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Blue Heaven

Take him from Heaven's Seat. Bring him to me. We will protect his sacred head. Stryver Zorti's mission appeared simple. Kidnap the Godchild and deliver him to his master. But with the first meeting of the holy man's azure gaze, desire surged in him to strip bare the God and touch the man within.

Worshiped all his life, the Godchild is shocked by the stranger who dared lay hands on him, even if to save him from assassins. With a different name given by his new ally, Blue is freed from the constraints of the holy order for the first time. He revels in the extraordinary experiences opening to him, then to the passion that sparks between him and the hard-edged, oddly gentle Stryver. But a god does not love, and if discovered, their precarious utopia will shatter, destroying any chance for a future together--that is if the assassins don't kill them first.

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BLUE HEAVEN

Jadette Paige

EROTIC ROMANCE



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BLUE HEAVEN

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DEDICATION

With all my love, I dedicate this book to my writing sisters Amber Green, Ali Katz, Cherise Sinclair and Cate Chase. I honestly don't know if this book would have been written if not for you ladies. Thanks much, Amber, for the coconut oil.

BLUE HEAVEN

JADETTE PAIGE

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Chapter One

On strong winds from Heaven, Fate arrives to play with empty hearts.

Take him from Heaven's Seat. Bring him to me. We will protect his sacred head. Master Aidal's instructions ran through Stryver Zorti's mind as he entered the main gate of the religious city. They helped him to remain focused on his goal.

Two Raegemon soldiers brushed past him. He stiffened, lowered his head, and glanced back. The two armored men disappeared into a cluster of people. They hadn't paid attention to his rough, leather attire worn by most mercenaries. And why would they? Even mercenaries attended the annual festival.

He wished his old friend, comrade, and lover, Rance, was alive to help watch his back. But no, the protection, the connection they had shared on and off missions had ended a year prior after a poison dart pierced his lover's spine.

He clenched his fists, shaking off the depressing memories. Once this mission was done, he'd have his freedom to live alone. Once free from his servitude to his master, he'd find a nice little farm, nothing too large, and grow fruit trees. He'd never seek another relationship. Rance's loss hurt too much.

If all went the way he planned, he'd hide in the cathedral, and when night fell, he'd have the prize. He needn't worry about the

guard discovering his purpose here. He'd slip unnoticed by the warriors to steal their most precious person.

The Godchild.

He found his target, the holiest of men, on Sanctuary Avenue, the road leading to the Cathedral of Heaven's Seat. Revelers flowed about him, celebrating the Leirinto Festival in honor of another flourishing year in the Raegemon region of upper Jomin Provence.

Stryver moved along the avenue, even with the dais carried by four shaved-head monks dressed in flowing, golden robes. Curiosity drove him forward. One look up close at the revered man wouldn't hurt. A simple glance to measure what challenge his target might offer when Stryver kidnapped him.

He swung his gaze toward the human instilled with a god's soul.

The wind gusted, ruffling Stryver's hair and swaying the long linen bands streaming from the Godchild's hat. Decorative pennants snapped.

Fathomless, clear azure eyes, purity radiating from them, glanced his way. They snagged and held Stryver's eyes, burning into his mind, branding his soul.

The Godchild's eyes widened with surprise, recognition, or fear. Stryver couldn't tell.

A light flickered deep within Stryver's chest. It grew warmer, the heat increasing with each heartbeat. He stumbled closer. He lifted a hand. Desire to touch the holy man overrode his normal caution. Uncontrollable need to discover what lay hidden beneath the white linen robes, the intricate folded hat, and the silken veil dominated his actions. He had to view the Godchild's features, his body, naked to his gaze.

Heartbeats slowed.

Breaths lasted an eternity.

The light in Stryver's chest brightened, spreading warmth, anticipation. The holy man looked away.

The connection between them broke. The Godchild's attention moved to the next person lining the crowded streets.

Gasping for air, trembling, Stryver stopped, his arm still raised.

He stared at nothing, his senses dulled.

One of the monks mingling in the crush of people placed something in his hand, said a quiet, mumbled blessing before disappearing in the crowds.

Someone bumped him.

Bright clothes streaked by. Pennants waved. The long poles they were attached to tilted. Painted masks leered. The noise, the smells converged on him. Celebrants dressed in home-spun clothes, alongside dark-robed, hooded pilgrims, slipped past him in a human array of textures, noises, and odors, jostling him out of the way. The procession moved forward.

The mind-numbing innocence, the purity of the holy man's gaze sent chills through Stryver. His body shook from the aftershocks. Weakened, vulnerable, he staggered into the nearest alley. He slumped against the dingy brick wall. He drew in deep gulps of air tinged with smoky incense to calm his racing heart, barely managing to gain control of his senses.

What the fuck had he gotten himself into? He couldn't go through with this mission. The man's power was overwhelming.

He maneuvered most missions so as to keep direct contact to a minimum, but this opportunity had presented a chance to survey his mark. Nothing good had come from his decision to look upon the man except to discover that the Godchild possessed a degree of the sight, an ability to drain a person of his very essence.

Stryver closed his eyes. He dipped his chin, resting it on his chest. No one his entire life had touched him in such a manner. *Damn*. The holy man had seen into his soul. Did he now know the danger nipping at his sacred ass? This aspect of the mission needed addressing. Now, before he proceeded.

He lifted a trembling hand, bringing his palm face level to see what the monk had given him. *Hartshorne*. Relaxing, he lowered his hand to thump against his thigh, fist clenched.

So the effect of the Godchild's gaze on people was known by the Leirinto Order. Well enough, too, for the monastery to prepare aid for the ones in need. He frowned and touched the beaded pouch tucked into the waistband of his leather pants. A small vial filled with protective potion nestled in one corner. This explained his master's reason for giving him the potion. He should have used it earlier. He shook his head at his stupidity. Too late now. He'd save it for after the kidnapping.

Aidal had warned him as he departed Shaifo, his home base, to have special care with this mission. The elderly man's words flared to life in his mind. *His power is unknown. His life is in danger. You must go and take him from Heaven's Seat*. Aidal never allowed his instructions to be questioned. When needed, his master even twisted his words for his own benefit.

Stryver crushed the Hartshorne and lifted it to his nose. He grimaced at the pungent aroma. Throat and nose burning, his belly tightened in disgust.

In slow measures, his strength returned enough to give him energy to straighten and ease into the crowds trailing behind the raised platform. Doubts increased with each passing moment. Stryver avoided moving ahead of his target.

Jeweled incense burners swung from long, golden chains held tight in the hands of the monks at the four corners of the dais. Each swing matched time with the song, sending smoky wisps into the air. Stryver blinked the burning from the frankincense mingled with the Hartshorne from his eyes. The priest's chants echoed above the overall clamor of the crowd.

*Those living near and far,
Those born and to-be-born—
May all blessings come to those in need.*

A food vendor hawked his wares next to Stryver. The aroma from the old man's fried potato cakes struck him full force. Food held no interest to him, not with the heat and the sweaty, unwashed masses, most of whom roamed intoxicated on the abundance of free wine. The smells worsened the churning in his gut.

He swallowed the threatening bile and stepped toward the middle of the street, right in front of a Raegemon knight. Ducking his head, turning his shoulder toward the man, he worked his way through the burgeoning crowds to reach the line of monks behind the dais. His gaze searching, he spotted several more knights. Not as many as he'd expected, but enough to control the crowds.

On his right, a pilgrim swayed, unsteady on his feet. Drunk on plum wine or religious fervor, the man presented Stryver an opportunity to enter the cathedral unnoticed. He slipped one arm about the inebriated man's waist and pressed the nerve point on his neck with his other hand. The man slumped against Stryver, dead weight in his arms.

In a well-practiced movement, Stryver pulled his arm over his shoulders and half carried the unconscious stranger to the nearest alley. No one noticed. No one followed. Continuing to the end of the alley, he divested the man of his robes and allowed him to slump in an undignified manner in the litter and dirt. He muttered a low apology to the man. He hated to involve innocent people in his missions, but there were times when need outweighed his normal methods.

Stryver worked fast in case a knight walked by the alley opening. He dragged the long robes over his head. Too snug. He stopped struggling with the cloth. He clenched his teeth in annoyance. Why hadn't he taken the time to judge the man's size? Frustrated, he stared at the smaller man slumped on the stone ground.

Should have never looked at the Godchild.

No help for it. He had to enter the cathedral as a pilgrim. Sliding his blade from his boot, he slit the robe down the front. He'd hold it in place—wouldn't matter, he didn't intend to wear it long. Hopefully,

the bad fit would go unnoticed. Rancid body odor rose from the cloth and almost gagged him. He closed his eyes and concentrated on keeping from spewing his earlier meal.

He braced a hand flat on the stone wall, willing his senses to return to normal. He frowned. He'd felt fine before contact with the Godchild, and now, scant moments later, his physical reactions were off, and his gut wouldn't calm. Damn it, his talents were wasted on this type of mission, but Aidal had insisted he go. Stryver did his best work in the dark, stealing into places. A mercenary, a thief, yes—not a rescuer, if rescuing was the true reason behind what his master wanted to do with the Godchild.

Startling azure eyes appeared in his mind. Stryver shook off the renewed curiosity the man's gaze instilled in him to discover what lay hidden beneath the Godchild's robes. He'd agreed to take the holy man, and he held his word sacred. This guaranteed him the best jobs with the most pay. Soon, he'd have his own land and house, free from Aidal. He'd decided, when he left his home base of Shaifo, that this was his last job. Retirement brimmed on the horizon where he intended to disappear. Out there, he'd find peace from the blood, death, and thievery—from his grief over losing his lover. A god incarnate didn't fit in his plans. Drawing in deep, cleansing breaths, he managed to clear his mind of the lingering, sickening haze and idiotic yearning.

He had to remember to avoid direct eye contact with the Godchild. Pride in his skills supplied the incentive to filter the last of the weakness from him. He never failed his missions. Holy man or not, he'd go to Aidal, by force or willingly. Stryver cared little for anything but the completion of his mission. His master could even take the man's head the moment they arrived in Shaifo. He didn't care as long as he received his freedom.

Stryver entered the celebrations, and this time, he shuffled with humble confidence, head lowered, shoulders slumped forward to help hold the robe snug about his chest. The hood would keep his covert

surveys of his surroundings hidden. He hoped not long after sunset he'd have his prize. He grinned. Yes, he'd execute the kidnapping and leave, towing the Godchild with him.

Once he finished this mission and was settled on his farm, he planned to grow and nurture an orchard. Perhaps, over time, he'd find another man to love. One to share this new life with him. He deserved some measure of happiness to erase the death and vice from his mind. The Godchild's eyes materialized in his mind. He blinked. His cock tightened. Dammit, he was not attracted to that innocent gaze.

Struggling to overcome this unwelcome spurt of desire, Stryver followed behind the procession. The revelers continued through the courtyard to the Cathedral of Heaven's Seat. Only the monks, priests, and pilgrims were allowed through the double golden doors gilded with the names of all the Gods and into the inner sanctuary. Stryver followed, head bowed in mock reverence, but he glanced about the area, searching for places to hide until dark. Entrance into the monastery from here guaranteed fewer eyes to witness his stealth.

Stained glass windows, bordered by huge, white marble columns, lined the three-story building. The only door he noticed was the one he'd entered. He gritted his teeth. There had to be other passageways.

The line of worshipers filed into the cathedral down the middle aisle toward the platform in the front where the marble altar stood ready for today's service. A brilliant, golden throne waited behind the altar for His Imminence. The Abbot was seated in a smaller chair next to the throne.

On both sides of the aisle, the first two rows filled before Stryver's turn came to sit at the end. He glanced toward the platform. The dais halted, and its bearers lowered it to the floor. The Godchild stood and glided with regal grace onto the steps leading to the throne. Taking the holy man's measure against the others about him, Stryver noted the Godchild was much shorter than his own six-foot height by at least a head.

The holy man sat, posture straight, his gaze on the Abbot.

Movement from one of the pilgrims across the aisle on the first row caught Stryver's attention. The hood on the worshiper's head slipped and revealed a band of armor.

Black Raegemon armor.

Shit.

There were knights among the pilgrims. Tension tightened Stryver's back muscles. His gaze switched from person to person, seeking any others in the crowd. He hated unexpected problems. This was one of them. His chances of discovery and capture doubled. He refused to allow this mission to fail, and capture was out of the question. He'd die first.

But why were Raegemon warriors hiding behind pilgrims' robes? Was he the only one? The man straightened the hood with a tilt of his head, aiming a covert glance over his shoulder toward the balcony along the back of the church. Stryver followed the line with his gaze. Nothing but elongated shadows shifted up there. Shadows meant people. But who? The hair on the back of his neck stood up. Why were they here? To protect or kill? He'd lay his dream of a peaceful retirement on the line to bet that these men were prepared to do more than worship.

His plans for a kidnapping under the cover of dark changed, swift and decisive. He stiffened, preparing for whatever was about to happen. Adrenaline surged through him, building. He took note of the distance between where he sat and his goal. One hundred strides would reach him if he used a normal gait. No, he'd use his quickstep. His lip curled in anticipation. He tapped the ball of one foot softly on the floor. No one would catch him once he took off. His ability to move at a faster speed was the primary reason Aidal declared him best for this mission. Now, he understood why.

The music ended, and the Abbot stood, moving to the altar. Before the aged cleric opened his mouth to begin the service, a steel shaft whirled from the balcony at the rear of the cathedral and imbedded in the center of his forehead. The poor fool's eyes and

mouth widened in stunned surprise. A narrow stream of blood leaked from the protrusion. The Abbot crumpled to the floor.

Stryver blurred into action. In one blink of an eye, he stood in the row. In the next, he reached the start of the benches. Calling up all his reserved strength, he switched to his highest level of speed. Another blur surrounded him, and he touched the Godchild's front vestments, closing the material in his fist. The holy man started to stand, and a confused frown clouded the smooth line between his eyes. Another shaft flew toward the altar, its feathers whistling. With a flick of his wrist, Stryver jerked the Godchild off his feet. Instead of his chest, the bolt penetrated the top of the revered man's right thigh.

The monks leaped forward, giving Stryver the needed coverage from more arrows. He pulled the stunned holy man over the back of the tilted throne. A wooden door on the left behind the chair caught his eye.

Hoping to find an exit from the cathedral there, he slammed through. He twisted, sending both of them spinning, to kick the door shut. They fell together, sliding in a rotating circle on the slick, gray marble floor.

They came to a stop ten feet from the door, lying across the hall with the Godchild straddling Stryver's hips. Faces just a breath apart, he lifted his gaze to meet the azure one staring down at him. Somewhere during their wild escape, the Godchild's hat and concealing veils had fallen off, and now, the secret of why the holy order kept him hidden from the people's view met Stryver's gaze. A god made flesh. White brows arched above intense blue eyes, and his lips—the fuller, lower one rested above his own, parted with his breath. Skin like the finest porcelain stretched across the straight line of his nose and the soft edges of his jaw and cheeks. Belying his true age, for he was no older than Stryver's own score years, his hair, so silver it appeared white, flowed long and silky about his shoulders to envelop them both in a shadowy, snug nest.

Don't look into his eyes!

Stryver swung his gaze to the right and behind the holy man. A stained glass window with a warrior seducing a bare-chested maiden in the foreground rose toward the ceiling. The artist had striven for romance, and with the holy man lying on top of him, Stryver fought against grinning. His cock twitched in response. The picture brought to mind lurid, obscene images of naked bodies, slick skin, and sweaty sex.

“Who are you?” the smaller man whispered. His voice, distracting and soft like sweet, honeyed butter, slid over him. Hot, damp breaths coasted over Stryver’s lips. His growing erection throbbed.

Twisting away to the right, Stryver turned until he hunched on the balls of his feet, mentally fighting the sudden rise of desire between his legs. The Godchild rolled to a sitting position.

The Godchild stared at him, but he kept his focus on the holy man’s chest. A moment then two slipped by before Stryver answered. “I’m here to save you.”

Expression brimming with curiosity, the Godchild opened his mouth to speak, but a scream from the cathedral stopped him, bringing his gaze around. Stryver sprang to the door and lowered the four wooden posts to keep it shut. He stepped back in time to avoid an axe cracking through the wood.

Worry creased the holy man’s brow and tinged his words. “My monks.”

“Too late for them.” Stryver returned to his side. He knelt next to the leg with the bolt embedded in it. “We have to remove this. Tie it off to stop the bleeding.”

Azure eyes focused on the wound. He shook his head. “It’s nothing.” As if wanting to prove the point, the Godchild eased the bolt out. He laid it on the floor beside him.

Amazed at his ability to resist the pain, Stryver tore a large section from the front tail of his raiment, ripping several wide strips from the white cloth. He wrapped the lengths about the wound. Very little

blood seeped from the spot. Well-formed, lean muscles twitched with his first touch. Stryver shot the Godchild a glance, careful not to look directly into his eyes, as heat spiraled through his abdomen to end in his cock. The holy man stared at him, a half-curious, slightly confused frown bringing his brows together.

Moments later, Stryver finished tying the strips together and stood, holding out his hand. “We must leave now, or your monks’ lives will have been spent in vain should you die.”

“I will not die.”

The Godchild came to his feet. His silvered hair swished over his shoulders. With the unknown enemy so close, the hair gave Stryver an idea to prove he’d taken the holy man. He whipped out his blade and pulled the holy man close by the front of his robes. He grasped the silver hair hanging down his back. In a blink, he sliced through the thickness.

The Godchild screamed, falling to his knees, his hands grasping at the severed ends.

A reaction from all his training in Aidal’s forces to silence any noise which might give away their location propelled Stryver’s clenched fist up to aim at the holy man’s brow. He hoped he wouldn’t crack his skull.

Chapter Two

Awakening is a burden to be born.

Intense agony rippled from the sliced ends of the Godchild's hair and traveled throughout his body. From the side of his tear-blurred vision, a fist swung in the direction of his head. The very man who'd saved him from the assassins appeared intent on harming him more in addition to chopping off his hair.

The stranger stopped a fraction from the Godchild's temple, his amber gaze wide, surprise etched on his lean features. Black hair edged with dark red along the front of his face fell across his brow. His aura flared about his body, a brighter, sharper magenta.

Terrified cries rose in the cathedral.

The Godchild blinked, clearing his vision to stare at the ebony eyebrows above the bright amber eyes. He couldn't speak. Pain continued to radiate from the severed ends of his hair.

Heartbeats clicked by. The unnatural quiet in the passageway added to his nervousness.

Who was this man who dared lay hands on him? Had this stranger who'd saved him found out his true identity? Was this why the attack took place? His own name went through his mind for a brief second, but he dismissed it. Better not to even think it, much less speak it, or so the Abbot claimed.

Heavy fists struck the door leading to the cathedral.

His rescuer lowered his arm and tucked the hair into the small bag hanging from his waistband.

The Godchild gasped. A plea came out before he thought. "Please. My hair."

The stranger shook his head. "Don't think so." He patted the bag. "This is my proof I had you. Won't get paid otherwise."

Paid? To take me? But why? The Godchild tried but failed to calm his breathing. The ends of his hair throbbed with anguish.

Grasping his arm, the stranger jerked him to his feet. The Godchild wobbled, his legs weak, and the wound in his thigh pulsed with a lesser pain for a moment. The man loped to the end of the hallway, tugging the Godchild, stumbling and tripping, behind him. He stopped at the door blocking his view of the other side. Agony surged in the severed ends of the Godchild's hair, calling out to his latent abilities.

Under the stranger's hand, the skin on the Godchild's arm grew warmer, undulating with his power.

The man frowned, readjusted his grip on the Godchild's wrist, and motioned to the door. "What's out there?"

The Godchild didn't respond. He wanted his hair back.

Squeezing harder, this stranger gently shook him. "Answer me."

Vision still blurry with anguish-induced tears, he met the man's gaze. "The gardens."

Placing his ear against the wooden door to listen, his rescuer stilled, his body stiff. He pressed the latch, easing the portal open a crack. Tension tightened his hold on the Godchild's arm. Alert, the man slipped through the door to stand under the covered walkway encircling the gardens. Water flowed from the fountain in the center. The soothing sound gave the Godchild little comfort.

Unintentionally, energy surged from deep inside the Godchild and sent a hot flood of power through his body. The stranger's fingers loosened. Confusion clouded the glance he sent at the Godchild, questions darkening his eyes. Another pulse of energy broke free, swirling inside the Godchild. Sizzling currents passed through him

into the man. He dropped the Godchild's arm and careened to one side.

His rescuer glared at him as he questioned in a hushed whisper, "What did you do?"

"My pardon." He gave the man a quick, unsteady, apologetic bow. "Sometimes I cannot control my power at times of inner unrest."

"I'm here to help you. Keep that in mind."

Help? You took my hair. Unable to stop, the Godchild eyed the bag on his hip. "Yes. I will."

"Come, we'll go over the wall." The man led the way over the lush grass bordering the covered walkway. He continued to scan the area around them, taking in every area of the gardens.

More cries and shouts rang out from behind them. Unable to stop, the Godchild tensed, wondering if Luther, the King of Raegemon, had heard of the attack. Luther would order his knights to protect him. Yes, the King would demand the capture of the ones determined to harm him. He glanced over his shoulder. The raw ends of his hair glided against his robes. He gritted his teeth against the resurgence of pain. No one came through the doorway at the end of the hall.

Not sure what to do, he trailed behind the man. This stranger crossed to the outer curtain wall of the gardens. Grasping the rough stones where they joined each other, he scaled the ten foot barrier hand-over-hand. At the top, he sat and leaned over and offered a helping hand. The Godchild glanced once more at the doorway they'd just left.

"They won't reach you for a while yet. Too much confusion. Come with me. I'll keep you safe."

His words slipped into the Godchild's body. Should he believe him? He had cut his hair. The Godchild looked at him, but he stared at his chest. The man's aura, now calmer, swirled in slow, easy motions. He reached up and placed his hand in the larger one. Without a word, his rescuer pulled. Unprepared for his strength, the Godchild flew up

from the ground. The man tilted toward him, off balance, but caught himself and leaned back, tugging him to the top of the wall.

“What do they feed you? Leaves and grasses? Careful.” His rescuer balanced him alongside him, helping to arrange the heavy ceremonial robe about the Godchild’s body. “We must stay concealed while we’re still in the city’s boundaries. Don’t call attention to yourself. Understand?”

“Why? The knights will come and protect me.”

“Not this time. Someone wants you dead. If you come with me, I’ll take you to a safe place.”

So much had happened in such a short amount of time. The Godchild’s mind stalled on what he should do. He studied the man. He had saved him, but he had also cut his hair. Without thinking, the Godchild’s gaze was drawn to the bag. Surely, this strange man would hold true to his word to protect him. It’d give him time to take back what was his. “Very well.”

His rescuer smiled, wide and bright.

The Godchild’s heart skipped a beat.

“Then come, Godchild. The doors are opening to a new future for you.”

New future? Alarms went off in his mind. He had never left the protective walls of Heaven’s Seat except to attend the festivals celebrated during the year. Unease riffled through him.

The man slid down the other side of the wall and reached up to help him. He tried to mimic the actions of his rescuer, but his robes caught on the stone. He fell. Strong arms caught him and held him against a broad, muscled chest. Under the leather of his rescuer’s sleeveless vest, the man’s heart fluttered under his palms. His own sped in response. His rescuer lowered his head, firm, thin lips parted. The Godchild held his breath, unable to tear his gaze from the man’s mouth.

A soft smile curved those lips. “You’ll do fine. Keep your mouth shut. Let me handle everything.” He released the Godchild and

stepped away. Slipping off his dark pilgrim's robe, the man swung it about his shoulders. "Wear this. It'll help conceal your identity if there are more assassins hiding out here."

The Godchild stuck his arms into the sleeves. The robe hung loose on him, even with his own beneath it. Rank odor rose from the cloth. He wrinkled his nose. "It stin—"

His rescuer cut him off. "You'll get use to it. Grows on you after a while."

This odor wasn't from him. No, the Godchild had smelled him, a musky sandalwood scent, after he'd landed on him.

The sound of heavy, steel-shod boots running over the cobblestones came from the opening of the alley behind the Godchild. His rescuer jerked him to the side. Crates hid him from view. The man squatted next to him and eased out to look.

"Damn. Raegemon has called out reinforcements."

"The knights will catch the ones who did this."

"They *are* the ones."

His words held the ring of truth, but how could he believe him? Raegemon was his homeland, his sanctuary. No one here would dare attempt to harm him, their beloved Godchild. Or so the Abbot had sworn. But the nagging thought that someone had found out his true identity worried him. No, he wouldn't believe it. He shook his head. "You're wrong."

"I'm not. I saw the armor. It was them, hiding in pilgrims' robes, waiting to attack."

The knights' running steps faded, and he stood. "We have to go. All I ask is for you to trust me."

This was a strange and new experience for the Godchild. He trusted only the closest people around him and only to a certain degree. He fully expected them to turn on him the moment they discovered which God he was. Most of his monks avoided direct contact with him as though they suspected. The Abbot, the one man who'd raised him from a baby, always seemed to have his own

motives regarding his life. Would this man be any different? What other choice did he have? His monks lay dead or dying. He had no idea what lay behind the closed door to the cathedral. He knew for certain that the Abbot lay sprawled dead on the marble floor. Were the knights a part of the attack? The possibility was there.

With no direction, he had to make his own decision. Unaccustomed to this, he stared at the man. The memory of his hard chest, his strong but gentle hands on him, came to mind and helped him decide. He wanted to know more about him.

So he nodded. He would place his belief in this strange, unknown man.

His rescuer grinned and led the way to another alley converging with the one that ran behind the cathedral. The Godchild followed him.

The stranger took him down twisting, sharp-turn alleyways filled with trash and rancid odors. The impure smells rose from all around them, masking the one from the robe he wore. His nose wrinkled at the foul odors. And the people—he'd never dreamed. They brushed past them, most with their gazes lowered, hopes vanquished long ago.

The Godchild had never imaged such a world existed outside the protective walls of Heaven's Seat. None of the short jaunts through the streets for the many festivals the abbot insisted he attend ever took him this far into the city's interior. The people celebrating on the avenues he traveled appeared joyful and healthy. But the ones he saw here—they were pitiful. For their sakes, he sent a silent plea to his sister, the Merciful Goddess, to help these poor souls. Most of their clothes were ragged, while others wore nothing but small cloths to hide their nakedness.

Almost all carried despair glinting in hollow gazes. The younger ones still managed to maintain a hint of hope, even joy. In all, the Godchild sensed a hunger. For solid food, for betterment in this life of theirs, for something. He empathized with them. He, too, seemed empty of an important aspect, one he hadn't found. What, he didn't

know, but the void remained deep in his heart, and he wanted to discover the one thing to fill it. He tried to understand, but the answer failed to come.

Occasionally, sunlight fell on a small section of his path, revealing the truth of the squalor. His heart squeezed with compassion. All these years, he had sat cared for in the highest degree while these poor wretches suffered. His monks wasted more food in a week than these had probably eaten in a year.

They came to a small doorway in one darkened alley. The Godchild glanced to the small strip of sky peeking through the gaps in the buildings on either side of him. He had to see his true home, his sanctuary, one more time, for he had no idea what lay behind this door. White clouds obscured some of the blue, but he was able to see a bit of sky. Calmness rippled through him.

His savior stepped inside, holding the door for him. The tiny room held only a small cot, a table, and a couple of stools. The miniature hearth, circular and blackened from all the past meals prepared on it, sat cold in the far right corner.

After a quick survey of the place, the Godchild brought his gaze to his mysterious guide, wondering who he was.

“What’s your name?” The question fell from thin lips in a rough, lean face. Strange. Had he read his mind? His thin nose appeared off centered, perhaps broken sometime in his life.

“I am not allowed to speak it. I have not come into my full power.” The Abbot had sworn this response would satisfy anyone curious enough to ask. From the frown drawing his rescuer’s brows down, it didn’t work.

“Well, I can’t call you Godchild. How about Blue? You like it? I had a dog by that name. He’d always come running when I’d call him.” A smile blossomed on his lips, and the sight sent sharp pangs through the Godchild’s belly.

He stared at this man, considering this new name. It would be different from any he’d known in the past. He gave a little nod.

“You’ll get accustomed to it. Call me Stryver.”

Blue whispered the name, testing it on his tongue. “*Stryver*.” Energy flowed through him. The currents sent delicious aftershocks into his curled toes and fingers. “Very well, Stryver. I will do my best to remember.”

His hair vibrated the air about him. It called to him. “I would like my hair returned.”

In the motion of turning away, Stryver stopped and shot a look over his shoulder. “What?”

“My hair. You c-cut it. I wish it returned.” He held out his hand, waiting.

“Not gonna happen. It’s my gold ticket to prove I had you. If you want it back after I get paid, you can have it.”

Appalled, Blue took a step forward, shaking his head, “No, you must give it to me. Now.”

“You don’t need it. It’s cut. No use to you.” Stryver turned away, moving to where shelves hung from the far wall.

He centered his gaze on the bag at Stryver’s back and concentrated, hands held out in front of his body, palms toward the ceiling. The flap to the bag opened. Long, silver strands slid from their prison, flew the distance separating them, and hovered about the severed ends hanging from Blue’s head, waiting for their reunion. Stryver looked back at him, mouth open to say something. He froze, staring at the long strands floating about him. Blue brought his hands together in supplication, and the separated pieces meshed and reattached.

Some of the uneasy tension careening through him since Stryver removed his hair lessened. Pleasure coursed within his body, and he released a sigh.

Blue met his shocked gaze. Was there fear flowing through his look? The monks often averted their eyes from him, frightened by his abilities. “I cannot be separated from it.”

“Ah.” He shook his head, lifting his gaze toward the ceiling. “Why me? Why does Master choose me to do these jobs?”

“I have no idea. Perhaps he depends on you?” Unsure if he should have answered, Blue studied him. “What are your intentions now?”

“They haven’t changed. I have my duty. I swore to bring you to my master, Aidal, and I keep my word.”

Yes, a man of honor. This explained much to him. This man would carry through with his mission to the very end. Yet as he realized this, another question arose. Would this end with them arriving safely to where his master lived? Where was that? After what had happened in the cathedral, the odds of him succeeding in this matter appeared slim at best, especially if the truth had been discovered. Blue had no doubt that he would live through physical attacks, but the chance of this man’s survival was little to none. Luther would never allow the Godchild to leave his grasp, and Stryver’s life would be forfeit if the King of Raegemon caught him.

His stomach clenched with fear, uneasy at the thought of this man harmed by the very people meant to protect him.

With little motion, Stryver picked up a bundle of clothes from the small cot and tossed them at him. They landed with a low thud against his chest. “Put these on. It’ll help disguise you when we leave the city.”

He caught the bundle on its downward fall toward the floor. He unwrapped the outer layers and revealed dark pants and a pale, long shirt. The nature of the attire confused him. “What kind of clothes are these? I’ve never worn such before.”

“They’re what poor farmers wear in the north. What better way to sneak you out?” He proceeded to slide the peasant attire over his own leather pants and vest. The loose, homespun pants and overshirt of natural cotton heightened his dusky skin and bright eyes. “I’m a simple farmer come for the festival, traveling with my younger brother.” He sent a wink Blue’s way. “That’s you.”

Stryver stopped dressing and stared at his hair. “We’ll have to do something about the color. I wish you hadn’t done that thing with your hair. Short would have been better. We’ll have to dye it. As it is, you’ll stand out with the length, but the color will get us captured within moments of leaving here if we don’t change it.”

Unsure, torn between wanting to submit to his request and the need to fight against doing anything to his hair, he shrugged and asked, “What color?”

“Pardon?”

“What color do you want my hair?”

“Black’s common.”

Without much concentration, he touched the top of his head with one hand and smoothed down to the tips of his hair. From the corner of his eye, Blue verified the silver had turned to black. A simple spell for him and a much better method than what Stryver had suggested. The idea of something coating the strands sent shivers of distaste up his back.

“Right.” Stryver waved a hand toward his head. “Part of your Godly powers?”

