



MOTHER EARTH
DRAGON'S
KISS

ALLY BLUE

Sarah Jane Roberts

Dragon's Kiss
by Ally Blue

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

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Dragon's Kiss
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In a future ruled by superstition and fear, wanting the wrong man can be deadly.

A Mother Earth story.

The rules governing a Pack-Brother's existence are simple. Love your Brothers. Protect each other and your Tribe with your life. Seek sex only within the bonds of Brotherhood, or your life is forfeit. The laws are harsh, but fair. Or so Bear has always thought. Then he and his Brother Lynx capture a stranger in the Carwin Tribe's outlying lands—Dragon, a Brother from a distant Pack, banished from his Tribe for the crime of challenging things he shouldn't.

Dragon intrigues Bear from the start, and not just because of his exotic beauty. Interest in the decadent old world is discouraged in this post-Change society. Dragon is the first person Bear's ever known, other than himself, who's curious about the vanished past. That kinship sparks a forbidden attraction between them. An attraction which is, if they give in to it, punishable by death.

In the space of a day, everything Bear was raised to believe is called into question, and he must make a life-changing decision—follow the law, or follow his heart.

This story was previously available, but has been expanded and re-edited for Samhain Publishing.

Warning: This book contains ropes, oil, primitive post-apocalyptic cultures and gay sex in the dirt.

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Dedication

To my mom, for getting me hooked on reading early on, and my sister for helping me dream up the imaginary worlds which gave birth to the world Dragon, Bear and Lynx call home. Between all the books and under-the-fig-tree forts, my childhood was one filled with adventure, and I'm convinced that's one reason I write today.

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Chapter One

Bear was bored.

For three days, he and Lynx had been patrolling the forest on the outskirts of the Carwin Tribe's land. Mother Rose had sent them to find whoever or whatever had been emerging from the woods at night to steal food from the outlying farms. So far, they'd seen nothing more sinister than one of Bear's namesakes, and a pathetic starved specimen it had been. The thrill of entering this forest for the first time in his life had worn off quickly, and now Bear was fidgety with boredom.

He leaned against the oak tree at his back and stretched his legs out in front of him. The full moon peeked through the maze of branches overhead, dappling the forest floor with an ever-changing pattern of shining white. A breeze sighed through the leaves, bringing with it the scents of earth, honeysuckle and running water.

Bear frowned as he caught another scent underneath the normal ones of a forest on a summer night. It smelled like sex. Like raw male sex. Bear's body responded, his cock rising to tent his soft buckskin pants.

That smell made him want to fuck. Right here, right now. Lynx was a good fuck, and like all Pack was honor-bound to fulfill his Pack-Brother's needs.

It would have to wait, though. The man Bear smelled wasn't Pack, wasn't tribe. He was Other, and Other meant danger.

Ignoring the ache in his crotch, Bear tilted his head back to stare up into the tree. Lynx's compact shape huddled against the trunk a few feet above him. "Lynx?"

"Yeah?"

"You see anything?"

"No." With a faint rustle of greenery, Lynx slid out of the tree, landing in a crouch beside Bear. "My ass is going numb up there."

Bear groaned. Now was not a good time to be thinking about Lynx's ass. Bending down, he put his mouth close to his Brother's ear. "There's somebody near," he whispered. "A man."

Lynx turned to frown at Bear, green eyes flashing silver as they caught the scattered moonlight. "I didn't see anyone."

"I smell him," Bear insisted. "Not far. No more than fifty paces."

Rising to his feet, Lynx peered through the tight-packed tree trunks. His night vision was almost as good as the cat he was named after, but Bear's sense of smell was never wrong and they both knew it. After a moment, Lynx knelt beside Bear and leaned close, thick golden braids brushing Bear's shoulder.

"That way." He hitched his thumb to the northwest. "There's a fallen tree. He's hiding under it."

"Why does he smell like sex?" Bear asked, bending to nip Lynx's throat.

Lynx purred and arched his neck. "He's jerking off." He snagged a handful of Bear's unruly curls and pulled him down

for a hard kiss. "Let's go watch. We can wait 'til he's done, then jump him."

Bear growled as Lynx's clever fingers played with the ties on his trousers. "Then can we fuck? Before we take him back to Mother Rose?"

"Yeah." Lynx dipped his head and bit Bear's nipple, locking his teeth around the bit of polished bone piercing it and tugging hard enough to hurt. "He can watch us. It's only fair."

Bear grinned. "Let's go."

They crept silently toward the spot Lynx indicated. Bear's nostrils flared as they drew closer. The strong musk of cock and pre-come nearly drowned out the scents of sweat, dirt and animal blood rolling from the stranger.

"He hasn't bathed in a long time," Bear murmured. "Wonder why?"

"Fuck, he does reek." Lynx wrinkled his nose. "Either he doesn't think anybody can smell him, or he doesn't care."

Bear didn't answer. They were only a few paces from the tree now, and he didn't want the man to hear them. Not that the stranger could possibly hear anything past his own noises. He was loud. Dangerously loud. One of the first things Bear had learned after his initiation into the Pack was to keep it quiet when outside Carwin's walls, whether alone or with a Brother.

The stranger's disregard for his own safety shocked Bear to the core. Didn't the man know that anyone might hear him? His panting and grunting, the scuff of feet on dirt, the unmistakable sounds of a hand moving hard and fast on a cock...

Bear shook himself. He could let his mind turn to sex in a few minutes. Right now, he and Lynx both needed to concentrate. This intruder was most likely what the farmers had spotted skulking around their properties. Mother Rose and the council would not be happy if they failed to capture him.

