongue swirled lower, teasing at the edges of my sheath. My shaft began to slide past the protective folds, and my balls began to descend from their tucked-up position.

I cried out, unable to be silent, when Sadan's long tongue wrapped around the emerging tip of my shaft, a sound of pleasure escaping his throat—at the taste perhaps, or was it the heat?

My thoughts scattered away like leaves in a gust of wind as he lapped at the moist surface of my overly sensitive shaft, the tip of his tongue dipping into the edges of my sheath. I arched off the ground in shock, never having felt that sensation before, and the strangeness of it was a thrill on its own.

Sadan seemed pleased with the response, and his tongue plunged farther, tracing up the hot length of my shaft that was yet to be revealed.

My eyes rolled back into my head at the feeling engendered, the painful pleasure as my sheath stretched in a way I had never encountered before. My shaft surged farther, and its engorgement and the width of Sadan's tongue led to a pressure that had me writhing upon the soft grass, little pants of need escaping my lips to rise in the humid air.

A stray thought intruded—surely we were being viewed. There was no privacy in such a place, but it skittered away again into the recesses of my mind, and I could not bring myself to act upon that revelation.

Sadan wove such a web of pleasure and sensation around me that I could not care in the least.

At long last, he slowly withdrew his tongue from the depths of my sheath and instead wrapped his lips around my now fully extended shaft. I looked down, feeling a jolt of lust as I saw that mouth stretched over my girth, saw the heat in his eyes as he sucked, never taking his eyes from mine. His paler beauty was stark against the darkness of my skin, his sadly darkened hair splayed over my thighs and belly, slightly brown against my blackness. I reached down to gather some in my hand, enjoying the luxurious softness winding around my fingers, missing the beautiful silver that so entranced me.

The contrast between us could not have been greater, yet in that moment, it was beautiful, right in its differences.

I tried to hold his gaze, but when his fingers trailed down to stroke over my sensitive balls that had dropped to their full length, I could only throw back my head and whimper. I had no idea how Sadan seemed to be able to find my erogenous zones so precisely, but could only think that somehow he was feeling it within me. If sex made me so open to him, so able to sense what he sensed, then what was he feeling with his greater powers?

I felt his other hand gently smear through the moisture from my sheath, using it to moisten my nether entrance, the finger slowly pressing within.

Oh gods...

My body reacted without my say-so, pushing up against his touch, forcing his finger deeper.

My head thrashed from side to side as he pressed a second finger within.

I whimpered shamefully, my hands leaving his hair to grasp his shoulders, trying to force him over me, trying to bring his shaft to replace those maddening fingers. I wanted him within me, wanted the pleasure I remembered from the river. Then I had been too shocked to fully register the sensations. Now I wanted to revel in them, wanted to return to that state of bliss.

With a last lick at my shaft, Sadan gave in to my urging and rose over me, fingers now using the faint oozing of my seed to prepare his own shaft. I watched those fingers glide over that silken skin and licked my lips, feeling the desire to taste that hardness.

Sadan groaned, lowering his head to lick once more at the mating scar upon my neck. I could feel his fangs descending. Their length pressed against my neck in preparation.

I shuddered with need, no fear in my thoughts, only the desire to once again feel that kinship with Sadan, that opening of our minds within each other. My grip tightened as I drew him closer, my hips arching upward of their own accord, seeking his length.

He guided his shaft to my entrance, and I felt its slickness against the pucker that protected this most intimate of places. He pressed forward, and I felt the pressure, felt my body stretch, the muscles twitching in protest, not yet fully used to this type of invasion.

As the head slid within, past the first guardian muscles, they clamped down on Sadan's shaft, holding us bound together with such pressure it was almost painful to us both.

Sadan gritted his teeth, lips pulled back in a snarl, his eyes burning into mine.

I willed myself to accept the intruder, to relax that small amount that would allow Sadan to gain further access to the depths of my body. I could feel the trembling of his large form above me as he strained to withhold his need to thrust. I took several deep breaths, and the muscles gave in that tiny amount. Sadan grunted, pushing farther. My channel stretched helplessly, twitching around the girth of Sadan's shaft that now surged deeper as if he could not stop himself.

I clenched my fingers upon his shoulders, my head thrown back as I stared blindly at a bloom near my face. Its colors were blurred by its proximity, and I tried to focus upon it, anything but feel the almost unbearable stretching within me. The

incident in the river, perhaps because the chill waters had reduced Sadan's engorgement, had been nowhere near this painful.

He was huge within me, dominating all I was.

I almost sobbed with relief when I felt his balls nestled against me.

He paused then, and I took a deep breath, trying to stop the painful ripples as my body fought to expel him, free itself from this intruder that dominated it so completely.

Sadan licked my neck; then without warning, his fangs pierced my flesh.

As a distraction, it worked beautifully. I forgot the pain within my body utterly at the overwhelming sensations that flooded me, mind and body.

I wrapped my arms around Sadan as though I could meld with him, become part of him in truth.

I could not focus on one thing. So much feeling swamped me that my poor mind could not make sense of it all.

I could hear Sadan's heartbeat, hear the breath in his lungs as he began to thrust, slowly at first, then with more force as my body gave in, the muscles grudgingly stretching to suit his size. I was part of him—perceiving things in a dizzying array that became almost too much for my senses to handle. Overriding everything, the strange sensation of feeling both his shaft and my channel, of his perspective and mine at the same moment.

Bolts of purest ecstasy seemed to radiate from the bite itself, and I could literally taste myself upon his tongue, feel the strength and pleasure that swamped him as he took the very essence of me within his own body. Above it all, loud and crystal clear, his inner chant.

"Mine!" That whisper that sounded like it came from the very core of his primal being named me as his mate, and there could no longer be doubt in my mind that this was true. There could be no deceit in this place, only the purest of intention and clarity of desire.

To Sadan, I was his, now and forever. There would be nothing else, no one else.

My lonely heart leaped at this confirmation, and I struggled to regain my distance. But here, I had no room for inner lies or self-deceit. There was only truth.

My own truth terrified me in some corner of my mind still able to think.

Sadan slowly released his bite, and I could feel his care of me, concern for my injury. He would take no more blood, much though he wanted to.

He licked his lips, eyes staring deeply into mine, and I shuddered with the strangest of thrills as I viewed my blood upon that mouth.

His arm slid beneath me and half lifted my hips, impaling me farther upon his shaft as he drew me closer to him, tilting me so that he pushed even deeper.

Settling himself, he growled once more and began to thrust deep and hard, pulling me into each impalement.

I cried out softly each time, a chant of need and sharp desire that began to spiral higher and higher within me so that I writhed upon him, my body tightening with such need as I had never experienced. The connection between us seemed to pulse. I was aware of every nuance, every move of his body, each breath we took in heated synchronicity...

Then breath froze in my lungs so that my scream of completion was utterly silent, frozen inside. I arched within his grasp, feeling hot streams of seed spurt across my heaving chest, painting me with sticky evidence of my own pleasure.

Sadan grunted as I spasmed upon his length, tightening no doubt painfully on his shaft. My body finally relaxed, the convulsions eased, and he began to hammer into me, each breath explosive, chasing his own peak.

My body jerked with each thrust, and I lay limply beneath his force. Then he bruised my hips with the press of his fingers as he arched, face contorted with the pleasure that racked him mercilessly.

I could feel his seed pulsing into my body, deep within me, a mark of possession that made me hum with contentment at this undeniable proof of our mating.

Sadan slumped over me for long moments, breath rasping in his throat, eyes heavy-lidded as he basked in his own completion, his body shivering with the aftermath.

My own body trembled, slowly coming down from its heights, my whole self beginning to mourn as rich sensation began to fade, the pulsing bond gradually dimming to individual selves once more.

I whimpered in loss as Sadan slowly, carefully pulled from my body. The sense of aloneness was stark then, and he must have seen the dawning sadness in my eyes, for he lay down beside me, pulling me half on top of him to allay it.

I closed my eyes, reluctant for reality to intrude, wanting only to cling to the closeness just a little longer. I hardly realized how my hands clutched at him.

His soothing murmurs, still rasping with faint breathlessness, made it easier to pretend there was nothing else, no past, no future, just this moment.

His hands stroked over my crest, and I let my mind go, let my body stay in its sated lethargy. I hardly remember sliding into a deep, relaxed sleep such as I had not known since my arrival upon this world.

Sadan

I lay there, disbelieving that such an amazing occurrence had actually happened. I held Graitaa close, unable to conceive of ever releasing him, such was the force of my emotion. He had willingly participated, had wanted me, needed me in such depth as rivaled my own need of him. I felt tears rise to my eyes with the beauty of it, and fought them back. Such a gift my little one had given me. I had never thought to receive the rapture of taking him until years in the future, had

never believed he would have submitted to my touches with anything but resistance for some time to come. That he would give me total pleasure and take it in return.

I was in shock, scarcely able to conceive my luck. I thanked every god I could think of, the magnitude of this moment more than I could truly take in. Not only that, but I had felt such power sweep over us that I began to believe we had been blessed with more than just the creation of life mates. This was beyond that, in a way I had only ever read of.

A bloodmate, a bond of body, mind, and soul unto eternity, a gift given to so very few. If this was true, it would be a gift without price. I would have to ask my father; he knew so much more of these things than I.

A wide smile slowly took shape as I contemplated what had just happened. Such pleasure, such a bond as dwarfed even our initial coupling in the river. This was so much deeper and richer for Graitaan's willing involvement. My smile turned no doubt fatuous as I contemplated the future. This was only the beginning. How much would this bond grow through the years as we became ever more completely entwined within each other's thoughts and actions?

A deep chuckle shook my chest, making my little mate stir faintly and moan in his sleep.

I stroked his face, eyeing his features with possessive intensity.

We would have our setbacks; of that I had no doubt.

Graitaan was not going to accept his own actions easily once he awoke, but I would be with him throughout it all, never letting him retreat far enough to destroy what we had already gained. It would be a game of advance and retreat until the time that my little one would not be able to avoid his own feelings, his own need to bond completely with me. I could not wait for that day, could not wait to bear his mark upon my neck for all to see. Then I would be complete. Then the bond would be unbreakable.

I hummed in my throat, contemplating the battles to come and the triumph at the end of it all.

Chapter Nine

Graitaan

I stared with grim intensity at the scenery below my perch, trying to bring my mind to some semblance of normalcy.

My actions, I hoped, had finally surprised that Finnarian bastard.

Upon awakening in such a compromising position, laying on Sadan, fully naked in a courtyard where any number of eyes could be watching, I had risen to dress, not speaking to him. I did not rant, did not rave, simply walked away.

And he had let me, which was annoying because I had expected a grand battle in my retreat. Yet he had not, which probably indicated he knew I needed space, and that irritated me no end. I did not want him understanding me, mostly because I did not understand him in turn and that was wholly unfair in my view.

To my complete surprise, the guards at the gates had let me through without comment. They had watched me as I exited the palace grounds and headed for the lush wooded area ahead. Once I gained the sanctuary of the trees, I sighed in relief as I felt the pressure of curious eyes lifted from me.

Walking through the heavy growth was difficult, and I had no idea how far I had actually come before I found a large rock wall extending upward before me. Beginning to feel lost in the strangeness of the forest, I eagerly accepted this escape and nimbly climbed the nearly vertical rock wall with almost forgotten skill. It was no time at all until I stood upon the flat summit of the immense cliff and faced into the wind that swirled over its height.