“Something like that,” Blue agreed. His gaze lowered to the clothes in his hands. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how to put these on.”

“Simple. Take your clothes off and dress in those.”

“I don’t know how.” Hoping his building anxiety came through with the repetition of his words, Blue looked at him.

“Excuse me? How old are you? Don’t tell me you’ve never gotten dressed before.” Stryver shook his head in disbelief.

Blue had no excuse for his ignorance in fending from himself. Stryver’s words were true. “My monks performed the task of dressing me.”

“Treated like a spoiled baby. Helpless. This mission is doomed. I can see it. I’ll be lying in a ditch, dead.” The words came out low, muttered under his breath, but Blue still heard. The bad thing about

them was they would probably come true. Heated embarrassment flooded his cheeks.

Stryver turned away. "Hold on. Let me dress first, then I'll show you how to do it. But only this once. You're on your own after today."

"Yes, of course." Blue bowed to his back. "My thanks."

He made quick work of pulling his homespun disguise over his clothing. The outer layer concealed his identity. Blue studied him while he dressed. He used little, efficient movements to complete his task. Muscles under the smooth, almost hairless skin rippled. Blue's heartbeat sped, and he frowned, unsure of his reaction.

Once finished, Stryver turned to him. Eyes wide, Blue tensed, anticipating the same fast touch on his own body.

Stryver motioned with one finger. "Come here."

The order sent a charge across Blue's skin. His hair prickled over his scalp.

Oh, Heaven keep me.

He complied. He soon wished he had not. Stryver grabbed the edges of his robes and tugged, pulling them open and off. Next came his linen undershirt. His pants slid over his hips and dropped about his feet. Stryver bent to remove them. The rough texture of his calloused palms on Blue's bare ankle robbed some of his control. His power surged through him, much the same way as when he danced. He loved to dance. Did this mean he loved this strange man's touch? Confused, Blue leaned over and stared into the lean features before him, silently hoping to find the answer.

Stryver lifted his gaze and met Blue's, their faces almost even with each other. His glance held for a heartbeat then darted away. Warm breath breezed across Blue's jaw. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Stare at me."

More confusion flooded his mind. "Why?"

"You have the sight."

Blue shook his head. “The sight?”

“To affect and control people.” Stryver shot a quick look at his face. Blue absorbed it, savoring the heated rush coursing through his body from the visual touch. “Didn’t you know?”

Breathless, Blue responded, low, quietly. “I forgot. It’s never mentioned except for the festivals.”

“Well, stop it.”

“I will try.”

Again, the quick glance winged his way and was followed by the jerking of his underpants off. “Try harder.”

Blue straightened into a rigid stance as numbing heat gathered in his limbs. Not sure if this reaction came with the slight brush of Stryver’s hands against his bare flesh or from the glance he sent him, Blue attempted to draw in a breath but froze, rigid at the pulse vibrating below his belly.

His voice came out sounding out of breath, dazed. “What are you doing to me?”

“Dressing you.”

He reached and touched between his legs where the throbbing originated. Sensations flowed through him, and currents of pure, intense pleasure raced within his veins, more potent than when he danced. He gasped, stiff from the building pressure.

Stryver cursed. “Stop it. Think of something nasty. It’ll help take your mind off it.”

Heat surged to his face. By the heavens, he’d noticed. Think of...no, Blue tried but failed. He had no comparison of nastiness. He wasn’t even sure what his body’s reaction meant. Some mornings, he would awake to this strange reaction, but never had it happened because of another person. Stryver reached for the pants, shoved Blue’s feet in, and jerked them up his legs. This strange man accidentally bumped against Blue’s tight hardness where it brushed against the lower part of his belly.

Fire erupted and raged out of control within Blue. His entire body involuntarily lurched. Lightheaded, he closed his eyes with a groan, tilting against Stryver. “What is happening to me?”

A low chuckle, a simple gust of air came from Stryver. It passed over Blue’s neck, creating a delicious, fiery path across his skin. “Easy. We don’t have time for this. Maybe later. Not now. Haven’t you ever experienced desire? Passion?”

Dizzy with need, Blue shook his head. Searching for stability, he placed his hands on the broad shoulders before him. The hard muscles layered over bone helped steady him. Still, the firm heat between his legs refused to go away. “Tell me what it is?”

“Not now. Later.” Stryver tugged the clothes tighter, covering Blue’s bare skin, hiding the evidence of his strange physical reaction to the other man’s touch.

Blue whispered, “Promise me?”

“I swear.” His oath vibrated from his upper chest into Blue’s palms. Stryver tied the outer sash at Blue’s waist and stepped back. “In detail, too. Will that make you happy?”

He looked at Stryver and managed a fast nod. “I want to know.”

“Turn around. I’ll fasten your hair.”

Weakened, gasping, Blue stumbled away from him. “No.” He held out his hand. “I’ll do it.”

A frown puckered his rescuer’s brow. He shrugged, holding a wide, red ribbon out to Blue.

Taking it without touching him, Blue turned away. Deep inside, reasoning arose that if Stryver touched his hair, an explosion would take place. The power inside him swirled, intensified, seeking a release.

For the next few moments, Blue struggled to pull his hair to the top of his head and tie it off, all the while fighting the exhilarating tension flowing through his body. The pounding of his pulse eased off, and he finished the knot, lowering his hands.

“Not bad. Now, if only things are quiet out there, we can walk out with no trouble.” Stryver stared, his gaze hard and assessing. Blue squirmed under the intensity of his look.

He tilted his head toward the door. “Come, we need to leave now before they close off the gates. We’re near the Caldron’s Arch. The road leads south toward the shore. We’ll catch a boat and turn north. Should throw them off our scent for a bit.”

“Very well. I am ready.” But was he? This entire escapade went beyond any he’d experienced during his time in this era. The Godchildren reincarnated through birth never recalled their previous lives on this world. What would his rescuer say if he learned Blue held a power so massive even the Abbot feared to utter his true name? His name revealed it, but he kept this secret close. Stryver needn’t find out just yet. Blue hoped no one had, but after what had happened, the time approached when the truth would be revealed. He dreaded the impending discovery. This man’s concern would turn to hate. For some reason, his heart mourned the future loss.

Chapter Three

To seek the truth often releases dark doubts.

The streets on the south end of the city held odors of rancid oils, decaying fruits, and many other cheap foods from the market booths. Fewer people roamed about also. Stryver searched for Raegemon knights, hoping to distract his mind from the memory of the Godchild standing before him, naked and open to his gaze, so very different in size and manner from Rance. He had felt desire looking at the smaller man earlier. He swallowed, surprised at his reaction to the beauty and pureness of the pale skin over taut, lean muscles. He should have never helped him dress.

Why the hell had he sworn to show him what his hardened cock meant? Rance's image appeared in his mind. God, how could he desire this small man when he still missed Rance? But he did want him—too much. His own erection, hidden under his clothes, had rivaled the Godchild's. He'd never been so stretched and hard, throbbing with need, not even with Rance. He could have thrown the smaller man on the cot, taking his body without a thought. But he'd found the control he needed to keep from overpowering the Godchild and taking him by force. His desire had almost reached that point.

Movement along the side of the street drew his attention to the couple of soldiers lounging in empty doorways. Stryver snapped to the present. He shoved his unholy thoughts to the back of his mind, focusing on the armored men. They appeared at ease, probably hadn't heard the news yet. Soon, though. The success of their escape

depended on speed. He glanced over his shoulder. The Godchild stared at their surroundings, his face smooth, unreadable.

The holy man baffled him. Of course, Stryver had never associated with anyone like him, so his confusion seemed reasonable. Or did it? What information did he have about the Godchild? None except for the fact he possessed godlike powers. The extent of those powers remained a mystery.

He intended to find out once they cleared the city gate. No more surprises, especially not one like the sudden rise of unbridled desire he'd experienced while in the tiny room alone with the man. For this mission to succeed, he needed information only the Godchild possessed.

They approached Caldron's Arch. Two guards, one on each side of the massive gateway, eyed their arrival.

"Halt. State your business."

Pasting on his most charming smile, Stryver moved to the guard on the right. "We're returning home. My brother and I came for the festival, but we have to leave." He bent closer and spoke low as if to a valued comrade. "He doesn't want to go, but we can't delay. Won't eat this winter if I let him have his way."

The guard leaned over and looked past him to the Godchild. Stryver tensed. If the holy man betrayed them with any strange behavior, they were done for. The guard's eyes widened, and a slow, besotted glaze coated his eyes. "Your brother's pretty enough to be a girl. Do you two travel here often?"

One brow shot up at the man's prying lewdness. He followed the guard's line of vision to land on the disguised holy man. Swift heat flowed up Stryver's neck, burning his cheeks while anger at the guard filled him. Jealousy? Over that helpless, tiny excuse of a man? He ignored his own reaction at dressing the Godchild. He chose instead to compare him to his dead lover.

Rance's body had been huge, rawboned, with rough scars criss-crossing here and there. Stryver had been small against him. He'd

loved the feel of Rance's arms around him, sheltering him in the dark. There wasn't any way this diminutive holy man would ever instill enough reason to give rise to jealousy in him simply because another man eyed him.

No, not jealousy, but the idea of this guard looking at the Godchild with lust-tinged interest brought out the need to punch the stupid man. Not for the reason of Stryver's unsatisfied desire but to protect the innocent Godchild. He grunted out an answer, clenching his fist, trying to control the need to plant one on the guard's nose. "Not often. Just for the celebrations."

The Godchild angled a curious glance in Stryver's direction.

Artlessness radiated from the holy man. Stryver suspected but had no true idea what lecherous thoughts roamed behind the guard's bright eyes. If he compared them to his own, he would hit him. Anger built in Stryver until his fingers ached from the tightness of his fists.

"Well, we'd best be off. We have a long way to travel before nightfall." Hoping to escape, Stryver's smile threatened to crack like ice as he attempted to shove his anger aside. They had to go through the gate now, or their chance to leave would disintegrate. All his efforts to rescue the Godchild would be lost in an instant.

The other guard walked to his side. "We have orders not to allow anyone out of the city. You'll have to receive permission from the captain to do so."

Damn, not good. Relaxing his tense muscles, Stryver grinned at the man. "Aw, why? I'm a simple farmer."

Wind coasted over the ground at their feet, stirring dust into the air. The Godchild stepped closer to the newest guard, his cherubim gaze caught on the man. "We will leave now with your blessing, yes?"

The guard's eyes dulled, and his mouth drooped. He gave a slow nod in answer to the Godchild's inquiry.

Soft, alluring, the holy man continued to speak. "Please move back to your positions. You have never seen a simple farmer and his brother pass through here."

Both guards inclined their heads before returning to their posts on either side of the gate. The Godchild looked over at Stryver. Calmly, he asked, "Are you ready?"

Fear of failure stopped in a heartbeat. Stryver reached out and grabbed the Godchild's hand. He ignored the sudden, tingling surge and numbing power racing from his fingers up his arm into his body. He tugged the holy man behind him. They passed under the arch, slipping out of the city's walls and into the fresh, clean air of the land beyond.

A huge, invisible weight lifted off Stryver's shoulders. This part of his mission had worried him the most, but no longer. The soldiers hadn't seen through their disguise to realize the truth of their identity. The assassins had failed. Whoever they were, they would never catch them now.

He remained silent for a while as he kept his gaze on the dirt road ahead of them. Relief continued to course through him the farther they moved from the city's walls. He released the Godchild's hand. The smaller man followed behind. The possibility of discovery still presented a problem for them. If they were pursued and captured, the holy man's life would eventually end. And Stryver...he shuddered, considering the variety of tortures he'd go through before the Raegemons executed him.

They had to remain hidden until they'd passed out of the range of both Heaven's Seat and the Raegemon stronghold. It should be an easy task with so many people roaming the country side, traveling to the city. His gaze took in the masses flowing about them. He had to remain on guard not to be lulled with a sense of security at becoming lost in the crowds.

Stryver looked over his shoulder. Eyes wide, the Godchild soaked in the outside world, studying all within his sight. The amazed,

innocent air about the holy man lightened Stryver's concern and, for some unrecognized reason, brought a small smile to his lips.

"Pick up the pace. We have a long way to go before nightfall."

Azure eyes swerved to meet his. "Um, yes, of course."

Little puffs of dirt clouded under their feet. The heat of the sun beat down on Stryver's head and shoulders. Silence passed between them. He found a strange peace in the quiet.

Suddenly, the holy man stopped with a gasp. He half turned back to Heaven's Seat. "What of my potion?"

Stryver faced him, unease renewed. "What potion?"

"It helps to keep me composed."

What? Stryver lifted a brow. "Composed?"

"Calm, controlled, to assist me from inadvertently releasing my power."

"What is your power?"

The tail of his hair swung with his negative response as he refused to say. "I took my first dose this morning before the procession began. It feels about time for my next dose."

Trying to understand, Stryver considered what type of potion this might be. The cobalt vial in his pocket tempted him to try it on the holy man. He wasn't sure if what Aidal had given him was same potion the Abbot gave to the Godchild. "You take it how many times?"

"Three."

"Have you ever missed taking it before?"

A frown creased the smooth line of the Godchild's brow. "A few times."

"And? Did something bad happen?"

"No."

"Then don't worry about it. We're not going any place to upset or excite you." He remembered the man's reaction while he'd dressed him. No more of that type of activity. Especially if he didn't know what powers the Godchild possessed. Wasn't worth the chance.

He glanced away from direct eye contact with the Godchild. No. Blue. He had to remember to speak and think of him by this new name. He didn't believe he'd let the title slip, but still. He shot a grin at the smaller man. "Ready, Blue? Walk faster. I don't want to leave you behind."

A somber nod answered him.

Damn, such a cool, emotionless being. Stryver had never met anyone like him. Blue's lack of reaction to even teasing unsettled him. He faced the road ahead with a frown. No use worrying over it. He'd perform this mission and never have to think about Blue again.

They walked for most of the afternoon. Blue trailed behind him. Watching him over his shoulder, Stryver noticed the slight man appeared comfortable in the loose clothes, his steps at ease.

Rain arrived in the early afternoon to stream down over the landscape and turn everything gray. Stryver halted their journey under the sprawling limbs of an oak. Some of the raindrops slipped through the thick canopy to splatter on them, but, for the most part, the full force of the downpour missed them.

Stryver leaned against the broad trunk, waiting with waning patience. Blue had been fine until the rain. He had melted with the first drops, shivering and gasping until Stryver helped him move under the protection of the oak.

He frowned at Blue where he huddled among the roots' knobs at the base of the trunk. His knees were drawn up against his chest, his thin arms wrapped around them.

Rain never hurt anyone. Why him? Stryver couldn't figure it out.

Everything about the holy man confused him—in particular, the reason why someone wanted him dead. He didn't appear to be a threat to anyone, yet from what Aidal said and what Stryver had witnessed in the cathedral, his life was in imminent danger.

Shaking his head, Stryver dug a cloth-covered bundle from his supply bag. He unrolled half a loaf of bread and a small wedge of cheese. He squatted next to Blue, his own back pressed against the

bark. He stared at the holy man, his hand frozen in the act of offering him a share of the bread.

Head lowered, gaze caught on something next to him, Blue held one finger out. A small, black ant crawled onto the tip. He lifted his hand, his gaze centered on the ant.

Uncomfortable with the intensity of Blue's survey of the insect, Stryver released a low laugh. "You act like you've never seen an ant."

Blue's gaze stayed riveted on the tiny creature as he murmured, "That is its name?"

Confused even more by the strange question, Stryver shook his head. "Yes. You've never seen one?"

"No. It's different from us. So fragile."

Disbelief replaced his confusion. "There had to be ants at the monastery."

"No. Only the monks and myself. No other creatures were ever allowed to enter."

Stryver looked at the ant. What sort of problems could an ant cause? "Why?"

"No distraction, nothing to influence or interrupt my growth. No threats to my development."

Amazed at the calm, accepting manner with which Blue repeated this simple mantra, Stryver asked, needing an answer, anything to clear the muddle in his mind, "What is your ability?"

This question brought the azure gaze over to meet his. The gentle patter of the rain striking the dirt road and leaves surrounded them, enfolding them in a secluded place. For the space of a breath, Stryver forgot to look away. Then he blinked, focusing on the ant again, making sure not to stare into the innocent orbs studying him.

"I was instructed not to tell anyone."

"You can't tell me your name. Now, it's your true power. Why the secrets? The last Godchild's name was proclaimed across the land. People rejoiced in his abilities."

The finger lowered to the ground. The ant hurried away to resume its work. Blue spoke low, and Stryver had to lean closer to hear. "Some things are best not known."

Unease rippled along Stryver's back. So there were reasons why the assassins tried to kill him. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"No."

"Even if it means life or death for both of us?"

Fresh, crisp, rain-washed air breezed over Stryver's face with the gentle shake of Blue's head.

The answer struck Stryver full force. So the odds for this mission to fail had increased. His mortality loomed in front of him. All because of one small, quiet man. Compassion for him and unease for what the future held washed over Stryver.

When he broke the quiet, his words came out low and gruff. "Here. Eat. You have to keep your strength up."

Blue's slender fingers broke off a small hunk of bread. Stryver pulled the cheese apart and gave him the larger half.

As he chewed in the peaceful rain, he tried to find a way to discover the truth about the Godchild. His life depended on knowing it.

Chapter Four

The barrier around the heart dissolves into dust under the birth of passion's flame.

Blue's savior watched him often during the next three days. Stryver still had silent questions he wanted answers to, but no matter. Blue refused to reveal the truth. Fear drove his decision to do so. He turned into a trembling coward at the thought of his rescuer's features twisting in horror at the discovery of his true identity.

He didn't want to see this and avoided the man's inquiring gaze. The questions waited just on the other side of his eyes, ready to pounce on Blue. What explanation did he have to offer? None. The naked, terrible facts of who and what he was threatened to drive Stryver away. Many times, he considered telling him—no, demanding Stryver desert him, to leave him to his fate. But the thought of never seeing him again prevented Blue from allowing the words to spill out.

His presence reminded Blue of the new freedom he now possessed. He enjoyed not having to worry about how he walked or even what he said. Stryver never censored him. The strange release from constant surveillance gave Blue choices normally left for the Abbot or his monks to decide. Now, they belonged to him alone. He wanted to keep them close, to savor and enjoy them for just a while longer.

These last few days, they had stopped little, mostly at night to sleep a few hours. Stryver had prepared him a grass-padded bed covered with a light blanket. Blue wondered if he should offer Stryver a spot next to him. His curiosity over what had happened in that little

room within the walls of Heaven's Seat stayed with him, increasing with each day.

But Stryver never lay down, preferring to sit at Blue's feet, his back braced against a tree, guarding their camp against intruders. Blue would awaken several times during the nights to find him slumbering, his watchful eyes closed. These quiet moments, Blue would lie staring at Stryver, absorbing into his memory the lines and textures of the man's face and hands and the skin on his broad chest where his shirt gaped open.

During these times, the word "passion" appeared often in his mind. He'd turn it over and over, attempting to understand its meaning. Was passion what he'd been experiencing—this strange urge to reach out and run his hands over Stryver's face? Or perhaps watching him stride in front of Blue, his lean legs moving forward along the path, the muscles in his taut rear tightening and loosening with each step—was this the explanation he sought?

The sight of his movements brought a strange tightening in Blue's chest. He'd been tempted many times to ask Stryver for passion's meaning, but he found when he opened his mouth to say it out loud, a knot formed in his throat and prevented the question from coming out. So instead, Blue observed him, marking different things about him to hold close to his heart once their time together ceased. He never wanted to forget him.

Tonight, Blue lay on his side, facing so he could stare at him. Stryver's breath caught, and he sputtered before shifting a bit then settling against the tree. His chest expanded and deflated deeply as sleep tugged him further into its recesses.

Cool ocean breezes coasted over Blue's shoulder. They carried the scent of rain with them. His mind shifted from his study of the sleeping man to the land behind him. He smelled salt in the damp air. Were they near the shore? If so, then their journey would shift and bring them among people. A twinge of regret flashed through his

mind. He didn't want this time to end. He liked traveling with Stryver. Alone, just the two of them.

Tingling currents slipped through the breeze and stroked over Blue, calling to him. He sat up and stared toward the east. Yes, there in the brisk wind, the call came again. He pushed away the blanket and stood, Stryver forgotten in the need to answer the summons seeking him.

He stepped forward. Stryver's warm, calloused palm caught his wrist. "Where you are going?"

"Release me," he ordered, sending enough energy flowing through him to break Stryver's connection to him. His voice lowered, and he whispered, hoping Stryver would understand. "I have to go."

Stryver held his hand, pressing his thumb into the palm. "Don't do that to me. Damn it, it stings. What do you mean, you have to go? Go where?"

Without answering him, Blue leaped forward. The world blurred about him, and the trees and bushes he maneuvered around disappeared far behind him in a breath. Stryver's foul curse chased after him. Blue ignored it, desiring only one thing, to answer the dictate of the universe. Even he held no control over what it requested of him. He had no say in where he went or what purpose this served. Only one thought remained at the front of his mind. He had to reach the point where the call originated.

Blue burst through the last section of bushes and came out among beach grasses. Tall sand dunes littered with swaying plant life rose before him. He stopped. There above the rolling dunes, along the horizon, flashed a spear of white-hot power. His heart thudded in his chest. From behind him, in the distance, Stryver cried out for him to halt. He didn't listen, couldn't respond. The waves accompanied the music of the thunder. Another spear lit the sky, splitting into three lines of pure brilliance.

Unexpected joy filled Blue's mind as he ran again. He had to reach the power. It beckoned him, taunting him with its supremacy

straight from Heaven. The shore appeared under his feet. High, white-capped waves crashed against the beach. Rain-scented winds rode over the water and struck him full force. The thought of the impending wetness coating his body didn't persuade him to stop. He continued, his feet rising in the air above the sand and the waves. He raced higher and higher, several yards over the water, until a spear of light reached out and touched him.

His now-silver hair floated about his head as he absorbed the raw, natural pulse of pure energy. It flowed through his body, spiraling, whirling, and urging him to dance. He twirled, sending the power out from his fingertips. A smile formed on his lips. Yes, this was a part of him. A part long separated from him by the artificial currents his monks used to help him dance. But this was real, imprinted on his very pith. Now that he had experienced the true force, he would never return to the fake one. Never.

Blue danced with unbridled exuberance, reveling in his newfound freedom to display his ability. Streaks of light flew from his hands, his hair, even the soles of his feet as he swerved and dipped. The waves, wind, and thunder supplied the music to his movements. He forgot all else. Nothing existed beyond this moment and the thrill of his dance.

Moments flew by. The rain drew nearer. Another strong current struck him, and he finished with a last twirl. Dragging in deep breaths, he descended to the beach.

There, the blanket slung over his shoulder, Stryver stood, waiting. Blue stepped onto the sand, shoulder to shoulder with him—he faced the water, Blue the shore. Stryver didn't look at him. His rescuer's unease was evident in his stiff body.

Rain hit Blue on the head with tiny, sharp pricks. He cringed, shivering under this new onslaught. The blanket fell over his head and shoulders. Strong arms lifted him against a solid chest. Stryver's spicy scent filled his head. Blue glanced at his stoic features. He moved fast, the same way he had in the cathedral the day he'd rescued him.

The beach slipped by, and they once more entered the tree line. He stopped several yards within the narrow woods and slid down the trunk of a tree. With spare movements, Stryver wrapped the blanket over both of them, tucking Blue snugly between the spread of his knees. Darkness surrounded them.

“Stryver...” Unable to resist, Blue lifted his hand, and the back of it bumped his cheek. Using his fingers, he found his mouth, needing to touch it once, needing the memory to carry him forward during the days ahead. Stryver took Blue’s forefinger between his lips and sucked. Fire erupted in Blue’s blood. Heat raced to his cheeks. Warmth pooled in his balls.

Releasing one edge of the blanket, Stryver found his mouth with trembling fingers. Blue considered doing to him what he’d done with his finger. *Oh, by the heavens, was that his tongue licking along the pad?* Breathing became a labor too difficult. Blue couldn’t seem to drag in enough air. Lightheaded, he pressed his brow to Stryver’s neck, his ear to the comfort of the other man’s chest. Stryver pulled Blue’s finger free and tilted his head. His thumb glided across Blue’s bottom lip. His head dipped, and his mouth followed the same track. The muscles in Blue’s neck gave way. The larger man covered his mouth, urging his lips apart, tongue probing against his teeth. Blue opened to him. His tongue slipped into Blue—cool, slick, breathtaking. Blue sucked on it, dragging it deeper into him.

Hot breath coasted along his cheek from where Stryver exhaled through his nose. A groan came from the big man’s throat. Blue placed his hand over Stryver’s heart, fearing he might have hurt him. But Stryver applied a stronger pressure to his lips. Lost in the sensations Stryver created in his mind and body, Blue heard nothing, saw only darkness. His awareness centered on the other man’s scent. Stryver’s touch surrounded him, became a part of him. Throbbing increased between his legs and along the hardened length at Blue’s hip where it pressed into the V of Stryver’s spread legs. His heart

threatened to pound through his ribs with the knowledge that Stryver's reaction was like his own.

The larger man pulled his mouth away, gasping. His arms tightened around Blue, holding him close.

"What does this mean?" Blue needed to hear so he might understand this wonderful new craving in him.

A low, nervous chuckle vibrated the chest under his cheek. "I suppose it's the start of passion."

Stryver's comment brought forth an unexpected slow smile to Blue's lips. "I rather like it. With you, that is."

"Go to sleep. We'll be in the village by tomorrow evening." Stryver rubbed his chin on the top of Blue's head. "Hopefully, a boat will be available to use."

Sorrow nipped at his joy. "Then our journey will be over."

"Not yet. We still have a ways to go."

"Good." He rubbed his cheek against Stryver's solid chest, content as he closed his eyes. "I will miss you when it is done."

Stryver's teeth ground together. He spoke, his voice husky and deep. "In the village, I'll teach you."

He didn't need to explain. Blue understood, so he nodded to let him know. Tomorrow or the next day, he'd learn from Stryver the true meaning of passion. His heart continued to race in anticipation. Sleep came slow within the confines of the other man's arms.

Chapter Five

One kiss amid the east wind brings the discovery of one's fate with the reaper.

He hated complications. Blue had become a greater one last night. Stryver kept his gaze on the smaller man's rear where he strolled ahead of him along the rutted dirt road bordered by the dense foliage of the surrounding jungle. Birds cawed, and feathers fluttered as they took flight. Blue appeared well rested and happier, if the timid smiles he sent his way meant anything.

The day grew warmer, the muggy air suffocating. The rain from the night before had brought with it a stifling heat. Mosquitoes buzzed about him, landing on his sweat-coated body to take a taste or two. Frustrated with the heat, the bugs, and the uneasiness his memories from last night presented him, Stryver frowned at the holy man's slender back. Damn it. He'd allowed his desires to gain control, and now, all he could think of was relieving them. With a god, no less. Well, fuck.

He hadn't asked Blue, wasn't sure he wanted to know, about his performance last night. The sight of so much power controlled by such a small form amazed him. But it also insisted he discover the truth about his soon-to-be lover.

Once they reached the village, he'd question the local priest or monk about which Godchildren possessed the ability to manipulate lightning. He hoped beyond hope that Blue wasn't the war God. Still, once he found out, it would supply him with the reason behind Aidal's desire to protect Blue. If Raegemon decided to attack their

neighbors with Blue's power, their victory would be absolute. Yet why...

Blue appeared before him, his head tilted to look into his lowered gaze. Stryver hadn't realized he'd stopped walking. Worry filled Blue's narrowed azure gaze. His soft question carried concern. "Are you well?"

Stryver's heart ached. The longer he remained in Blue's company, the more he realized no one could save the quiet man. Even Aidal's stable of talented mercenaries presented little defense if Raegemon discovered who had snatched the Godchild. Stryver frowned. Why would the military state want to kill Blue, especially when they could use him against their enemies?

Then who had sent the assassins to the cathedral?

"Stryver?" Small, slim fingers brushed over his brow. "You don't look well. All the color is gone from your face."

He raised his eyes to meet Blue's. This time, he refused to turn away. "Who wants to kill you?"

Blue drew back. He shook his head. A confused expression replaced the concern from a moment ago. "I don't understand."

"I was led to believe your benefactors, the principality of Raegemon, quietly issued an edict for your murder. But they didn't, did they? They don't want you dead. Not when they can use you and your talent to control lightning. So who? Who wants your head?"

As soon as the words came out, Stryver stiffened. His master's orders returned full force to the front of his mind.

His life is in danger. You must go and take him from Heaven's Seat. Bring him here, and we will protect his holy head.

Stryver shook his head. *No, it couldn't be.* Aidal would never dare something so atrocious. He'd be branded for life as the slayer of a Godchild.

"I lived in peace at Heaven's Seat."

Unable to voice his thoughts out loud, Stryver swallowed and nodded. “Yes, you did. Come, we need to reach the village before sunset.”

He led the way, his mind full of questions, more today than yesterday. Blue dancing, diverting, channeling the flashes of intense power last night, dwelled in Stryver’s thoughts along with his master’s instructions. Though he tried to fit the pieces together, none seemed to snap into place. He doubted even Blue possessed enough information to help him understand.

They stopped midday, drinking some of the remaining water and nibbling on the last scrap of bread. Stryver remained silent. Blue, in turn, appeared to accept his silence as normal. They rarely spoke, but when they did, Stryver always learned a new, helpful yet confusing fragment about the holy man.

He cut off a snort. Holy man! If the monks had witnessed the kiss they’d shared last night, none would believe either of them possessed an ounce of pureness between the two of them. And his own words to Blue, promising to teach the smaller man about passion—what was he thinking?

No, he had to find a way to avoid further physical contact with Blue. He hated his fellow mercenaries for conquering naïve women and men then leaving them. That was not the ending he wanted for this journey with Blue. He desired memories of their peaceful companionship.

Stryver stiffened, his gaze taking in the surrounding area. Yes, too peaceful—just another worry to occupy his thoughts. But why was their travel so quiet and easy? Surely Raegemon’s soldiers even now searched for Blue. Yet from what he could tell, no one followed them, not even in the distance. What if a force waited ahead of them in the village? Damn it, why hadn’t he considered this earlier? Damn the Godchild for distracting him from the mission.

His gaze shifted to where Blue squatted next to him, chewing his last bite of stale bread. His cock flooded with blood. Shit, he

shouldn't have looked. Need for the man increased with each contact of his gaze on him. This need accumulated between his legs with the constant, tight constriction of his sore balls and the twinges in his cock. God, it'd been a year since he had last sought out relief. Stryver placed the blame for his lack of attention and pain-filled need squarely on those narrow shoulders. The man had a way of distracting him. Even now, Blue tilted the water skin to his mouth, and some of the moisture slipped from the corner of his lips to slide down his chin. Stryver fought the desire to trace the line up with his tongue and lick the moisture from those lips.

Swallowing, Stryver jerked his attention in the opposite direction. Did Blue have the ability to place spells on people? Oh, yes. Hadn't he witnessed the ease with which Blue had controlled the guards at Caldron Gate? Was this what ailed him? He continued to consider this aspect long after they resumed walking. The longer he walked, the tighter the tension coiled in his gut.

With each step, his imagination supplied all sorts of horrible scenarios of what awaited them. Death even appeared to loom over him, pressing a sickle against his neck.

He stopped, his nerves stretched with fear and frustration. He shouted at Blue's back. "I won't let them take me alive."

Blue turned and faced him, shock and a tinge of fear in his gaze.

Stryver pointed a finger at him. "If they capture us, I want you to kill me."

The smaller man stumbled back a step as though he'd slapped him. Blue jerked his head once, twice before shaking it. "I...No...I can't."

Anger flared in Stryver, erupting out in a torrent of words. "So you'd rather they'd gut me and let me bleed out while everyone watches, jeering at me?" He grabbed hold of Blue's upper arms and shook him. "Is that what you want? You have the power to kill me. You have the power to destroy an entire army. Don't you?"

With another sharp jerk of his head, Blue denied the words.

They battled with their eyes. Stryver, mindless with worry, forgot to consider the effect of holding the smaller man's gaze. Finally, Blue whispered, forcing Stryver to lean closer to hear.

"Yes."

Pain etched the beauty of the Godchild's face. He tried to twist free, but Stryver held tight. Blue raised his voice, anguish lacing every panting breath he took. "Yes!"

"Then when the time comes, you kill me. I wish you to do it."

Tears formed in the azure eyes. "I can't. You're special to me."

Unable to witness the torment on Blue's face any longer, Stryver tugged him against his chest and held him. "Listen to me. If less than fifteen warriors attack us, I can manage them, but if more, I have no chance of defeating them. And I don't believe you have the heart to take another's life. I will not be taken alive. If I am to die, I want you to do it, not some unknown soldier."

Blue scrubbed his cheek on Stryver's chest. "You're only speculating. This might not happen."

"But if it does, you will take my life. Swear to me you will. Now, here."

"I ca—"

He squeezed Blue tighter. "Swear!"

Small hands clutched at his shirt. They pulled harder at the cloth as Blue answered. "I will try."

"Much better." Relieved, he shifted away, one hand catching Blue's jaw, tilting his face up to meet his mouth. Sweet, soft, the younger man melted under his heated onslaught.

How could Blue taste like Heaven? Stryver pulled away with a chuckle. Why wouldn't the small man carry an essence of Heaven's pureness about him? He originated from a holy place, so it was only natural he retained some of it here in this human form.

"We'll go forward with the plan to reach the village. I'll check it before we enter to make sure nothing unusual is afoot. If there is, we'll turn west and then south. Should it be clear there, we'll seek out

a vessel. All right?" He spoke gently as if to a young child. Shock still radiated from Blue's body. Releasing him, Stryver turned and walked several feet down the path.

"You don't despise me? Fear me?"

Stryver glanced over his shoulder at where Blue stood, shoulders slumped, hands wringing at his waist. "Hate you? Why should I?"

"My power is terrifying. Deadly. Aren't you frightened I might inadvertently use it on you?"

"No. Not by mistake." He smiled, hoping to reassure him. "You're not evil. I'm amazed at the goodness in you. I'd wager my life that you'd never hurt me."

Blue staggered the distance separating them. His arms wrapped about Stryver's waist. He buried his face in the middle of his back. "Thank you."

With a quick pat on the hands holding tight to his shirt, he pulled them free and held one, tugging Blue along with him. Some peace returned to his mind as they continued on their journey. The questions without answers crowded the far side of his thoughts, but he kept them at bay. He'd speculate on them later, when he was rested with his belly full of food. They'd reach the village soon.

Hopefully, he'd find some answers there with the local monk. If not, then he'd find a way to make Blue tell him. He had to, or all hope for his future dream of a small farm in the outer edges of the kingdom would remain just a dream.

Chapter Six

Contentment brings peace. Peace allows joy to blossom.

Stryver accepted him.

Without any questions that demanded answers. Blue's joy increased, and his heart opened more toward this man. He'd saved him, given him freedom. Even now, with the knowledge of a minor portion of his ability revealed, Stryver still looked at him the same way as yesterday and the day before. Weighted worry, heavy and dark, lifted from his shoulders, and he managed to walk easier.

Yet no outward sign revealed exactly what the man thought of him. Yes, he wanted him. Blue realized this through his heated kisses. Even now, the memory of the larger man sucking his finger sent needy shivers rolling over his skin.

At this moment, amid the array of joy circling in Blue, confusion with a tinge of fear nudged at the edges of his mind. The fangs of his doubts waited, ready to pounce should matters change with the lengthening of the day.

How did humans live with such a variety of emotions coursing through them? His eyes widened at the question. Where had that question come from? His gaze shot to the blue sky with its startling white clouds. Was this his divine self inquiring? Blue wasn't sure. He certainly had never imagined such a multitude of feelings to exist in him. Was this the natural effect of the absence of the potion the Abbot gave him? Probably. Unfamiliar with these emotions, Blue realized he never wanted to restart the dosage of what the Abbot gave him. No, he'd much rather feel than not experience these riotous sensations.

He stared at Stryver's back as he trudged in front him. The large man's leather vest hid the skin covering hardened muscles. Blue wanted to run his palms over Stryver's dusky back to memorize the movement of those muscles. His mouth went dry. Throbbing started between his legs, deep in the lower reaches of his loins.

"Stryver," he called and stopped walking.

The other man glanced over his shoulder. Slick sweat coated his face and arms. He stopped, his legs spread, feet planted solid on the ground. "What's wrong?"

"You will show me. Tonight." Blue had to hear the words from him once more.

Slowly, easily, Stryver grinned, swiping at the back of his neck. Blue's heart melted. He'd never smiled at him in this way during their journey. The large man's eyes crinkled, and he nodded. "We'll see. If everything is clear."

"Are you sure? You will show me more?" Was there more? Did it have something to do with the hardening of Blue's cock? Blood rushed to his head, and the world swayed. *By the heavens, what could it be?* His gaze glided over Stryver. *How could it be?*

"A lot more. Stop worrying. Won't do any good except make you break. That's what I did earlier. Too much worrying. No more. We will make it. Together." Stryver moved to his side, wrapped an arm around his neck, and tugged him at his side down the dirt road.

Blue's heart hammered in his chest. In turn, Blue curved his arm around Stryver's waist. His head barely reached the larger man's shoulder. Happiness returned and chased all the darkness from his thoughts. This heartbeat in time belonged to them.

They kept close to the road's edge in case they needed to hide. The thick foliage under the trees promised protection from prying eyes. Up ahead, the road bent to the right toward the shore. Stryver released Blue with an order for him to wait. He eased to the curve and studied the path ahead, his gaze searching for any ambush.

Stryver motioned for him to join him. Blue hurried to his side, grasping his fingers. They went around the bend and came out into an open, sandy stretch of land. The shore's curved along the water's edge far to their right. In the distance, huts raised on thick poles faced the water. Colorful blankets blocking the entrances to the huts fluttered in the calm ocean winds. Small boats lined the beach where the jungle rolled down from the undulating hills. Palm trees leaned forward toward the ocean. Cool breezes met Blue's heated cheeks, providing some relief from the humidity.

He closed his eyes, savoring the wonderful air coasting over his face.

"Looks safe, as far as I can tell. The people are relaxed. No one's looking around uneasily. Sure sign danger's not present." Stryver squeezed his hand. "Ready to play the part of my little brother again? We have different mothers, same father. We live in a village to the north and need a ride to return home."

"But won't they wonder why we're this far south?"

Another breath-stopping grin came flying at Blue. "Simple. You whined and whined until I brought you to visit your mother's people."

Blue rolled his eyes and thumped Stryver in the upper arm with his fist. "I don't whine."

The larger man laughed and nodded. "All the time. If I didn't love you so much, I'd have kicked you out of the house years ago."

His heart stopped then pounded. The words were said in jest, a story he fabricated to help them in their escape, but hearing this man loved him sent indescribable happiness to the center of his being. Even Stryver's gaze softened, and he reached out to brush the back of his fingers across Blue's jaw.

"Hey. Don't be so serious. This is fun time. Let's enjoy it and relax for a little while." Another laugh, lower, huskier, rumbled from his throat.

Trembling, Blue agreed with a quick nod. "I understand."

“Good. Let’s have this over with.” Stryver released his hand and strode in the direction where several men sat on a couple of the boats, their hands moving up and down into a mass of meshed cloth.

And Blue followed. In this moment, it seemed as though he was always behind Stryver, letting him lead. Strange thing about it, Blue didn’t mind. Not with Stryver. With his monks, when he didn’t want to follow a mandate, he performed little rebellious acts to slow things down. Yet with this man, his rebellion remained absent. Blue wasn’t sure if the danger lurking along the edges of their journey prompted him to listen and obey or if he wanted to because of Stryver. He shook his head. One fact he definitely noticed while in his savior’s company—he thought way too much. He assumed this, too, was another aspect of the missing potion.

Stryver neared the men. They shoved the material away and rose to walk to him. He lifted his right hand and clasped the man in front by the forearm. “Hola, brouda.”

“Hola. What’s got ya a-coming here, brouda?” The man’s skin shone with a slickness even the wind didn’t dry. He had skin darker than Stryver’s by several hues, and his teeth flashed white with his friendly smile. Black curls fluttered in the wind.

“We are returning home to the north and have need for a boat. Money isn’t a problem. You’ll be paid a fair sum.” Stryver grinned at the man and then nodded in Blue’s direction. “This is my little brother.”

“Be two, three days afore the boats come in. They a-fishing in deep water. You stay, wait for ’em.”

“Two or three days? No sooner?”

“No, no sooner. You wait, you enjoy. We prepare a feast to welcome our new friends. You eat good tonight. You and your brouda.”

Blue listened, mesmerized by the lovely way the man spoke. His deeply accented voice pronounced words in a sweet, lilting manner that arrested Blue with its charm.

Children's laughter pulled his gaze away from the men. Farther along the beach, several small boys and girls ran back and forth from the water's edge. A couple of the boys carried slender sticks. They inserted the ends into the sand. In a moment, a strange, bright blue, oval-shaped creature popped out to snip bulbous claws on the front of its body open and close.

More glee-filled laughter followed. Curious about the creature and what the children did, Blue walked toward them, leaving Stryver's side. Once he stood on the outer edges of the small group of about seven children, he stared at the creature. It scurried down the beach away from them.

Small fingers grasped two of his and pulled at him. He glanced down into the deep brown eyes of a tiny girl. Long, curly, black hair bounced against her shoulders. She laughed and tugged harder, her little legs straining. "Come, big brouda, we catchy-catchy crabby for din-din."

So this creature was a crabby. Blue'd never heard of such. With a nod and a smile, he allowed the little girl to drag him along with her and the other children. They played more than caught any of the crabbies. The older children freed another one from the sand. This time, instead of scurrying away, it darted toward them. The tiny girl squealed, turned, and took off, away from the creature, her little legs pumping fast. All the while, she gripped his fingers, pulling him behind her. Laughter broke free from him. Shocked, he covered his mouth with his free hand. His gaze sought and found Stryver where he leaned against a palm tree, watching them.

A slow smile formed on his lips. Blue's stomach bounced, and another laugh escaped.

Blue reached out, grabbed the child, and swung her about as he turned in a wide circle. Her excitement poured from her with light, beautiful laughter, carefree, joyful.

Someone called out, and the girl squirmed. "Mama calls Rica. Rica gots to go."

Setting her down with gentle care, Blue released her. She ran off toward the thickest group of huts. A dark-haired woman waited, hand held out to the little girl. The other children followed after Rica.

The wind coasted over Blue as he made his way across the white sands to where Stryver stood.

“Made a new friend?”

“Yes, she’s nice.”

“Melbo, the headman here, is furnishing us with an unoccupied hut until we leave,” Stryver said, motioning with his head toward one of the huts along the outer edges of the village. “I believe while we wait to eat our feast, I’m gonna take a nap. You should rest, too.”

“I’m not tired.”

He walked toward the hut, chuckles trailing behind him. “Better rest. You’ll need it.”

Heat rushed to Blue’s cheeks. What had he meant? Did he refer to them and the promised lessons in passion? His face burned with an internal fire. “Well, maybe a little nap will be all right.”

More laughter came from Stryver. “Thought you might agree. They’ll wake us when the food is ready.”

Blue entered the weaved palm-leaf hut through the short, wide, blanket-covered doorway. Two bright red-and-yellow-striped blankets were spread on the thatched floor. Stryver stretched his arms over his head, turning his head left then right, popping his neck. He dropped to his knees and pulled the blankets closer. “Lay with me, Blue. Let me hold you a little while.” Ducking his head, he reclined on his side, patting the spot next to him. “I like having you close to me.”

Who was he to argue? Hands trembling, Blue almost tripped in his haste to reach the other man’s side. Stryver caught his hand and held him steady. Another smile graced the larger man’s mouth, but his cheeks carried a dusky rose tint. Was he nervous, embarrassed? Calm filled Blue with the realization he, too, was nervous, perhaps even frightened.

Stryver helped him lie next to him. Strong hands adjusted his smaller body so Blue's back fit snugly against his chest. Blue's rear pressed in the hollow between his legs and abdomen. One lean thigh lifted and swung over his hip. Stryver smoothed the wayward strands of Blue's hair, kissed his ear, and murmured, "Rest, my Blue."

Rest? This close to him? No matter how long his eyes remained closed, sleep never came. Instead, Blue listened to his breathing, enjoying the movement of his chest with each of his breaths at his back. For now, for Blue, that was enough.

Chapter Seven

Passion's heady aroma drives the senses to oblivion.

Comfort and a strange but familiar, sweet fragrance he recognized but could not place filtered over Stryver. His back was cool from the ocean breezes, but his front—warmth made him desire to curl closer into it. With long-ingrained caution, he opened one eye the barest amount to look about him. Between the window coverings, a beam of red-gold sunlight at a shallow angle spoke of the approaching dusk. Dust floated in the light. The stiff evening breeze carried distant laughter and voices of the villagers.

He closed his eye and rubbed his cheek against the silkiness under it. More of the wonderful aroma rose, tantalizing his senses. He moaned, wrapping his arms tighter around the source of the scent. Aidal never gave his men anything this pleasing and comfortable to rest on.

Lightly aromatic hair tickled his nose. He shook his head, turning to scratch his nose with his left shoulder.

Softly, gently, the owner of the hair spoke. "Stryver? Are you awake?"

Surprised, he froze, his head angled away from the small man pressed snug against his chest.

Shit. Blue. How had he forgotten Blue? All the days of traveling to and from Heaven's Seat had taken their toll. He'd been so relaxed lying there. Enjoying the quiet, the light, and the answering in and outs of breaths echoing his. Blue. His.

No, no, no, back up. This can't happen.

But why not?

He's a Godchild, not meant for such scum like me.

He wants you. It's there in his face, his eyes. Look at him.

And you want him.

He glanced at the curve of Blue's cheek, and then his gaze glided over to the question in the azure eyes looking at him. Need and innocent desire darkened the irises.

Blinking, breaking eye contact, Stryver shifted closer, sliding his body over the side of the smaller man. He half covered the parted lips tempting him, lapping at the corner. Lifting up onto the arm beneath him, he helped Blue to turn, facing him. Chest to chest, he ran a hand over the curve of Blue's back and dove down onto his mouth, tasting, savoring. Low, soft gusts came from Blue, his moans rising from his slender throat. They slipped into Stryver's mouth, sending muscle-melting shivers across his body.

He'd never imagined someone could taste so good. Their first kiss kindled a desire for another. Just a small one—no, not small...He dipped his tongue, swiping Blue's palate, playing along his teeth, reveling in the wondrous, spicy yet sweet flavor.

Body humming with need, Stryver rose up and slid his palms under the sleeveless shirt, tugging it apart and free from the material covering slim hips to reveal smooth skin. Not as muscled as his own body, the gentle swell of Blue's damp chest and tapering lines at his waist beckoned Stryver's fingers. Breathing became torture. His mind demanded silence, but each breath wanted to scream out Blue's name in heated gasps. The sweet, peach-tinted nipples pulled him closer for a tiny nibble, something to carry him through the days ahead. He sighed against a pert tip, barely running the end of his tongue over the top.

Blue twitched. His hips lifted off the mat, his back arching. He begged, silently offering, his panting breath uneven and unsteady with need. All for him. Stryver sucked the tip into his mouth. Keening came from between Blue's clenched teeth.

Sweet, hot, too much, too fast—slow down. Now, or he'd lose control and end up hurting instead of pleasuring the one he desired.

Pulling back, Stryver lifted his head, gaze moving up to stare into Blue's face. The soft glow from the setting sun washed over the small man beneath him. Alluring, fragile, powerful, a deity gifted from the heavens to him alone.

He sent silent praise to the powers above. He'd never have the means to repay this kindness. Not in a thousand lifetimes. No, this time belonged to him. And to Blue. He had to make it good for him.

"Are you sure?" He had to hear the words from Blue.

A trembling nod answered his question.

Sending a tiny smile at him, Stryver pulled away, gaze searching the hut. There in the far corner—a small cooking stove with bare essentials. He touched a swift kiss on Blue's brow, climbed to his feet, and moved toward the corner. He found what he needed in a hollowed-out coconut shell. Removing the cork, he poured a bit on his fingers. A sweet aroma rose from the oil.

He returned to Blue. Setting the shell on the mat next to Blue's hip, Stryver undressed. Leather vest and pants slid off his body. Not fast enough. The hunger in the azure eyes devouring each bare bit of skin almost undid his good intentions. He knelt between Blue's knees, his body taut, his cock harder, tighter than he'd ever known it possible to grow. The difference between them appeared instantly with the darker tone of his skin against Blue's paler body. The diversities between their bodies became evident. He was rough, hard, molded to kill, whereas Blue possessed none of those traits.

"Are you ready?"

Low, starving pants escaped from Blue's lips. "Yes."

Nodding, Stryver picked up the shell. He grinned and held it up. "Coconut oil. Fragrant, tasty, and very slick." He took his still-coated finger and placed it on the center of Blue's bottom lip, sliding down to the center of his chin. The smaller man shuddered. The vibrations

traveled through Stryver's fingertip to end in his cock. A small, pointed tongue slipped between Blue's lips and swiped at the oil.

Stryver groaned, fighting to retain control of his baser desire. He would not rush this.

Rising on an elbow, Blue half sat. One hand lifted, reaching. "I want to touch you."

Stryver caught his hand an inch from his abdomen. He laced their fingers and held tight. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against Blue's. "No, not yet. I'm on the edge now. Don't push me off. Okay?"

"All right." Blue's exhalation slipped into his mouth.

He absorbed it. Licking his lips, he pressed a quick, chaste kiss before drawing away.

Straightening, he pulled the cork out of the shell, tossing it away. He laid his palm flat on Blue's stomach. Trembling from the contact slid up his arm into his chest. He tilted the shell. Pale oil poured from the hole onto Blue's belly. He gasped, and Stryver felt it in his bones.

He spread the oil over and over, circling, shifting lower with each movement of his hand. His thumb disappeared along the edge of Blue's waistband. He plucked at the tie holding it in place. "Time for this to come off." Throat tightening, he untied the knot and glided the cloth free from Blue's body. Spread below him, his body bare and open, hard and needy, Blue moaned at the first touch of his eyes on him.

His mouth dry, unable to pull in enough air, Stryver coasted his hand lower. He lifted his gaze. Blue watched him through narrowed eyes. His hair faded from black to silver, the spell gone in slow, agonizing heartbeats.

Without breaking eye contact, Stryver ran his fingers under and around Blue's erection, shifted his body enough so his face came even with Blue's taut, pale member. Removing his hand, he grasped one side of his hip, holding Blue steady. With one long, slow swipe, he

ran the tip of his tongue up from the base, along the front of Blue's cock, to the head.

Sweet coconut with a trace of salt burst in his head. Heaven had arrived.

The smaller man's breath caught, his body arching off the mat. Low keening came from him, and his hands clung to the blanket under him. Stryver groaned. Pure, unadulterated pleasure coursed through him at the sound of Blue's cry. This was Blue, his Blue, no one else's. He opened his lips over the end and took him into his mouth to the back of his throat, applying a slight suction.

Another low, stifled cry traveled the distance between them. Stryver took the sound into his body through the connection of his lips over the taut length of Blue's erection. He needed more to feed his own passion. He worked to wring every cry, moan, groan, and gasp from the smaller man. This was his Blue, his man, no longer a Godchild, but his. A strong suction, and Blue jerked, trembling in the aftermath, panting, with sweat glistening on his skin.

Yes, his, only his. No pain, no fear, nothing but pure gratification, fulfillment, and satisfaction. Just for Blue.

"Ah-ah," answered a twirl of his tongue. Blue's breath caught and followed with a stronger, trembling moan at each stronger suck Stryver applied. A bit more oil to his palm, and he lifted Blue's hips off the mat. He rubbed the oil over his butt, up in the crease, between his thighs, and at the back of them. One finger slipped inside Blue. The muscles around his finger vibrated, closing around Stryver's digit.

Working with his finger, stretching the tight ring inside Blue in a slow circle, Stryver continued to lick and nip the other man's cock. Soon, the inner ring relaxed and stretched. With a grin, Stryver finished teasing and succeeded in setting off Blue's ejaculation. He swallowed, satisfied that he'd taken the sharp edge off Blue's desire.

As his lover shivered with the aftershocks of his release, Stryver positioned his body between his knees.

“Blue...Look at me.”

For a moment, just before the sun slipped over the horizon, Blue lay awash with brilliance. Ethereal. Not human, but a real god, writhing beneath him, giving him the gift of his body straight from Heaven. He glimmered in the fading light, flesh and bone forming a being so beautiful, his very existence was inconceivable. Yet he existed. He breathed. He lay spread and trembling on the mat.

Swirling his tongue across Blue’s belly, Stryver tasted more salt on his skin. The small man shuddered, arching his back to meet the tongue circling around his navel.

“Stryver, please, *shit*.” He rotated his hips. “Ohhh, fuck—ah-ah—me, Stryver.”

Shocked at what had just come out of Blue’s kiss-swollen lips, Stryver straightened. He released a shaky, breathy laugh. “Where did you learn such language?”

Impatience flared in Blue’s gaze. “Don’t make—” He twitched, knees bending to slide along Stryver’s thighs, a hot, horny deity striving for his total initiation into the world of passion. Pulling at Stryver’s shoulders, frustration evident in his features, he growled low, an ongoing sound deep in his throat. An irritated god made flesh.

Blue’s eyes flashed only a hint of azure along the edge of midnight-black pupils. All thought of avoiding direct eye contact was forsaken as Stryver marveled at how even the slightest change in this man affected his own racing heart rate. He positioned his cock at the entrance to Blue’s body and, slick with oil, penetrated the smaller, heated form writhing beneath. Blue accepted the intrusion with a low moan caught on a breath.

Heat massaged his cock with startling, tingling contractions. He forgot to breathe, couldn’t drag in a mouthful of air, all his focus centered on the tight grip surrounding his aching member.

Head thrown back, Blue’s hair, undone from its tie, flowed about him. He grasped Stryver’s forearms, squeezing, releasing, panting, chanting his name over and over.

Stryver leaned forward, his brow against his lover's slick shoulder, his breath coating his collarbone. The narrower chest under him passed shivers into his own body.

Muscles twitched, ached in an effort to keep still, not to move, to cherish every breath, each heartbeat of these sensations, the smell, the taste. He deserved Heaven for waiting, for wanting Blue to adjust—not to tear into him like he desired to do.

And Blue nudged his brow, so he looked up. “Kiss me, please.”

Covering his mouth, Stryver dipped his tongue into the warm, dark recess. Claspings the slimmer hips in his hands, Stryver moved, slowly, easily—*no, not too fast. Savor this, relish it, never let it end.*

Small, inquisitive hands burned wherever they touched him, blistering over his sensitive skin, sinking into his nerves. Naked, vulnerable, every shift of breath crashed through his body as though he drew in an inferno. His lungs shuddered, his belly clenched, his groin pounded, and his heart, that strong vessel deep in his chest, hammered Blue's name through his veins. He wanted to get closer, deeper, never let him go.

Hoarse, wordless, a cry echoed in the hut, and, by now, Stryver wasn't sure whom it belonged to—him or Blue. His steady pace poured fire along with lightning through him, up his abdomen, his back, and down his thighs to end in a roiling, steamy pool in his belly. These charged flames encompassed his body, dragged, coiled around his guts, squeezed, licked, and white flashes exploded behind his closed lids. His world flared and with his release, ruptured into shattered fragments. In that moment, he realized his entire life was changed by one simple, little man.

Shivering aftershocks vibrated in his limbs. He shifted, buried his face in the curve of Blue's neck, trying to catch his breath. He never wanted to move, only to stay and be cradled in the arms of this divine being. His Godchild. His Blue.

Chapter Eight

I grasped the moon and asked if this was love. The silver disk smiled.

Blue lay under his weight, trying so hard to calm his wayward breathing. This thing—what had Stryver named it? Ah, yes, passion. Never in his wildest thoughts had he imagined the power, the incredible intensity could exist beyond his dancing. What had happened was so much better than when he danced. Even now, waves of tingling shocks ricocheted within his weakened muscles, reminding him of his reaction. He lifted trembling arms and ran his palms across Stryver's broad shoulders. Softly, with gentle care, he savored the feel of the sleek, damp skin.

When had Stryver become so important to him? Blue would lie down and die, wilt away when the larger man left him. The brightest star in his universe would have vanished, leaving him in the darkness. Blue dug his fingers a bit harder into Stryver's back to keep him with him, fear escalating in him. Tension tightened his relaxing muscles as he attempted to quell the rising panic in his mind. He wanted to stay with this man for eternity. But...he squeezed his eyes closed.

This was not meant to happen.

Stryver murmured his name in question. Blue turned his head and brushed a light kiss on the dark hair at the top of his head to reassure him.

Footsteps, moving fast, approached the hut. Blue's muscles tensed more. Stryver raised his face to stare into his eyes.

"Your hair." Stryver moved away, leaving cool ocean air to pass over Blue's body. Chills swept across his skin at the sudden absence

of the larger man's warmth. Was this what he could expect with Stryver's departure? Cold, emptiness. His eyes stung.

Stryver grabbed his pants and pulled them on. Blue sat, fighting the onslaught of tears as he combed through his hair, turning it black again.

A boy's shout came from outside. "Hey, broudas, food's ready. Come eat."

Blue grabbed the edges of his clothes, covering his exposed body.

Stryver called back, his voice huskier than normal, "We're coming."

The child left, his feet pounding the sandy ground. Stryver glanced over his shoulder at Blue. "You all right?"

Realization struck Blue in the center of his forehead and sent sharp pangs through his head. In all his lifetimes, he had never attached with any object, place, or person. He sensed it deep in his essence. But this time was different. Stryver had touched him in a way no other human had, and this frightened him. This gentle man gave Blue something to lose, someone who would one day leave, and he'd be alone again. He never wanted to experience loneliness again. Never. Yet at the same time, he'd given Blue a reason to live—to stay with him for a lifetime.

Unable to tear his gaze from the larger man, Blue nodded, still shaking. Stryver knelt before him.

Emotion swelled to a drowning pool in his heart. He threw his arms around Stryver's neck, his head pressed against the other man's sternum. "I-I..." His breath caught in his throat. "Don't want to lose you. Not ever."

Stryver touched his shoulders, tugging him closer. "Can you see the future?"

Blue shook his head. "That's not one of my abilities."

"Then stop it." Stryver placed his cheek against Blue's hair. "Stop worrying. The time will come, and we will decide. But not now. I

want to live in this moment. Here with you. Don't spoil it with doubts."

Stryver's words sank into his body. The thought of being alone, just as alone as when he had lived at Heaven's Seat, pressed down on his heart. He never wanted to feel that way again. No one to tease him, laugh with him—heat crawled up his neck—touch him the way this man did. But Stryver intended to leave him. There was no question of that, unless Blue could somehow convince him to remain at his side. Hope flared in his heart, brightening his mood. The near-panic receded, and he was able to level out his breathing. "I need you, Stryver. With me."

"You have me," Stryver said, giving him a gentle squeeze.

Wanting to conceal his desire to keep the other man close, Blue answered his earlier question about his language. A smile tilted his mouth. "I heard it from one of the Raegemon knights guarding the cathedral."

"What?" Laughter edged his question.

"The words. You wanted to know where I learned them. I had to ask the Abbot what one of them meant. He explained in great detail about creation, then he ordered the knight removed from duty at the cathedral."

"Well, I can understand why. He didn't want his precious Godchild corrupted."

Blue rubbed his head against Stryver's chest and whispered, "No. I'm glad he will never know what we just did. It would embarrass him."

"Are you embarrassed?"

This question deserved eye contact. Blue met his gaze straight on. Stryver didn't look away. He was glad. "Not in the least."

"Don't look at me like that. Makes me believe you want to do it again."

Blood pooled with enthusiasm in his balls, enthusiasm that came out in his answer, the words rushed. "Oh, yes."

Stryver chuckled, released him, and rose to his feet. "Later."

Heat rushed into Blue's face. He ducked his head and struggled to fasten his clothes. The coconut oil stuck to the cloth over his belly.

Staring down at him, Stryver noticed. "Just tie them up. We'll swing by the beach and rinse off before we join the others to eat."

Blue pulled the ends together and stood. His thighs trembled as he came to his feet, and tightness pulled at his rear. He wobbled to the side.

Reaching out, Stryver caught his arm and held him steady. "Careful. It's the aftershocks. Passion does that to you."

Curious, Blue leaned on his strength to make it to the door. "Does it? Is it always like this?"

"No, not always. But sometimes when two people come together, a fire starts that burns brighter than at any other time."

"So the people have to fit."

Releasing Blue, Stryver jumped off the top step, laughter trailing behind him, and landed on the sandy ground before the hut. "That's a good way of looking at it."

"I like the way we fit."

The look he sent over his shoulder sent heated quivers through Blue's stomach.

"Me, too. Are you better?"

Blue concentrated before he nodded.

With a grin, Stryver motioned for him to follow. "Come on, I'll race you to the water. I'm ready to eat. Can't you smell it?"

The strong aroma of cooked food floated in the air. Blue grinned. A few sharp twinges came from his butt, but this didn't stop him from racing after the man he'd come to care so much for. He'd follow Stryver to the ends of this life with a cheerful smile, enduring any pain just to be near him.

Growling set up in his belly. Yes, he was hungry, but not just for the food. He wanted him again, soon. Stryver reached the waterline before Blue, lifting his feet over the incoming waves. Using both

hands, he cupped the salty water and, with a twist at the waist, tossed it at Blue. It hit his mid-section, leaving a wide, wet spot on his shirt. Blue gasped at the sudden, cold wetness.

“Not fair,” he cried, lunging away. He pivoted to the right. Separating from Stryver, he stopped at the edge and knelt to clean his lower body. His rescuer wasn’t satisfied with this arrangement. Using his quickstep, Stryver came behind him and lifted him up, moved into the deeper water, and dropped him. The shock of cold ripped a cry from his throat. Sputtering, he batted his hands over his face. Salt stung his eyes, and water dripped from his hair. His clothes hung, sopping with the briny water.

“Now, scrub with the sand. Everywhere. You’ll feel better.” Stryver squatted next to where Blue sat with the waves shoving against his back. “Want me to help you?”

“No. I’ll do it.” If those large, skillful hands touched him, Blue would come undone.

Stryver had the gall to snicker and sat by Blue’s side, washing his body free of the oil and sweat.

When they finished, they walked toward the large fire burning farther down the beach. The older villagers sat quietly speaking to their friends and family while the younger ones ran and danced about the cone-stacked, long logs in the flames.

The man who’d greeted them when they’d entered the village motioned for them to join him.

“Here, broudas. You sit, enjoy, stretch your bellies with paipai. You drink much with us to celebrate your arrival. It’s good to sit and talk with new broudas. Always good.”

“You have our thanks.” Stryver nodded. He sat to one side of the headman. Blue took the spot next to Stryver.

Women appeared, bearing food on banana leaves and small, hollowed-out wooden trays. They placed the trays on the ground before them. Others brought coconut shells with the ends cut off and filled with a whitish liquid.

The aroma of the food rose with the steam. Blue's stomach clenched. How many days had gone by since he had last eaten hot food? Not since the attack at Heaven's Seat. Mouth watering, he swallowed, placed his hands together in supplication, and bowed his head. After a very brief prayer of thanks, he lifted his gaze to Stryver, looking for a sign of when he could start eating.

Blue was met with a cocked eyebrow and a half smile. "Hungry?"

A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. Heat rushed to his cheeks, and he ducked his head, embarrassed at his eagerness.

The headman threw back his head and laughed. "Eat, little brouda! Eat! There's plenty much now. Last season, this time, we suffer mightily. The fruits spoiled in the trees before they ready for picking. We found little fish. Many went hungry. This year much, much better."