Here I could see for miles, and it was with annoyance I realized that with my city-bred senses, I had obviously been walking in circles, because I was only a short distance from the palace grounds.

Snorting in exasperation, I turned my back on the sight with a huff and sat down facing in the opposite direction, staring out over the bounty of the forest below. Far away I could see the faint glint of water, but from this angle I could not tell if it was sea or inland lake. I took a deep breath but could smell no salt, so perhaps it was a lake after all. Whatever it was, it sparkled in the sunlight, beckoning.

One day I would have to go there. The prospect of a leisurely swim was too good to pass up. Surely there must be a path or a road in that direction, because I was not going to risk the forest route again.

I had no skills of woodsmanship. On my home world, the trees never grew any taller than a single-story home. Here they seemed out of control, wild, like the Finnarians themselves.

From my perch, I could see vast tracts of forest in all directions, with occasional breaks that might indicate fields, towns, or perhaps even natural clearings. It was all so foreign to anything I had seen or experienced, and although its beauty was truly inspiring, at this time it only added to the sense of displacement and strangeness of my current situation. I felt rather helpless in such an environment.

I should test the boundaries, see if they were as unbreachable as Sadan had explained, or if he was merely expecting me to believe him and not see for myself.

At the moment, I could not even conceive of finding my way more than a mile or two, and in that I would become hopelessly lost and no doubt have a kind Finnarian gently lead me back to the palace.

The humiliation of *that* scenario would keep me imprisoned until I had more detail of my placement in relation to the barrier. Really I doubted Sadan had lied.

The stories I had heard from the humans pointed to the same thing, but at some point I needed to see for myself.

Sitting there on the sun-warmed rock, I contemplated what had just happened with Sadan and what it all meant.

It was sex, just that, no more.

I had been alone for so long and without any sort of gratification; of course I was needy. Who would not be?

That was all.

A malicious little voice within my mind hooted at the concept, bringing back images and sensations that completely disagreed with my cold assessment.

I scowled in answer. If my own mind was going to argue, then I was not thinking anything at all. So there.

Time passed quickly, or so it seemed, and by the ache in my belly, I would soon need to try to retrace my steps. That at least I could do by scent. I was not completely helpless, damn it.

The sound of a soft footstep made me stiffen, and I snapped round, claws emerging in reaction.

I opened my mouth to lambaste Sadan for his inability to give me any sort of privacy, only to freeze in embarrassment as I realized it was not Sadan at all but an unknown Finnarian.

I would have blushed if my body had allowed it, having this stranger see my defensiveness so readily displayed. A warrior should have better control than that. But he might have been an enemy—in Finnarian-protected lands, which had only ever known peace.

The Finnarian viewed me without expression for long moments. Then a faint twinkle lit his eyes, and he approached me on silent feet, leading me to believe he had only made noise deliberately to warn me of his presence.

He wore simple black pants with a loose, long-sleeved blue tunic, remarkably understated for a Finnarian, for most of them seemed to prefer formal clothing of ornate beauty.

Perhaps this one was of the common people, none of whom I had met in the palace itself. At least I did not think I had. Surely the servants would look somewhat different, would they not? In my world, servants wore something green on their persons at all times, showing their caste. Color was important to Draconians.

Here, I was not so sure. Color seemed irrelevant, as though any caste could wear what they wanted. It was confusing to say the least. How did you know what caste someone was without color telling the story?

This Finnarian wore blue, but I had the feeling it was choice, not necessity that had made the decision.

I nodded to him in grudging politeness, then turned back to the view, keeping him in sight out of the corner of my eye.

I had no reason to trust anyone here, peaceful though it was. I could not imagine any of them being pleased at my presence, except perhaps for a curiosity, a freak to gape at.

How could they possibly accept my being with someone as beautiful and as important as Sadan?

My comfortable solitude had been shattered, and I could not help feeling resentful of the other's presence. Perhaps it was time to leave now, try to find my way back before nightfall.

"What do you think of Finnaria?" The intruder's voice sounded beautiful, almost musical in its tone, but with an underlying power I found somewhat intimidating.

I shot a glance at him, but he was not looking at me—was staring instead out over the vista below, something very like pride gleaming in his green eyes.

“It is beautiful, unlike anything I have ever seen.” There was truth in my voice, if with a bit of bitterness at the thought that it was not my choice to be here.

The Finnarian sighed, deep and low, and sank to sit cross-legged perilously close to the edge of the drop-off.

I found my fingers twitching with the need to haul him back into a safer zone, but prevented myself with the thought that the world might be a better place without yet another Finnarian.

Still I kept a sharp eye on his movements. Daft bastard. I was convinced all Finnarians romped on the edge of insanity. Immortality was a wasted gift on them, for they always tested the limits of its protection. How the species had managed to last long enough to actually breed and multiply was a constant wonder to me.

All beauty and no brains.

I huffed and looked away. If the idiot wanted to harm himself, who was I to stop him?

“So you are Sadan’s mate.” It was a statement instead of a question, and I bristled at something below the surface tone.

“No, I am the one Sadan *thinks* is his mate. There is a vast difference between the two.” My own tone held a certain warning in the depths.

One silver eyebrow arched up at my words, and he turned to look at me fully, something of a challenge in his expression. “One would think you would jump at the chance. He is a prince, after all, wealthy, powerful...”

I snorted. “He is a pushy bastard, so full of arrogance that I am surprised he can walk under the burden of it. I did not learn he was a prince until I got here.” The gloom in my tone indicated quite clearly it had not been a happy discovery.

The Finnarian’s gaze dropped to the bite mark upon my neck. “And yet you bear his mark. You must have consented.”

I glared at him. "Consented? Have you ever dealt with Sadan? There was no 'consent' involved. The son of a bitch took what he wanted. He is like a force of fucking nature. Bastard."

A surprised smirk flashed across the Finnarian's face, and he looked away for a moment as if to compose himself.

"I have dealt with Sadan on occasion. He can be a little...forceful when he wants something badly enough."

I huffed. "A spoiled monster is what he is. He should never have been let loose outside Finnaria."

"His father sent him out to deal with a threat to our borders in the form of the war you took part in."

"Well, his damned father has a lot to answer for, then. Not to mention it is quite obvious that he never disciplined his son in an appropriate manner. Instead he sends him out to wreak chaos upon the land."

The smirk turned into a full smile. "I had no idea Sadan was so powerful that he *wreaked* such havoc. The Masarian king said nothing about such actions. Surely if Sadan had done such terrible things, he would have mentioned it."

"The royal idiot liked him," I intoned gloomily. "Made him my godsdamned commander, of all things."

"Ahh." The word held implicit understanding. Perhaps this Finnarian had been in the military too at some point.

"Perhaps the king thought you worthy of fighting with them."

"Worthy? Draconians are so far superior in military prowess to Finnarians, it should not be spoken in the same breath." I slapped my hand on my thigh for emphasis. "It is just that I was the only one left." I thought for a moment, too honest to leave it at that. "I have to admit Sadan and his troops were not bad at all. They were just not Draconian." I shrugged, catching my breath as it pulled at my side. "Still, they were miles superior to the humans." I rolled my eyes. "How that race has

survived at all, I have no idea. It must be because they breed like rabbits. Otherwise they would long ago have become extinct.”

The Finnarian stared at me a moment, a faint glint of affront in his eyes at my expression of Draconian superiority, though he seemed to agree with the assessment of the humans.

“So you would not have come here if you had been aware of what Sadan had planned.”

I gave him a look that suggested he was an idiot. “Of course I would not have come. Did I not have to deal with enough Finnarians in Masaria? Why in creation would I have come to where they congregate?” I waved my hands for emphasis.

“Indeed,” he murmured, the humor seeming to have returned full force, for his lips were twitching.

I was offended that he took my travail with Sadan so lightly. It had not been a pleasant experience the last few years, and here this fool dismissed it so lightly.

“You have no idea what I have undergone with that crazy person. He has been in my face at every opportunity for how many years and then started—” I cut off abruptly, realizing what I had been going to confess.

“Started?” the other questioned with interest.

“Nothing,” I snapped. “Just he is a pain in the ass, and he is insane if he thinks I am giving in to this mating nonsense he is spouting.” I ignored the remembrance of how much this meant to Sadan, how prevalent it was in his thoughts. It did not mean *I* had to feel the same way.

The Finnarian sobered, his eyes sliding over my sullen expression. “So you would leave then, given the choice?” A hint of disapproval in his tone had me bristling.

“Of course I would damn well leave. I never asked to be brought here, and there is absolutely nothing to hold me here but that barrier.” I glared at him. Why

was I even arguing with this idiot who was proving himself just as witless as the rest of his cursed race?

“There is more than the barrier that should be convincing you to remain.” The Finnarian’s face had settled into stern lines that reminded me of my foster father, Marind, who had had just that tone when I had displeased him, when he believed I was being particularly obtuse.

This Finnarian had that same fatherly disapproval, and I had to fight myself to remain defiant and not look away in the proper submission to an elder.

“You would do that to Sadan? Leave him in pitiless solitude for the rest of his existence?”

I snorted, my glare intensifying. “I hardly think he would mourn for long. I am sure there are many who would seek him. His loneliness would be short indeed.”

The Finnarian’s eyes narrowed as if he was gauging my honesty. “You know little of Finnarian mating to make such a statement. A Finnarian mates for life. Once he chooses, there will be no other that he will accept. No other will interest him sexually or mentally, and grief would be for his entire immortal existence. That is how much you hate him, that you would gift him with such pain?”

I stared at him in astonishment slowly sinking into horror. He had to be lying. I could not have such a responsibility on my shoulders. I would be able to leave, make another life...

Not be trapped here in order to prevent Sadan’s pain.

“We are not truly mated. I have not reciprocated.” I hated the defensiveness that coated my words, showing I was not immune to what I had just been told.

“It has been made on his part. If you do not complete it, the results will be the same. He has committed himself utterly to this relationship. It is now your responsibility to see that he is happy, fulfilled.”

“But I did not want this,” I wailed, becoming more and more panicked as I realized this Finnarian was speaking truth. It was in the weight of every word he spoke.

“Are you a child then, to run from commitment? Sadan offers you much, with little security on his part as to your reactions. He has shown great courage in his pursuit of you, great love in his dealings. Will you throw it back in his face? Do you have so much to return to, that you would give up this opportunity for true caring, great love? Think on this carefully before you throw it away in heedless anger. You would come to regret it with every portion of your soul.” His tone held utter conviction as though he had access to the future, could see it in every detail.

I stared at him, clenching and unclenching my fingers with the entrapment I felt, the need to flee this binding.

No one had ever loved me in this fashion; it was neither comfortable nor wanted.

If my heart said differently, then I was determined not to listen.

I rose stiffly to my feet, and without another word to the Finnarian, I turned away to begin my return trek to the palace.

He let me go in silence, but I could feel the weight of his words upon me all the way back.

Sadan

I sat staring out the window, fighting my anger.

“How could you have been so foolish? To make a bonding outside your own people. It has not been done before and can only lead to grief for you, for us all as we watch your unhappiness. A bloodmate bond, as this assuredly is from the energies I am sensing, could lead to your death from grief if severed.” My father’s voice was curt with displeasure as he paced the small meeting room. “I have been told your

‘mate’ wants nothing more than to escape this place, escape you. This can lead to happiness for you both? This is ill done, Sadan. I am not at all pleased. Bonding is a serious matter. Years of preparation and assurances of compatibility and true emotion go into each ceremony. But this...this is beyond words. You have given your heart to one who does not want it!”