So he did. Blue used two fingers to scoop some of the mushy, yellow paste from the banana leaf. He didn't bother to sniff, just put it in his mouth. Rich fruity flavors tinged with a light nut taste ran rampant over his tongue. Without thinking, he took another bite then another. The roasted meat on the wooden platter lay forgotten while he devoured the mush. Once it was gone, Blue looked up to find Stryver and the headman staring at him.

With a quick duck of his head, face heating, he managed a little smile as he mumbled, "It's good."

"That's paipai. Very good, yes, brouda?" The headman motioned to one of the women. "Bring more paipai for our new friend."

Stryver chuckled and pointed to the meat on Blue's platter. "Eat the meat, too. We have a long way yet to go, and you have to be strong."

"Oh, I will. I didn't realize how hungry I was." Blue glanced up at the woman standing before him. She smiled, and he returned her smile with his own. She piled two large scoops of the yellow mush onto his banana leaf and left.

Blue ate, half listening to Stryver and the headman talking. The way Stryver maneuvered the conversation amazed him. He asked how often Raegemon soldiers came through here without coming out with the question directly. From what Blue gathered, Raegemon rarely sent anyone this far south. The land was peaceful and poor, not worth the bother of more than one or two patrols a year. Next came questions of any monks in the village.

“No, no, brouda. The holy men come here for one day to bless the village, then they leave. They no stay.”

This caught Blue’s attention. “Why not?”

“Long ago, long before even my grandpappy lived, a demon was brought to a place deep in the jungle and sealed away. Even now, many believe they still can hear the screams of rage from the place this one resides.”

Shivers slid up his spine. Blue swallowed and shot a glance at Stryver. He stared at the headman. A demon? How had the humans captured and contained it? Unease built inside Blue. A sudden need to leave this place nudged at him. He met Stryver’s gaze. His wink did nothing to sooth Blue’s nerves.

Chapter Nine

Awaken to the dawn and realize nothing will ever be the same.

Stryver's curiosity sparked with the mention of sealing a demon away. He'd never heard of such but didn't doubt what Melbo, the headman, told them. The mention of a place in the jungle where even the monks refused to go did tempt his curiosity, but he had a mission to complete. And it didn't include side trips through cursed jungles to satisfy his inquisitiveness.

He glanced over at Blue. The smaller man met his gaze for a second before lowering it to his food. Fear glinted in his lover's azure eyes. Blue's reaction triggered unease in him. What was the Godchild thinking? He'd find out once they returned to the hut for the night. For now, he'd bide his time with the celebration in their honor.

Several of the village children sat farther down the beach on their left. They chewed on juicy slices of meat. The greasy moisture clung to their mouths and fingers. Some of the men joined them, teasing them about their appetite. The calming normalcy of the atmosphere helped alleviate some of Stryver's tension. He decided not to mention the demon to Blue. No use worrying about something so unimportant.

Women and men came closer to him and Blue, speaking in low tones, inquiring about what their home was like. Blue kept silent, allowing him to weave a simple tale—nothing too complicated where a lie could be detected.

Waves crashed against the beach. Even the wind appeared determined to sooth their visit to this seaside village. Once everyone

had eaten and the fire burned low, the villagers slipped away, returning to their homes for the night.

Stryver nudged Blue with his toe. "Time for bed. It'll be nice to sleep in comfort tonight."

His lover nodded and stood with a low groan.

"You all right?" Stryver rose to his feet and took hold of Blue's arm to steady him. Damn, had he been that rough with his lovemaking? The whole episode blurred in a cascade of intense pleasure. He hadn't meant to hurt him.

A shy smile graced Blue's lips as he ducked his head and mumbled, "Just a little stiff."

"Ah, I see." He threw an arm about Blue's shoulder. With slow, steady steps, he guided him toward their dwelling.

"You see what?" Blue tilted his head to look at Stryver's face.

"I didn't mean to be so wild with you. Couldn't help it, though. You have a way of driving me a little crazy." How else could he explain how Blue affected him? He'd never had anyone, male or female, instill such a need to possess as he experienced with Blue. Not even with Rance. Hell, he hadn't even spared a single thought for his dead lover. In a way, his reaction frightened him. He didn't want to belong to anyone. No ties whatsoever. They were too easy to use against him, to devastate him like when Rance died. Now, the one person he intended to desert upon completion of this mission turned out to be the one he dreaded to leave. What had changed since his arrival in Heaven's Seat? A slim, short Godchild with innocent eyes had wormed his way into Stryver's mind. He had to stop this.

Glancing down, he noted the tiny smile on Blue's lips. "What?"

"Sorry. The Abbot said often I have an ability to frustrate. I never intended to affect you, too."

"This kind of frustration is all right, I guess." *It's only for a little while longer.*

They reached the hut, and Stryver let Blue climb the steps ahead of him.

“You’re sure?”

“Positive,” he affirmed, hoping to alleviate any doubt in Blue. He took the thinner wrist in his hand and rubbed the pad of his thumb over the bone. “Lay with me. I want to hold you close through the night with the moon shining down on you.”

Blue’s pulse raced under his fingertips.

Together, they knelt on the mat, fixing the blankets. As one, they reclined, facing each other. Stryver ran a finger along the edge of Blue’s face. He moistened his lips. His muscles tightened with need to cover the smaller man’s mouth, to taste his sweetness. Giving in to the temptation, he leaned closer, tilting his head. He raised his gaze and met Blue’s eyes. Stryver lowered his eyelids. The touch of warm breath slipped over his lips a second before he brushed a soft kiss on Blue’s mouth.

Heat built in his body. Throbbing started deep in his balls, insisting he seek relief and fuck Blue again, but he refused to allow his baser side to dominate him. Blue needed time for his soreness to disappear. Another round of intense lovemaking would hurt him more than it would hurt Stryver to sleep with a hard-on. No, he’d wait.

“Good night, my Blue,” he whispered against the parted, satiny lips.

One thin arm slipped about his waist. Blue rested his cheek against his chest.

Stryver placed his jaw on Blue’s head and smiled. Why did this seem so right? He tried to picture his future, but all he saw was Blue smiling, laughing, twirling in a dance of power and joy. He squeezed his eyes shut. No matter what, the time approached when they would part, and the pain of this thought hurt more and more with each beat of his heart.

The moon rose high in the sky before he managed to fall asleep. When he opened his eyes again, the sun brimmed over the ocean’s horizon. The blanket on the door blew up enough for him to watch the spectacular sight. Peace entered his mind with the gentle murmurs of

nature's song. Deep in his heart, he wished they could remain in this place.

With his next breath, fear shot through his gut as he realized no one lay next to him. Stryver sat straight up, tension cramping the muscles in his back as he searched the area for his companion. His glance snagged on a slender arm propped on the top step outside. Coming to his feet, he strode to the door and moved the blanket out of the way.

Blue sat on the sand next to the steps, his gaze on the rising sun.

Need rose inside Stryver to discover the smaller man's thoughts. What had awakened him so early? Had he heard or seen something strange? Stryver eased out of the hut and sat on the step where Blue's arm rested. He slanted a look at the Godchild. "You're up early. You all right?"

Blue didn't look at him as he responded. "Isn't it amazing how the world never stops? No matter how many times I'm born, it remains constant."

"And that bothers you?"

He shook his head. "No. Not at all. I know I will return."

Stryver nudged his arm. "And?"

This time, when he spoke, Stryver had to lean closer to hear.

"I want you with me. Not just this time, but every time."

Stunned at hearing the echo of his own desires, Stryver pulled back, resting his shoulders against the hut behind him. "That's not possible."

Using both hands, Blue swiped at his face. "I know."

Was that moisture, tears, or sweat? Damn, was Blue crying? Over him? Sharp pangs lanced through Stryver's belly. He swallowed once then again before he could speak. "We can't be together, even in this life. You understand, don't you? These days here are transient. Once we reach my master's fortress, I will leave you."

Hands lowered to his lap, the smaller man nodded. "I'm aware of your plans. It's your mission. Still, I can desire it. No one can take

that away from me.” His azure gaze lifted to meet Stryver’s. “Not even you.”

Need rose up inside Stryver to tell Blue he wished the same, but he didn’t let the words escape. His silence was better than to allow Blue to hope that maybe they might have a chance of staying together. Now, every time he thought about his future, he envisioned Blue at his side, but it was only a dream, not reality. Speaking it aloud would cause problems and make it more difficult to leave Blue when the moment arrived.

Hoping to pull Blue from his morose thoughts, Stryver nudged him again, pointing toward the closer group of huts. “I see breakfast cooking. Are you hungry? I am.”

A small smile twitched the corners of Blue’s mouth. “You’re always hungry.”

Feigning hurt, Stryver stood and looked down at Blue. “I’m not. After all the days of living on cheese and bread—well, I look forward to having real food.”

The tug on Blue’s lips widened into a full smile, revealing perfect, white teeth. “Yes, I’m hungry. Shall we, my savior?”

Stryver held out a hand, and Blue clasped it. With one tug, Stryver pulled Blue to his feet. He released him and waited while he brushed the loose sand from his rear. They walked side by side to where the women bustled about their outdoor cook fires.

One of the braver women came forward, bobbling her head. “There is a stream behind the farthest huts where you can wash. Your breaking meal is almost cooked, so please, you wash and come back to eat.”

Bowing to the women, Stryver strode ahead of Blue, his gaze shifting to and fro across their surroundings. Some of the men were emerging from their huts. He waved at them as they passed.

Along the far side of the village, a narrow path led through thick, green foliage. Stryver heard the rush of water. The narrow stream this close to the ocean roiled with a mixture of salt and fresh water. He

stopped at the bank and watched the bubbling, stirring stream join with the ocean. The combination reminded him of his relationship with Blue. This was never meant to happen. Each of them had their own lives and had lived them peacefully until the attempt on Blue's life. From the way Blue talked, and what he desired, both their emotions surged, much like this estuary. .

Shaking off his depressing thoughts, he pointed farther inland. "We'll wash over there."

Upon reaching the spot before Blue, Stryver leaped into the flowing stream. A breath later, he popped up with a howl, the icy coldness a shock to his warm body. Blue laughed at him.

Stryver narrowed his gaze. He took careful steps through the waist-deep water toward where Blue stood on the bank. "So you think it's funny?"

"Oh, no. Not funny at all." More quiet chuckles came from the smaller man.

Unable to resist, Stryver sent a cold spray at Blue.

The sparkling water stopped a foot from its target. Stryver froze in place, his own smile rigid, his hand still cupped and raised. The moisture hung in the air for several moments. Blue grinned and whipped his hand toward Stryver, sending the water flying. The wetness struck him with little tings. He gasped and waded to the land. Stepping up from the stream, he glared at Blue, shaking a finger at him.

"You're full of surprises, huh?" He hadn't finished speaking when he quickly stepped behind the smaller man and landed a palm into the center of his back, giving him a hard shove. Blue flew forward over the gushing water and came to a skidding stop two feet above the stream. He straightened, turned, and looked at Stryver, one brow lifted.

Stryver shook his head. "You're determined not to wash up, aren't you?"

"I bathed last night."

“The ocean doesn’t count.”

“Does to me.”

Shaking his head, Stryver quickstepped over the water, moving so fast he stayed above it while circling Blue. He scooped water, first with one hand then the other. The more he tossed at the smaller man, the more returned until Stryver became soaked. Blue twirled, moving with him, his own hand blocking the onslaught of moisture aimed at him.

The Godchild laughed, his eyes sparkling, matching the array of droplets catching the sunlight.

Unable to stop his own laughter, Stryver joined him. Their movements reminded him of a strange dance, each trying to lead but neither preventing the other’s expression of the soothing music of the jungle.

Shouts came from the direction of the village. Footsteps pounded the ground, growing louder as they drew nearer. Both Stryver and Blue dropped in the stream, landing with quiet splashes. Blue gasped. Stryver grinned.

“Well, that’s one way to get you to bathe.”

Shivering, Blue glared at him. “It’s freezing.”

“Bathe. Then you can get out, but not before.” Stryver tapped Blue’s nose. “Now, wash. I don’t want to taste ocean brine on your skin tonight.”

The smaller man’s eyes widened, and pink flooded his face. “All right. For you.”

“Always.” Stryver’s answer was followed by a chuckle.

Two youths sprang off the bank and landed with low geysers not far from them. They bobbed up and waved in their direction. One called out, “Melbo says you go eat. We run before midday sun is above.”

Run? What the hell? Without considering, Stryver nodded in acknowledgment. The exercise would help relieve some of his tension. He turned to the bank and climbed out. Lying on his back, he

propped his head up with his hands behind his neck. He stared at the clear blue of the sky above. A few white clouds floated across the expanse.

Moments passed, and Blue joined him. He knelt at his side, water dripping from his clothes. His hair swayed, dry as before he had landed in the water.

Tilting his head, Stryver stared at it, amazed at the strange qualities of Blue's hair. "Is that where you keep your power?"

A frown creased Blue's brow as he glanced at him. "What?"

"Your hair? Is your power centered in it? Is that why it hurt to have it cut?"

Blue laughed with a sweet, ringing tone. He shook his head, a sweet smile gracing his lips. "No. My hair helps to channel my power, the same as my arms, hands, feet, legs. It's a part of me."

He waited for Blue to continue. When he didn't, Stryver prompted him. "Then where does your power come from?"

The smaller man lifted one finger. He touched his chest above his heart. "Here. My power comes from my heart, the same as yours."

Shooting Blue a sideways glance, Stryver plucked a blade of grass and stuck it into the corner of his mouth. He thought a moment, not positive if he believed what Blue had said, but how could he know for sure? Instead, he changed the subject, not wanting to delve too deep into Blue's explanation. "This quiet isn't good. We can't let our guard down too much. Raegemon forces could show up at any moment."

Blue's eyes widened. "Do you think they might?"

"It's too quiet. Upsets my stomach." He tossed the blade of grass away and sat up. "Why haven't we seen any sign of them? They should have been on our heels, but nothing is there. I've been watching for smoke, sounds of horses, something. Don't see or hear anything. Why?"

"I don't know."

"Me neither. The ones in the cathedral wore Raegemon armor under their robes. I saw them. If the King ordered your assassination,

then why hasn't he sent forces to capture you and finish the deed? Makes me uneasy."

His lover faced the stream, staring at the water churning but a few feet away. "Perhaps he didn't order them to kill me. Maybe it was someone else."

"But still, he'd want you back, wouldn't he? Or did you piss him off somehow, and he doesn't care what happens to you?"

"I rarely saw Luther."

"Luther? You're on first-name terms with the King of Raegemon."

Ducking his head, Blue mumbled, red flooding his cheeks, "Not first name. He refers to me as His Imminence. I suppose he considered me higher in the chain of rulership."

Stryver snorted. "Hope so. You are a Godchild." He sat silently for a moment, thoughts whirling through his mind. "Wait, did he know your true name?"

Innocence poured from the wide-eyed look Blue sent him. "Not that I am aware. No one was allowed to know it."

"Because it would instill fear?"

"Yes." This time, Blue didn't look away or lower his voice. The artlessness disappeared from his gaze. He spoke clearly. The familiar twinge of unease roiled through Stryver's gut.

Chapter Ten

Nothing is remembered of past sins. Evidence of evil is hidden by nature's mercy.

Stryver never batted an eye at Blue's answer.

The longer Blue stayed with him, the more he desired to divulge all his secrets to the other man, but he still feared what Stryver's reaction would be when the truth came out.

With a nod, Stryver murmured, "I see."

"Do you?"

"From what I understand, you are a god of tremendous power. Let's say you have the ability for great destruction. It's reasonable to assume many believe this unhealthy for everyone, so a few decided to remove the risk of annihilation. Am I following along the right line?"

Blue stared at him, surprised at how well he rationalized about his powers. Slowly, Blue shook his head. "I can't say. It'd be better if you don't know."

"Even if it means your life."

This comment brought a smile to his face. "My life is not precious." He lifted his gaze to Stryver's. "Yours is."

"Oh, so I'm more important than you?" Anger flared in his eyes, and heat brought a dusky tint to his cheeks. Stryver surged to his feet, glaring down at him. Blue had to tilt his head back to see his lover's face. "Did you ever think maybe you're more precious? To me?"

He didn't wait for Blue's response. Instead, he pivoted and stomped toward the village, calling over his shoulder, "I'm hungry."

Blue knelt on the damp ground, his gaze caught on Stryver's receding back. He, more precious than Stryver? To him? The thought had never occurred to Blue. Had Stryver, too, developed a strong attachment to him the same as Blue had for Stryver? The idea seemed impossible that a man so full of life, so attractive, could want to be with him for the rest of their lives, but his words continued to repeat within Blue's mind. Did this mean Stryver cared deeply for him?

Hope blossomed in his chest, pounding out a steady rhythm. He wanted nothing more at this moment than to run after Stryver, wrap his arms about his lean waist, and declare his love.

Love? Was this the emotion he held for his rescuer? A smile tugged at his lips. Yes, love. The unconditional and complete capture of his heart by the very man sent to save him. How had this happened? Sure, there had been, since the first day, an attraction to him, but somehow, this had changed into a deeper, more profound emotion. A thing inconceivable for a Godchild to experience and definitely impossible if he desired to retain his throne.

His head started to throb. Blue rubbed at his temples. No good came from worrying about this matter at the present time. A low rumble rose up from his stomach. He stood and made his way back to the village.

Stryver sat on the same log from last night. He held a wooden tray while he ate the fresh fruit and grilled meat. Blue walked to his side and sat next to him. The larger man didn't look at him.

One of the village women approached Blue with a similar tray, bowing low with respect as she presented it to him. He nodded his thanks, accepting the tray. After a timid smile, she hurried off. He ate in silence, fearing to say anything to his grumpy companion.

Melbo, the headman, joined them and spoke of the upcoming race, asking them to race also. The distance would be five leagues through the jungle along a circular path. They'd start and end in the village. Stryver merely agreed with a small jerk of his chin.

Yes, he still fumed. Why couldn't he understand that no matter what they did, Fate had already decided what would happen? This Blue knew. Fate happened to be an uncle of his and not a very nice fellow. Sometimes he'd allow nice events to occur, but most of the time, Fate took great pleasure in throwing obstacles in the way. Blue had no doubts he affected their actions also, determined to force them to make decisions detrimental to their well-being.

He frowned into his tray and muttered out loud, "Bastard."

Stryver stiffened. With a stilted movement, he turned a glare on Blue. "Bastard?"

Shocked at his misunderstanding, Blue shook his head. "Not you. Fate."

"Fate? So Fate is a bastard?"

Blue shrugged and whispered for his ears only, "He's my uncle."

Disbelief tinged Stryver's expression. "Really?"

"Yes."

Stryver continued to glare at him as he popped a piece of meat into his mouth. Juice leaked from his lips down his chin. Without thinking, Blue reached out and swiped the glossy line with his thumb. Bringing his finger to his mouth, he licked the juice off.

Desire flared in his lover's gaze. Blue's body answered with a deep, warm throbbing between his legs.

Stryver jerked his stare away and asked Melbo, "When is this race going to start?"

"You ready now, brouda?"

"Yes."

"Good. I git our boys. They run fast, yes, so you work hard to beat them." Melbo leaped to his feet and ran toward the huts.

Ducking his head, trying to control his breathing, Blue whispered, "Sorry."

Lifting his hand, Stryver cut down with it. "Don't do that again. I'm about to explode."

Blue rubbed the back of his neck and threw a repentant grin in Stryver's direction. "I didn't think. Forgive me?"

"Can't do anything else." He glowered at his nearly empty tray then tossed it on to the sand. "God, I want you so much, it's making me nuts."

With that comment hanging in the air between them, Stryver tromped after Melbo.

Again, Stryver had shocked him. From his words and actions, he gave Blue no real idea he spoke the truth. Anger didn't relate to desire. At least, not in Blue's mind. Unable to find a reasonable way of explaining his mood, Blue finished eating, took both trays to one of the women, and went to where the men stood at the edge of the jungle.

Dense foliage hid the interior of the land around the perimeter of the village. A narrow path cut through the trees. Vines grew over the dirt track. Shrill cries and low grunts came from the canopy. Blue glanced up to see a band of monkeys frolicking in the upper branches of the trees.

Rica, the little girl who'd greeted him yesterday, skipped to his side and took his hand. She tilted forward, looking up into his face. "You ready to run fast, little brouda?"

Gazing into her bright brown eyes brought a smile to his lips. "I suppose."

She'd never know that if he so chose, he could run the entire track twice as fast as any human. He'd never do it, though. One of the young men stretching on the outskirts of the crowd would win, if not Stryver. Blue would make sure to lose this competition.

"You try hard, okay?" She encouraged him. Without waiting for him to answer, she released her hold and ran to where her mother sat on the steps of their hut.

Stryver strode to his side. "Ready?"

Blue nodded.

"Come on. They're allowing us to lead the way. You go first."

“Oh, no. You first.” Blue managed to look worried then lied. “I’m not fast.”

He stared at him longer than needed. “Why don’t I believe you?”

Blue widened his eyes in what he hoped was in an innocent manner. “I have no idea.”

With a shake of his head, Stryver answered with a wag of his finger for Blue to follow. And so he did. He always seemed to be tagging behind him. Of course, Blue loved the view from this vantage point. Stryver’s rear tightened with each of his steps. Fingers itching, Blue wanted to run them along the solid strength.

Melbo slapped Stryver on the shoulder. “Ready, broudas? Go, then, and may the blessed Godchild keep his holy watch over ya.”

Stryver’s eyes widened a fraction as he glanced at him. Blue shrugged and grinned at him with a quick nod.

He passed Blue, entering the jungle. Almost immediately, he broke into a fast, steady lope before switching to his quickstep. Blue remained on his heels. Soon, the sound of more running feet came from behind him. Blue dropped back to allow the two young men competing with them to catch up. One at a time, the two slipped by him and soon trailed behind Stryver. He grinned. This race seemed a perfect way to distract Stryver from his worries.

The three men disappeared around a bend. As Blue drew nearer to the turn, a sharp force from the right tugged at his body. He slowed, frowning at the invisible strings holding him back. He stopped and glanced around. His gaze searched for the reason. Monkeys screamed overhead. Bird fluttered their wings as they took flight to the clear skies. Closing his eyes, he concentrated harder. Heartbeats later, the source came to him. He looked to his right.

A stone monument peeked from the clinging vines. He moved to stand in front of it. Ancient, worn glyphs decorated the vine-shielded body of a squatting monkey. The Abbot had taught him many languages, and most of the writings for them. These glyphs, though, weren’t familiar. He lifted a hand and touched the stone.

Invisible strings shot out from the stone and latched onto his hand. He pulled, but they tightened. His gaze shot toward the direction where Stryver ran ahead of him. Not many spells possessed the power to hold a Godchild, and Blue had never expected to find one here.

He opened his mouth to call out but stopped. No, this time, he had to find the strength to not be afraid of his power, to battle this unseen force on his own.

Attempting to physically pull away from the statue, his heels slipped on the loose dirt. More of the invisible strings touched him. This time, they tugged him closer to the statue. He ignited a white-hot flame of his energy into his fingers and sliced through them. Lifting his gaze, he noticed another statue farther into the jungle. Unable to stop, he moved toward it. Again, the unseen force pulled at him. He repeated the same process with this one as he had with the first.

Ten more statues stood along a straight tract, each situated deeper and deeper into the dense jungle, and all of them sought to bind him. The trail became more difficult to traverse, but using his power, he cleared the way. By the time he reached the last stone statue, the path behind him had long since disappeared. He wasn't worried. He'd simply follow the statues back.

Still, why had these stone monkeys been put here, and when? His answer came as he turned in a circle, looking for a sign. Under a wall of trees, branches, and more vines, he made out the lines of a stone building. So, the statues marked an avenue leading to this place.

For the first time, unease rippled through him. His inner self insisted he leave and return to the race. But his human side needed to discover more about the building and statues.

The headman's comment from the night before came back to him. Could this be the spot the monks from long ago had imprisoned the demon? The hair on his arms stood up. A demon. He'd yet to come across one in this life. What were they like? Did this one still exist? He had to find out.

Blue moved to the wall and followed it in a circle, climbing over branches and shoving the foliage out of the way. Dank, musty dust floated around him and mixed with the rotting mulch under his feet.

There must be a door somewhere. He yearned to find it. No, he would discover it. The desire to seek out what was in this building turned into an obsession. He refused to turn away. Something important waited for him there.

He'd almost made an entire circle before the stone gave way to thick, wooden beams rising vertically. Their length ran at least four times his height, almost reaching the tops of the eaves. From this side, the rounded copper dome over the building became visible. The copper had long ago turned pale green, blending with the array of greenery surrounding it. The metal on the door had rusted but still appeared to hold the wood together. How long ago had it been since they had built this structure? Why had they selected this spot to construct such a place here in the jungle? Was it truly a prison for a demon?

He eased closer, listening. He stopped, standing frozen to stare at the imposing structure. The glyphs from the statue were absent here. His gaze snagged on a hump against the stone next to the door. He knelt beside the strange shape. Carefully, he moved some of the leaves away.

A mummified face met his gaze. He fell back, landing on his rear. His breakfast rose to the back of his throat, and he swallowed, fighting the need to empty his belly. He stared into the black holes where eyes were meant to rest. Was this the demon, dead many years now? Dusty prayer beads showed against the slumped shoulders.

No, not a demon, but a man. His hands were tied close to his face by a band of cloth. The same cloth wound from his jaw about his head and around his neck. Even his legs were bound by the same band.

What had happened to him? Who was he? Why was he here, left to decay, forgotten with time? Blue shifted closer, captured by the vacant spaces of the long-dead eyes. He'd seen the same type of

mummies in Heaven's Seat. There, in a room set aside for holy relics, mummies were displayed for pilgrims to revere. They, too, had bound their bodies with tight bands, starving and choking their lives away in hopes of a boon from Heaven. Most of them did so in an effort to curtail the horrors of a war god reincarnated in this plane.

Had this man done the same? Giving his life as a form of penance for the carnage wracked by a Godchild?

Blue's gaze shifted to the door.

Or by a demon?

What lay behind this decaying portal?

He had to find out. Standing, trembling, he stepped to the wooden entrance, placed his palms flat, and shoved. The hinges, rusted through years ago, gave way, and the door crumbled to pieces within, sending dust and debris up in its wake. Echoes of the larger sections hitting the stone floor resounded against the interior walls and copper dome.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Blue moved through the doorway. Again, the unseen threads sought to capture and bind him. This time, the strength of their force stopped him. He lifted his hands on either side of him, palms toward the walls, whispering one word to end the binding spell.

"Release."

Freed of the strings, he stepped over the threshold. Very little light penetrated the darkness. He lifted a hand and formed a ball of lightning in his palm. The cerulean power illuminated the round room, no more than eighty feet in diameter.

No demon leaped out at him. Nothing was left of the creature, if one existed at all.

Blue walked along the edges, his gaze searching for some clue as to what had lived in this room years ago.

Along the far curve, an etched drawing stood out from the stone. The carving was of a Godchild, kneeling at the feet of a human, hands

raised in supplication. Yet nothing in the cut lines revealed which Godchild.

He stepped back to see the entire image better. His foot bumped into an object on the floor. He lost his balance and fell on his backside, landing with a thud. Numbness rose from his abused rear. Frustrated and confused, he reached out and picked up the object he'd tripped on.

The moment his hand made contact, intense power flowed through his body. He cried out and tried to drop the object, but it stuck to his palm. His energy surged inside him. He lifted the thing that tripped him, struggling to control the forces swirling inside his body. His light-ball shone on the black sockets and rounded top of a small skull.

He gagged. Heart pounding, he again attempted to drop the thing, but the force within it refused to let him. *This must be the bones of the demon Melbo mentioned. How else could the bones retain so much potency?*

Snuffing his light, he used his other hand to remove the binding holding him to the skull. Instead, as his hand drew nearer, the skull separated from his palm and floated between his hands. The intensity of the power flowing from it to him doubled in strength. Body frozen in terror, Blue sat, unable to stop the flow of evil from the ancient skull from entering into him.

Chapter Eleven

Hope survives, even when the reaper's blade is pressed against the spine.

Each pounding, running step Stryver took hammered in the fact he'd fallen in love with a Godchild. The innocent, azure gaze staring at him from the smaller man's face remained branded in his mind. How had this happened? Just a short, dangerous mission, and he'd have his freedom.

He leaped over a fallen log, landing on one foot. His weight leaned forward a breath, and he swung his other leg forward. Soon, this race would end. He'd take a dip in the stream then find a quiet place to talk to Blue. The tie between them had to end. Now, the time approached, and they'd have to go their separate ways.

He groaned. He had to find a way to sever their relationship. No, discover a way to keep his hands off Blue while erasing from his mind all the images of the smaller man lying beneath him as he begged Stryver to possess him.

Pain sliced through his chest. He didn't want to leave Blue.

Damn it, he belonged with Stryver, not cloistered behind stone walls.

But how to change that? No favorable answer came to him.

One of the village youths caught up to him, stepping close to his heels. At first, Stryver considered letting the boy pass, but he'd fought too hard through the years to rise above all his competitors. The desire to win welled up inside, and he switched to his next-fastest quickstep, the world blurring about him.

He left the youth behind without another thought.

Keeping this pace was second nature to Stryver. He'd run at this speed for longer periods just to escape pursuers intent on taking his head. He rounded a sharp bend. The path ahead opened out into the village. He grinned, slowed to a steady run, and burst from the jungle ahead of the others.

Melbo came to his side, thumping his shoulder. "You done good, big brouda. Real good."

Moments later, the other two boys thudded out of the jungle. They came to a stop among the people waiting to greet them. Both turned and grinned at Stryver. He saluted them with two fingers to his brow.

The headman took a gourd from one of the women. "Here, drink to the Gods for smiling down on us."

Half grinning, Stryver tilted the gourd over his lips. Fermented alcohol poured out into his mouth. Fruity, tart, the stuff slid down his throat in a smooth glide. Oh, yes, he needed this. Tense muscles between his shoulders relaxed. He drank more, savoring the tangy explosion in his mouth.

The little girl Blue had played with the first day took his hand. "Hey ya, big brouda, where's little brouda? He not come back yet."

Shrill alarms went off within Stryver's head. He jerked his attention toward the empty path. Sending a sharp glance at the two boys who'd raced also, he asked them, "Did you see Blue?"

"Ah, yeah, we passed him long time ago. Midway, maybe more, into running," one answered, and then he sent a look at Melbo. "It close to *that* place."

Tension returned between Stryver shoulders. "What place?"

"Oh, you not need worry. Don't bother most people. Only holy men got problems going near it. Sometime they go mad with fear."

Holy men?

Holy shit.

Stryver slung the gourd. Alcohol sprayed from the opening. He leaped for the path where the race had started. He moved at his

highest level of quickstep. What the hell had Melbo said last night? Something about a demon imprisoned in the jungle ages ago? How the hell did that affect holy men?

Idiots. Why hadn't they said something about the prison's location before the race? Simple—they didn't know his *little brouda* happened to be the Godchild.

Shit, damn, fuck, fuck...

Each thudding step echoed his silent curses. He reached the halfway spot in raging heartbeats. He stopped, his gaze centered on the tracks pressed into the path. From what the boy had said, Blue's footprints should be the last marks in the dirt. He found the small, slender impressions easily. Squatting, terror churning in his belly, dampening his palms and brow, he touched the print.

Damn it, where was Blue?

He stood, his gaze captured by the prints from Blue's feet. He followed their path for several hundred strides before they came to a standstill. Stryver studied the change in pattern. No evidence of a struggle appeared in the pattern. At least he didn't have to worry that someone had snatched Blue. For some reason, Blue had turned off the path and gone into the jungle. Had he heard some strange sound? Seen something out of the ordinary?

Stryver stepped near the edge of the foliage, hoping to find some sign of where the Godchild had gone from there. Reaching his hand to lean against a tree, his palm met stone. He jerked away.

A leering, gape-toothed stone monkey stared out from the vines at him.

Was this what had caught Blue's attention? But why was an ancient statue here in this jungle?