The harshness of the final statement cut at me, found that small doubt in my mind that whispered Graitaan would never accept me, would never fully bond with me, no matter how long I kept him prisoner in an attempt to win his heart.

I had kept that fear buried deep, convinced true belief would win me my greatest desire.

I had always looked up to my father, respected his judgment and wisdom.

To hear those words come from him, my father, my king, was more painful than any wound of battle.

My anger died, and I could feel my fingers curling into fists. I had to stay positive, had to believe.

A gentle hand stroked back my hair, tucked it behind my ear in a familiar ritual from my childhood. “I love you, my son. To see you perpetually grieve for an impossible goal...this is not what I wanted for you.”

I looked up into green eyes the mirror of my own. “I love him, Father. I have from the moment I saw him. I waited eight long years before I made the decision to force the issue. Graitaan is not one to coax or woo. He is too hurt within to believe such things. Only action will get his attention. I truly believe the gods chose us as mates. I could not mistake this feeling, could I?”

He was silent for long moments, then laid a hand upon my cheek, his eyes closing as he called forth his power. It surged around me, through me, and I braced for it, striving to keep myself as open as possible.

When at last he took a deep breath and the power faded to faint tingles, I watched him, hardly breathing for the anxiety I felt.

My heart sank at the grimness upon his features as he opened his eyes.

“It is not certain. There are many paths. You have walked yours to this point, but now it is up to Graitaan. There is no more you can do. It is his choices that will determine this.”

Up to a stubborn Draconian who thought so little of himself and shunned any caring cast in his direction...

This was not comforting. Not at all.

Graitaan

I entered the palace gates with grim determination after wandering for hours, lost in thought. There surely was no truth to what that Finnarian had told me. I would not be coerced into staying, into giving myself to Sadan for some half-baked belief of eternal grieving.

That was far-fetched to the extreme.

I was reluctant to face Sadan; I needed time to think, so I returned to the courtyard.

That was a mistake. I was swiftly assaulted by vivid memories of our lovemaking. I shook my head in immediate negation. Sex, it had been sex; that was all.

I plunked down on the nearest bench, away from where we had...

I growled under my breath at my inability to erase the images that made my body flush, my ear frills tingle.

I took several deep breaths to cleanse myself of—

A small snuffle sounded just behind me, an area to the right of the waterfall, decorated with thick, finely pruned bushes.

I froze in place, wondering if a small animal had wandered in and managed to get itself somehow trapped.

I rose and with soft and silent tread made my way toward the tiny sounds, tracing them easily enough.

Slowly and carefully I crouched down to see beneath the nearest bush.

Tearful green eyes met mine, startled. One small hand covered his mouth to try to muffle the sounds of weeping.

“Vlar?” I kept my tone gentle. The sight of his tearstained face jolted something deep within me. I had always loved being with younglings. Had not wanted one of my own, but...I found their innocence and honesty a refreshing change, and they seemed to like me in return, fulfilling a need and purpose I did not even realize was important to me. I had gladly cared for the younglings within my adopted clan, teaching them, loving them as I had not been loved. I missed them...but I had Vlar now.

His hand slowly dropped from his mouth, and he gave a hiccupping sigh, staring at me as if at a ghost.

“You did not leave,” he whispered, the thankfulness in his tone astonishing me.

Before I could even take in the words, he had launched himself at me, and I found myself with an armful of sobbing Finnarian.

“Don’t go. I am sorry I was mean to you. Don’t make Father sad. Please, I’m sorry.”

For a long moment, I froze utterly before carefully embracing him and patting his back, trying to stroke a crest that was not there, the motion seeming to calm him even though he was not Draconian.

“Sssh,” I soothed, absently wondering if today was part of some god-driven plan to ensure I could not leave Finnaria. Between Vlar and that Finnarian earlier, this was getting a bit much.

“I am here. I only went for a walk, Vlar, nothing more sinister.”

He peered up at me from under a fall of golden hair, clutching my tunic as though to a lifeline.

“You won’t go? Please don’t go. I will be so good. I won’t be grumpy to you at all.”

I had to grin. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, boy. I would miss your tempers, now wouldn’t I?”

He watched me uncertainly, gauging the truth in my words, no doubt. “You don’t mind me being angry?”

“Did you mean it?” I rejoined.

He paused, shaken out of his crying. “Not really.” He scrubbed at one eye with a less than clean fist. “You were so interesting, but I did not want you to make me go away from Father.”

I looked at him askance. “Is that the custom here, to make children go elsewhere upon a bonding?”

He shrugged, looking a little ashamed. “Not really, but it could happen. And you were not Finnarian.”

I sighed, wiping a streak of dirt off his cheek. “My boy, you have to learn to get to the truth of things before running amok. I would never have done such a thing. Younglings are extremely important in my culture. Never would I have imagined separating you from your father. What a horrible thought.”

He hung his head, twisting his fingers in my tunic. “So you will stay? Promise?” The hope in his eyes as he looked up at me nearly split my heart in two.

Gods.

The words of that dratted Finnarian who had joined me on the cliff came back to haunt me. “*Do you have so much to return to, that you would give up this opportunity for true caring, great love?*”

In truth, what *did* I have to return to? I had wanted to leave the army, true. But what then? My vague plan had been to retreat to some distant corner of the

lands, where I could be alone. And then? I had no ability in woodsmanship, no talent for living off the land. I would need some contact with people if only to get supplies. And was that possible? If they had never seen a Draconian before, I would seem a monster. The details of living in such a manner now seemed impossible upon true reflection. So where did that leave me?

In Finnaria.

Here I was away from humans, a true blessing. I had access to a community for supplies. Was it possible that I could have some relationship with Sadan that was not intimate and gave me my solitude? Then he would not truly be separated from me; therefore he would not go through the grieving nonsense, right?

I wished I knew more about this mating. I had been foolish to try to ignore it. It was obviously not going to go away as I had wished. It was a fact, apparently, and I had to deal with it. The first step was to understand more.

But for now, I had a promise to make. If I had to stay here, perhaps it could be on my own terms. That was hard to imagine with Sadan involved, but still...

I laid my hand upon Vlar's cheek, making him meet me eye to eye. "I promise to stay, youngling. And I do not break a promise, not ever."

My reward was a brilliant, teary smile and a hug that half strangled me.

Chapter Ten

Sadan

“Father!” I turned from a morose contemplation of a simple drawing I had sketched of Graitaaan to brace myself as my youngest son launched himself at me. Vlar was always one for vast enthusiasm, and a person had to be prepared or certain male bits received small knees in tender places.

I grasped his waist and swung him up to my lap, safely seating him before he did any damage. Happiness lit his face, and I could not help but smile, his presence chasing away the dark doubts that had descended upon me after the talk with my father.

I kissed the top of his head, smoothing back his thick, unruly hair fondly. Of all my sons, this one was most like me, and although I would never admit it, for I loved all my sons greatly, this one held a special place in my heart.

He reached up and cradled my cheeks in his small hands, his eyes shining.

“I did it, Father! I was so sad, and I started crying, and I should not have because that is not brave, but it worked out because he found me, and he is so nice, Father. Much nicer than I thought, and he held me just like you do, and then we talked, and I made him promise to stay, and I thought he would just tell me maybe, because adults always say maybe, but then he promised! And he said he never breaks his promises, and I think maybe it is all fixed, and then you don’t have to be sad, and I can see his wings for real, and then we can do things together, and it will be like having a new uncle.”

I listened in growing bewilderment, wondering how I had completely no clue what he was talking of. The wings sounded like Graitaan, but the rest... Vlar refused to have anything to do with Graitaan, except for going to his room each day to rant at him. I had been going to halt that behavior until I saw Graitaan's reaction and realized this was between the two of them and nothing for me to interfere in.

So what was this then?

Finally I put a hand over Vlar's mouth, sometimes the only way to halt his rambling.

He was used to this treatment from his family, and he merely paused, green eyes shining happily at me over my fingers.

I kept my hand where it was, knowing he would start again within a breath if I let go.

"Vlar, stop a moment. What are you talking about? Graitaan found you crying?" My brow knit in concern. "Why were you crying, son?"

When I uncovered his mouth, he patted my cheek, his expression far too adult for a moment. "Because if Graitaan left, you would have been sad forever. I heard Grandfather speak of it, and I knew it would be my fault if Graitaan left, because I was mean to him, and he is not really all that bad and—"

I felt my heart swell with love. "My son." My voice halted his words as he looked at me inquiringly. "You have such a caring heart. This is not for you to worry about. Adults have to fix their own problems. If things do not work out between Graitaan and me, it is not your fault. You need to understand that. It would take a lot more than you being angry at Graitaan to make him do something he does not want to. I do not want you worrying about this."

He nodded solemnly but then broke into a wide smile again. "Yes, Father. I understand. But I fixed it."

I arched an eyebrow in question.

"I made him promise to stay, and he did."

I blinked, barely managing to keep my jaw from dropping with astonishment. “He promised to stay? Here? In Finnaria?” I could not even conceive of the idea.

“He did.” Vlar bounced in his joy, and I had to shield things from his vigor. “He means it too, because he said he never breaks a promise.”

I was speechless for long moments, and Vlar’s look turned to concern.

“I thought this would make you happy, Father.”

“It does,” I managed somewhat dazedly. As it began to sink in, a smile curled my lips. “It really does, Vlar.” I hugged him hard. “You little devil, you managed what a whole army could not have.”

He beamed with pride.

I kissed his forehead. “This is a wonderful gift, my boy. Thank you, more than I can say. Thank you.”

The love in his eyes made me intensely grateful for all I had and hopeful that the future might hold the ultimate fulfillment.

My heart leaped with a renewal of hope. If Graitaaan stayed, then I could have the chance to show him the merits of being loved. If Vlar accepted him, then for all purposes we would be a family. In time, who knew?

But for now, perhaps a change in tactics was called for.

Graitaaan

I fully expected Sadan to pursue his advantage at my promise to remain here, but in the hellishly perverse fashion that he seemed to excel in, he said nothing, did nothing. The only thing that changed was that he brought my meals to my room personally and often remained to talk.

He chose neutral, interesting topics, so I could never be outright rude without sounding like a petulant child. I had to grit my teeth and pretend civility. I would not let him show me up as any less civilized than he himself could be.

The problem was, he was intelligent and learned and knew enough on a wide range of subjects to make them interesting. Despite my dislike of him, I would find myself listening and getting involved enough to make comments, much though I cursed myself afterward.

When he was like this, Sadan was a pleasant companion, and my response to his topics made me uncomfortable, showing how starved I was for conversation. Since my exile, I had always thought of myself as a true loner, not needing anyone or anything, and this revelation that I did indeed wish to speak to others, wish to be heard, was not a comfortable one for me.

As usual in Sadan's presence, I seemed at odds even with myself. Not only that, but I noticed my strange habit of staring mindlessly at Sadan was growing. There were times when he spoke and I would watch those lips and remember them on my body, recall the image of them wrapped around the girth of my shaft.

I would look away then with a sort of breathless desperation, some evil part of my mind wishing Sadan would just shut up and dominate me, take me so I would not have to fight myself. I wanted him; I didn't want him. If he took charge, it would not be my fault then, would it? Where was that rut cycle when I needed it?

Why, by the gods, was I so attracted to him? Yes, the rest of the world thought he was beautiful, but I had never wanted him before he had taken matters into his own hands, so to speak.

I would never have seen him as anything more than a pain in the ass and my cursed commander. Would I?

Had there been something there all along, and I had just not realized it until now?

How this one Finnarian had gained the power to turn my life on end, I just did not understand. Still I made an effort to curb my surliness and find some sort of common ground that we might stand on to create a working relationship of sorts. There had to be a way to find a niche that each of us would be comfortable in, but the problem was, I was too much the coward to question Sadan directly about his

expectations of having a mate. He had made it plain that there would be sexual demands, and I was still not sure where to take a stand on this matter. If it could just be sex, well, it was pleasant enough—more than enough actually—and if emotions stayed out of it, perhaps we could deal with each other.

My little voice laughed hysterically over this particular musing, and I had to admit I could not really see Sadan touching me in the dispassionate manner of simple sexual gratification. Such an image disturbed even me on some level, enough that I wondered at my own motives. If I enjoyed the sex but did not wish it to be cold and impersonal, what did I really want?

I was afraid to face that question head-on. I was afraid the answer would be strikingly simple and devastating to my independence. I did not need Sadan or anything regarding this mating.

That inner voice only mocked me all the more.

* * *

I was able to remain in my cocoon of denial for approximately three weeks after my promise to Vlar.

It was utterly amazing that Sadan gave me that much time.

I had grown restless in the confines of the palace, having explored everything it contained as well as its vast grounds. I had met many people, most of them surprisingly pleasant and welcoming, a great many of them seeming to be related to Sadan in some fashion. I was a little overwhelmed by the immensity of his family tree, and I had entirely given up trying to keep everyone straight. They would meet me after the first time and simply declare Declan, uncle thirty-one, or Parlain, son forty-two. They did not seem the least insulted that I could not remember their names or fit them into the vast and overloaded family branches. Thank goodness they did not breed like humans or the world would have been overrun with Finnarians. Considering Sadan was 3,500 years old, that would have been a lot of kids.

How did one cope with the thought that their so-called mate was 3,500 years old—and considered relatively young?

It was a little stunning when I did find out that small detail. Then of course there was the thought that Sadan would find grief in this mating anyway because I was not immortal. Eventually I would die, and he would be bereft regardless.

Draconians lived to approximately a thousand years, according to health or injury, and I had reached 450 just two months ago. Almost half my life span was already gone, and after eight hundred or so, my strength and speed would start to deteriorate. I hardly wanted to saddle Sadan with such a burden. An immortal could not possibly understand age. He only saw me now, at the peak of my life.

I had told him, haltingly, of my concern in this area. I still found it difficult to speak to him one-on-one if I was not in the heat of anger or totally involved in a discussion or debate on some topic or another. Just casually talking was difficult for me, and I usually let him take the lead. It was rare that I would address him first.

As to my concern, he seemed very blasé about the matter but with a hint of secrecy about his manner. There was something he was not telling me, and that worried me. The bastard loved to spring things on me, give me no time to back away from his machinations. Seven hells, but he was irritating!

Fine then, I would die of old age, and *that* would show him! Stubborn ass.

So today he had invited me to go swim in that far-off lake I had seen from the cliff top. I thought it was a ruse to calm me down after he told me we would be meeting his father that very night.

As a ruse, it was a damn good one. Firstly because I did not want to think of meeting the Finnarian king. He would have no reason to welcome me into the family fold. Secondly because I desperately wanted to swim in that lake. In my world there was never water of enough quantity to swim. When my companions and I had arrived in this world, we had learned how to swim from several humans, and I loved the sensuous, rich feeling of that much precious water flowing over my skin. It was sinful luxury in Draconian terms.

I had to admit the climate of Finnaria greatly agreed with me. The humidity had mostly cured the itch of my scales, though I still would have liked to oil the ones upon my back. Perhaps with a mate at hand...

Perhaps Sadan could actually be useful.

Hard to imagine.

I thought we would have to walk, but Sadan steered me to the stables. I had ridden horses before. Did not particularly enjoy it. Neither did the horses. They were often spooked by my scent and appearance, so riding was a rather wild affair at best.

I should have known Finnarians would have to have superior and terrifying mounts.

Horselike, yes. If you did not look at the red eyes, horns that spiraled forward, and carnivorous teeth so long they extended partway past their mouths.

They were larger than horses to suit Finnarian size, and they were not confined in their stalls but allowed to come and go as they chose.

Looking at them, I was not surprised. Who was going to try to pen them in? Finnarians were not totally stupid, it seemed.

Sadan spoke to two of them, softly so I could not truly hear his words, then saddled them both, but with no bridle to guide them.

Oh joy.

They followed Sadan as he returned to me, and I watched the beasts warily, uncertain what to expect.

"They are called Vasleia. They are an ancient race of beings who kindly consent to carrying us in return for our good care of them. Treat them with respect, and they will deal well with you. Treat them like horses, and they will kill you."

Lovely. "They are meat eaters?" I asked warily, fighting the urge to back up as the Vasleia towered over me.

“They are omnivorous. They eat both meat and vegetation.” Sadan scratched the neck of the nearest Vasleia with true affection evident on his face, and the beast leaned in to those fingers with a faint moan of appreciation.

The second beast eyed me, hopefully without intention of trying out Draconian meat, while I stared back with wary respect.

I was not a very adept horseperson, so Sadan had to boost me up to the Vasleia’s back, a humiliation I could have done without. Yes, I could have vaulted up, but not without perhaps inflicting some small hurt on the beast that could have left me as supper.

Once I gained the Vasleia’s back and batted away Sadan’s groping hands, I sat up, wary of the height. The Vasleia was broad, and I gripped its sides with my legs gingerly, not wanting to irritate it.

Sadan mounted with a leap of smooth grace, of course, then sat grinning at me from his perch. I snorted and rolled my eyes.

Show-off.

He leaned forward and spoke into the Vasleia’s ear, describing our destination. Then we were on our way. After the first few tense moments when my Vasleia and I tried to adjust to each other’s movements, we settled into a ground-eating, fast-paced walk that was easy to sit too. Sadan and his mount drew back beside us, but Sadan did not speak, only smiled at me before closing his eyes and breathing deep.

I could not tell if he was scenting me or the surroundings, but I felt flushed and looked away hastily, not really wanting to know which.

The ride itself, though, remained pleasant. The day had dawned bright and clear, with hardly a cloud in the sky, and a faint breeze, laden with scent and moisture, caressed my face. The humidity was rising, but to a pleasant degree, not overwhelming. I wanted to spread my now healed wing to stretch but worried about the Vasleia’s reactions.

The Vasleia snorted disparagingly, and I jumped in surprise.

Sadan grinned. “They are somewhat adept at reading thoughts.”

Great, now he tells me. I reviewed my thoughts rather frantically, wondering if there had been anything that could be offensive.

Sadan’s mount rumbled in its chest, and the Finnarian laughed. “He said they fear nothing, so do your worst.”

I glared at him, then at the Vasleia he rode. Fine then.

I snapped my wings open, spreading them to their full length, a motion I rarely had the luxury of for lack of room.

Sadan watched, his eyes darkening to deepest green, something I was now able to discern as lust in their depths.

For a wild moment, I considered knocking him off his mount with a well-placed buffet of my right wing.

Both Vasleia gave a high-pitched noise that sounded remarkably like laughter.

“If you do that, my little one, I shall have to retaliate, and we may not make it to the lake today.” Sadan’s expression was pure mischief as if he truly hoped I would try it.

I huffed at him and the Vasleia who had given the game away, folding my wings back with a ruffle of skin, clamping them tightly against me in a sign of irritation.

Sadan just laughed, and then his Vasleia sprang into a gallop. I only had a moment to grab for a handhold of mane before mine followed.

The speed was unbelievable, and I saw Sadan crouch forward, his hair whipping in the wind, so I followed suit, eyes watering from the force of the air against my face. It was terrifying—and utterly exhilarating.

I could not really focus on what was in front of us, not willing to release my death grip upon the mane to wipe my eyes. It seemed no time at all from the moment we started this wild run until the moment I felt my mount leap into the air—and splash down.

The shock of the cold water made my hands open, and I cartwheeled over the Vasleia's neck, ending up sinking headfirst into the frigid waters of the lake. I would have howled at the chill if such a move would not have gotten me drowned.

I rose up, sputtering furiously as soon as my head broke the surface into sweet air.

The first sound I heard was Sadan's laughter, and after I had spit out half the lake, I wiped my eyes until I could locate him floating some short distance away, laughing his fool ass off at me.

"You bloody maniac! Are you trying to kill me?" I did not even attempt to swim after him. No doubt he was an accomplished godsdamned swimmer too, and I would only look foolish. I could swim, but with no grace to it; my wings made me less than sleek in the water. Even the Vasleia, swimming contentedly not far away, were better suited to the water than I.

"You said you wanted to get to the lake as soon as possible, were looking forward to a swim." Sadan's tone was innocence itself.

I gave him my best killer glare.

"Do you wish me to treat you with more delicacy, my mate? I can arrange that too." That voice surely should belong to a demon.

"You ever treat me like a female, I will deball you," I announced with grim certainty.

"Then I was only celebrating your fortitude and bravery, my little one." The damn smirk he wore bled through even into his words.

I smacked my fist down on the water in frustration.

"If I kill you, then I won't have to worry about this grief nonsense. Remember that."

His resulting laughter was as irritating as a burr in the crotch.

Fucking Finnarian.

Sadan

Contentment. The sun shone above us, the sky cloudless, beautiful and made more so by the presence of my mate in this place I so loved. The lake water looked stunning in the sunlight—that blue-green shade of deep mineralization that soothed the senses. I had felt a kinship to these waters from the time I first learned to swim as a child. Here I felt closer to the gods than at any other time, and that was the reason I had brought Graitaaan.

I sensed strongly that it would be here, at last, that he would fully reciprocate, participate willingly in our mating. The bond would only be complete when he initiated a coupling, gave himself wholeheartedly into the mind-set that we were together, that we were one in heart.

The magic of this place gave me hope that he would submit to the will of the gods at last—that he would want me, truly want me. I swallowed hard with the force of the need within me for that long-awaited moment, to know Graitaaan wished to be with me in truth, not just because I had maneuvered him into this situation. I could not help my own desperate optimism.

After the first spate of cursing, my Graitaaan settled down nicely, and although he swore at me now and then, the heat of it had abated somewhat and he began to enjoy the swim.

The sunlight emphasized his beauty. His scales shone with a blue-black sheen that was completely stunning, and his body seemed relaxed for once, without the tense surety of attack from others that so often seemed his normal way of being. It saddened me that he expected nothing but pain from those around him. So alone, he was, with no others of his kind to understand him.

I would take their place, and I would make him happy. As happy as Graitaaan's personality would ever let him be. I think he enjoyed being the grouchy recluse. But I knew now, after talking to Vlar and listening to my own heart, that there was a

gentle soul underneath, and if that only ever came out in my presence or of those few he might trust in times to come, then I was happy enough.

I did not wish him to ever become less than his surly, grumpy self. It made the flashes of vulnerability and need that much more poignant.

But as my father had said, it was Graitaaan who had to make the next step. That he had consented to stay in Finnaria had been the biggest boon I could imagine, but now, no matter how I wanted to press things, he would have to actually take charge of our lovemaking to make this bond truly unbreakable.