The headman trotted up behind him.

Breathless, Melbo pointed. "The evil place there. We never go there. Bad juju. Much suffering."

Cutting the headman a glare, Stryver snarled. "Where? Show me."

The other man shook his head.

Stryver grabbed him by his shirt. "Now!"

Trembling, Melbo nodded. Stryver released his hold and motioned for him to lead the way through the jungle.

"Twelve sacred monkeys mark the way. A sainted monk guards the door. Holy men come to village. They say never go here. Evil resides within." The headman glanced at him over his shoulder. "Sure you wanna go, brouda?"

Stryver spat his answer out. "Yes."

Anger at his own stupidity in agreeing to the race, terror for his love, and a need to smash something occupied Stryver's thoughts while he fought the small branches and grasping vines as he trailed behind Melbo. Here and there, signs appeared of someone else passing through not long before them. Blue? God, he hoped so. He counted the statues as they passed each one. At the twelfth, they came out of the thick undergrowth into a small clearing.

Melbo pointed ahead. "That's it. The evil place."

Only cut stones showed through the foliage.

"Where's the door?"

"That side, brouda." Melbo gestured toward the left side. "You can't open it. No one can but a knowing monk, and you no find one here. None will even enter the jungle."

Stryver snorted. "One already did."

The headman gasped. "Oh, not good, bad, bad juju this." Eyes round with fear, Melbo's gaze shot about the clearing. "I wait here."

"Fine." Stryver strode to the wall and worked his way around on the left side. Breathing heavy, heart pounding, he struggled around the outer edge of the building until he reached the door. He eased to the opening, anticipating what attack he would use if needed. Very little light penetrated the walls.

Once in the opening, his gaze snagged on the lone figure, sitting in the center of the single room.

Silver hair glinted in the bluish light emanating from between his palms.

Blue.

Relief surged through Stryver. What was he doing? Playing with his lightning? Here in this place? Oh, wait till he got him back to the hut. Once he had the smaller man to the village and safely ensconced in their hut, he intended to give him a tongue-lashing he wouldn't soon forget. Stryver moved to his lover's side and lifted a hand to touch him.

Chapter Twelve

Eye to eye with the beast—reach out, touch his fang.

Flat on his rear in the center of the round tower, Blue used all his strength to fight the flow of energy binding him to the skull. Tension hardened his shoulder muscles. A dull ache throbbed between his shoulder blades as he tried to jerk his hands away. The binding power refused to let go. He drew his knees under him and rose to kneel. Perhaps if he reached Stryver, he would help free him.

The tower around Blue disappeared in a white haze. Even the musty air vanished. His gaze caught on the black eye sockets. The demon commandeered his inner eye.

No! Blue concentrated and sent a stream of energy out to destroy the bones. The skull swallowed the blue-tinted rays, the white igniting into a pale cerulean glow.

No, please, let me go! He had to fight this creature and not allow it to seize control over him.

The power pulled his awareness closer until he lost some connection to his body. He floated in the haze.

Horrid, terrified sobs echoed in the whiteness. Was that the demon? From the depths of the haze, a small child stared at him. The child's blue eyes glinted with tears of rage and terror.

Blue eyes.

He knew them. He blinked, unable to drag in enough air for a breath. Dizziness warbled his vision. Inside, he gagged while panic bubbled at an alarming speed. He recognized that face, those eyes. *I know them.*

By the blessed heavens, no!

The child's face filled with rage—all his.

The skull belonged to this child. To him. Incoherent noises escaped from his open mouth, his control gone.

The demon imprisoned here over five hundred years ago was he.

Oh, blessed gods, it can't be true.

But it was true. The pain from his past life tore at his soul.

Godchildren were never to come in contact with one of their previous lives. He'd violated a law from Heaven.

Now, Heaven had decreed his punishment. He fought harder to escape, but while man could break human law and Godchildren could break earthly law, there was no escaping the consequence of heavenly law, the knowledge of good and of evil.

So Blue saw his true self, the one all feared and despised.

The pain, the sorrow radiating from his past life, tore at his soul while the realization of the truth forced him to fight harder to escape.

He remembered his birth five hundred years ago to a simple farming couple. *A face appeared. Gentle eyes gazed at him with love. Her joy filled his heart. She brushed a soft kiss across his brow. Her happiness vanished with the arrival of the warriors. They tore him from his mother's arms.*

A hard knot tightened in his chest with his mother's heartbroken tears. But not for long. Blood gleamed deep red on the blade one man pulled from his mother's breast.

Blue screamed. How dare these men take away the ones who loved him?

He raged at the warriors all the way to Heaven's Seat. There, they handed him over to the monks, who tended to his every need. He settled once more into a sort of normalcy.

Then one night, when he reached the age of six, the warriors reappeared. He despised them. Their hatred, shining from their gazes, outmatched his.

They brought him to his tomb.

His only comfort was the lone monk who accompanied him.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Blue tried to close the door to his mind's eyes. He didn't want to see, to know. Oh, but Heaven demanded recompense for his crime. He had found what should have been destroyed. He had opened the door to his past from this side, and only Heaven could close it from the other.

The warriors had made the reasons clear before they sealed the doors. The world didn't need more death and destruction. If he no longer existed, then another god incarnate would take his place, and the cycle would begin again. The oracles had foretold the next Godchild would be a merciful one. His death sentence had been sanctioned.

Blue moaned.

The monk, with his dark hair highlighted along the front with deep red strands, carried cobalt prayer beads. These rattled all day and long into the night with chanted pleas. He begged mercy from Heaven for the Godchild's soul.

He stifled a sob. Smiling, amber eyes watched him. So familiar, so loved.

By the gods! Mercy.

The knot in his throat hurt. Tears stung his open eyes.

The monk's duty had been to guard and watch over him until he'd died.

His precious voice remained the same from that era to this one.

The truth came to Blue. Now, he understood the reason for the mummy outside. The spells in this place had helped with the preservation of the monk's remains.

Blue's heart—the lover he craved with all his essence had never departed.

Another vision jolted him from his sorrow. In the child that he had been, fear had ruled his actions, his speech, all that he did. No one had given him food or water. Not even the monk.

His mouth dried out, parched from fighting to breathe with remembered thirst.

His gut clenched from the intense hunger and thirst. The skull vibrated with his long-ago terror. Six years old—his age had not mattered to these humans. Anger over the injustice of their sentence mingled with his sorrow, his fear.

A sob caught on his breath.

The monk spoke often. His words soothed his fear and agony.

At his young age, the Godchild had not come into his full power. The spells surrounding this place kept him secure. Yet he desired to escape.

When he had asked the monk to end his life by his hand, the man had wept.

Blue's eyes and face burned from the pain of witnessing their torture.

He sensed in the monk a kinship, two lost and longing souls reaching out to one another, just as Stryver and he had in this lifetime. His duty required he stay until the Godchild died. He had stayed. He swore he would linger to guard his sacred remains. And so he had.

The warriors returned to check on the Godchild, waiting for his death. They'd been surprised to discover how long it took for him to succumb.

When they departed, though, nothing but silence remained.

He called out to his one ray of hope. The monk said not a word. He beat at the door, savaged his fists, screaming for the holy man not to leave him. His feet slid on the moisture coming from under the door.

He touched the dampness, coating his hands, his face, and in the end, his entire body with the monk's lifeblood. They had murdered him, blamed him for the Godchild's refusal to succumb to death's darkness.

Then, Blue had loved him as a child. Now, in this time, Blue loved him as a man.

Rage overwhelmed him. Uncontrollable screams tore at his throat until nothing but harsh gasps escaped. He swore vengeance on the humans. They would suffer the torments of hell for taking from him all that he cherished.

Another face appeared before his vision.

This one shocked, frightened him. Blue again, at an earlier time, a thousand years ago. Furious madness ruled his life.

He destroyed all in his path. Their corpses burned black with his power. Their screams meant naught to him. He found nothing to alleviate his loathing.

These new yet older images sprang from the bones. Wicked, evil deeds rifled through him. Pleasure over killing a hundred, a thousand innocent humans overflowed into him.

The visions spurred insane laughter from his lips. He tried to shake his head to deny this, but the past did not lie, nor did the bones of a Godchild.

His eyes narrowed as sharp anguish shot through him. This knowledge ravished his soul.

The skull glowed bright cerulean from the power of his previous selves. Eon after eon passed into his mind. Fury over his treatment at the hands of fear-driven humans overrode the horror of what he in turn did to them. How dare they deprive him the right to live?

From a distance, he heard the monk calling his name. A touch brushed against his shoulder. The white haze shifted. Some of the tower edged into his sight.

Frustrated, heartsick with his discoveries, the energy within Blue surged out and flung the monk away. He tilted his head back and stared at the dome above him.

The visions faded but left behind the knowledge he had never desired.

His body lifted off the ground with his inability to control his actions, and he rose toward the dome. There, in the center, a rusted rod protruded.

Pale cerulean streams rushed from his hands, passed through the skull, and struck the rod. His hair, once again its natural silver, broke free of its confines. It speared out around his head, lightning streaking from every strand, bouncing about the dome then hitting the rod.

The wickedness of his previous lives overflowed in him. He bled evil and foul deeds with each stream of lightning.

Again, the voice of his love urged him to return to him.

Blue lowered his gaze and locked onto his.

Stryver?

My Stryver! Oh, Heaven, what have you done? Why have you brought us together again?

He dropped to the stone floor, landed feet first, and crumpled to his side. The skull released its hold on him. It rolled from his grasp.

Gasping, muscles frozen with agonizing pain and fear, Blue curled into a tight ball. Leaves crunched under Stryver's hands and knees as he crawled to him. Blue squeezed his eyes tight, horror preventing him from looking at the man he loved. A sob broke free. He'd discover the truth about him. Blue didn't want that, had never, ever desired it.

Soft as a gentle breeze, Stryver whispered his name. "Blue."

Unable to control his reaction, Blue shuddered.

Strong arms encircled and pulled Blue against the solid strength of his body. He absorbed the warmth through his back. Stryver curved against Blue, tightening his clasp.

All the horror, his terror came out in a rush. "They brought me here to die. The monks didn't want me. No one wanted me. They sealed me within these walls without food and water. In the darkness, alone. I was six."

Moaning, Stryver buried his face along the back of Blue's neck.

Tears burned Blue's cheeks. He struggled to pull in a breath. Panic edged his world.

Soft, soothing, Stryver kissed the hollow beneath his ear. "You're not alone now."

"No...he was with me. They murdered him. Outside these walls. He never left." Fumbling, searching, Blue found his hands and squeezed. "You never left."

"I won't. I swear."

"You swore the same before they came. You couldn't keep your oath." He shook with suppressed emotions, all of which threatened to devour him. "Stryver, I loved you so much. That love followed me into this life. You were my light in the darkness. That's why your aura is different from everyone else's. I just didn't know."

Lean fingers brushed his hair from his face. Stryver's warm breath breezed over his brow. "I don't understand."

"This is our second time together. The heavens have decreed it. We have to make it right."

"We will."

Calmness started in the center of his chest. Blue twisted in his arms, pushing him onto his back. His mouth covered Stryver's lips, devouring every wet, warm corner.

His lover's name repeated in his head and came out with each breath he took.

Grasping his face, Stryver held him still. "Blue..."

"I need you, now, here. Prove to me I'm real and alive and here with you. God, Stryver, I need you."

"Shhh, hush, not here. Later, I promise."

Numbness licked up Blue's spine. No? Later? Not now.

A rejection, another restriction from the one man he needed the most. But why? Why did he stop him?

Everyone told him to withhold the truth, to hide what and who he was. But no longer. Blue refused to do this anymore. He wanted

freedom, the same release from all his restrictions Stryver had given him when he'd rescued him.

Stryver pulled away and stood. "Come, Blue. Let's return to the village. We'll bathe and eat. Then we'll give each other what you desire."

Blue stared at Stryver's hands, his chest, his legs. Everywhere his gaze touched renewed the desire in his blood to possess him.

Bending, Stryver took Blue's hand from his lap and tugged him to his feet. Blue tilted toward him. Stryver leaned over and brushed a gentle kiss over his mouth.

Blue's breath caught in his throat.

One last time, Blue followed. But this would be the last time. From this day forward, they would walk side by side. This life belonged to Blue. He needed to make his own decisions, not have them dictated to him by others. If Stryver remained at his side, he decided to let him be the only person to help him with his choices. No others, not in this life.

Shivers wracked his body as he stood on unsteady legs.

His lover's breath on his brow warmed Blue. "Lean on me."

Yes, help me grow into the God incarnate I desire to be. Aid me in knowing right from wrong, good from bad. You did before. You can again.

With this thought, Blue wrapped an arm about his waist and let him take him from the ancient tomb.

The oppressive heat outside the walls struck Blue full force. He moaned and stumbled over the debris on the ground.

"Careful. Watch your step." Stryver tightened his grip on his shoulders. His comfort helped Blue find the strength to move.

They made their way, bent and wobbly, around the stone building to where the path leading out of the jungle started. Once they rounded the curve, the headman saw him. Melbo gasped and dropped to his knees, prostrate before Blue.

Damn. He never once considered his hair. Stryver hadn't mentioned it, either. Now, Melbo had discovered their secret.

Blue glanced at Stryver.

He shrugged, lifting a brow. "Melbo, stand up. It's all right."

"It much great honor. Too great for me to rest my eyes upon his glorious self."

Shocked, Blue stared at the poor man. Glorious? Him? The prominent images of last night appeared in his mind and overlaid the ones of his past lives. He sputtered in an effort to keep a snort from escaping.

Stryver pinched his side. "Behave."

He released Blue and walked to the kneeling man. "Swear you won't reveal our secret."

"Aw, no, no. I wish no bad tides to come from this. My lips stay sealed."

"Good, then come on, brouda. Let's go home." Stryver held his hand out to the man. "I'm starving."

Replacing the spell on his hair, Blue piped up, nervous about how to handle this situation. His mind remained befuddled with his earlier experience. "Me, too."

"But we have no grand feast for Your Holiness."

A smile tugged at his lips as Blue nodded, "Yes, you did. Last night, you and your people graced me with a grand meal. One I will always remember and cherish."

Melbo raised his gaze to look at him.

Blue patted his shoulder as he moved past him, a grin on his face as he glanced at the headman. "Time to go home."

The headman agreed with a jerk of his head. Coming to his feet, he bowed low.

Leading the way, Blue pulled at his hair where it stuck to the damp sweat on his arms and neck. A strong gust of wind cut through the vines. The moisture on his body soaked up the cool ocean breeze. Shivers coasted over his skin. Thunder rumbled in the heavens above,

calling to him. He looked up through the gaps in the canopy to see the sky had darkened to a deep charcoal gray.

Lightning flared through the clouds, illuminating the sky. His heart leaped in joy, but he stifled it. He refused to dance today.

Surprise flowed through Blue. He'd never been able to stop the urge to answer the call to dance before now. Was it because of what he'd discovered? New, massive amounts of knowledge filled his mind. He'd not taken any time to examine any of it. Later, he would, when his soul settled from all the excitement of the day.

Stryver's touch in the center of his back urged him forward. With rain imminent and lightning's currents filling the air, he had to find shelter. The rain coated him with water which drained the currents inside him so that he had less control of where he desired to direct it. Safer to find cover than tempt fate by inadvertently losing control of his ability.

They reached the dirt path and turned toward the village. Over another deep, thunderous rumble from the sky, a woman's cry came to them. They rounded a corner and almost collided with several of the women from the village. Most carried smaller children, while others herded the older ones before them.

Their voices rose with panic and terror. Blue made out the words—"soldiers" and "attack," "wounded" and "dying." Fear shot across the distance and settled in the pit of his belly.

Stryver slipped past them, ordering Melbo to take them to the building for their protection. The headman shook his head, but Stryver cut him short. "And what do you intend on doing besides dying? Take them and go."

His lover took off with his quickstep. Blue went after him. Two breaths later, he passed him. Stryver might be able to help, but Blue held the power to halt the attack in an instant.

He came out of the jungle and stopped, horror claspings his heart with the sight before him.

Raegemon knights, mounted on their war horses, charged at the unarmed men, women, and children who'd been unable to escape. Foot soldiers chased young girls while others lit several of the huts on fire with torches.

Stryver ran ahead of Blue, heading for the closest mounted knight. He slid under the horse's belly and, using his knife, slit it open. The beast screamed and went down, floundering in pain. The knight kicked his feet free of his stirrups, but Stryver cut his throat the moment he gained his feet.

Blue trembled, fearful of his future path with the decision he made in this heartbeat. Death had arrived in his life on the wings of agony and terror.

Chapter Thirteen

Falling in the surging river, bitter Fate drives forth the flutter of past mistakes.

He'd sworn to protect Blue. Now, to do so, Stryver had to kill as many of the attackers as possible before they joined and turned their attention to him. He had three down when a streak along the edge of his vision caught his attention.

Blue quickstepped to the center of the village. He slowed and came into full view, his hair trailing silver behind him. He flipped in a perfect circle without using his hands. He landed with one leg stretched and pointed forward, his other knee bent behind him. His right hand pointed toward the sky. Lightning streamed from the dark, churning clouds. Blue took the massive impact within his palm, channeled it through to his other hand, and aimed at three horsemen before him.

The force of the strike toppled the mounts over onto their backs, crushing their riders beneath them.

More lightning came from above. Blue twirled. Crackling streams of energy flowed from his hair all at once. The strands lifted and angled toward the remaining attackers. Currents raced from the tips of his hair to strike them down.

In the space of several heartbeats, the Raegemon warriors lay on the sand, dead, dying, or severely wounded. Pain-filled groans came from those yet living and joined with the villagers'. Smoke, blood, bodily excrement, and burned flesh mingled to circulate in the wind.

Familiar with death, Stryver stood frozen, hard pressed not to empty his stomach at the senseless destruction of the peaceful village.

A young man stepped toward Blue, his back bowed in supplication. "Please, save her. Our little girl. Our baby. You gotta save her."

Behind the man, a woman sat on the ground. She held a blood-soaked, black-haired little girl in her arms. Blue's eyes widened, shock evident on his face.

Damn. The little girl who'd befriended Blue.

The need to scream at the heavens for the injustice of the attack came over Stryver. Instead, clenching his jaw, he bent and cleaned his knife on a dead Raegemon knight's cloak. If what he suspected about Blue was true, then his ability lay in killing, not healing. The girl's chances of survival slimmed to none.

"I'm sorry." Blue's voice trembled as he stepped back away from the man. "I can't. I'm so sorry."

A different man, holding a gash on his upper arm, spoke. "But you a sacred Godchild, yes? You the one they came for, yes? You must help us."

The villagers able to walk moved closer, pleading for succor from Blue.

Blue's feet tangled with each other, and he stumbled back. He shook his head. "I can't." His spine straightened as he drew up to his full height. "I am not a God of healing."

"Mercy on us. You grant us mercy. We welcomed you." More voices took up the pleas.

Stryver's chest tightened.

Panting, tears brightening his eyes, Blue shouted at the people, "I am Braeden, War God of Lightning. I cannot heal."

Stryver's heart pounded. His knees threatened to buckle. Bile rose to the back of his throat.

Shit, shit, shit.

He'd been right all along. Now, he knew. This was the reason someone wanted Blue dead. His lover possessed the power to leave the entire land in ruins. Hell, he'd done it many, many times in the past.

The people gasped and scurried from before Blue.

"My ability lies in destruction, in death. I do not desire it. Not now nor in the future." Azure eyes rose to the darkened skies. "By all that is holy, I did not mean this to happen. It's my fault. The burden is more than even I can bear."

Swallowing, Stryver spoke low but steady. "Then change it. Use your power to protect, just like you did today. Save the innocent ones, give them your protection."

The smaller man's gaze caught his. For the space of several breaths, he stared at Stryver. Pain shadowed by horror etched his features. Then a new light brightened his eyes, and his face relaxed. He nodded and took tottering steps to the wounded little girl's side.

Stryver walked and touched his shoulder to stop him. "We can't stay here."

Blue shook free. "No, I won't leave her. This is my fault. All of it."

Opening her eyes, Rica looked up at Blue and whispered, "Little brouda, you came back. I knew you would."

He dropped to his knees next to her and covered his face with his hands. "Please, have mercy on these people."

Thunder rumbled in answer. Lightning flashed overhead.

Throwing back his head, he shouted to the skies above, his body glowing with an unnatural cerulean aura. "My beloved sister, please! Grant me your mercy."

The wind coasted over the sand, lifting some and scattering it over the pooling blood on the ground next to Rica's mother.

Rays of golden light cut through the darkened clouds. "So, brother, you have, for the first time, called upon me."

Soft gasps and quiet whispers slipped through the gathered crowd, growing louder with each second. “Merciful Goddess. It’s her. She’s here.”

Blue unclenched his fists. He lowered his gaze, whispering. “I’m so ashamed I brought this on these fine people. I beg you to save them. None of this was their fault.”

“No, it never is.”

Someone nudged Stryver’s side. He glanced over his shoulder and met an identical pair of the azure eyes he’d come to love. They stared back at him from the face of a woman. She glided to his side. Her dark hair pulled up about her head, her white gown shimmered with a holy light, and a gentle smile—Blue’s smile—graced her lips.

He stepped out of the way.

The beauty leaned toward Blue, running her fingers through his hair. Blue twirled and came to his feet. His sister, the Merciful Goddess, stood taller than he by a head. His slender arms wrapped around her waist, and he buried his face against her chest.

A soft whisper escaped him. “Forgive me.”

“Always, my love. I consider it a great honor to help you this day. You have grown much, brother. Your heart overflows with love and compassion. Thus, my greatest wish has been granted.” She kissed the top of his head.

Rica’s mother gasped.

Stryver tore his attention from his lover to glance at her. Tears flowed down her cheeks. His gaze shifted to the little girl in her arms. The wound that sliced across her tiny chest closed until no sign remained to attest she’d suffered any injury.

More cries of joy filtered through the crowd. Even the wounded Raegemon soldiers carried no evidence of damage.

Life returned to the dead. They sat up, eyes wide with confusion. Even the horses struggled to regain their feet, their wounds vanished.

Shivers raced over Stryver’s body. He’d never witnessed a miracle, but he had no other way to describe this.

The Merciful Goddess spoke to the Raegemon warriors with a clear, musical tone. "Return to your King. Tell him you have been touched by the Merciful Goddess, and he is to leave off his efforts to take back my brother. Inform him to prepare, that soon, the Godchild will return. Have no fear. He will not harm you. You carry my grace within you."

Return? What the hell? Stryver stiffened. "Wait. We can't go back."

She turned the full force of her gaze on him. He gritted his teeth against the tension her stare evoked in him as she replied. "Did I say you would return, heart of my brother? No, your journey will continue until the end."

He didn't care for the way she said "the end."

Within a heartbeat, the flames devouring the huts sputtered out. The palm walls returned to the way they were before the attack. Even the colorful blankets were restored.

Noise increased with praise for the Goddess and Blue. Even the Raegemon warriors knelt in supplication before they took their leave. The villagers flocked around Blue and his sister.

"Hush, treasured ones. I must return to Heaven. Have no fear of further danger. You have gained the grace of my family," the Merciful Goddess informed the villagers. She slipped from Blue's arms and took his hand. "Now, I would speak with my brother."

She led the way toward the water.

Stryver stood rooted, refusing to turn and watch them.

"You, too, mercenary." Blue's sister threw the order over her shoulder.

Without any other option, Stryver trailed behind the siblings. They stopped at the edge of the waves. The Merciful Goddess spoke low to Blue. After a nod, Blue looked at him. "We'll go to your master."

Stryver shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

A frown creased Blue's brow. "We have to finish what we've started. Heaven has decreed it."

“Oh, and you’ve never gone against what Heaven wants? This is not good. None of this.” Stryver rubbed at the back of his neck. Fear prickled over his arms. He wished he had some sign of what would happen once they arrived at his master’s home in Shaifo. He looked at the Merciful Goddess. “Will he live? Will I?”

She released a low laugh. “Do not be so foolish. If I were to reveal what you ask, I’d be manipulating your fate. That is forbidden.”

Frustration sparked his anger at the vague manner in which Blue’s sister answered him. “What about your mercy? We deserve some, too.”

“Your mercy is the love you found with one another.”

Hot waves of anger crashed over Stryver, heating his face. “I never said I loved Blue.”

Another tinkling laugh came from the Goddess. “Blue? I do so love that name. Suits you.” She touched her brother’s hair. “You have been given enough joy to last a millennium.”

Blue shrugged, blushed, and sent her his precious smile. “He had a dog by that name. He said I would like it, and I do.”

Her gaze focused on Stryver again. “So, you do not wish to admit your attachment to my brother. Is it only physical? Or is there something more between the two of you?”

Stryver swallowed, his anger forgotten at the unwanted, meddlesome, but honest questions. “What’s between us is none of your business.”

“But it is my brother’s. I will be watching closely for the moment you tell him how much you care for him.” She smiled and gave Blue another soft kiss on his forehead. “Take care, my love. I will wait with great patience until we are reunited again.”

“Be merciful to us,” Blue murmured with a respectful bow.

The Goddess glowed with sparkling rays. She faded away within the white streaks.

Stryver crossed his arms over his chest. He lowered and shook his head. “How the hell am I to touch you again? Especially knowing she’s going to be watching.”

Blue chuckled. He rubbed the back of his neck and grinned at him. “She won’t. She promised.”

He lifted a brow in question. “You believe her?”

The smaller man shrugged. “Does it matter?”

Deep male shouts came from one of the villagers. Stryver tensed, preparing for another attack. This time, though, the villagers pointed toward the churning, dark ocean. He faced the water and saw on the horizon four sails in the distance, growing larger as they approached the shore line.

The boats had returned.

He looked at Blue. “What did she tell you?”

“To savor my happiness while I can.”

Unease settled in Stryver’s gut stronger than after the Merciful Goddess’s comment about the end. “Well, that’s great to hear.”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t? I’m screwing a War God. Shit...this crazy mission isn’t worth dying over.” He started to leave, intent on meeting with Melbo to make arrangements for their immediate departure once a boat was restocked, but he stopped. He clenched his fists. “You are, though. Worth it.”

Chapter Fourteen

Energy flows like lightning illuminating the sky, silver, white-hot, to slither like desire in my veins.

Blue's sister had warned him to mind every nuance of movement and behavior around him. Not from Stryver, but from others.

He stood at the rail of a merchant ship, watching the water slip by. The larger oceangoing vessel, alongside the smaller fishing boats, had arrived at the village after the battle. The captain of the ship swore a spirit had arrived on board and instructed him where to go. He had accepted the message as Heaven sent. This aided him in his decision to take Blue and Stryver on board. The ship sailed north toward Fantin, the port Stryver hoped to reach.

The stiff breeze pulled the sails, flapping them in the wind. The full moon hovered above in the heavens. Blue stared toward the north, where the water and night sky bled midnight black with strands of crystal streams flowing over the waves. A night for peace—for love. His gaze wandered to where Stryver sat on a barrel near the bow. Blue wanted him again. Tonight. Impending and unseen danger threatened their future. For this reason, he needed to make a memory with Stryver, something to carry with him should the time arrive when his lover no longer stood by his side.

But Blue refused to mention their shared passion again, even though he desired to with each beat of his heart. His rejection in the jungle still stung. Without saying a word, he joined Stryver.

His amber gaze rose and met Blue's. A smile blossomed on his lips. "Won't be long now. Not with this big girl cutting through the waves."

Tension rode underneath the surface of his jovial comments. It tightened his jaw and shoulders.

Blue gave him a small smile. "Yes. Not much farther." His fingers itched to massage the taut muscles in Stryver's upper back. He glanced toward the door that led to their cabin, the only occupied one on this end of the ship. "Come, let's retire. The captain sent fresh water for us to bathe in."

"Wow, you must rate. Fresh water to bathe in on a boat in the middle of the ocean. Nice."

The husky teasing didn't work. Blue reached out and took his hand. He tagged along behind him as Blue led for a change. After opening the door, Blue stepped in and waited until Stryver also stood in the small compartment that would serve as their lodging for this voyage.

No curtains covered the two tiny windows, and only one stub of a candle burned in its nailed-down holder on the far wall. But the modest amount of light didn't matter. The moon sent enough beams through the windows to see where the candle didn't reach. Blue silently closed the door. Taking a deep, fortifying breath, he turned.

"Lie down. I'll wash you," he told Stryver. A knot formed at the base of his throat, and his blood pounded in his veins with the offer. What would his lover think? Too forward? Below his level as Godchild? Would Stryver reject him again? He wasn't sure. He'd grown so much in every aspect of his life during the short amount of time with Stryver. This man, once a stranger but no longer, had shown Blue a bright, new world. Now, all he wanted was to run his hands over Stryver's smooth skin, but he refused to go any further than bathing him.

Too many times in this life, Blue's wishes had been set aside, considered not good for his growth. Disappointment was normal. He never wanted to experience that bitter taste again.

Stryver stopped at the edge of the bed. With a shake of his head, he said, "No." Another shake sent his hair sliding over his brow.

Blue froze. This new refusal lashed out at him, and he bled invisible drops, glistening red, straight from his heart.

Careful, he shifted and asked, "No, what?" He moved to where a bucket had been left along the wall at the edge of the bracketed bed, clasping his hands together so as not to reveal his trembling.

Stryver faced him. "Let me bathe you."

Blue shied away from the hand he'd lifted.

Heart pounding, breaths growing harder to pull in and out, Blue clenched his hands harder. Once sure he could control his voice, he lifted his gaze and met Stryver's. Did he not realize how much he meant to him? "I want to do this. Have to. You didn't let me touch you last night. I have—"

Stryver grabbed his shoulders and jerked him against his chest. His lips found Blue's. Without thinking, Blue opened his mouth to the larger man's tongue, allowing him to pillage inside. Blue tangled his fingers into Stryver's vest and held on while his world tilted.

They broke apart. His chest hurt from trying to drag in enough air. "Wait."

Tilting his head, Stryver dipped close to his lips again.

Blue pressed his palms to the hard wall of his chest. "Wait. It's my turn now."

Chuckles vibrated under his hands. Heated air coasted over his cheek. Stryver's hold grew tighter. Obviously, Stryver had decided not to pay attention. Blue twisted under his arm, pulling it across the front of his body, and flipped the larger man over his shoulder. Stryver landed with a thump in the middle of the cot.

Blue wasn't sure who was more surprised—he or Stryver.

Slow, sexily, a half smile tugged up the corners of his lover's mouth.

Blue's heart melted. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. Where did that come from?"

"I told you. It's my turn to touch you."

Stretching out, Stryver clasped his hands behind his head. "Be my guest."

Slowly, carefully, Blue crawled onto the cot and straddled his hips. With one finger, he traced a trail down the center of Stryver's chest, ending at his belly button. His tanned skin tempted Blue with an unending need to run his hands over him. He glanced up and met his observant, hot gaze. The smile on his lips had relaxed a bit.

Blue followed the rim of his belly button around, once, twice. He watched the movement. Below Blue, Stryver hardened against his own erection. Blue's breath caught, and he had difficulty concentrating. Laying his palms flat, he slid them along Stryver's sides.

Stryver twitched. Blue shifted farther, and the larger man burst out laughing, twisting to one side.

"Sorry. Tickle," his lover choked out.

Surprised, Blue leaned over him. "Tickles? You, the strong and mighty warrior? Ticklish?"

He'd tell him later how sorry he was, but the enticing chance to enjoy this moment overcame all other thought. Blue curled his fingertips into Stryver's sides.

The larger man jerked, his body rising off the cot in an attempt to escape. He reached to grab Blue's hands, but Blue moved faster.

Laughter exploded out of Stryver. Between gasps of air, he begged, "Stop. Enough."

Blue's own laugh echoed his. His heart sang with joy. He shook his head. "No."