There were times when my optimism slid into a type of quiet despair. Not only was my Graitaaan stubborn in the extreme and talented in pushing everyone away, but could I be too vain in thinking he could desire me at all, beyond sexual gratification? I did not count myself terribly handsome or outstanding. I had been brought up surrounded by what outsiders termed great beauty, for that was a Finnarian trait, but what constituted beauty to Graitaaan's eyes? It might be a totally different form he privately desired. I was not Draconian, not one of his kind. I seemed so very opposite to anything Draconian that I wondered if Graitaaan could ever see me as someone that he wanted, someone to spend forever with.

And it would be *forever*.

I had not had the chance yet to speak to Graitaaan on what his staying here in Finnaria would change in him. Had not told him that the energies would work upon him, in time granting him immortality as great as my own, at least according to my father and what the gods had indicated. I did not think my mate was ready for such a revelation. He was trying to cope with so many changes now, trying to orient himself in this strange world, amid strange people. I would not burden him with the knowledge that he would never age another day past when he had first entered Finnarian borders. He was not yet immortal, but the process had begun immediately. Someday I would teach him to use the energies for his own purposes, but for now...

If I could just persuade him... I sighed to myself, feeling my mood dim further. No, it had to come from Graitaan this time, and really, in his eyes, what did I have to offer him, so different from his own kind, a prince of nothing. My father was mated to a female Finnarian—a great rarity. Because of that, because he would mate with no other female, he had only nine children: five female, four male. I was the youngest, and so far my father had given me no lands to govern, no great responsibilities. Perhaps he did not think I was worthy or responsible enough for such a thing, but never did it chafe so greatly as now, when I wished to prove myself to my mate.

I floated on my back, staring at the sky for long moments before turning and swimming for the land. Somehow the pleasure of our time together was gone. I would leave Graitaan to his swim, and when he was ready, we would return.

My plans for the day, for Graitaan to feel my gods, suddenly felt foolish in the extreme.

Chapter Eleven

Graitaan

I swam back and forth, enjoying the water immensely. The exercise and the beauty of the day calmed my nerves and brought a subtle contentment to my soul that I could not remember ever experiencing before. There was nothing I had to be on time for or be responsible for. There was no war, no death and blood and misery around me. No critical eyes. No decision of the future that was pressing upon me now that I had made the pledge to stay within Finnaria.

It had just occurred to me now that I was free of my people's expectations, free of the bond my emperor had placed me under when we had first come to Masaria. It was quite plain that Sadan considered me an equal, not someone to command, and it was freeing in a way that was completely new to me. I had always been low in the ranks of my companions, for although they had been loyal to their own, of which I was one, the stigma of my birth was well-known and subtly separated me from them right from the beginning. Over time we had become somewhat closer in the way that people will when they are entrapped among strangers, but it never grew to the point that I loved them as family or counted them as close friends.

Then there had been the moment I realized I was truly alone among the humans. Yes, there had been gratifying respect and fear to a degree, but closeness, never. Whether that was my own innate wariness, or whether the humans themselves saw me as too alien to attempt friendship or attraction, I do not know. I only knew I had been alone for so long, and although I had found Sadan to be a major irritant once he burst into my life, I also only felt truly alive in the moments

we fought, the times he made me so angry I wanted to scream. It was emotion, when for so long I had been numb to everything around me but my duty.

Since I had arrived in Finnaria, a burden I had not even realized I had been carrying was lifted from my shoulders, leaving me lightened and unsure what to do with this new feeling. It was completely alien to anything I had ever known.

No one here, apart from Sadan and his unit, knew me at all. The other Finnarians had no expectations of my behavior or actions. I would be judged on what I did from this time forth, not on my past or birth. No one here even knew about Draconian society and its strict system.

My life was a blank slate from this point on, and all I had to do was contemplate what I wanted or how to proceed. It was heady, now that it had finally sunk in. How strange that my initial imprisonment should lead to a type of freedom.

All due to Sadan.

I stopped swimming and trod water for a moment, searching for him.

To my surprise, he was no longer in the water at all but sitting on the beach, arms wrapped around his legs, staring out over the lake. Something in his posture radiated sadness, and such an impression was heightened by the way the two Vasleia stood over him, almost protective.

I frowned. It was all very well to fight with Sadan when he was a worthy opponent, but I had never encountered him in anything but a confident, arrogant mood. The pall of melancholy that hung over him was disturbing and unlike anything I had ever seen in him.

I swam slowly in his direction, wondering what had caused this sudden mood shift. He had certainly been fine when we had arrived here, judging by his laughter at my spectacular dismount, but I was not aware of anything that could have happened since to send him into such a slide.

I emerged from the water somewhat self-consciously, all too aware of my clothing clinging to my body in far too revealing a fashion, but Sadan did not look at me, did not even send a leer in my direction.

My growing worry deepened. Why seeing Sadan morose was so bothersome, I could not quite comprehend. I should be reveling in anything that caused my nemesis discomfort, but this did not feel right. I hesitated but finally came to sit on a rock some small distance from him, letting the sun's rays quickly dry my dark form.

I picked up pebbles from the beach and tried skipping them over the water. It relieved my rising inner tension.

Silence lay between us for some time. Then Sadan seemed to shake himself mentally and turned to me with a smile that did not reach his eyes.

"Did you enjoy that swim, Graitaaan?"

The fact that he would try to hide his inner distress nagged at me, even though I had to admit I would have done the same.

I nodded. "It was beautiful. Thank you for bringing me here."

I felt his look of astonishment at my civility and turned my head aside as I searched for a stone.

"This is my favorite place in Finnaria." Sadan's voice was softer than I had ever heard it, almost wistful. "My father used to bring me here to learn to swim, and when I was older, I came almost every day I could escape school."

I tried to imagine him as a youngling and could only come up with an image of Vlar, confident and fierce with pride. He would have been just as cute as his son.

I scoffed at such a thought. There was nothing cute about Sadan. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye.

Beautiful, yes, sexy as all get-out, but cute? That word did not suit the amazing being that Sadan was, did not cover his power and presence.

I jerked a little at my own description. Sexy?

I peered cautiously at him again.

Oh yes, very sexy. I had touched that body, knew its form, an image emblazoned on my mind's eye.

My fingers spasmed over the stone I held. Maybe it was the energies here in this place, but my libido seemed particularly high this day. I shifted uneasily on the rock. Heat seemed to rise in my body, and it all centered on the maddening Finnarian beside me. I had seen many beautiful Finnarians during my short time here, some perhaps even more striking than Sadan, and yet...I could not conceive of wanting their touch, of being intimate in such a fashion as I had done with Sadan.

For some reason, it was Sadan alone that drew the intense emotions of both anger and need. I could not fathom my reaction any more now than when I had first crossed paths with him.

"You were probably a wild brat," I scoffed, trying to drive the strange sadness from his eyes.

He grinned, and I felt my heart lift again.

"I was the perfect child. Ask my father." Sadan flung his hair back over his shoulder dramatically, the familiar smirk returning.

I shook my head. "Fathers are no judges of their sons, and since Finnarians leave their mothers so young, neither are the mothers a good voice of reason. I need to speak to one of your brothers, or an uncle who had to put up with your antics."

His eyebrow rose superciliously. "You will find no one who speaks ill of me."

I snorted in truth this time. "I can feel the waves of delusion washing over me."

He laughed fully, and I fought back a smile of my own. It would never do for Sadan to realize the impact his moods had begun to have over me. The bastard was arrogant enough as it was. Gods help us if he ever realized that even a Draconian was attracted to him.

"I saw that," he accused, leaning over to peer at me.

"What?" I sharpened my expression into a swift scowl.

"You smiled. I saw it."

"I never smile and certainly not around you, you irritating burr," I growled in response.

Damn Finnarians and their speed. One moment he was seated at a safe distance, and the next he was bent over me, hand caressing the back of my neck as he leaned close to let his lips brush the edge of mine.

“Ah, but burrs can end up in some of the most interesting places.” His whisper floated over me, making me shiver, and I could smell him, sharply male and with a slight musky scent that made my scales begin to stand on end with desire. He was so close and smelled so damn good.

I hardly felt my hand go up to mirror his grip on me. My long tongue swept out and into his mouth before I even had control of it, as though it had a mind of its own and knew damn well what it wanted.

It wanted him and to the hells with reason and modesty and dislike. And my body agreed wholeheartedly, beginning to rise to the occasion.

It was only my mind that screamed this was *a very, very bad idea*.

For once I did not listen to my mind or the many fears that plagued me. My body wanted this desperately, and for this moment, it ruled.

My hands came up of their own volition, cradling his face as I slanted my head to better angle my tongue to sweep his mouth, to sample every breath he took. He tasted sweet, and I could not get enough.

He groaned, and his hands came to my shoulders, kneading restlessly as he kissed back, his tongue sliding along mine, seeming to revel in our differences rather than be repulsed by them.

He arched against me, driving our damp bodies into each other, making me gasp at the touch of his hardness beneath the cold, wet cloth. We ground our shafts along each other, gradually heating the tender flesh, feeling the rest of our bodies follow into newfound warmth.

“Graithaan,” he whispered, and the need in his tone made me shiver. It provided proof that Sadan knew who he held, was not imagining another or pretending. It was me who made him hard, who made his body tremble with need and heat.

Me.

The thought seemed strange, yet this Finnarian had never lied to me, never pretended to want anything else but total bonding since he had brought me here. He was being honest with me. Was I being as honest with him or myself?

I wanted him. Whether this could be deep and true and forever, I did not know, but right now I could not imagine wanting another.

There was only Sadan.

His right hand swept down my body and pressed deliciously over my now fully extended and hardened shaft. I withdrew my tongue to lick over his neck, testing his quickening pulse, feeling his desire throb through his body.

I could not wait to strip him, to have that body at my mercy, to lick and taste every bit of that beautiful flesh and see him writhe beneath my touches, hear him moan my name and have us...

"Your Highness." The voice cut through our ardor like a blade, and we froze, eye to eye, both too startled to move.

Sadan swallowed hard, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment as though to regain control of himself.

"Yes, Nasir." Sadan's voice held the smallest trace of the stress of withheld passion, and I could only admire his control. As for me, I wanted to rip his second in command's head off, and that would be a shame because I quite liked Nasir, most of the time.

Certainly not at this moment, however.

Nasir cleared his throat. "I would not have come, but your father demands your presence and that of Graitaaan immediately. A messenger has come from the king of Masaria, and the news he carries is urgent." There was a fair amount of discomfort in his own tone.

My hand fell from Sadan's face and clenched into a fist. If this was recalling us to a battle...

Sadan sighed, deep and long, before gently stroking my face and stepping back, his expression full of regret and frustration that equaled my own.

“My father would not call us if it was not important. He was supposed to formally meet you tonight. We were having dinner with him.”

I sucked in a deep breath and tried to collect myself, tried to tame the beast within me that snarled and fought to get back to Sadan. I could only nod, for my voice would have failed me utterly or sounded completely animalistic.

I turned to face Nasir and felt somewhat appeased by the apologetic look on his face. It was clear that this was of import or he would never have interrupted us.

Sadan sighed and signaled to our Vasleia, who were grazing nearby.

“Hopefully this won’t take long, Graitaaan.” His gaze upon me seared hot enough to ignite wood. “Then we will commence where we left off, but perhaps in more comfortable surroundings.”

Damn right we would. I growled, licking my lips, clearly showing my intent.

He grinned then, and our tempers slowly subsided to disappointment and simmering need.

The night ahead was too far away for my liking.

* * *

By the time we returned, the evening meal was almost ready anyway, and so it was that I met Sadan’s father when we walked into the private dining room of the king.

He was standing with his back to us, and I frowned at the faint feeling of familiarity before he turned, his deep green gaze fastening on me with nothing of friendliness in their depths.

I sucked in my breath with annoyed recognition.

Sadan bowed to his father, a hand to his heart in respect.

“Father, this is Graitaaan. Graitaaan, this is my father, Tanis, King of Finnaria.”

I bowed the smallest degree. “We have met”—my tone was sharp—“though your father did not do me the honor of introducing himself.”

Sadan straightened with a frown, looking between us. “How have you already met?” The confusion in his voice made it clear he had not known of the subterfuge of that day upon the cliff top.

Tanis met my anger with calm, cold tolerance. “I saw no reason to reveal my identity. You would not have spoken freely then.”

Sadan grimaced, obviously wondering what had been said and knowing my temper all too well.

“I was concerned for my son, and therefore I questioned his would-be mate.” Tanis’s tone held no guilt for his actions. “Our conversation made it very plain that Graitaaan wished to leave, that he had no interest in completing this mating. How am I to take that information, then? Am I to congratulate you on being the one to hold my son’s heart in your uncaring hand?”

Sadan made a sound in his throat and stepped forward, but I laid a hand on his arm and stopped his movement.

Never did I take my eyes off Tanis. The king had the right to protect his son; I could only admire him for his caring, if not his methods. He had taken my words and my reluctance to heart that day, and now they came back to mock me, for what I felt had changed in some fashion that not even I understood. All I knew was that I no longer wished to leave. I had made that decision and acted upon it, perhaps just for Vlar’s pleas, but perhaps much more than that. But Tanis did not know the why or how of it. For all he knew, I might have changed my mind purely on the fact that Sadan was a prince, wealthy, and powerful.

“I have thought much about your words that day.” I fought to keep my voice even, though I faced him with head held high, hoping he would see my need to have space to explore what existed between Sadan and me. We needed time, but this ruler would hold much sway over whether we would actually receive it. “I think

what you said had great weight and wisdom, and I am trying to reconcile that into my own feelings. This is not an easy thing, for either of us. We need time.”

Tanis simply stared at me, no give in his expression. “Well, there is no more time. A message has come from the King of Masaria.”

Sadan drew a deep breath, his gaze flicking between his father and me, confusion and concern written all over his face. “Please let it not be another request for aid, Father. Surely we are done with their conflict.”

Tanis nodded, never taking his gimlet stare from me. “We are done with them, but apparently Graitaan is not.”

I growled faintly, fingers curling into fists. What could possibly...?

“An emissary has come to speak to the Masarian king. A Draconian.”

I stiffened in disbelief, my jaw dropping. Another Draconian, here in this world? My heart began to pound painfully.

Sadan shot a glance at me, noting my reactions, a certain fear evident in his eyes. “A Draconian? Why would one come here now? I thought there was no further contact with their world?”

Tanis folded his arms over his chest.

“All I know from the messenger is that when the emissary discovered Graitaan was the only living Draconian left, he demanded to see him.”

I shivered, unsure what I was feeling. Another of my kind. Why was he here?

“I have arranged transport to the border immediately. Food will be sent with you so that you can eat on the way. A mage will accompany you and portal you to Masaria to shorten the journey.” Tanis looked at Sadan, and he laid a hand on his shoulder. “This needs to be done as quickly as possible.” The tone of his voice clearly stated he could see nothing good coming of this.

Sadan nodded, shock in his expression, before he looked at me, something like despair slowly appearing in his eyes.

Our time, it seemed, had run out, with no clear decision being made.

I took a deep breath. This changed nothing. I would return with Sadan, and Tanis could eat his words and his attitude at the same time.

* * *

We were accompanied by Sadan's unit as guards and a Finnarian mage, who avoided me like I carried disease. Sadan banished him to the end of the procession after only a short time of his attitude and apologized to me profusely.

I shook my head. "He can think what he likes, Sadan. Not every one of your people is going to appreciate my presence in your life. Let it go."

"And will you still *be* a presence in my life after this meeting?" Sadan's normally lyrical voice sounded strained and tight with withheld emotion.

I glanced at him in disbelief, only to chastise myself. I had not spoken to him of so many things. Did I imagine he could read my mind as the Vasleia had? I was leaving him to assume many things, most of them negative.

I put out a hand to grab his arm just before we stepped into the portal. "I said I would stay in Finnaria, Sadan. I promised Vlar. As to the rest of it, I do not know or understand what I feel. That is something only time will take care of, but I..." I drew a deep breath. "I do feel something for you. Not just irritation."

He huffed out a half laugh, his tension easing for a moment. "You are such a flatterer, Graitaaan. I can always rely on that at least. You make me blush with your fervent protestations of endless love."

I rolled my eyes and growled at him. "Don't make me rethink the irritation end of it."

He put a hand to my cheek and sobered. "Don't make promises you can't keep, my little one. You do not know what this emissary may offer."

I shrugged. "It cannot possibly compare with what Finnaria has to offer." I slid my gaze to him and then away. "And that might possibly include you."

He bowed with a faint grin that lightened his tension, then pushed me stumbling into the portal and away.

Ass.

Chapter Twelve

Graitaan

I had composed myself in the breathtakingly short time it took to navigate the portal, and I even managed not to retaliate against Sadan as we stepped onto Masarian soil. I thought that was very mature of me.

Several soldiers waited for us, and after a quick glance around, I realized we were only a short walk from the palace. I drew a deep breath and followed in our guides' wake, wondering what in the hells an emissary would want with me. Perhaps just to get a recounting of how our unit had followed the Draconian emperor's orders. That seemed the likeliest scenario, and I calmed somewhat. That would be easy enough to tend to, and we could be back in Finnaria by morning.

I was somewhat shocked by my own eagerness to return, as though Sadan's homeland had become part of me, necessary to my being.

Not to mention the Finnarian beside me.

I very much wanted to return to the pleasure-filled moments that had been so rudely interrupted. I was beginning to realize my dislike was formulating into something quite different, with the potential to be powerful in its own way. Or perhaps I was going with the thought that if I could not get rid of the bastard, perhaps kissing him to shut that mouth up might be the solution.

During the walk to the palace, I thought of hot and pleasant scenarios where Sadan was not allowed to talk at all.

Sadan grew increasingly tense beside me; I could feel his energy pulsing with it. Obviously my stay in Finnaria, short though it had been, had opened up my sensitivity to energies in general and Sadan's in particular.

We entered the throne room as a group before the other Finnarians held back. Sadan and I bowed to the Masarian king, Inean, then proceeded forward at his acknowledgment.

A figure stood from where he had sat on the sidelines, and I felt my breath freeze in my chest at seeing another Draconian after so long.

"This is Einas. He wishes to speak with you in private, Graitaaan." Inean's eyes flicked between Sadan and me, a certain worry clear in his expression.

I hesitated, but Sadan put a hand on my shoulder and tried to smile, though it was a feeble effort at best.

"It has been a long time since you could speak to another of your kind, Graitaaan. Go enjoy it." His voice was hoarse, as though he had to force the words out.

I searched his eyes, made him look into mine. "I am coming back, Sadan. Do not doubt that."

He nodded, but I knew I had not convinced him. I wanted to growl with frustration, but this was not the time or place to persuade him of my changed feelings. That was for privacy and Finnarian surroundings.

After turning to Einas, I followed the Draconian from the room.

* * *

How strange to sit at a table, meeting another Draconian eye to eye.

Einas was younger than me; I could sense that and his curiosity in me and everything around him in this place of humans.

"I have been sent by our emperor to determine the fate of the unit he sent here so long ago. He told me if there were survivors that I was to inform you that your

deeds and longevity in his service are to be rewarded by the opening of a gate for your return.”

I stared at him in shocked amazement, the words flying around my mind without making true sense.

I could go home?

My heart swelled. To see Marind and Alysia once more. It was a dream come true. I smiled truly, joy rising.

“We can leave now if you like.” Einas seemed pleased at my response.

I fairly quivered with eagerness before a thought intruded. “When will I be allowed to return here, though?”

Einas frowned, confusion evident in his manner. “There would be no return. The gate here would be closed once more. We will have no more dealings with the humans unless the emperor should choose to, which I cannot see in the future. The humans have become as much a threat as ally.” He shook his head. “This will be the last contact.”

Sadan

Inean had ushered us to a small meeting room, where he ordered food and drink be provided for us.

I could look at neither. My heart was frozen in my chest, and I stared out an ornate window in numb silence.

I had been so sure in my heart. So sure that Graitaaan had been the one, that he was gods given to be my mate, yet...

Now he would disappear for good, and I would be alone.

Inean had told me what the messenger came for, and I had died a little inside.

It was what Graitaan had always wished for, had always grieved about. He had spoken to me of his home world in several of our discussions/arguments, and I knew how much he missed his adoptive parents.

That this would be a final good-bye had been clear from what Einas had told Inean. My Draconian was free at last.

It was I who would be imprisoned.

I lowered my head, watching my fingers where they gripped each other, my knuckles shining white. My chest felt so tight that my hand went to massage the pain.

Graitaan had always made his dislike of me plain, and I had imagined it was because he felt more for me than he deemed comfortable. Now I could only grimly laugh at that arrogance. I had pushed, trying to achieve the impossible, and now I would have all eternity to endure my folly. I had been sure that in some part of him, Graitaan felt what I did, would come to love me.

Fool. Cursed fool.

My father had been right.

Nasir's hand came down upon my shoulder, shaking me from my daze. There was only one thing left to be done—to set my Draconian free.

Graitaan

Many hours later, when at last I left Einas, I was numb and exhausted, too tired to think further. Had I made the right decision, and how would it affect others? Whichever way I turned, people would be hurt, but in the end, there had been only one path. Now remained the difficult task of telling others.

Exiting the room wearily, I longed for something to drink, and as if by magic, a mug of water was thrust at me. I glanced up at Inean in surprise that turned to gratitude and nodded in thanks before gulping the water eagerly.

"I have sent for food, Graitaaan. I was not sure when you would be out." Inean paused, his gaze keen upon me. "Or *if* you would be out."

I glanced at him with a frown, and he clapped a large hand on my shoulder and steered me to plush chairs nearby.

He pushed me down on one, even as food arrived.

I fell upon it ravenously, little caring of manners at the moment.

Inean watched with a neutral expression that I well knew boded ill. I had dealt with Inean for too many years not to know his moods, and this one was serious in the extreme, a heavy concern evident in his expression.

I finished eating with a contented sigh and sat back, sipping the wine with appreciation. Only then did I look at the king I had served for so long and knew so well.

He sat back, hands draped over the arms of the chair, meeting my eyes squarely.

"When are you leaving for your home world?"

I frowned at him. "Whatever makes you think that is my choice?"

He snorted inelegantly, less a king and more a man, a friend of sorts as he had been through the years, as his father had been, and his grandfather before that. All of whom I had served to the best of my abilities. It felt strange not to be taking orders from him, knowing I had freed myself from this round of duty that had so long held me firm.

"You have longed for this moment with everything in you, Graitaaan. You have not spoken of it, but I have seen it in your eyes, heard it in your voice when we have spoken of your adoptive parents. This has been only a dream. Now it is reality."