They struggled on the cot in a mock battle, each trying to overcome the other with playful touches. The ropes holding the

mattress in the wooden frame groaned under them. After several minutes, Stryver pinned Blue on his right side, his hands gripped between both of his and held above his head. Panting, Blue tugged one more time, but not seriously trying to escape. The ship rode a wave and came down, giving him the sense of floating in Stryver's arms with nothing to anchor them to the world. Silently, he wished this would never end.

Husky, low, Stryver spoke against the side of his head. "Benevolence, Blue." Warm breath glided over his ear, sending tingles down his neck.

Eyes half opened, Blue stared at the line of his neck. "For you? There are others who need mercy more."

"But they're not your lover."

Blue grinned against Stryver's throat. His whiskers scratched at Blue's lips. The tiny pricks added to the sweet vibrations drumming in his lower body. "No. Very well. Mercy."

Stryver dipped his mouth and covered his, releasing his wrists to grasp the sides of his head. Blue opened under his assault. Strong, lean fingers massaged his scalp. Warm, delicious sensations spiraled through him. Stryver's erection prodded his belly.

Remembered pleasure from last night added to the new promise of ecstasy flowing in him. Blue slipped his hand between them and into the front of his lover's waistband. Stryver trembled under his touch. The larger man threw his head back as he pulled air between his clenched teeth.

Stryver managed to mutter. "Not fair. You're...uhn...cheating."

Wrapping his fingers around his hard length, Blue shifted closer and pressed his mouth against the pulse in his neck. "Yes, fair. You did the same to me last night."

He applied pressure. Stryver released a groan.

"Move like this." His lover unlaced his pants and set his hand over the back of Blue's hand, teaching him the rhythm.

Stryver's breathing rumbled in his chest with each stroke. Blue matched the movements with thrusts from his groin, riding Stryver's side.

"Where the hell is the coconut oil?"

A gasping laugh escaped Blue. "By your head, on the floor."

"Don't stop," he muttered between his clenched teeth. He lowered one arm behind him onto the floor. "Damn, where the fuck is it?"

"Turn," Blue managed to say between quick nips on his neck.

Stryver rolled onto his back with Blue half over him. "Got it."

Blue missed a stroke.

He moaned. "Keep moving."

The cork flew across the room. Gurgles came from the shell. His hands, hot and slick, eased under Blue's pants, slipping them lower.

Blue wiggled. The material ripped. Stryver muttered an apology. Blue choked, lost between the hilarity of the situation and his need to have Stryver inside him.

Humor faded with the first swipe of his lover's hand on the back of his thighs. His breath caught in his throat. The scent of coconut rose from his movements. Strong fingers rubbed and stroked over his butt, sliding into the crease and inside him. Warmth spiraled out of control between his legs with the increased pressure. Blue's body opened for Stryver's incredible touch. His pants slid off under his lover's skilled hand.

Stryver grasped Blue's hips and pulled him astride his body. Aiding his lover, Blue helped guide him to his entrance. Unhurried, careful, Stryver eased inside him.

The first slow thrust, and his world erupted into a kaleidoscope. Blue moaned as Stryver slid deeper, pressing against the spot radiating pleasure. Sitting straight, his head back, Blue drew in gulps of air. Intense need cascaded over and through him, curling his toes.

His lover taught Blue the movement by lifting and lowering over his hard length. And Blue learned, quickly and eagerly.

Leaning forward, Blue braced his hands on his lover's shoulders, staring into his amber gaze. With each gliding push downward, the coil inside him wound tighter until with one last, deep lunge, his world shattered, and his body convulsed with his scalding release. Stryver grunted as he loosed his own passion. Blue fell forward onto his chest, and Stryver wrapped his arms around him, raining kisses on his brow.

A low chuckle vibrated his chest under Blue's cheek. "Now, you can bathe me."

Boneless, Blue wasn't sure he could sit up, much less stand and carry the water bucket to the side of the bed.

Another low laugh and Stryver eased him over. "Stay here."

Blue didn't have the energy to refuse. His heart still raced, and his eyes drooped. He imprinted this memory into his soul, next to all the others he'd gained since Stryver came into his life. In this safe haven, he could cherish all of them forever.

Closing his eyes, he drifted in the afterglow.

Sleep edged his mind. Heartbeats later, a cold, wet cloth ran over his belly. He gasped in shock, his peaceful glow ended.

Stryver chuckled. He ran the scrap of linen lower, and Blue jerked. The chill from the water sent shivers across his skin.

"Easy. I'll warm you up in a moment."

This alone helped him remain in place as Stryver continued cleaning off the coconut oil mixed with their bodies' juices and sweat. He rinsed the cloth out and finished washing Blue's body.

"I wanted to clean you," Blue mumbled.

"Too late. You're an infant at sex. Give it time. You'll have your chance."

His words hung in the air between them. They might never have what he spoke about. Ever. Blue swallowed the threatening pain this brought.

Finished, Stryver spread the cloth along the edge of the bucket. He crawled into bed but didn't meet his gaze. Blue scooted closer,

needing to feel his strength against him. He returned the favor by wrapping both his arms and one leg around him. Stryver kissed his brow, murmuring for him to sleep. Used to obeying such commands, Blue closed his eyes. Sleep took him away, but not for long. In his dream, he stood in one of the many corridors at the monastery within Heaven's Seat. Only small candles burning in their holders high on the walls lit the hallway. Up ahead, the Abbot called his name.

Surprised to hear his familiar voice, Blue walked forward, searching each corridor without finding him. He came to a doorway leading to the small garden with the fountain. The same one Stryver and he had passed through during their escape from the assassins.

The Abbot stood next to the fountain.

"You came." His deep voice shook. His forehead showed no mark of what had taken his life.

"I don't understand." Confusion clouded Blue's thoughts. He shook his head, his gaze riveted on the elder man's stout form.

"I tried to protect you. Now, no one can."

"Protect me?"

"From the ones who fear you, who dread your coming. They do not understand that you must be. You were sent to this dimension for a purpose. To deny and attempt to destroy one with powers such as you possess does not change the truth. You must exist and live among us." His pale, gray glance passed over Blue's face. "I saved you at your birth. I kept you hidden, the truth secret. I cared for you."

"You took me from my family."

"You could not remain with them. The abilities you possess are too powerful for a normal life. Even you realize this."

Yes, Blue did. No matter how much he desired to stay with Stryver, his power would present insurmountable problems. The force inside him increased every day. After his time in the ancient tomb, he'd discovered new levels of his power. Looking into the pale gaze, he asked, "You drugged me to control me?"

A gentle smile curved the old cleric's lips. "For your own good. Why do you believe I allowed you to dance in the dome? You needed to prepare before you came into yourself."

"But to drug me? Could you not have told me the truth?" Blue wanted to understand but found it difficult.

"What would you have done if you discovered the way you have been persecuted in the past? One cannot change what has come before, just as one cannot decree what will happen in the morning. I have helped you find your compassion, your human side. Otherwise, you would have made difficult decisions with disastrous results." The Abbot looked at the sky above. "The unfairness of the humans in the past justified your anger over their attitude toward you. You are destined to destroy all in your path. Now, you have the chance to restore, protect, and save lives. Is this not better than the truth?"

His words sent a ray of peace through Blue. If he'd been left alone to his own means, then his rage would have killed all those about him. He'd never have met Stryver. He alone filled Blue's world, became a part of him that he wanted to keep forever. But as their journey drew to an end, he wasn't sure he had the strength to go on without Stryver at his side. The unknown future crowded his peace and threatened to destroy that fragile thread he clung to for hope.

Blue looked away, focusing on the stone slabs forming a walkway around the fountain. "What am I to do?"

"Remember who you are. You've forgotten during your travels. You can never forget. Your divinity is absolute. No matter what anyone decides, you are the only one to control your life the way you see fit."

When he finished speaking, the Abbot faded along with Heaven's Seat. Blue opened his eyes. His gaze landed on Stryver's chest. A dream? Yes, of course, he'd dreamed of the old man.

The moonlight streamed through the window and turned his lover's skin to liquid steel, hard, shining, and magnificent. Blue ran his palm over the line of his smooth breast.

Stryver shuddered, and chill bumps erupted over his skin. Blue looked into his face. His eyes were opened to narrow slits, staring at a spot in front of the window.

“Did you see?” Stryver blinked, rubbed his eyes with one hand, and looked again.

“What?”

“I thought I saw...” He shook his head. “Never mind. Must have been the light.”

Tilting his head, Blue needed to hear. “Tell me.”

“The Abbot. I thought I saw him standing there. Like I said, had to be the light.”

His stomach clenched. Had the Abbot come to him? Not in a dream, but here in this place. Blue didn’t want to consider it. He’d made his decision. Just as the Abbot had said, the man who’d raised him no longer held control over him. The choices he made belonged to him alone.

“Kiss me, Stryver,” he whispered against his jaw line.

His lover shifted and covered his mouth, driving dreams and restless spirits far from his mind.

Chapter Fifteen

Deciding to desert Heaven, severing all earthly ties, shattering the heart's desires, so all that remain are the ash and dead embers of a forgotten past carried away in the cold wind.

The boat thudded against the dock. Sailors with steady feet and hands worked to tighten off its mooring lines. The tiny city of Fantin spread out from the pier. The simple, wooden houses, overlaid with plaster, showed white against the dark grays and greens of the mountains behind. Several of the smiling residents waved at the arrival of the ship's crew.

Stryver leaned against the rail. He tilted his head back, closing his eyes to enjoy the cool breeze over his skin.

The peace within him receded. He had a choice to make—to finish this mission and leave Blue with Master Aidal or to remain on board, traveling to other lands in hopes of disappearing with the Godchild. He glanced over to where Blue stood, farther down the rail. The smaller man watched the docking like a child receiving a precious gift from loving parents.

How the hell had he managed to involve his heart during this mission? He should have ignored Blue, treated him with callous reserve until he delivered him to Aidal. But no, he'd fallen in love with the man.

Damn it.

His honor battled with his desire. What mattered the most to him—love or holding fast to his word? The decision was tearing him apart.

“Will we buy some food supplies before we leave?” Blue appeared next to him. He shot a shy smile in Stryver’s direction. “We’re running low on coconut oil.”

Tingles streamed over Stryver’s skin. The remembered scent of the oil tightened his balls. Exotic, sex-riddled images formed in his mind, reminding him of the reason behind the shortage of oil. Last night alone had left his thigh muscles twitching for a long time from the intensity of their lovemaking. He’d created a sex addict. No, wait, a sex god. He snorted at the route his thoughts traveled. An endearing sex god. One he dreaded separating from once they arrived at Aidal’s fortress.

But reality reared its head. He had to complete what he’d started. It didn’t matter what he wanted. Blue was a Godchild, not a common man able to live a quiet life.

How had he ever thought he and a Godchild could escape their fate? Aidal would find them. His master’s laws concerning a betrayal decreed a slow and painful death to the offenders. Few in Aidal’s stable ever attempted rebellion. Stryver had seen such punishments meted out in the past. The cries of the poor wretches still lingered deep in the night when his defenses were lowered by exhaustion and those souls wandered the corridors of his dreams.

“We’ll stock up on what we need.”

“Coconut oil for sure.”

Stryver nodded. A day’s walking separated them from Aidal. One more night of passion, and then...

The gangplank thudded on the wave-soaked stone dock and intruded on his thoughts. He mentally shoved his melancholy away.

Blue trotted down the ship’s plank ahead of him. Stryver followed slower, enjoying watching the way the smaller man moved. No longer restrained by the holy order’s dictates, Blue surveyed the world about him with an insatiable curiosity, his gaze swinging left and right, trying to see everything. Stryver’s heart pounded with worry and frustration. He had created a new person in the Godchild, someone

unrecognizable but one he loved dearly. One he could never admit his love to, not ever.

Dread pulled him from his thoughts and returned with the sensation of unwanted, hidden eyes on them.

He covertly studied the people moving about them. The nearest avenue through the city held the markets. The citizens and visitors of Fantin moved about the makeshift market stalls from vendor to vendor, making their selections of fruits and fresh fish. Stryver stopped at the second booth on the south side of the street. Blue stood only a few feet from him, looking at the fruits for sale.

Lowering his head a bit, Stryver kept his voice soft. "We're being watched."

Blue never looked at him. "I know."

Surprise brought Stryver's gaze over to the smaller man. "What?"

Azure eyes glanced at him. "Don't worry. They won't bother us."

"Why?" Another thought hit Stryver full force. Blue had changed in other ways also since the incident in the ancient tomb. He'd make strange comments about things he had no way of knowing about, just like now. "What did you do?"

The Godchild's innocence came out with a casual shrug. "Nothing. I can sense what their intentions are."

Stryver lifted a brow. "Another one of your abilities?"

"I suppose." Blue looked up at the sky as if he considered his answer. He shook his head. "I didn't have this gift before I entered my ancient prison. Perhaps it was dormant and is now awakened."

Unable to stop, Stryver asked the question he'd avoided during the ocean voyage. "Or maybe your full powers are working?"

The small, much-loved bastard had the nerve to rub the back of his neck and flash him a stunning, white-toothed grin. "We'll see."

Oh, not good. At. All. "Blue," Stryver warned with his fiercest scowl.

"What? It's fine, there's nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about? Who was he kidding? “Can you tell who they are?”

“Like you.”

Stryver frowned. Like him? Had Aidal sent men to escort them? The possibility was there. This mission had listed as an A rank, and the old man had assigned only one man to it—him. Collecting his thoughts, he tried to figure out who Aidal would have sent to keep a watch out for their arrival. Probably the two rated in higher skills above him. His master’s right-hand soldiers, Omata and Fen.

Of course, they’d keep their distance, approaching only when Stryver and Blue reached the outskirts of the fortress. Would they notice how close the two of them had become? Damn, how could they miss it? Unable to stop the rapid increase of anxiety, Stryver envisioned Aidal’s reaction to this piece of information. He’d aim his anger at Stryver, perhaps even denying his release from service.

No matter what, Stryver had to stay whole and alive to make sure Blue remained safe, even from Aidal.

“Let’s go.” He motioned to Blue. He moved past the booths, not bothering to purchase anything.

“But...” Blue lagged behind, but he did follow.

He didn’t stop to even look back. “We don’t need anything. The time has come. We’ll quickstep the rest of the way. We can reach Shaifo before dusk. Can you keep up with me?”

“Yes, but...”

This second *but* brought Stryver around. He glared at Blue. “We can’t wait. If we’re being watched, then my master is aware you’ve arrived. I should have expected this, but you’ve distracted me to the point I overlooked the possibility. No more. We have to go. Now.”

Blue studied him. He must have sensed Stryver’s unease. He responded with a slight downward tilt of his head.

With a nod, Stryver strode the length of the avenue, confident Blue was moving with him. No outer wall surrounded Fantin. They

walked away from the clustered, plaster-coated houses and buildings without a guard halting them.

He continued up the path leading to the mountainous terrain looming before them. Higher and higher they marched until they reached a dip in the land. Stryver glanced at Blue and nodded. Together, they sprang into their quicksteps. Blue stayed at his elbow. Each light touch of Stryver's feet on the ground carried him farther from Fantin and prying eyes.

The land around him blurred in an array of greens and browns. The sun trailed across the sky behind them. Stryver kept a steady pace. His determination to leave the spies behind hardened. By mid-day, satisfied no one could have kept up with them, he breathed easier. Their destination waited not far ahead of them. He slowed, reached out, and grabbed Blue by the elbows. He twirled on one heel into the protective cover of the thick trees growing along the sides of the path.

He pushed Blue against the rough bark of the nearest tree. "The fortress is over that high peak. Our journey ends there."

His azure eyes widened. Blue gave a quick twitch of his head, and his fresh scent tinged with coconut filled the air around their heads. Desire lanced through Stryver's cock. He refused to allow Blue to argue with him. "Don't say a word. No pleading. This is how it's supposed to be. Aidal will take care of you."

"I have to let this play out, don't I?"

His gaze burning with the sharp heat of tears, Stryver blinked the sensation away. "Yes. We both do. I want you to swear, no matter what happens, you won't destroy the place. Many innocent people live there. If my master does anything to anger you, swear you won't hurt anyone."

Blue's throat worked. His pink tongue slipped out and swiped his bottom lip. Heat pooled hotter between Stryver's legs.

"What do you think he'll do?"

"I don't know, but my gut's in knots. Not a good sign." Stryver loosened his hold on Blue's arms. "Just swear. Please."

"You're going to leave me, aren't you?"

The question sent sharp pangs across Stryver's chest. He considered lying, but Blue meant too much to him. He gulped over the knot in his throat. "Yes."

Long, black hair shook with Blue's rejection of his answer. "I don't want you to go."

He tightened his hold on the smaller man's arms. "It's not for you to decide. You are a Godchild. You aren't supposed to have a normal life."

Jerking from his grip, Blue's eyes flashed with fury. "I want one. *I* deserve one. All these lifetimes, I've done what humans have demanded. Why can't I have what I want? Just *one* time?" He panted, his frustration evident on his features. He laid his palm flat against the spot where Stryver's heart pounded. His next words came out in a low whisper. "With *you*."

Anger flaring at the unfairness of their situation, Stryver snarled. "You. Are. A. God. You can never live among humans as an equal. Don't you understand? You have to return to what you're meant to be." What did he have to do to make Blue understand? They had to go forward and resume their lives. He shook Blue. The smaller man's head snapped back and forth. "I don't care about you. I never did. I used you to have a nice trip back. That's all."

Motionless, Blue stared at him, silent agony swimming in his eyes. Disbelief spread over his face and replaced the anger.

A hollow spot formed in Stryver's chest where his heart raced. He opened his mouth to shout he'd lied, but instead, he said, "Now, promise. You won't harm any innocent people in the fortress."

With a shuddering nod, Blue agreed. Stryver released a gusty sigh. "Good. That's good."

Words failed him. What could he say to explain the truth to Blue? Nothing, yet everything? Instead, he closed his eyes and pulled Blue close, savoring his lover's body against his.

The wind carried a hint of wood smoke from the cook fires at the Shaifo. Stryver eased away from Blue. "We have to finish this."

After a hard swallow, Blue nodded. "Very well. I am ready."

But when Stryver met his gaze, uncertainty of the future clouded the azure.

Stryver turned away to the path. Without looking back, he started his quickstep again. His heart thudded in his chest. He had trouble drawing in enough air. He led the way over two more small rises before coming to the last, higher ridge overlooking the fortress.

Built into the far mountain slope, the wooden fort's buildings were positioned in a staggered pattern surrounded by a tall, upright log wall. In the past, the sight of this fortress, with its high, wooden barrier and timber homes, had always given him a sense of satisfaction. Today, it struck disquiet in him. Aidal's lodge, larger and more illustrious than the smaller buildings, appeared to beckon him with the smoke curling from the many chimneys rising from the slate roof.

He came to a halt at the top of the ridge and stared at the only home he'd ever known. He'd learned many life lessons in this place, even some skills that he'd wished he'd never learned. Blue stood off to one side of him. He was glad the smaller man kept silent. If Blue had asked any questions, Stryver wasn't sure he could answer over the knot in his throat.

Sudden shame for his past deeds washed over him. All the assassinations, burglaries, and many other tasks he'd completed over the years seemed to jump to the front of his mind. Had any of them been justified? Had taking Blue and bringing him here to Heaven knew what kind of fate served a purpose? He didn't know. Still, he couldn't figure out what Aidal's reasons were behind the orders to kidnap the Godchild.

He wanted his freedom, but at what cost? Losing Blue?

He gritted his teeth and took the first step toward the fortress. He'd given his word, sworn an oath to secure the Godchild. He refused to go back on it. He'd follow this through to the end. The Merciful Goddess's words echoed in his mind. *Your journey will continue until the end.*

The end had arrived, and he had to face it. Even if it meant he'd never have a life with Blue, he had to accept what Fate had decreed.

Chapter Sixteen

Step into the blackness.

A cold, dark fury simmered within Blue, matching the growing black clouds overhead. Stryver had lied about using him for his pleasure on this journey. Blue sensed it in the air around Stryver, just as though he had spoken the words of rejection. Flames raced under his skin. His blood scalded through his veins. He still heard Stryver's cruel words. How could the man he loved say such things?

The familiar pleasure of seeing him added to the turmoil in Blue's mind. Deep blue edged Stryver's aura. Was this his fear manifested around the larger man? But what or who frightened him? His master? Blue? Didn't he realize Blue would never let anyone harm him? Not ever. Yet his words burned deep into his soul.

A breath later, his chest tightened with repressed anger. How dare he lie to him? *To him?* The moment this thought slipped through his mind, another chased it away in an instant. None of this was Stryver's fault. No, his master had ordered him to bring the Godchild to this place. The blame for Stryver's spurning him lay at Aidal's feet. This master of Stryver's would pay for alienating the man he loved. He had time. Soon, they'd arrive, and Blue would have his justice.

Stryver may have gotten his oath not to harm innocent people, but he hadn't received one not to destroy his enemies. Aidal topped his list of despicable people. Blue tucked his lips between his teeth to keep his smile hidden. Aidal was the only name on the list. The master would suffer for blocking his wish for a future with Stryver.

Blue had sworn not to allow anyone to control him again. Aidal was a fool if he believed Blue would be malleable to his will.

“Change your hair to its natural state.”

He jumped at Stryver’s order. His lover spoke but kept his back to Blue as he trudged ahead.

With little concentration, Blue complied.

Two more steps, and an armed force quickstepped, surrounding them. Dust billowed from many feet on the path. Unsheathed swords and curved knives glinted in the dim light of the gray afternoon. The men hid their faces behind scarves. Leather covered their muscled, sweat-coated arms, chests, and legs.

Stryver stopped. He stood, hip cocked, his gaze leveled at the fortress. His hands stayed loose at his sides.

Blue took slow, deep breaths, trying his best to control the rise of turmoil in his mind. His silent anger threatened to break free, and with it, his power surged in him, rippling under his skin. If needed, he could form a barrier to separate them from this new force. The cerulean currents would devour any attack from these warriors, including their bodies. Not now. Not here. These men were like Stryver. They followed Aidal’s orders. Blue repeated this over and over until a slow calm filtered through the pending rage and helped calm him. Besides, Stryver would be furious if he harmed them.

“Were you followed?” one of the closer men questioned.

“Only by the ones Master sent,” Stryver responded.

Watchful eyes over masks scanned the area. The inquirer nodded and lowered his weapons. All the others copied his lead. “Come. Master is waiting.”

They remained around them as they continued toward the fortress. The massive, wooden log gate on the protective wall swung inward the closer they drew. Stryver, familiar with the place, kept his gaze on a spot level with his eyes. Not Blue. Why should he? Curiosity rose up, and he took in all the sights, the cluster of timber homes, the healthy but wary people. Their attitudes, the hollow, enslaved tint to

the quick looks, the faster lowering of their eyes, the clenched children against mothers' sides, all rang of servitude to a harsh master. Blue's chest tightened more.

How could someone claim to help his people yet instill this type of resigned acceptance and fright in these same ones meant to serve? It seemed to Blue that Aidal used them and discarded them once he received his desired wishes. No man who cared for his people would inspire the fear Blue sensed coming from each of them. Did they understand, and were they still willing to accept it? Some of their gazes held the same glint Stryver's did whenever he mentioned his master. They'd serve Aidal for their security from the harshness of the outside world. Most would consider this a logical reason for remaining under the servitude of a difficult master.

The path within the fortress opened to a stone circle with a fountain in the center. Before the water basin at the bottom of the fount stood a man not much taller than Blue's own height. The finest fur edged the crimson, velvet tunic, and underneath, slick, dark, leather pants hugged his bowed legs. Gold chains hung about his neck. His sharp, black eyes, as dark as his long hair, gleamed with a bright inner light. His aura, though, streamed onyx about his body.

Evil.

It called to the wickedness from Blue's past lives. At this moment, unease coursed through him. This man possessed power. Absolute. Blue would not underestimate him.

Stryver moved to stand in front of this man and genuflected with his head bowed. Blue saw no reason for him to show any respect for this man. He tilted his chin higher.

Aidal went down on his knees and prostrated with his brow pressed against the cobblestone. False reverence radiated from him. The people watching along the edge of the circle all followed Aidal's example and knelt also.

Blue stared at the back of Stryver's head. The sudden urge to kick him came over him. His leg twitched, but just as he was about to lift it

and swing, the Abbot's words breezed through his mind. *Always remember who you are. Maintain control at all times. You are a God. Comport yourself in a Godly manner.*

For the first time since the attack on Heaven's Seat, sorrow rose inside Blue for the loss of his teacher. This mournful sense added to the agony of Stryver's impending departure.

Stryver twitched and stiffened.

Realization hit Blue. If Stryver had lied, he must have a reason and not simply because he intended to leave. He'd sworn to keep Blue safe. His word was his life.

The fool! What was he thinking? Did he even now have a plan? Why didn't he share it with him? Why shoulder the burden alone? It was typical of the Stryver he'd grown to love and admire.

Satisfied for the time being with his conclusion, Blue spoke to Aidal. "Rise. You honor me greatly with your homage. I am forever in your debt for sending Stryver to rescue me."

Aidal came to his feet in a fluid motion. His black gaze met Blue's for a brief moment. Aidal blinked, and his eyes landed on Stryver, who also came to his feet before swinging back to Blue.

"You must be exhausted, Your Holiness, from the long journey. A bath and garments suitable for your station are prepared within. Please, this way." He held his arm out toward the path leading deeper and higher into the fortress.

The house at the end waited, massive, impressive, but not a home. Coldness permeated from the outer walls, and Blue realized the inside would also carry the same icy emptiness he perceived.

"If it pleases you, I would have Stryver attend me." Blue sent a stream of invisible power toward the tilted lid of a barrel outside a building to the right of and behind Aidal. The lid fell with a loud thud, followed by the screech of a cat in hiding behind it. Blue jerked toward the sound, more surprised by the animal than what he'd intended with just the lid. When he glanced back at Aidal, he kept his expression tense. "You do understand. I feel comfortable with him."

“Of course, whatever you desire. I can only imagine what you suffered.” The older man stepped to the side and allowed Blue to precede him.

They walked in a slow procession up the side path of the mountain to his house. The carved faces of Gods adorned the edges of the overhang and its corners. There on the far end was the accepted rendition of Blue’s own features. His sister, the Merciful Goddess, was over the entranceway. He had to assume Aidal already knew his identity. If not, he possessed the upper hand in this game Aidal played.

Stryver strode behind Aidal. Comfort came over Blue with the knowledge he remained with him for a while longer.

At their approach, two burly men hurried to open the double doors leading inside the three-story, timbered hall.

Blue climbed the stone steps and entered into the realm of his enemy.

Once within, the older man motioned to a waiting attendant. “Please guide His Imminence to his quarters.” Aidal faced Blue. “Rest, eat, and later this evening, we will visit.”

He inclined his head in agreement. His guide remained silent the entire way up the right-hand staircase and down a long, wide hallway. Stryver’s soft footfalls came from behind him. Relief swept through Blue.

The black-clad servant turned one corner to the right and came to a halt before a closed door midway down the hall. Opening another set of double ornate doors, the quiet man stepped to the side to allow Blue to enter first. The rooms spread before him in opulent glory. They befit his station with their white and gold dressings.

The heavy, bold lines of gilt carvings on the headboard of the oversized bed centered in the room glinted in the light.

His guide bowed deep. “If Your Imminence likes, I will assist with your bath.”

“That won’t be necessary. You may leave.” Blue kept his gaze on the bed and wondered how anyone could expect him to sleep there.

The doors swung close with a whisper.

“The bath is over there.” The sound of Stryver’s voice sent shivers across his shoulders. He faced him to see him pointing to a door left half open on the far side of the room.

Moving to the opening, Blue gave a gentle shove on the heavy, wooden portal. The pool’s waters released vaporous streams to float in a dreamlike manner above. “Come. Wash my back. I have trouble reaching a certain spot right below my shoulder blades in the center.”

Without waiting to see if he came, Blue entered the room and made his way to the edge of the pool. Decorative mosaic tiles layered the huge basin in bright blues, golds, and deep reds. Four wide columns rose from the floor to a domed ceiling. More figures of gods reclined and danced above him.

“Your master must be a reverent man.” Blue moved to where a table stood midway along the edge of the pool, surprised at his calm. Drying cloths of the finest white linen lay folded on the surface. He fingered the corner of one. “I hate water, but I suppose it is a necessary evil.”

Stryver snorted. “It’s not evil.”

No, but Aidal is. He swerved to face his lover.

Jerking back a step, Stryver narrowed his gaze. Had the larger man felt what he’d thought? Possibly. Stryver didn’t comment, so Blue couldn’t be sure, and he refused to speak the words out loud. They were, after all, in the viper’s den.

With a half smile pasted on his lips, Blue winked at him and proceeded to undress. Stryver continued to study him. He desired nothing more at this moment than to have Stryver reach out and touch him just one more time so he might experience the exquisite sensation of beautiful lightning beneath his skin, that tingling, heated pleasure Stryver gifted to him.

Naked, Blue went to the poolside. Unable to stop a frown from surfacing, he stared at the smooth surface of the water.

“Get in there.” Stryver reached his side in a blink, and firm, calloused palms, planted in the center of his back, shoved.

This time, caught off guard, Blue fell with a geyser rising all around him. He came up spurting. “Why, you...”

Stryver had the gall to chuckle. Flashes of smooth, dusky skin came through the streams of water flowing into Blue’s eyes. Stryver jumped in to land not far from him. He surfaced an arm’s length away, vapor rising off of the hard, smooth skin on his chest and shoulders.

Blue’s mouth watered at the sight. His lover brushed the moisture off his face with both hands. Throbbing pulses of need careened through Blue. He swam backward until he came to the edge of the pool. He placed his arms along the lip and lifted his feet toward Stryver.

With a slow grin forming on his lips, Stryver grinned and moved toward Blue. He grabbed Blue’s ankles. Those strong hands tugged his legs apart for his tall, lean body to move closer. Small waves of foggy water rushed to Blue and batted against his chest and belly. Each gentle touch echoed in a deep, breath-stealing throb at the junction of his legs. Stryver stopped short of touching Blue’s body with his.

“What are you doing?” Blue hoped his gaze, his voice, even his breathing conveyed to his lover that he needed him to come nearer.

“Taking care of my charge.”

“One last time with your favorite God? Another *enjoyable* memory to tuck away?” Blue couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of his tone. Stryver had ripped him open earlier with his thoughtless words, and though Blue wanted him now, the wounds he’d inflicted still bled.

“Not at all. I thought you wanted me to wash your back.” Calm and collected, Stryver stared at him with those incredible amber eyes. His palms slid higher up his legs. *Damn it, not the back of my legs.*

Long, lean fingers brushed against one sensitive spot. *Yes, right there.* Blue tried not to pant.

“Don’t be spiteful. It’s not becoming.” Stryver leaned over, grasped the bamboo tray on the poolside, and dropped it in the water next to Blue. The steamy air threatened to suffocate him with its moisture. His tone, so sexy and husky, penetrated the core of Blue’s soul. “I thought you wanted me to bathe you.”

The heat from the pool added to his own growing temperature. “So I did.” Blue tried to lower his legs. Stryver held tighter, even positioning his knees on either side of his flanks.

“Come closer.” His soft order tumbled a rapid beat of desire under the surface of Blue’s skin.

“So you can reach my back?”

“Of course. What other reason would I have?”

“Dunno.” Blue panted, unable to think or drag in a deep enough breath this close to Stryver. Need for his touch, his gaze, enveloped him completely.

He released the edge of the pool and placed his hands on the solid line of Stryver’s shoulders. The smooth, slick skin forced a low moan from Blue’s lips.

“Not now. Not here.” Stryver whispered against his ear.

“But...”

He cut Blue short with a swift nip to the corner of his jaw. “Quiet, Blue. The walls have eyes and ears. Turn around slowly. Enjoy it.”

His flesh and bones turned to mush. He lowered his legs with Stryver’s help. With sluggish precision, Blue turned so his back faced Stryver. A soap-coated cloth slipped over his shoulder while one hot hand slid across his flank and grasped his cock. Lightning flared under his skin.

He bit his lower lip to keep from moaning out loud.