I looked into the wine with a grimace, swirling the deep red liquid absently. "True enough. It was a difficult decision to say no." A sigh shuddered in my chest, and I once again wondered at my own sanity in my final choice.

Inean stiffened, then leaned forward in his chair, shock evident in his expression. “You—refused to go home?” His incredulous tone only heightened my own misgivings.

I shrugged uncomfortably. “I did. Told Einas to give my love to Marind and Alysia, to explain to them why I cannot come back.”

Inean collapsed back, staring at me as if I had grown another head. “I cannot believe it,” he whispered. “You actually love him.”

I choked on the wine, then grabbed a cloth to wipe myself off, glaring at Inean. “What are you talking about?” I growled, dabbing at my tunic with irritated strokes.

“Sadan. You love him. All this time, I thought you would kill him. But that wasn’t it at all.” His eyes were wide as though he had just made a great discovery.

I frowned quellingly at him. “I made a vow to his son, Vlar. I promised I would not go back on that.”

Inean tilted his head, looking at me with shrewd, wise eyes. He was no fool, this king. He saw far too much at times for anyone’s comfort. Especially mine.

“You might say that, you might even think that, but in reality, my friend, it is about Sadan. You love him.”

I snarled, but not as fiercely as I would have liked. “He took the choice away from me. Made me his damned mate.”

Inean shook his head, refusing to release me from his piercing stare. “No, you were just given another choice, and you made the one that keeps you here, that truly confirms this bond. You might as well shout it from the tip of the tallest tree, my friend. This decision will confirm it for any and all who hear about it.”

He fell silent for a moment, watching my discomfort with a keen eye.

“This is not Sadan’s doing anymore, Graitaan. This is your choice, and I am so, so glad. I am happy for you both beyond words.” His suddenly grim countenance did not lend credence to his words. “However, I think you may have a bit of a fight on your hands.”

I felt a sinking of my heart.

“Sadan and his Finnarians left—went home. Sadan was sure you would leave. I cannot even describe the pain I saw on his face.”

“What!” I screeched, wincing at the volume of my own voice.

That son of a bitch. I was going to kill him if it was the last thing I did.

Fucking Finnarian.

* * *

I am sure that I gave lots of fodder for future tales of Draconians as I left Inean’s palace. I could not portal without a Finnarian mage, horses were too damn slow, and it was too rough a terrain to run.

Therefore I had to fly.

No one in this world had ever seen me fly. I had done so off and on, but always in privacy, keeping my differences hidden. All Draconians could fly, but over time it had become more strenuous as our size grew in relation to our wings. We were not as light boned as our ancestors had been. We became lazy and preferred more mundane modes of transport rather than the effort of flying. I had only ever done it on this world to keep my muscles honed, my strength sufficient for flight if I ever needed it.

Now I needed it.

After bidding a hasty farewell to Inean, I had scarcely made it past the palace gates before I spread my wings wide and stretched them in preparation.

I could hear the humans, feel the stares upon me, their curiosity and excitement almost palpable, but I had no concern now with how they viewed me. I had more important things to think of and a Finnarian as my prey.

Turning into the wind, I ran a few steps and lifted off.

I heard Inean’s shout of “good luck” drift on the wind, but I did not turn back, striving harder to gain altitude, to use the subtle wind shifts to my advantage.

I was breathless with exertion by the time I reached a level where I could catch the thermals and drift in their embrace, wings outstretched to their full potential, spiraling ever higher.

It was easier here, and I could see the lay of the land far below. I had no need of direction. It was as though my heart knew where it belonged and pulled me there with no conscious thought.

The sheer joy of flying overtook me, and I rolled in the air, grinning fiercely. This must have been how my ancestors felt, lords of the air, predators of renown. It was heady, this feeling of kinship with the sky and the joy of a hunt.

I left the lands of the humans behind for the last time and headed toward Finnaria with anger and determination riding me hard.

It was a surprisingly short time later that I reached the Finnarian border, the barrier shimmering like opalescent fire in the sun.

I landed harder than I would have liked, my wing muscles burning with the unexpected strain they had just undergone. Clearly I would have to practice more often if I wanted to keep my skills intact.

Still I had no time to judge my own strength; I shook off the pain in my wings with a grimace and approached the barrier with a feeling of dawning fury.

No way in.

I paced the barrier, looking for a weakness, a gate of some sort, any sign of how I might enter, but found nothing.

Each time I approached too closely, I became physically ill and had to back away or collapse.

My anger grew, desperation beginning to entwine with it.

“Sadan!” I yelled, putting all my force into that cry.

Birds startled from the nearby trees as echoes of my voice bounced down the valley I stood in.

I shouted until my voice was little more than a hoarse croak, trying to use the energies of the barrier itself to send my message through, to reach my mate, but there was nothing, just the cold expanse of the never-ending barrier.

At last I sank to the grass, panting, trying not to let hopelessness tear at me and sap my will.

Somehow I would get through, and when I found that damned Finnarian...

If he was my bloody mate, then should he not be able to feel my presence, feel my need for him?

"He cannot feel you."

For a wild moment, I thought it was my inner voice speaking, before I whirled to confront Sadan's father.

He stood there, literally within the barrier, neither on one side nor the other, the powerful energies having no visible effect upon him.

The opalescence swirled around him, leaving him an otherworldly figure, not completely solid in my vision.

A red glint to his eyes gave me warning to step lightly, but I was in no mood to pander to Tanis. He stood between Sadan and me. I faced him, head held high. I could literally feel the energies he produced wrapping round me like tentacles, licking along my flesh, telling me in no uncertain terms that he had the ability to destroy me should he choose.

His fangs were visible, slowly sliding into place as his eyes reddened further, and he was a sight to behold, king of the Finnarians and no one to cross.

Mad as I was, Draconian as I was, I stepped toward him instead of away.

His hair danced in the power that bled off his tall form, and there was death in the very air around me.

"The barrier is of my making. It will stand solid against any who dare its powers. No one will pass my borders without my permission." His voice sounded eerie, reverberating within the confines of the barrier itself. "You are not of my

people, and you have brought nothing but grief to my son. You shall not enter Finnaria again.”

I walked toward him, flinching as my skin began to heat painfully.

“Sadan is my mate, and I will go to him, one way or the other. Do not stand between us.”

My tone sounded amazingly calm under the circumstances, but if Tanis seemed immovable as stone, then I was as steel.

I would not give way.

His eyebrow rose, his lip curling, revealing slender, needle-sharp fangs longer than Sadan’s.

“Now you wish to acknowledge that bonding? You had no need of it before. Your protests to the contrary were at best weak.”

I clenched my fists. “You claim to love him yet would bar me from him? If the gods created this mating, as Sadan has claimed, then you go against their will.”

His expression did not falter. “You acknowledge that this may be gods given?”

“If Sadan believes it, then yes, I will also.” I met him look for look.

“Then tell them. Tell the gods themselves that this is what you want.” His tone was mocking, goading me.

“Very well.” I looked heavenward for a moment, then back at Tanis. “Finnarian gods, I accept Sadan’s claim that I am his mate, and I in turn wish him as mine. Hear this also.” I glared at Tanis. “I will let no one stand between us, not any of you, not his sire. This I so swear.”

The barrier split, providing a way through.

The suddenness of it startled me so that I stood slack-jawed in shock.

Tanis stood back, fangs gone, eyes green once more, arms folded calmly over his chest.

At my hesitation, one of his eyebrows arched in a manner all too reminiscent of Sadan at his worst.

“Well then, enter.”

I growled under my breath but hastily trotted through the breach before the bastard could change his mind.

Tanis sealed the barrier once more with a casual wave of his hand. He turned back to me with the faintest of smirks, just enough to raise my blood pressure several notches.

The smirk was present, but his eyes were hard.

“Go then; see to Sadan. He is by the lake with his unit standing guard over him.” He caught my shoulder before I could turn away.

“Know this, Graitaaan. If you hurt him...” The threat in the velvet tone was clear enough.

I shook off his hand and stood facing him for a long moment. “If I do, then I would welcome your blow.”

He measured my conviction for long moments, then smiled, the hardness disappearing as though it had never been. “We understand each other then.” He thumped my back hard enough to make me half stumble. “Welcome to the family.” His grin was pure evil, possibly even worse than Sadan’s.

Then energy swirled between us, and he was gone. Simply gone. What trick was this? I gaped for the barest moment, then growled under my breath and lofted myself into the air.

Bloody Finnarians. Should have known Sadan came from bad blood. Made sense that the worst of them would rule Finnaria.

I could fly more swiftly here, and I did not know if it was my heart that drove me or if the energies of this land were being gifted as part of it. Whichever it was, I took it and flew like I had never done before.

The vast lake shone like a blue-green jewel below, spread before me from my vantage in the sky. Its beauty did not move me, though; I searched for my Finnarian, and nothing would divert my hunt.

I sensed him now, could feel his utter, soul-deep grief, and it tore at me like talons. If I had had any doubt that he loved me to the depth of his being, it was swept away in that moment.

I caught sight of a faint glimmer of silver, where the true color of his hair was emerging from the darkness of the mourning dye, and it was that that led me to him. When I saw him at last, sitting on the same rock from when we had last been here, my heart leaped and I knew then that this was right and good. I did love the bastard after all.

Nasir and the others were spread out, some small distance back to give Sadan privacy, no doubt.

I furred my wings and stooped, wind rushing past me in a dizzying roar of sound, my eyes never wavering from my prey.

I would have to teach these foolish Finnarians that they might be a terror on the ground, but they needed to learn to protect from attacks by air.

They never even looked up.

Sadan must have felt something, because he straightened a little, glancing around with a frown on his tired, lined face.

It was only as I spread my wings, abruptly slowing my descent, that he turned, eyes wide as he saw me.

It was far, far too late.

I pounced on him and knocked him flat, kindly putting one hand beneath his head to prevent him from being knocked unconscious. I hardly wanted him out cold for what I had planned.

I heard the shouts of the others, but I merely grinned down at a half-stunned, breathless Sadan trapped beneath me, his expression disbelieving.

Our lips met, and I stole what little breath he had left with a kiss that curled my own toes and made my wings spread out in reaction, a curtain of privacy. I felt

one of his hands stroke over my cheek, and the love in that touch, the beginning of belief in his eyes made my chest ache.

For a long moment, I met him, eye to eye, opened myself to everything within me, let him see and feel all that I offered, all that would only ever be his.

I pulled back and stood, holding out a hand. He took it, speechless for once, and shakily gained his feet, never letting go of me.

I grinned and curled my wings around us again, blocking out the world.

“Now,” I murmured against his mouth, feeling his body heat in response to my touch. “Where the hells were we?”

Epilogue

Sadan

I woke slowly, far too warm and comfortable to want to leave the bed. I sighed a little, reluctant, but knowing there was purpose to my rising this early.

I pushed back the covers and sat up, rubbing my face in an attempt to stir myself to wakefulness.

A faint moan and a grumbling growl sounded behind me. Then the covers were yanked back over the bed.

I grinned and glanced over my shoulder, my look softening as I beheld my little mate, sound asleep, sprawled over most of the bed as he always was. I reached out a hand to arrange the covers more securely around him, tucking in his tail that always seemed to manage to trail over the side of the bed and get cold. My touch lingered, and I was not able to resist caressing down his crest.

He half purred in sleepy acknowledgment, then rolled over, his back to me in clear dismissal of further encroachments.

I laughed under my breath and rose to pad naked across the room.

I got dressed slowly, delaying the coming parting. At last I could postpone no longer and left the room, closing the door softly in my wake.

Down the curving stairs I went, trailing my fingers over the ornate carvings on the banister. Never did I take our home for granted, our modest palace, so much smaller than my father's, but suiting our small population of this northernmost principality.

Our principality—where Graitaan and I ruled and had ruled for so long now.

Our home.

The courtyard was a sea of activity even this early as servants prepared for the departure.

I stood for a moment, staring at his back, wondering how this day had come so swiftly. Far too quickly for my peace of mind.

“Vlar.”

He turned at my voice and smiled, striding over to embrace me, his eyes bright with love.

I pulled him close, wishing I could keep him here, safe.

“Father,” he whispered, returning my hug with a show of strength that made me proud.

He stood back, and I held his shoulders, meeting him look for look.

He was only a little shorter than I was now, tallest of my grown sons and the most willful, the most stubborn and adventurous. I had known Finnaria could not hold him forever. He wanted to know of the outside world, ever curious. Then last year his powers had told him that his mate existed out there somewhere. Like me, it seemed he was destined to find love beyond our people. He was more serious than I was, more withdrawn into his own thoughts, and I worried for his happiness, worried the world beyond our borders would not treat him kindly despite his strength.

He refused to take anyone with him, and there had been many months of arguing before I had been able to let him go. In the end, it was Graitaan, as usual, who had stepped between us and mediated peace.

My fierce Graitaan, peacemaker. Hard to believe, but true. He and Vlar were so close, so bonded that sometimes I felt ganged up on when they stood against me. Still, there had been times when my little one had laid the law down with Vlar when I had known nothing of the transgression, so my mate was no easy parent.

He and Vlar, along with friends and family, had celebrated the night before, spending their time with each other in a way they could accept—not too emotional, not too blatant. I had not been able to attend the celebration, too sunk in morose contemplation of my son's departure. Instead I needed this time with my son in the moments before he left, without others, even my mate.

I stared at him, wondering when he had grown up, when he had ceased to be a child and become a powerful presence, a grown Finnarian in his own right.

He was renowned in our lands as a great fighter, trained by both Graitaaan and myself, rivaling even our talents. I was proud, yet to me he would always be my son, always someone I wanted to protect. It was so hard to let him go.

He knew it, tried to soften it with humor and gentle taunts. I let him have his way, subdued my urge to keep him here.

Vlar had the right to seek his own destiny, walk his own path, and who was I to interfere with what the gods had planned for him?

They had brought me my Graitaaan. I had to trust in them.

"I will be fine, Father. I will send word to Grandfather, who can pass them to you. You will always know how I am and where I am, all right?"

My father, the king, was the only one who could receive a mind link outside the barrier.

I nodded, without words for all I felt, and his smile turned crooked for a moment, acknowledging my inner pain.

Vlar was not one to prolong things; he was like Graitaaan in that way, facing the unpleasant with a surge of defiance.

Vlar hugged me once more, then stepped back and turned to the Vasleia that would take him to the barrier. From there...

I had told him to stop in Masaria, see what king now ruled generations after Inean. There Vlar could offer Finnarian services, make a living and be independent

of his royal status here if he so wished. It would please Vlar to be able to fight, and he would be a brilliant teacher of martial skills.

Masaria would be lucky to have him.

Vlar mounted with smooth skill and looked at me one last time, holding his fist over his heart in a gesture of respect, before turning the Vasleia and heading out the gates.

I stood in silence, the wind blowing hair across my face, sticking to the wetness there.

* * *

“You did the right thing.”

Warm arms came around me where I sat on the edge of the bed, staring into space.

I snorted, a shaky sound at best, clearly revealing my less than stable emotions.

“He will do well out there. He is too wild to remain here. It is too peaceful, and he has not learned the meaning of peace, does not know how to appreciate it yet.” I could feel Graitaan’s shrug against my back. “He will learn as we learned, and he will come back someday better for it.”

I nodded but could not take my mind off my son riding even now to leave Finnaria. To leave us.

He kissed my neck and leaned forward to drag his teeth over the skin, knowing all too well what that did to me when I was on the edge of my lust cycle.

I cursed softly under my breath, and he laughed in his throat, the low sound going straight to my shaft.

A primal growl grew in my chest, and I whirled, pressing him flat to the bed, looming over him. If this was his way of diverting me, he was doing a damn fine job.

He grinned and stretched, arching just slightly to rub his body against mine. The soft black skin of his belly tempted me, as the coarser scales over his chest

goaded me into further action. Over all the years we had been together, never had our passion died or burned less brightly. If anything, it had grown over time, honed to a fine awareness of each other.

“You are playing with fire, little one,” I whispered, knowing my eyes were turning red as heat rose in my groin, demanding I satisfy the hunger, demanding sexual energy to feed my Finnarian body.

His smile widened, and he reached up to cup my cheeks and draw me closer so our mouths brushed each other.

“Draconians love fire,” he murmured against my lips.

I wanted to draw out the game, resist his temptation, but I was too far gone in my cycle now, too needy to be able to punish my little one in the way he so deserved. That would have to wait for later.

I fed on his lips—bit them none too gently, only just managing to keep the edges of my fangs from piercing them.

He moaned under me, hands moving to my shoulders, kneading them restlessly as he parted his legs to wrap around me. I could feel his shaft emerge from its sheath, hot and wet against my skin.

“Feel my energy,” he moaned, shifting so our shafts rubbed along each other, making me hiss as my need spiked. “Take it now. Take me.” His teeth were bared with challenge, his eyes opening to meet mine, fierce and bright.

My Finnarian instincts rose, undeniable in their strength, and I held him down, panting around the distension of my fangs, my body beginning to burn with heat. This would be no long, lazy coupling—not now.

I slid my left hand down his form, loving every inch of him, before dipping into the edges of his sheath, drawing forth the slick moisture to coat my fingers well.

He moaned, and I could feel him quiver. His sheath was so very sensitive, and I smiled as I dropped my face against his neck, licking the soft skin there just where

the hard scales of his nape met the softer skin of the sides. I inhaled his scent, closing my eyes at the rush of passion that almost overwhelmed me.

I presented my moistened fingers to his entrance and speared two deep. He arched upon the impalement, a half snarl of pleasurable pain escaping his mouth. His claws emerged, digging into my back now, and I could feel his body shiver with the wild energy that flowed through him, awakened by our coupling. His wings flapped feebly, occasionally completely encasing us.

I had to half hold him down just to mount him fully, and I reveled in the small struggle as I presented my shaft to his entrance, meeting his golden eyes as I pressed in.

He threw his head back, moaning, a quiver of momentary pain running through him before he looked back at me, a challenge in his eyes.

I growled in answer, thrust hard and again, until I rested balls-deep in my mate's body, fully encased in heat and energy that flowed over me, soothing the lust for a moment so that I could think again.

Until Graitaan drove his hips up, forcing me even deeper into tight heat. I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, then opened them again, meeting my mate's triumphant smirk.

I put a hand beneath him and thrust, driving him onto my shaft with some force.

He gasped, but I felt the pleasure as our link began to pulse with our joining. He writhed upon my shaft, soft growls urging me on. His wings wrapped round me, soft membrane holding me secure, insulating us from the outside world.

I used my hand to hold him steady as I began to snap my hips, driving my shaft into his body with ever-increasing speed and pressure, a snarl curling my mouth as I leaned down, licking his neck once before plunging my fangs into him.

Graitaan cried out in ecstasy, pulling me tighter against him, his own teeth bared, his talons digging into my flesh and drawing my blood as I drank his.

Our bond swelled and pulsed with the force of the link, and we soared on its back, totally one with each other in that precious moment of time.

His energy flowed into me, fed my body and my soul with completeness.

I came so hard that for a moment I thought I almost fainted, dimly aware of Graitaan following me into bliss only a second or two later, hot cream splashing up over my chest and stomach as his wings spread out to their full extent in reaction.

After withdrawing my fangs, I hung over him, panting, unable to move, reveling in the quiet peace that always flooded my very being after such an intimate act with my little one. So many years—Graitaan being immortal now—and still this never palled, never grew less than amazing.

He drew a deep breath and gently stroked my lips before lifting one of his talons to his face and licking away my blood with long laps of that amazing tongue, his look pure sexual enticement.

I grinned, slowly regaining both thought and strength, rolling my shoulders so I could feel the marks of his passion upon my back.

“You taste good, Finnarian,” he purred, cleaning each talon in turn. “I wonder if my ancestors ate your ancestors.”

“Probably only the one time. Then my ancestors caught your ancestors and created the best sex slaves ever known.” My leer made him grin and pull me down to lick my lips clean of his own blood.

We lay together for a time, and I held him close, needing his touch to soothe my thoughts into order. He stroked my hair with gentle fingers, showing how he felt my mood, and I could feel his own sadness just under the surface.

That he was sad was something I could never endure.

I rose from the bed at last, and he lay there, watching me dress with his usual interest in my every move.

I pondered how to distract him. Then a small smile formed on my lips as I headed for the door.

“I saw that.” His voice held suspicion, knowing me all too well, it seemed.

I opened the door, prudently providing an escape before I faced him. “What?” I questioned with innocence brimming in the word.

Graithaan crossed his arms over his chest where he lay, narrowing his eyes, never taking that gimlet stare from me. “You are up to something or perhaps have forgotten to tell me something I won’t like.”

I arched an eyebrow in wounded surprise. “I would never.”

“Yes, you would. Out with it.”

“Well, there is perhaps a small detail I have forgotten to tell you. I only found it out yesterday, and it slipped my mind due to Vlar’s departure.”

Graithaan sat up, a hint of worry appearing on his features. “Oh gods, what now? Every time you forget, it is usually something...”

“Well, you know our next son was arriving today from his mother’s home?” I watched his expression avidly.

Fortunately the matter of breeding had long since been settled. Graithaan was fine with my seed being donated to a Finnarian woman, but he had vetoed actual contact, something I was more than happy to comply with. I wanted no one else but my little bloodmate.

We had had two other sons since Vlar; a small number, true, but enough for Graithaan, who claimed I had more than enough already. One had just moved out, and we had heard there would be another arriving shortly.

Graithaan had been looking forward to it and had spent a whole month arranging the room and making sure everything was in place. My little mate liked things settled ahead of time. He did not deal well with surprises, which was why I often supplied him with them just to see the sparks fly.

I never wanted to be boring.

“Yesss,” he said slowly, looking for the angle in this that had my lips already curling with anticipation.

“Well, it seems like there might be more.”

“More what?”

I put a foot outside the door. “It seems the mother did not inform us that it was a multiple birth.”

Graithaan’s jaw dropped, and his eyes lit to fire. “Twins?” His tone was pure horror at the thought of having two identical images of me running through the palace creating havoc in their wake. One was handful enough.

“No, triplets.”

I made it out the door before the bedside table hit the hallway and shattered against the stone wall.

I laughed as I fled.

“Fucking Finnarians!” Graithaan’s roar followed me down the stairs.

All was right in our world again.

 THE END 

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J. C. Owens

J.C. Owens originally wrote historical fiction with three published books under J.C. McGuire and still loves the genre but, having discovered the art of writing erotic male/male fiction, is now obsessed with it. Fantasy backdrops make a beautifully blank page to work with and J.C. only wishes that the characters were real!

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