Chapter Seventeen

Some truths are hidden until death threatens. They swirl like hungry predators, prepared to attack the unsuspecting.

Damn Blue. The sight of his bare ass had driven Stryver crazy with lust. He'd shoved the smaller man into the pool first in hopes of hiding the fact he'd grown hard in a moment. He jumped in after as another way of preventing the enchanting fool from seeing the rigid bulge in his pants.

But now, his hands on Blue's satiny skin drove him closer to the edge of revealing how entangled they'd become over the length of the trip. He couldn't tell Blue how much he loved him. Aidal would find out—that is, if the bastard didn't already suspect. And what if he did discover or even know the truth about their relationship? Master would play his turn in the game no matter what. All Stryver needed to do was stay alert to any changes so he could counter and save Blue.

His lover, head lowered, brow resting on the lip of the pool, moaned.

Stryver leaned closer. "Feel good?"

A short, abrupt nod answered him.

He applied a bit more pressure and tugged on Blue's cock at the same moment his other hand barely passed over the knotted muscles of his narrow back. Another moan came from Blue, deeper, filled with pure ecstasy.

"Almost there, love." Stryver moved the cloth lower and dragged it over Blue's balls.

“Yes.” Blue drew the word out, releasing more of an exhalation than speech. The next heartbeat, spasms racked the smaller form before relaxation loosened the tightened muscles under his hands.

His body tense with his own need, Stryver grinned, happy he’d given Blue another passionate memory he seemed so adamant about keeping.

Several moments later, with Stryver pressed against his lover’s back, Blue spoke, his tone quiet, speculative. “Did you know he wants me dead?”

Stryver stiffened and leaned forward to see his lover’s expression as Blue raised his head.

Their gazes met as Stryver lowered his to Blue’s mouth, watching his lips move with his words. “Do you know what your master intends?”

“No. I suspect. Is this what you believe, or do you see something that verifies it?”

“I felt it the moment we arrived. He’s evil, this master of yours. His aura is black.”

Stryver grunted. “All for the better good.”

“Yes. His.” Blue turned so he faced him. “Do you think his spies are listening to us now?”

“Probably.”

“I thought as much. So if I kissed you, they’d know it, too?”

“Most definitely.”

“Do you think they’d care or run screaming from this place at such a sinful sight?”

“Let’s find out.” Stryver covered Blue’s mouth, and all other thoughts fled his mind.

The first touch of his lover’s hungry lips sent welcoming shards of desire through him. He refused to heed the gentle nudge to fulfill his own need.

They broke apart. Blue’s eyes glazed over with passion.

How could he leave his precious love?

No, he wouldn't, not like this.

His future stretched long and empty, a pointless journey of endless days without Blue at his side. He'd find a way to fix this.

Aidal had his own manipulations at work here. When Stryver discovered what they were, he'd know the path he'd have to travel. Together with Blue.

"Come. Let's get you dressed and ready to meet with Master."

A low groan slipped from Blue's kiss-swollen lips. "There's no other way?"

"None."

Stryver released him, grabbed the edge of the pool, and swung out of the water. He picked up one of the drying linens and snapped it free of its neat folds. He held it ready for Blue.

His lover rose from the water, hovering above the steamy liquid. He floated to the edge and alighted with gentle ease on the mosaic tile. A magnificent God in the flesh, bared for any who dared spy on them. Did those who no doubt watched in secret experience the same awe he did every time he witnessed Blue's nakedness? How could they not? A soft, glowing aura covered the smaller man's body, giving it the ethereal presence of the God inside him.

Pulling his thoughts away from the unseen eyes, he focused on the cloth as he wrapped it around Blue's slender form. He rubbed every inch of the smaller man's body, silently enjoying the feel of the taut muscles under his hands.

While Blue waited, Stryver dried off and pulled his own clothes on. Once he finished, he led Blue to the other room, where scarlet and gold robes were laid on the bed, waiting to adorn the Godchild's body. Blue stopped at the edge of the bed, his gaze centered on the rich robes. He touched the satiny material with one finger.

"Call the servants."

Surprised at the quiet command, Stryver went to the door and motioned to the attendant waiting outside to follow him.

The man entered and knelt before Blue.

Still wrapped in the linen cloth, Blue spoke, his voice low and contemplative. "Please remove these. Bring me linen. Light blue robes with no adornment."

"But, Your Imminence, surely these are more appropriate to your station." The servant's expression added to the confusion evident in his words.

Blue's eyes shifted to the man. "Do you question me?"

The instant glint of fear in the man's eyes forced his head down. "Not at all, Your Holiness. I will bring what you desire." He stood and backed to the door, leaving them alone.

"Why not those?" Stryver moved closer to the bed. He picked up the edge of the gold-trimmed, crimson outer robe, rubbing the silky material between his fingers.

"They no longer suit me. I am not who I once was." Blue met his gaze. Sorrow reflected in the startling azure eyes.

Servants traipsed through the open door, carrying new, simpler robes of white and pale blue in their arms. Placing the new raiments on the bed, they removed the other ones and departed, shutting the door behind them.

Stryver nodded toward the clothes. "Want me to help you dress?"

A slight smile tugged at Blue's mouth. "If you like. It would be nice to have another memory to keep."

Small tingles went off under Stryver's skin. He grinned and shook his head, reaching for the white underpants. "You'll have a lifetime of memories, love. I swear it to you."

Blue gasped and glanced at him. Within the azure of his eyes, hope budded.

"Now, drop the cloth. I do so admire your body bared to me."

"Do you?"

Leaning closer so only Blue would hear him, he breathed against his brow. "Always." The cloth slid off to reveal pale, sleek skin. Warmth pooled between Stryver's legs.

With gentle touches, he adorned Blue's body with these new robes. He slid his palms down over slender hips. The feel of Blue beneath his calloused palm sent weakening streams of desire throughout him. Why couldn't this be different? Why hadn't he been reared a farmer and Blue born as a normal man? Their lives would have been so simple, serene and calm. Not like now, when fear left the taint of loss in his mouth.

He swallowed over the tightness in his throat. *Stay focused, idiot. You want to live, but not without Blue. We'll escape this. We have to.*

Once he smoothed the outer robe down, Stryver stepped back, his gaze surveying his lover. The color brightened and complimented the azure of his lover's eyes.

"There's food. Do you want to eat?" He glanced over to the table arrayed with several different dishes.

"No, not now. Besides, I'd rather finish this."

Stryver nodded. "Yes, it's best. I'll take you to him."

"Then you'll leave?"

"If he releases me." He grasped Blue's shoulder. "You'll do fine."

"No harm to any innocents. That's what you said, correct?"

A pang of fear lanced across Stryver's belly. The beloved fool was planning something. "Yes. No innocents."

"We're only a step closer to what we desire." Blue turned to the door. "Shall we go and face our future?"

What else could he do but trail after him? The door opened to the path before them where Fate intended them to travel, even into the jaws of the beast whose fangs might rip them to shreds.

Chapter Eighteen

Rage is sharp like the finest blade, cutting, slicing, disseminating all in its path.

This life belonged to Blue. No one else. He owned it. He would decide what would happen to shape the world around him. Who he chose to love, where to live, and when to die remained solely in his hands. The fear of death no longer loomed over him. His decision burned through his blood, pounded in his chest, demanded he carry it through.

His heart, his very soul followed behind him. Stryver implied he would help change what Aidal plotted. His hints said with clarity that they would have a future together. And so they would. Stryver's mortality was absolute. Blue's, not so much. It would take a long time for Blue to die from wounds. Even starvation had taken months to deprive him of life and there was only a few holy relics that would end his life quickly. The man he loved could die. If that happened, Aidal would pay with his blood for the deed. Blue made his decision.

Blue moved forward to the entrance of Aidal's home. The flames flickered with low crackles above the torches lighting the hallway and entrance foyer. The man he despised waited for them. Eyes shadowed in the dim light, a void of any gentle emotion radiated from Stryver's master, thus making Blue's reasons for his demise justified.

"Your Imminence." Aidal spoke in a voice slick with false subservience. Oh, yes, Blue heard the lies in his tone and saw the emptiness in his gaze. Another low bow in his direction provided him a heartbeat to control his simmering anger. How *dare* this man

pretend respect and honor in front of him? Who did this human believe he was when compared to him? *I am a God*. Not one to trifle with in the best of times. Yet here Aidal seemed to believe he would take and manipulate him.

Foolish man.

For Stryver, he would play the game a bit longer. Aidal would reveal his evil intentions shortly.

His host straightened and motioned toward a set of double doors to his right. "Please join me so we might visit. There is much I wish to discuss with you."

Blue stopped the sudden twitch of his left eyebrow. *Do not show him any response. Nothing. Calm, composed, stoic, even, until the right moment.*

Inclining his head in assent, Blue waited for him to move forward to open the wide, wooden doors.

Aidal took two steps, stopped, and glanced at Stryver. A slow smile widened his lips. He withdrew a small bag from his sleeve and tossed it to Stryver. "You may go now. I set you free."

Fear bolted deep in Blue's belly. Evil rippled in the man's words. Tension gathered in his limbs. His joints ached with terror-induced pain. *Control, complete, without doubt*. The stiffness ebbed in tiny receding waves from his body.

Stryver moved. Blue refused to look at him. He did not want to remember his departure. This memory he'd gladly eliminate from his mind. Stryver's leather pants creaked as he walked, the sound loud in the silence of the entranceway.

He spoke low, and the deep tone sent Blue a measure of calm. "As you say, Master."

He took more steps away from Blue. Was he leaving forever? Possibly. Blue had to remain strong. He refused to look, but the weak human in him succumbed. He turned his head. Out of the corner of his eye, he found Stryver's strong, leather-covered back. The large man

strode in his loose-limbed manner toward the door, never once looking at Blue.

“Stryver,” he said, the name a bare whisper, “my thanks for your care of me.”

He stopped. How could he stiffen more than before? The quiet enveloped him. The flames in the torches crackled. Was he not going to answer him?

“It was an honor. Have a good life.”

The door opened under his hand, and the wind gusted in, fluttering the flames. Blue blinked. Stryver was gone.

Invisible hands gripped his chest and squeezed. White spots appeared in his vision. He couldn’t drag in a decent measure of breath.

“He was a good fighter. I shall miss his services.”

Aidal’s cold remark snapped the thread of his grief over Stryver’s departure. The older man spoke as if Stryver no longer existed. A eulogy for a living man? No, a hint of what he expected. Coldness settled in Blue’s bones.

“Your Imminence?”

Blue lifted his gaze to meet the other man’s dark eyes.

“This way, please.” Aidal reached out and threw open the double doors across from the entrance.

Darkness subdued the room so Blue could not see the interior. He moved forward, his body stiff with the pain of loss. Once inside, his vision adjusted to the dimness. He was able to make out the circular curve of the huge room. A large, wooden chair with a high, carved back and armrests was positioned to his right, close to the wall. Some of Aidal’s men stood at intervals about the room. Blue-tinted flames flickered on the candles in their holders above the men’s heads. The scent of old wood and unwashed bodies assaulted his nose

All of this Blue took in with a quick sweep until his eyes were drawn to the center. There, a single, three-legged, golden chair stood. The legs started at the seat and narrowed so they formed a close

triangle at the floor. This chair had been created to prove the authenticity of Godchildren. No human could sit on it and remain upright with perfect balance.

“You wish to test me?” Blue looked over to Aidal as he eased into the other seat, facing the three-legged one.

The older man slouched to the right, watching him under the shadow of his thick, ebony brows, one hand covering his mouth. “Do you blame me?” Aidal motioned to the chair. “This is to verify your identity. A mere technicality. Please, this one boon for me.”

Keeping a slight smile on his lips, Blue turned his gaze to the chair. He nodded. Let this impious man believe he was weak, unable to protect and guard against his useless traps.

The tight knot in his chest from Stryver’s departure loosened a bit. He took a slow breath and moved to the chair. The small amount of light in the room glimmered on the gold. No threat came to his senses from the seat. He faced Aidal and sat. Several gasps came from around him. Blue wanted to laugh. What had these lesser creatures expected? For him to fall on his face? Never. He was Braeden, War God of Lightning. This mere chair held no powers to defeat him.

Aidal smiled, sly, slick with the wickedness within him. “Excellent.”

To Blue’s right, a door he hadn’t noticed opened, and a line of bald monks clothed in rust-tinted robes entered the room. Seven in total. Blue lifted a brow at them, unsure of what they intended. With ease, he leveled out his breathing to remain calm. The holy men encircled him. They started to chant.

Blue tilted his head toward Aidal. “And this is to do what?”

“You will see.”

Strands of power, glistening white in the dim room, came from the monks’ prayers beads. They raced across the distance and ensnared Blue, fastening him to the chair, similar to the binding spell in his ancient prison but stronger.

“Can you move?”

Aidal's voice reminded him of darkness—black, empty.

He attempted to lift his hand but couldn't. His outer composure remained tranquil. His mind raged at the daring of one such as he. Soon, he'd witness a god's wrath. "No."

"Good."

So arrogant was his manner, he fanned the desire in Blue to rip his head from his shoulders. The bastard—he'd have no succor. "Why are you doing this?"

The older man smirked at Blue. "They lied to us. Put all the people in the land in danger. They didn't care if you gained your power and destroyed everything. I decided to take matters into my hands and eliminate you myself."

"You were the one who sent the assassins. You killed the Abbot."

"How astute. Yes, they were my men. And Stryver, of course, was there to save you." Aidal waved his hand to the side. "I didn't want to take the chance of them not killing you. Thus, I instructed him to bring you here."

"You're going to kill him?"

"His usefulness is finished. He won't suffer. My men have their orders. Do not let it worry you. They are efficient." The black aura around Aidal increased in size. He lied. He intended to prolong the suffering of both.

Soon. Not long now.

With a smug smile on his lips, the older man continued. "And at this point in your life, you have an important choice to make."

The door opened again, and this time, a monk entered, carrying a babe in his arms. Next to him, a small boy walked with a proud stance, gripping the hem of his robe. The child appeared no older than two winters. Dark, flame-tinted hair covered his head. A stream of knowledge and recognition shot through Blue. The monk placed the baby on the floor beside the boy and stepped away. Blue should have suspected, sensed the presence of these children. The monks must

have placed a barrier around them to conceal their identities from him.

Pain lanced through his chest. Now, not only would he have to save Stryver but these two also. His blessed brethren would not suffer at Aidal's hands. He would never allow it.

"You will swear allegiance to me or die. Which will you choose?"

"If I decline, you'll use these children." His shock at seeing them refused to fade. How dare this man threaten not only him but them also?

"For a time. The older will assist me in overthrowing the fools who sought to place a demon like you over the order. When my need of him is finished, he, too, will return to the realm of Heaven until his time of rebirth comes once more."

Demon? Like him? Such an insult coming from a man like Aidal. Blue gritted his teeth. *Stay calm, remain in control. Do not let your rage control you.* He relaxed his jaw. "Either way, both my and his life are forfeited."

"I wouldn't phrase it in such a manner, but yes."

Heat increased in Blue's head. Throbbing started behind his eyes. Trying his best to maintain control, he glanced at Aidal. Sweat slid down his sides under his robes. "You know who they are."

"Oh, of course. It is possible for more than one Godchild to be born in the same era. As long as you hold your seat, they can never come into power. You have to die or abdicate your throne." Aidal tapped his chin as he pondered him. "What is your choice? Aid me or..."

Blue half smiled. "You are an evil man."

"Only in your eyes. My people adore me."

"Out of fear of retribution if they defy you."

Aidal frowned, his gaze hardening. Ah, so he'd hit a nerve. The older man's response came out sharp and clipped. "Does it matter? They need me to provide work so they can survive."

Blue looked over at his heavenly brethren. The red-haired child stared back at him. Blue recognized the boy as he did him. Oh, yes, many times they had played within the hallowed halls of Heaven. The baby met his gaze. He, too, sweet child, was one Blue knew well.

The calm he sought came over him. "As you have demanded, my choice is made."

"Then speak so this matter can be concluded."

With a slow grin, Blue shook his head. "I will never serve you."

Chapter Nineteen

Helpless, no more than insects in the path of Fate, men struggle to survive.

Bile, born of regret for leaving Blue, churned in Stryver's belly. There were so many choices he should have made differently before they arrived at this time. He reached the gates and was stopped by the guard. A bundle of supplies—a short sword, a pair of metal-studded sand-pack gloves, and an oiled cloak, everything needed for a long journey—was pressed into his hands. Stryver checked the sword's edge and found it sheared fine like a razor. The man, a longtime drinking partner, kept his gaze lowered. A sure sign the man believed he'd never again see Stryver on this side of Heaven.

Stryver smirked. Aidal's generosity along with the quiet of the gatekeeper screamed of betrayal. His master never gave something for nothing in return, and everyone in Shaifo was aware of it. He nodded his thanks and departed the fortress.

By all that was holy, he should have spirited Blue away and kept him hidden, safe from the ones seeking his death. Stryver quickstepped for about a half league toward Fantin then doubled back to the stronghold. The need to return to Blue's side overrode his normal defense of surveying the place prior to entering. The east side had a weak point. Closer to the mountain behind it, the fortifications depended on the steep access to keep attackers away. Still, one man could gain entrance with ease.

He slipped over the wall. Keeping to the shadows, he scrambled down the other side. From there, he made his way to Aidal's house

and to the door used by servants on the south side. He set the short sword inside his sleeve with the blade's end pointing out from his elbow. He tightened the cloak about his shoulders and double-checked his other weapons before he stole into the building.

The door he entered was situated on the opposite side from where he'd left Blue. He eased forward with care. He'd succeed if no one spotted him.

His shoulders tightened with tension.

This was too easy.

Something wasn't right.

But even suspecting a trap, Stryver refused to stop. He would save Blue. He'd sworn to protect him.

Low chuckles echoed from behind him.

He stopped, back stiff, arm with sword bent at his waist.

"Our thanks for saving us the trouble of tracking you."

That voice. He recognized it. "I never suspected one so weak as myself would ever catch your eye, Omata."

"Not mine. The master no longer has need of you."

"He gave me my freedom."

Another low laugh reached out and raced over his skin.

"Yes. The same freedom as he gave Rance last year."

Cold numbness swept across Stryver's body. Rance's image—tall, rawboned, laughing at a joke, dead in his arms—materialized in his mind. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He tried again, releasing his question in a gasp. "What?"

"You never did question the angle of that dart. From directly behind him? The enemy wasn't there. You won't be so lucky."

"Why?"

Derision leaked from Omata's answer. "He'd grown bold in his actions. He even bragged about taking you with him when he left. The fool. Did he truly believe the master would allow his arrogant boasting to continue?"

Think, damn it. Don't freeze, put all out of your mind. Remember your goal. Taking a deep breath, Stryver tilted his head, his gaze angled to the side. "Master gave me my freedom. Not a death sentence."

"No. You're wrong. He set you free from life itself." A light step could be heard as Aidal's second-in-command moved closer.

Stryver drew in another slow breath, heart pounding against his ribcage.

From the shadows in front of him, Fen, third in charge under Aidal, appeared. "He's very good at phrasing his double meanings. You didn't realize until you reached Shaifo that he wanted the little god dead, did you?"

"I suspected." *Remain calm. Erase all from your mind. Blue needs you.*

Omata tsked. "But not enough to flee. Then again, it wouldn't have mattered. We were there behind you the entire time except on the ship. We traveled across land and arrived at Fantin days before you. All we had to do was wait."

The slender Fen smirked at him, his gaze glistening with open malice, no doubt proud of the way the events fell into place.

"So now, you intend to kill me, and Aidal will destroy the Godchild. Why? I deserve to know that, at least."

"You have to ask?" Omata's question sounded closer.

Dammit, he had never sensed him. No sound had betrayed the man's movement this time.

Angry at the condescending attitude of the two older, more experienced men, Stryver bit out, "Just answer me."

Fen shook his head. "Ah-ah, none of that. No anger. It'll just make you bleed faster. Didn't we teach you anything?"

He was right. *Calm down, damn it.*

"Won't hurt to tell you," he continued with a slight shrug. "If this Godchild is allowed to mature to his full power, none of us will be safe. Not even the strongest warriors. You saw what he did so swiftly

to those soldiers who attacked that village. How many more do you think he could have killed in a half a day? A full day?"

Omata picked up where Fen stopped. "He'd kill us all—our friends, families, everyone."

Stryver shifted to the balls of his feet and shook his head. "No, he wouldn't. He's not like that."

Snorting, Fen shook his head. "You think you know him so well. More like your cock talking."

Warm breath coasted over Stryver's jaw. Omata had reached him. *Shit.*

"How was it? Fucking a god?"

His question hung in the air. The calm Stryver sought flowed over him. Both would expect him to swerve behind Omata to deal with the one closer. He forced his lips into a grin, tilted his head a bit to the right. "Much better than killing two of you will ever be."

He shoved his elbow straight into Omata's gut. The blade slid between the small gaps in the man's leather jerkin and sliced through the soft tissue of his gut. Omata jerked to the left. Stryver pushed to his right, away from the wounded man. The tip of the sword cut across the other man's belly until it came free. The scent of blood filled the narrow hallway.

Stryver shot forward with his right fist. He met Fen halfway, blocking the knife coming at him. He landed a solid punch to Fen's throat. The metal-studded, padded leather packed with sand added extra weight and crushed the bones there.

Dragging in steady breaths, Stryver freed the sword from his sleeve and buried it in Fen's heart.

He glanced over his shoulder.

Omata, down on one knee, pressed a hand to the wall. He smirked, coughed, and slid to sit with his shoulder against the wall. Blood bubbled on his lips. "You think you won. I cut you." He released a gasping breath. "You'll be dead by morning."

Cut me? No, I never felt it. Stryver took a step toward the downed man. A dull tightness came from his right hip. He touched the spot. Warm wetness coated his finger. He brought his hand up and stared at the crimson coating his fingers.

“Blade had poison on it. We were going to cut you up some.” A sick chuckle ended in a choking cough. Omata wheezed, blood pouring from the wound across his middle. “Then bury you alive. Now, look what you’ve done. Spoiled our fun. Still, you’re too late. Your lover is probably dead by now. Amazed...you can’t...hear...his scr-screams...”

Omata gasped. His eyes rolled back into his head, and he slumped forward. Emptiness filled his sightless gaze.

Stryver checked him. Dead. Good. The bastard.

He glanced down the hallway, listening, not hearing the screams Omata hinted at. Blue was stronger than that. Still, Aidal couldn’t be trusted.

The numbness from the slice on his buttock spread up into his back and down his leg. *Dammit.* Stryver stepped to Omata’s side. He squatted and pulled the small, razor-sharp blade from his still fingers. Lifting the small weapon, he sniffed. There under the scent of his blood were traces of the musky poison used in most of their assassinations.

He let the blade drop to the floor. The metal clatter rang out in the silent hallway. Curses rose up in his mind, but he didn’t allow them to leave his mouth. No, it wouldn’t do any good to vent his anger, his foolishness. The antidote was kept not far from here. Should he go and find it? He’d save his life, but what about Blue?

The dead man’s words came back to him. Blue was dead by now? Not likely. His Blue would fight to live. But doubt entered Stryver’s mind. Aidal had been too sure of himself. He had a plan, a precise one. And Aidal never lost.

Thunder rumbled overhead, ending with what sounded like wood and glass breaking. Glancing over his shoulder, down the passageway, he listened, but only the unnatural silence met his ears.

He made his decision. Without Blue, it wouldn't matter if he lived or died.

Chapter Twenty

Moments change with the rise of the storm.

At Blue's refusal, Aidal threw back his head and laughed. The old man's chuckles echoed in the room, even though he had stopped. Obviously, he believed to force under his control a God incarnate.

Keeping his own smile in place, Blue studied the man.

Aidal's lips widened in a macabre travesty of pleasure, but his eyes glistened with ill intent. He reached under his seat and pulled out a narrow, wooden box, balancing it on the arm of his chair.

Blue tilted his head, curious to see his next move, the extent of his foolhardy conceit.

Once Aidal opened the lid, he met his eyes again. "So there is no hope to change your mind?"

"I will never serve you."

Aidal heaved a deep sigh. "Then you leave me no choice but to use these."

He lifted out a forearm-length crystal shard in one hand, a silvered blade in the other. Light from the candles glinted off the sharp edge of the dagger. He held them up for Blue to see. "Do you know what these are?"

Blue clenched his teeth. Oh, yes, he knew. Two thousand years before and again five hundred years later, mortals had used the God blade and sealing crystal on him. The blade took his life. The crystal encysted his soul. This was one of the reasons he had not returned during his normal advent. Instead, he had floated in a white purgatory for an additional five hundred years.

Did this man mean to frighten him with these? Yes, the laughter in his cold, dark eyes revealed his pleasure at the prospect of manipulating, threatening a god.

He stood and moved toward Blue. Stopping between two of the monks, he handed the objects to them. One held the God blade, the other the crystal. He returned to his seat while the holy men stepped to Blue's side, the blade in front, the shard behind him.

"Try to be still. I would hate to waste any of your precious blood." Aidal smirked before he continued. "It has been said the Godchild's blood is useful for longevity, and who better to live a long time but me?"

The bastard! Blue slid his gaze toward the children. Is this what this wicked man intended to do with these two once their usefulness to him was done? How dare he!

His anger simmered to boiling within him.

Aidal motioned to the monk before Blue. "Monks, proceed. A quick stab to the heart should do."

Blue twitched his fingers, shifted his gaze, and smiled at Aidal. He sent a pulse of power into the floor through the soles of his feet. Everyone save Aidal and the children froze in place, held there by the streams of his energy flowing into them from the floor. He created an invisible shield formed into a net around the children.

Not yet aware of the binding of his servants, Aidal slouched in his chair, waiting for the killing blow to strike.

Heartbeats ticked by, marked by the sweat drops falling from the monks' faces. The monks' mouths posed to chant but brought forth no words. Tension stiffened the muscles in Blue's back. Anticipation built. Energy crackled under his skin, and his aura glowed iridescent blue, reflecting in the monks' sweating faces. He fought the need to rush, to find Stryver.

Straightening in his chair, Aidal's eyes widened. The facade he'd maintained so carefully broke away, and evil etched his features in harsh relief.

The invisible threads binding Blue to the chair glowed white against his robes then disintegrated. He straightened and floated several feet off the floor, staring down on the lowly forms of these humans. The chair toppled over. He released a surge of his power outward. The monks, the chair, the very dust on the floor careened away from him to collide with the walls. The baby wailed. The older child tried to sooth him.

“How?” Aidal shouted, his face twisted in rage.

Blue’s throat tightened at frightening the little ones. When he answered, the voice escaping his lips was the mature one he used in Heaven. “Fool. Did you truly believe you would defeat a matured Godchild?”

The man gaped in disbelief. “Matured? Impossible! You had not come into your power at the time I sent Stryver to retrieve you.”

“And so I had not.” Power rippled around Blue, distorting the air. “You erred in sending Stryver. He is a part of my existence, even in my past. The road he took me down crossed paths with one of my previous lives. Did you know? Godchildren are not allowed to know what occurred in their past lives. Nothing. If they come across a body of their former selves, they will obtain this knowledge through the bones.”

Aidal leaped to his feet, and, like a man swimming upriver, struggled toward where the God blade rested on the floor. “No. I don’t believe you!”

“I found my fragile remains. One touch, and all that was came into me. I became aware of who I am, of what you human creatures have done to me in times across the ages. But mostly, I came into myself. Just one touch, and the barrier, thinned with my coming of age, broke apart to free my full potential.” A sickening pleasure coursed through Blue. He wanted Aidal’s blood on his hands, wanted to inhale the smoldering scent of his burned flesh. “You are not worthy of the air you use.”

The older man’s fingers brushed against the knife’s hilt.

Blue smiled, lifted his hands out, and released a small portion of energy upward. Lightning streaked from his fingertips, racing across the ceiling, burning, singeing the paint and plaster. Smoke and dust floated above his head.

Aidal grabbed the blade. The tip pointed toward Blue.

Again, he let loose another surge of power. The entire ceiling and what was above it blasted out toward the night sky. Blue centered his focus. The scattered pieces of the destroyed portion of the house halted. Wood, cloth, chunks of stone floated in the air where he had stopped them.

The bastard below him flinched and fell to his knees, the knife held before him.

Tiny, ant-sized energy orbs formed on Blue's fingertips. He released them. They flew across the room to stop one in front of each of the humans. Aidai's eyes crossed as he stared at the one hovering before him.

"Your death was decreed when you ordered Stryver killed. You should have left him alone." His voice cracked under the pain of the thought raised of never seeing his lover again, of never having his firm, warm hands on his body, his lips against his, his heart beating under his cheek. Grief turned to cold fury. Oh, yes, Aidai would pay with his life for what he had done.

The minuscule orbs grew larger. Blue's skin burned with the need to destroy all around him. The room narrowed in his view to only the wicked man before him. Blue stared down the line of his nose at him. How he despised him! He raised one finger and pointed it at him, building an intense bolt on the tip.

Aidal's eyes met his. Realization dawned in them. The knife fell to the floor with a clatter. He raised a hand in supplication.

He begged mercy from him, the very one he plotted to destroy? So he could drink his blood to prolong his years? The man who had destroyed his love, his heart?

No—no mercy for the wicked.

"No!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Death pounds at the heart, ripping, tearing it to shreds.

“*Stop it, Blue!*” Stryver slumped against the doorway, his breaths heavy, the poison coursing through his body. “He’s not worth it. Not worth your purity.”

The world around Stryver stilled and dimmed.

His master turned. “Stryver, save me. He’ll listen to you.”

Blue hung in the air. Splintered fragments of the ceiling floated around him. His azure gaze flared brighter than the blue of an autumn sky. The rest of the world darkened, but Stryver silently cherished this final sight of his love.

“Please...Blue,” Stryver managed to say before he slid down the door’s frame and sat on the floor, exhausted. Blackness edged his vision.

“Stryver?” A bare whisper came from the sky. Blue’s voice grew stronger in the next heartbeat. “Stryver!” He flew across the distance separating them and landed on one foot before kneeling at his side.

Damn, Blue flew. What else would his love do to surprise him?

Slender arms wound about his neck. Warm lips coasted over his mouth, cheeks, and neck to end with his nose buried there. “Oh, Stryver, Stryver, I thought you were dead.”

“Not...yet.”

Blue straightened but didn’t let go. He had to let go. He had to survive. “Stryver, you’re hurt. Wounded. Where?”

“It’s...poison.”

“What?”

“You need to...leave...now. Escape.”

“Alone?”

“I can’t go. The poison...” He patted his lover’s chest, grief over leaving him gnawing at his heart. “Just...go.”

Inhaling sharply, Blue shook his head so his hair whipped like a glowing flag. “No. You! Apostate! Come here!”

Aidal cried out and scooted back.

Blue’s eyes blazed with heavenly fire. He held his hand, palm out. Aidan skidded on his belly, like a fish on a line, across the floor to Blue’s side. His lover whispered, “Where is the antidote?”

His master gasped for each breath. “In...my...pocket.”

Vision slipped in to darkness. Stryver’s breath caught. Sudden roaring set up in his ears. Dangerous not to be able to see Aidan. Dangerous for Blue. He couldn’t protect his Blue if his master was too near. *Send him away. Don’t hold the viper too close.* But he couldn’t speak. His tongue lay numbed and useless in his mouth.

Vague movements filtered through to Stryver—Blue moving, a body sliding across the floor away from them. Fuck, where the hell was Blue?

When Blue spoke from in front of him, his heart jumped with relief. “Here, my love. Drink this. You’ll be fine. I swear.” A sob caught his breath. “Don’t leave me. Please—don’t.”

A tiny vial touched Stryver’s lips. He couldn’t take it, couldn’t drink. A few drops touched his tongue, burned through the numbness with a bitter, searing taste. More drops, and he could swallow. The fire scalded his throat, and then there was more in his mouth to swallow. He gulped. The burning settled in his gut. The lack of sensation ebbed from his limbs, his hands, and finally his fingers. He gasped with the pain, but it was life. He wanted to live. He had to survive to protect Blue.

Finally, his breathing leveled out. He opened his eyes, and his vision cleared. His gaze landed on the concerned features of his lover.

Love shone from Blue’s beautiful gaze.

“I’m glad,” he managed to mutter.

A small smile twitched at Blue’s lips. “For what?”

“That you didn’t stain your hands with his blood. He’s not worth it.”

“I was doing it because of you.”

He lifted one finger and traced it over Blue’s bottom lip. “Not a good enough reason. Nothing is good enough to change you from the person you are.”

The smooth lip beneath his touch trembled. “He told me he ordered your death. I didn’t know if you were still alive. I wanted to end it so I could find you.”

Cloth rustled behind Blue. A child’s cry rang out across the room. Blue shifted to the right and then froze, his eyes wide.

Stryver grasped his arm, but Blue twisted around. Aidal, bent forward, stood no more than two feet from them, the God blade gripped between his hands. His mouth twisted with vicious intent. His eyes glinted with venom.

Blood dripped from the tip of the blade.

Fragments of the ceiling dropped heavily on the floor. A baby cried out, fear evident in its tone.

“I’ve done it! I’ve killed the demon.” Vile laughter poured from Aidal.

“Killed me?” Blue reached out toward Aidal. He placed two fingers between the evil man’s eyes. “I think not.”

Cerulean energy came from the tips of Blue’s fingers and entered Aidal’s head.

“Blue, no!” Stryver struggled to rise, straining to pull his lover away. Blood coated a wide slash in the robe across Blue shoulders. He had been struck by the blade. But—by the Gods—what would it do to him? He still breathed. His heart beat. The proof was there with the blood continuing to soak the linen raiment.

Blue pressed forward with his hand.

More pieces fell from above them to crash next to them.

Eyes rolling back in his head, Aidal was flung to the center of the room. The blade flew out and up from his grip, arching above the fallen man. It came down with a thud in his chest. Buried to the hilt, the handle twinkled with the flickering candlelight.

Stryver blinked.

Well, fuck.

A sense of justice rushed through Stryver. The man had reaped what he'd sown. Death by the very blade he intended to murder Blue with seemed a warped type of penance for all his evil deeds.

What had happened had to be the work of a spiritual being. There wasn't any other explanation for it. He didn't believe he'd ever come to understand the ways of Gods. Just when he started to comprehend one aspect about them, something like this popped up and threw him off.

His gaze shot to where Blue knelt in front of him. He grabbed his arm and jerked him around. "We have to go. Now."

Pain edged the azure in his eyes. "But..."

"Enough. Everyone is in shock. We have to leave before any of them come to their senses and try to finish what he started."

"Very well." Blue nodded. He struggled to his feet, the slice on his shoulders bowing his back. "The children. We have to take them with us."

Stryver glanced across the room. There he noticed the small children. One of them, no more than two years of age, hair as red as fire, stood straight backed and met his gaze head on. The second one, no more than an infant, barely sat upright on the floor, chewing on his fists. "Who are they?"

"My brethren. Aidal wanted to use them to form this land into his making. We can't leave them. Others will try to use them."

"Brethren?" A lot of meaning went into that word. Were they like Blue and in possession of godly powers or simply children meant for the holy order?

"Godchildren, both. We can't leave them."

No, they couldn't. "You carry the baby. I'll take the older one." Struggling to his feet, Stryver tried to ignore the sharp pull of the wound on his hip. Damn, it stung now that the numbing effect of the poison had worn off. The fresh gush of blood trickled down the back and side of his leg underneath the leather pants.

A sharp intake of breath brought his attention to his lover. Blue managed to gain his feet, but he bent at the waist, holding his body up by the door frame.

"Are you all right? The cut on your back." He leaned forward, reaching for the slashed area on the robe.

"It's nothing." The smaller man avoided his hand. "The others are stirring. We need to leave."

Low groans came from the men sitting or flat on their backs around the perimeter of the room. Some were trying to stand while others were helping the nearest men next to them.

"Listen to me, all of you." The occupants of the room turned toward Stryver. "Master Aidal decided with a human heart to destroy a Godchild chosen by Heaven."

Silence met his words. Satisfied that they were paying attention, he continued, moving toward the opposite side of the room where the children waited. "Heaven ended his life. Not Braeden, War God of Lightning. Remember well what might happen to you should you decide to take vengeance on his head."

Halfway across the room, he stopped at the body of his dead master. He reached and pulled out the blade from the man's chest. Crimson pooled underneath and about the body. Aidal's vacant eyes stared at the floating mass overhead.

Stryver cleaned the blade on the dead man's tunic and cut away an unsoiled part of it to pick up an odd crystal lying on the floor beside the body. Reluctant to touch the crystal with his bare hands, he wrapped it and the knife together and tucked them into his bloodstained bag. Then he went to the children.

Blue had lifted the babe tentatively. The child, tears evident on his face, took his fists out of his mouth to grasp the front of Blue's robes in his little hands. He smiled up at Blue, eyes glinting with innocent joy.

The red-haired boy raised his arms, and Stryver grabbed him up.

"I don't want to quickstep until we're out of the gates. Not sure how my wound will hold up," he muttered low, not wanting anyone else to hear him.

"I understand." Blue nodded. He swallowed and returned to the open doorway, Stryver on his heels. He glanced back and up toward the fragmented pieces hanging in the air. "Everyone leave now."

Most of the men heeded his command. Two of the mercenaries moved toward Aidal, but Blue stopped them, his tone hard, cold, all emotion absent. "Leave him."

They didn't argue but scrambled from the room.

His eyes shut. The ceiling crashed down, burying the body under the rubble.

Stryver didn't wait to see the end. He limped to the outer door, pulling Blue with him.

Cold air blasted over them as they headed for the main gate.

The guards blocked the way, the gate shut behind them.

Blue stepped in front of Stryver. "Open the gate."

The two men shook their heads. "Master Aidal ordered them closed."

Wind gusted over the top of the wall. Dust flew from the ground. Blue's hair tossed in a combination of wind and his increasing power. "Move or die. Your choice, but know this. The gate will be opened."

"We can't. Master will have our heads." Though he spoke brave words, the man careened out of the way, fear evident in his wide-eyed gaze. His fellow guardsman took his cue from him.

Raising one hand, Blue released a massive flare of energy. The gate and both sides of the wall blew out, slivers of wood shooting like arrows into the darkness beyond.

Within moments, they were free of the fortress. They reached the first rise of land, and Stryver stopped. "Quickstep."

With a nod, Blue started before him. Stryver, pain radiating from his wound, ran at his slowest step. He decided to keep moving until they put enough distance between them and the fortress. They'd stop and tend to their injuries only with that margin of safety.

The clouds drifted above them. Still, he ran, Blue at his side, escape utmost in his mind. They had to elude any brave enough to trail them.

Sharp twinges shot up from the wound on his buttock. He tried to ignore it and the strain of carrying the boy. He'd never imagined such a small child could grow so heavy after being held for such a long while. The boy lay with his head against his shoulder, sleeping.

Shit. His arms ached, the wound throbbed, and his vision swam. He blinked, hoping to alleviate the growing dizziness. He'd lost too much blood. The remnants of the poison's effects still resided in his body. With another long stride, the impact of his step against the hard ground sent a harsh stab of agony up his rear into his back, helping to clear his mind. He had to stay focused on their escape and not let his guard down.

Much later, a light glow started along the horizon to his left. Damn, they'd run all night. He glanced over at Blue, barely making out his form. He didn't take the time to ask how he was doing. They had to keep moving.

Up ahead, the darkened shape of a building came into view. Candlelight brightened the windows.

Stryver motioned to Blue to slow down.

"It's an inn." Breaths rattling in his lungs, Stryver staggered to a halt and bent over. A coughing fit took hold of him.

"Stryver?" Blue touched his shoulder.

"I'm fine." He straightened, trying to gain control of his breathing. "Let's rest here for a few hours. Bet they have some hot food."

"I'm sure they do."

The innkeeper eyed them with ill-concealed contempt as they stood before his counter. He sneered at the gold coin Stryver placed on the counter. He picked the piece up and bit into it. The sneer changed instantly. He bowed respectfully and led them to a room upstairs.

Not long after, food and a tub filled with steaming water were delivered with more bows and smiles. Amazing what one gold coin could do. Stryver shook his head over the man's change of attitude.

He looked at Blue, noting his sagging shoulders.

"Let me tend to that cut." He helped his lover take off his clothes. The sight of his back almost took what little strength remained in his legs.

The slash angled across Blue's upper back from shoulder to shoulder. Gaping open, the puckered wound still oozed blood. The skin surrounding it had turned black, and jagged black bands radiated from it.

"What the hell?" He touched his love on the shoulder with gentle care.

"The God blade kills the human. Without this body, I will return from whence I came."

"You're dying?" No, it couldn't be true. He had to stop this now before it took over Blue and snuffed his life out. "What do I need to do? Tell me!"

"You can't do anything."

Stryver's heart missed a beat. "There has to be a way."

"I don't...don't know if he's mature enough." Blue beckoned to the red-haired child. "Can you heal it?"

The boy's unwavering gaze never left Blue as he nodded. White flames erupted from the small hands. He belatedly held them away from his smoldering tunic.

Blue sat on the floor, presenting his back to the boy. Fire leaped to splash across the slash. Blue gasped, his breath hissing between his teeth.

Stryver took hold of his lover's hands. Sweat popped out on his brow and slicked his palms, but he made no effort to swipe it away. He kept his gaze centered on Blue, silently offering his support.

Moments crawled past. After a while, the grimace of pain faded from Blue's face.

The boy stepped back and swung his hands to and fro. The flames disappeared.

Afraid to ask but needing to know, Stryver tilted his head to look into his lover's eyes. "Better?"

Blue graced him with a weak smile, his courage warming something cold in Stryver's gut. "Yes. I am...better."

"Why him?"

"Only...another god can...uh...cure another god from the damage...of the god blade." Blue turned to the boy. "My thanks, brother."

The boy smiled back.

With a gesture toward Stryver, Blue asked, "Now, will you heal this one?"

"Uh, no. That's all right. I'm fine. It'll heal." Stryver held up a hand to wave the boy away, but the child had a mind of his own.

Blue shifted his shoulders, his back popping with the movement. He faced Stryver and grinned. Pale sunlight entered the gap in the curtain and fell across Blue's body. "Let him heal you."

Stryver saw nothing but the beauty of his love's relaxed features in the soft, golden glow. His Blue would live.

Searing pain lanced through his buttock. He gasped and bucked, swinging his head to look. The child's hand was coated with flames again, and he swiped at the cut on Stryver's rear. Darkness edged the world around Stryver. A breath later, everything gave way to the blackness.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The raving beasts retreat from the glow of love. Their fangs no longer carry substance to harm.

Someone patted at his cheek. He tried to shove the person away.

“Stryver. Wake up.”

He opened one eye to a crack. Blue tilted his head toward him. Stryver shook his head. “What happened?”

“You fainted.”

What? Fainted?

“No, I didn’t.”

“Uh, yes, you did. You fell right over, eyes rolled back, mouth open, and bam, right in my lap.” Blue nodded, worry evident in his gaze.

Well, he was looking up at Blue from the spot in his lap, but fainted? “I blacked out.”

Lines furrowed between Blue’s brows. “No. It looked more like you fainted.”

He sat up, wobbled, caught himself, then straightened to look about. The red-haired god grinned, revealing a mouthful of white baby teeth.

Without accepting anyone’s help, Stryver struggled to his feet. “I blacked out. I did not faint. I never have, and I never will. Got that, Blue?”

“Of course. If you say so, but it did look like...”

Shooting a glare at him over his shoulder, Stryver motioned for him to remain silent. “You didn’t see it right. Don’t mention it again.”

“If you say, but—where are you going?” Blue came to his feet, hands out to help him.

“To bathe unless you want the water first. I need a bath and some sleep.” Stryver made it halfway across the room to the metal tub filled with steaming water.

“Go first. I’ll feed these two. We’ll bathe after.” Blue tilted his head to the table with the bowls of hot food.

After bathing and eating, Stryver reclined on the bed, intending to rest his eyes for a few moments while Blue bathed with the two children. Low snoring woke him some time later. Opening his eyes, he noticed the late afternoon sunlight leaking through the gaps in the drawn curtains. He shifted to one side and groaned at the pulling of the wound on his buttock.

The snoring halted then started again. He glanced down, searching for the source. His hair bright red in the dim light, crimson almost, the boy who’d seared the slice on his rear lay between him and Blue. Stryver nudged the child onto his side, and the snoring stopped.

He turned his attention to his lover. Shadows caressed the clear skin stretched across Blue’s face. Eyes closed in sleep, Blue had his cheek pressed against the blond hair of the younger child. Tiny baby arms were halfway around his love’s neck.

A beautiful, heart-touching view. His Blue with a child in his arms. Stryver had never seen a more wonderful sight. The love he held close threatened to pour out of him.

Azure eyes opened and met his. “You’re awake.”

“I wanted to stay up until you came to bed. Must have been too tired.”

“You’ve been through a lot the last few days.”

Shaking his head, Stryver half smiled. “It was worth it.”

He reached out and ran his knuckles over the edge of Blue’s cheek. “What now? Where do we go from here?”

Blue pressed against his fingers. He sighed, contentment filling the sound.

When his lover didn't respond, Stryver went on. "What about the District of Belaiss? It's close to the ocean. You liked the shore. I heard a man can purchase land there. Good land for growing fruit trees. I always wanted an orchard, something to nurture and harvest. Fruits that would give others pleasure in eating."

He was rattling on, but now that the threat from Aidal was gone, Blue had no reason to remain with him. He could return to the cathedral. No matter how selfish Stryver felt at wanting to keep Blue with him, the facts didn't change. He was the Godchild and still carried the title. He'd be the Godchild until he died. Living on a farm and growing fruits didn't fit into the whole god thing. Stryver didn't know how to fix it so he and Blue could stay together.

"Anywhere you go will be fine. But first, we must return to Heaven's Seat."

The old, familiar sensation of fear flashed through Stryver. "Why?"

One hand lifted and brushed over the baby's head. "This one must claim his throne."

That brought Stryver up short. Hope bloomed in his chest, growing stronger with each beat of his heart. "But...the throne is yours."

"No longer. I will abdicate to him."

"Why?"

"You once said that as a god I could never live as a human. If I abdicate to this one and allow his blessings to reign over the land, then perhaps I will have a normal life," Blue met his gaze, "with you. Would you like that?"

Like it? He rose up on one elbow and leaned across the sleeping child to pass a kiss over his willing lips. "When do you want to leave?"

"When you heal."

"Then we leave at first light. That should give us enough time to rest up."

“But...your wound—”

“Is nothing. I’ve had worse and still traveled.” He turned flat on his back to stare at the canopy above them. “We need to put more distance between Shaifo and us. Even the thought of that place makes me nauseous. For many years, I had a lover. A mercenary like me. We dreamed of leaving that life behind. Last winter, Master ordered his death. The closer we are to the fortress, the stronger the memories are of how that bastard changed my life.”

“He brought us together.”

He glanced at Blue. “For that, I will be forever grateful. But for the other, I can never forgive him. I cared deeply for Rance, and to discover Aidal issued the order for his death and yours, too, makes me want to kill him all over again.”

A low laugh came from Blue. “Well, thank the heavens he is gone already. You won’t have to carry to burden of his death on your hands.”

Blue fiddled with the baby’s covers. He glanced up at Stryver. Curious, Stryver asked, “What is it?”

“It’s nothing. Truly.”

“Yes, it is.”

With a soft sigh, Blue met his gaze. “You are the world to me. I love you, and I guess I was hoping you love me, too.”

Love? He wanted to know if he loved him? What was he thinking? Stryver opened his mouth to tell him, but the raw emotion of losing one lover and almost failing to reach Blue last night stopped him.

Tilting his head, Blue asked, “You do love me?”

“What makes you think I don’t? I came back for you.”

A slow smile bloomed on Blue’s lips. “So you do love me.”

“I didn’t say that. Men don’t say that.” Panicking, Stryver searched for a way to escape from having to say the words. Good god, Blue ought to know without him having to tell him.

“They don’t?” Blue frowned, obviously confused.

“No, they don’t.” Before Blue could question him about it, the child between them shifted and rolled toward Stryver, his red hair falling over the side of his face. Without thinking, Stryver laid his hand over the boy’s back and pulled him closer to his side. He looked at Blue. “And this one. What’s to happen to him?”

“He belongs to us. He’ll be the son we can never have.” Blue grinned, his eyes shadowed by his lashes. “Would you like that?”

He thought for a couple of breaths. “My son, huh? What about his parents?”

Blue shook his head. “They fought to keep their child. The mercenaries were stronger.”

He stared down at the innocent boy pressed against his side. Tiny hands clung to his shirt. He ran the tip of his finger over a small thumb. Red lashes fluttered for a moment before the boy settled deeper against him. Stryver shrugged. “Why not? We’ll teach him to fight to protect people.”

“And compassion, love for his fellow humans.”

“And to play. I never played as a child.”

“Neither did I.”

Stryver nodded. “What’s his name?”

“Ayden. War God of Fire. But we could always call him Red.” Azure eyes twinkled with laughter. “I bet you had a dog by that name. He probably liked it. I’m sure this one will, too.”

Chuckling at his lover’s teasing, Stryver shook his head. “We’d better stick with Ayden. I like it a lot better than Red. One more night here, and we leave.”

With a wide grin, Blue kissed the top of the baby’s head and slid his arm from underneath the infant. He rolled from the bed and headed toward the door. “I’ll request more food.”

The next morning dawned with a bright, cloudless sky. Before the sun topped the horizon, they departed. Neither looked back the way they’d come. They chose to take the land route south. The trip would be shorter by several days.

The desperate need to make love with Blue increased each day, but Stryver kept it in check. He felt like a saint, looking, appreciating, but remaining chaste. The presence of the children gave him no time to seek out relief with Blue. He satisfied himself, instead, with sending admiring stares at his slender lover and an occasional caress.

They stopped in the next village and purchased clothes for Blue and the boys. Stryver retained his leather. As long as danger to Blue remained, he would wear his mercenary attire. Only when they were settled on their farm would he put the clothing away.

Blue dressed much in the same manner as he had on the journey to Shaifo—dark pants with a long, knee-length overshirt, split on either side of his thighs from the waist down. His hair, tied off at the crown of his head, gleamed black in the sunlight and deep blue in the moonlight.

He never dreamed he could adore someone as much as he did Blue. Walking at his side, sharing his dreams for their future, holding their son in his arms—joy blossomed deep in his chest, and he wanted to keep this peaceful time forever.

But they had one more obstacle to overcome. Neither knew what to expect once they reached Heaven's Seat. The old Abbot was dead. What would the new one be like? Would he convince the Raegemon King to destroy Blue? Blue had sent emissaries from Heaven, for these men were prepared to take a new Godchild. But would they allow the old one to leave unharmed?

With each step they took towards Heaven's Seat, Stryver's worry multiplied.

On the fifth day of their return journey, toward the evening, the Raegemon citadel appeared. Off to the left, the dome of the cathedral reflected the last rays of the sun. Cold breezes coasted over the path. Stryver tightened the woolen cloak about his chest, protecting his dozing child in the shelter of his arms and the warmth of the cloth.

Blue held the infant. The gray folds of his cloak hid the little one from view while the hood concealed his lover's face from him. He stopped when Blue did at the top of a small rise.

"We will quickstep the rest of the way."

Stryver nodded. "Let's go."

The wind followed their steps as though rejoicing with their return, blowing around their feet but not slowing them down. Two soldiers stood guard at the gate. Their cloaks flapped as Stryver and Blue streaked by them. The dust billowed after them. Stryver chanced a swift glance over his shoulder to make sure they hadn't noticed them. The men looked at each other, shrugged, and faced the countryside again.

Relieved they'd made it inside the walls of the city without detection, Stryver slowed a bit to make sure they didn't run into anyone by accident. Blue followed his lead.

Within moments, they stood outside the outer gates of the cathedral. They stopped side by side. Stryver stared up at the white stone facade, marveling at how he had returned so soon. When he departed weeks ago, he had never assumed he would come back. Yet here he stood, next to the one man who meant the most to him in the entire world.

"Well." Blue looked toward the massive, golden doors.

Stryver grunted. What else could he say in response? They were about to face the lion in its den, and neither of them could say for sure what would happen.

Taking a deep breath, Blue tightened the cloak about his shoulders. "I suppose we need to finish this."

The Merciful Goddess's words echoed in Stryver's mind. "To the end. I suppose this is what she meant."

"Who?"

"Your nosy sister."

Blue snorted a laugh. "Don't let her hear you say that."

Releasing a deep sigh, Stryver started the journey up the cobbled walkway leading to the cathedral. “I’m sure she already has. Come, I want this over with. I’m tired of being afraid all the time.”

“Fear not, my heart. Nothing can take away the love we have or the future we will share. I won’t let them.”

Though meant to calm him, the words of his lover did little to alleviate his concerns. Neither of them knew what waited beyond those doors. He stopped in front of them and studied the intricate etchings and ironwork. Everything centered on the gods. He searched and found Blue’s god name among the many on the door. He ran a finger over the letters.

Shaking his head, he looked at Blue. A soft smile graced his lips, and his eyes brightened with excitement. Stryver grasped the door handle and shoved it open with his shoulder. The heavy door swung inward.

The flames of many candles fluttered from the air rushing inside. Appearing empty, the vacant pews lined the entire area and faced toward the altar at the front. Blue slipped by him and glided in that direction. His long, flowing cloak did nothing to hide the grace of his stride. He had been and ever would be a holy being. No human could ever hope to match the purity in Blue.

Two men faced them as they approached. The one pacing back and forth, clothed in gilded Raegemon armor, had to be Luther, King of the Provence. The other man sat in the small armchair the old Abbot had used shortly before his death.

Blue kept walking until he reached the altar. Luther faced him, fear and...was that anticipation shining from his eyes? Stryver didn’t tarry over the thought too long. He went to the front row and squatted by the seat, placing his child on the padded cushion.

The other man, attired in monks’ robes, stood and bowed low at the waist to Blue. “Your Imminence.”

Luther went down on one knee, his head lowered in respect.

“Please, don’t. I no longer require your honor of me. You have received word from Heaven. You should know this already.”

“You have been our Godchild for many years. Traditions demand we respect you.” Luther lifted his eyes to Blue, his gaze soft, loving.

So the king cherished Blue beyond what would be considered appropriate for a king to a Godchild, did he? Stryver struggled to control the mounting jealousy at watching another man look at Blue in such a way. Dammit, if he had cared so much, then why hadn’t he protected Blue from the beginning? None of this would have happened. He wouldn’t have met Blue...well, maybe it was a good thing the king had been lax in his guard of the Godchild.

“His parents are here?” Blue looked around him. He found the two he asked about seated at the far end of the opposite front row. A man, a poor farmer from the looks of his clothes, sat with his arms wrapped around a small woman. Tears brightened both their eyes.

Blue smiled the beautiful, compassionate smile Stryver loved so much.

The cloak shifted with his movements as he went to them and stopped. He threw the cloak open, leaned forward, and placed the couple’s baby in his mother’s arms.

A keening sob echoed in the church, followed by watery cries from the mother. Several moments later, the father stood, only to lay prostrate on the floor, hands wrapped around Blue’s ankle as he kissed his feet, murmuring his praise.

Ever modest, Blue helped the man to stand and patted his shoulder, whispering comfort to him.

“You understand, both of you? Your son is Lares, God of Plenty, guardian of home and field. He will rule in Heaven’s Seat. My throne will be his. Heaven has instructed the Abbot and the King that you two are needed to help raise him. For hundreds of years, the order thought to isolate the Godchild from the impurities of the outside world. One aspect they forgot or overlooked—I’m not sure which—but Heaven sent us to our earthly parents for a reason. You were

chosen by Heaven to raise this child. And so you shall.” He glanced at the Abbot. “You do understand the dictates of Heaven, yes?”

“Yes, Your Holiness. The child will be raised by his parents and taught by the monks.” The Abbot bowed his head in agreement.

“And I will assure that this happens,” Luther added.

“So be it.” Blue held out his arms to the baby. The mother appeared hesitant about handing him over, but after kissing his smooth brow, she lifted the babe into Blue’s arms. He took Lares to the golden throne behind the altar. Sitting him against the back of the seat, he knelt before him. Hands together, he bowed his head. Soft exultations of breathy words drifted across the space to Stryver.

Finished, Blue placed his hands on Lares’s tiny head and spoke low again. This time, a cerulean glow, intertwined with gold, radiated from their bodies. The light increased, sending thick rays above their forms.

The force of the energy sent shock waves out from them. Stryver half covered Ayden’s small, sleeping form with his body to shield him from the power. His son started to glow, his body vibrating in response to what was happening behind the altar.

He bent his head over the boy, whispering soothing phrases in hopes of calming the effect of what Blue was doing. Bright green eyes opened and stared at him fixedly. Tiny arms lifted and wrapped about his neck. He pulled the boy close and held him against his heart, continuing to sooth any confusion or turmoil from Ayden’s mind.

Moments later, the energy faded to wisps of glowing light, which dissolved not long after they had formed. Blue leaned and placed a kiss on the brow of the baby. He turned and faced the ones witnessing this event. “Behold, set your gazes upon your new Godchild, Lares, God of Plenty, guardian spirit of home and field. Know you this—he will rule with compassion and heart.”

“Hail, Lares, the chosen Godchild.” The Abbot went down on his knees, followed by Luther.

But Blue wasn't finished. He stepped closer to the two men. "Know you this—should the time come when this land needs protection from evil, you are free to call upon me. I will fight to save the innocents of the land. I will never fight to destroy."

Luther, eyes bright with unshed tears, slapped his own chest with his closed fist. "Hail, Braedon, War God of Lightning. May the heavens bless you for all the ages."

The Abbot repeated the words, respect shining from his gaze.

A gurgling chuckle came from Lares. Every eye turned to the baby. He clapped his tiny hands then reached out for Blue, who complied with his wish by picking him up. Before returning him to his parents, he moved to Stryver. Both the children embraced, giving each other kisses. His gaze clouding over with stinging tears, Stryver buried his face in the center of Ayden's back.

"We will visit, and neither one will forget the other. Not in this world or in Heaven," Blue whispered to the two. Neither child cried as Blue returned the baby to his parents.

Meeting Stryver's gaze, Blue nodded toward the door. "Ready?"

"Need you ask?" A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. He saluted the two men observing them. "Take care of him. He's precious to us, and I'd hate to have to come back and steal him away."

Surprise rendered the men speechless.

He didn't wait for them to overcome their shock. Stryver grabbed Blue's hand and tugged him after him, determined to put a wide distance between them and Heaven's Seat just in case someone changed their minds about honoring Blue.

After several moments sped by, they left the main gate behind and were headed toward the south along the same road they had journeyed on weeks earlier.

Laughing, Stryver sent a glance over his shoulder at Blue. "Right now, this very moment, our lives begin anew. Are you sure you want it?"

A wide grin answered him. “For forever, my heart.”

Epilogue

The cool breeze coasting over the land from the nearby shore passed over Stryver, drying the early summer dampness on his face. Bees hummed in the fruit trees about him. Clear blue skies with an occasional white cloud stretched above him. Peace had never felt so fine.

Grass shifting under his lover brought his attention to the slender man sprawled at his side. They'd worked hard for the better half of the day and finished with a quick dip in the stream not far from where they reclined in the lush grass. The aftereffects of their lovemaking from moments earlier still sang in Stryver's blood. He was amazed Blue could even move yet.

His azure gaze was angled at Stryver. "Twelve years."

Stryver frowned, not sure what Blue meant. Not wanting to appear like a complete idiot, he grunted.

"For twelve long years, I've waited for you to say the words."

What the fuck? Mind still fuzzy with the glow of release, Stryver shook his head. "What words?"

"The words."

Shit. Blood rushed to his head, bringing him to full awareness. He looked at the sky again. Not *the* words. *Crap.* He had assumed Blue had forgotten all about that nonsense. Hoping to sidetrack his lover, he shrugged, refusing to turn his head. "I've said them. You just don't remember."

"Stryver."

"What?"

A soft breath heaved. “My sister came to visit me this morning while you were bringing in more firewood.”

“Not the nosy one?”

One small fist thumped his upper arm. “She’s tired of waiting to hear the words.”

“I know I’ve said them.”

“No, you haven’t.”

The frown returned, aimed at the dragon-shaped cloud overhead. Shit. He could have sworn he had said them. At least once, in the heat of their passion, but then again, he might not have said them out loud. “Are you sure?”

Blue answered by rolling over and kneeling on top of him. Knees braced by his hips, forearms flat on his chest, his face at the same level as Stryver’s, he pressed his lower body against his. “They’re three simple words.” Soft, fragrant breath flowed over his face.

Fighting to keep from crossing his eyes under the sensual assault, Stryver clenched handfuls of grass between his fingers. His muscles melted with the honeyed onslaught. He inhaled, breathing in the heady aroma of Blue. He managed to answer, his voice steady. “I’ve already said them.”

The glint in the azure gaze assured Stryver that Blue didn’t believe him. Just as magnificent as the first time his lover had lain over him, his clear, pristine skin stretched over precious features. Over the years, Blue had allowed his hair to gray for the benefit of their friends and neighbors. Today it shone with the silver glints like it had in that hallway at Heaven’s Seat when the assassins wanted him dead.

“Repeat after me.” Blue brushed his lips over Stryver’s jaw. “I.”

A low rumble rose up from his chest. “I.”

“Love.” Sweet, gentle, Blue licked at the corner of his mouth. Warm breath followed.

Delicious tingles roared through Stryver. Another deep moan came from him. “L...L...Lo...love.”

His lover's mouth twitched into a small smile. "You."

Passive until that one heartbeat, Stryver threaded his fingers into Blue's hair, pulling him closer. "You." Mouth opened, he devoured the precious gift of Blue's lips. "Forever."

Laughter bubbled up deep inside Blue and entered Stryver's mouth. "Now, you've said it."

He gave the slender man's rear a gentle slap. "Don't get cocky."

The laughter turned into low, husky chuckles. "You like it when I'm cocky."

Shouts interrupted the start of another deep kiss. They raised their heads and looked off in the distance toward the small cottage they'd shared during the past years. Their son, fourteen-year-old Aydan, crimson hair flowing about his shoulders and down his back, strode across the open pasture where small, newly-shorn sheep grazed. Behind him, another young man loped, one arm raised in greeting, his long, flowing, blond hair trailing after him like wisps of smoke in a cold breeze.

Blue gasped and rolled off Stryver. "Lares has arrived!" He returned the wave and came to his feet, heading down the gentle slope to meet the two young men.

Mouth twitching in amusement, Stryver sat up and waited for a few moments to cool his raging desire before he stood to do the same.

Lares rushed at Ayden's back and leaped on it. Not missing a step, his son grabbed Lares's knees and held him steady as they continued across the pasture. Blue's soft laughter reached him, and he grinned.

Never once in all his years as a mercenary in his dead master's forces had he imagined the joy of simply living with peace and surrounded by loved ones. He wanted to hold it close forever, never releasing the ones who mattered the most to him.

His lover, the man he breathed for, stopped to glance back at him. Blue held out a hand and waited. Moving to his side, Stryver ignored the hand and threw his arm around the narrow shoulders, pulling his

lover snug against him. This was where his precious Blue belonged, now and for always.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jadette Paige is the pseudonym for author Judith Leger. Over the last year, she has started writing M/M and erotic romances. Blue Heaven is her first M/M novel. She lives in SW Louisiana (yes, hurricane alley) with her family. She loves creating new characters and worlds for readers to visit over and over again. When she's not writing, she's reading, watching anime, or enjoying the country atmosphere of her home. She sits on her back patio and looks out over the pastures to where her Appaloosa mare is grazing. Her little dachshund is stretched out at her feet. With four men in the house, Jadette needs all the female company she can come across, even the four-legged kind. She loves to hear from fans. If they stop by her website, be sure and sign the guest book!



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