Crouching beside Lynx in the shelter of a huge fern, Bear stared at the hollowed-out trunk. One dirt-crusting foot stuck out from under it, bare toes curling into the loam of the forest floor. A strip of braided leather was tied around the bony ankle. Bear wondered where the stranger had come from, and why he was alone in the woods at night, jerking off under a fallen tree.

A sharp cry rang out, and Bear's nostrils filled with the scent of semen. His stiff cock pushed painfully against his pants, but he ignored it. Now was the time to strike, while the stranger was off his guard.

Lynx shot him a fierce grin. *Now*, he mouthed, and mimed a lifting motion.

Bear understood what Lynx wanted. Rising to his feet, Bear ran silently across the small clearing to the tree, wrapped his arms around the broken end of the hollow trunk and heaved it into the air. Lynx was already in motion before the tree hit the ground. In the blink of an eye the stranger lay pinned face down in the dirt with Lynx sprawled on top of him.

"Bear," Lynx panted, arm muscles bulging as he fought to hold down the thrashing stranger. "Tie him. Hurry. Little fucker's strong."

Bear dug two long, thin strips of rope out of the hide pouch slung over his shoulder. Dropping to his knees beside Lynx and their captive, he held both the stranger's wrists in one large hand and quickly bound them together.

The man squirmed like an eel, nearly breaking free of Lynx's grip. "Let me go!" the stranger shouted, twisting around to glare at them. "I didn't do anything!"

"That's for Mother Rose and the council to decide." Lynx rolled off the stranger's back, one hand pressed between his shoulder blades to keep him down. "Tie his ankles, Bear."

Bear managed to catch one of the man's flailing legs, but the other was jerked out of his grip. Lynx swore when the stranger kicked him in the face. Growling, Lynx dealt the man a powerful punch to the back of the head, stunning him just long enough for Bear to bind his ankles with the second piece of rope.

"Damn." Lynx stood, wiping sweat from his brow with his forearm. "What a little hellcat. Awfully pretty, though."

Bear was inclined to agree. With their captive safely restrained—though still spitting a nonstop string of curses—Bear was free to take a good, long look. He liked what he saw, in spite of the dirt and leaf mulch covering the stranger's body from head to foot. The man was lithe and slender, with lean muscles, dusky skin and large, pale eyes that tipped up a little at the corners. Bits of leather and cloth in different colors twisted through his dark, waist-length hair. He was completely naked, which wasn't altogether unusual in most tribes, but Bear couldn't imagine why anyone would want to

go naked in the forest. Too many chances for rashes in sensitive spots.

A pearl of spunk oozed from the little slit at the tip of his half-hard cock. Bear watched the droplet slide slowly down the underside of the man's prick and had a sudden desire to spread the man's legs and sink his cock deep inside him.

Bear blinked, surprised by this unwelcome thought. He'd never before wanted to fuck a man who wasn't Pack, and not just because the penalty for such an act was death. He loved his Brothers. He'd gladly die for any one of them. This unbreakable bond was the reason all Pack had a sacred duty to be lovers to each other and were forbidden to seek sex outside the bond of Brotherhood. This unfamiliar urge to have a man who not only wasn't Pack, but wasn't even tribe, tantalized and terrified Bear. He had no idea what to make of it.

Not knowing how else to deal with what he felt, Bear yanked Lynx into his arms and kissed him hard. Maybe fucking Lynx would quench the strange new hunger pulsing inside him. Lynx moaned and opened to him, thighs spreading for Bear's groping hand.

"Let's fuck now," Bear growled, working open the laces of Lynx's pants with one hand.

"Yeah." Lynx wormed his trousers down and stepped out of them, leaving the big knife in its leather sheath strapped to his thigh. Grinning, he fell to his knees, taking Bear's pants down as he went. "What'll it be, big guy?"

Kicking his pants aside, Bear dropped to the ground. "Bend over."

Lynx dropped onto all fours and scuttled around to turn his back to Bear. He looked over his shoulder, green eyes glowing in the moonlight. "Fuck me."

Bear opened his pouch and pulled out the little glass bottle of oil he always carried with him. Lynx being a permanent bottom—except when he had to top during a new Brother's initiation—he needed no preparation, for which Bear was very grateful at the moment. Bear slicked Lynx's hole as fast as he could, poised his cockhead against it and pushed inside with a heartfelt groan. Getting a good grip on Lynx's hipbones, he set up a hard rhythm.

As usual, he and Lynx fucked silently, the only sound the smack of his balls against Lynx's ass. Habit, really. If there were any people around, the stranger's yelling would have already drawn them here, and that same racket had probably scared away every animal for miles around. They were safe enough, for now. But after all these years, quiet sex while outside the safety of the city walls was practically instinct.

It took Bear's sex-soaked brain several minutes to realize that it was, in fact, unusually silent. It took him a few more minutes to realize why.

Tearing his gaze away from his cock fucking Lynx's ass, Bear shot a keen look at the stranger. The man lay on his side where they'd left him, wrists and ankles bound, watching them with fire in his eyes. He had stopped struggling and cursing, leaving a palpable quiet behind.

Still and silent, the stranger possessed an exotic beauty unlike anything Bear had ever seen. None of his Pack-Brothers were like this, so small and seemingly delicate, yet

so fierce. He let his gaze drift down the man's body. The stranger's cock had hardened again, pre-come glistening at the tip. Bear raised his gaze to the man's face. Their gazes locked, and the stranger came with a soft gasp.

The shock of seeing the man come without even being touched shot fire through Bear's blood. He thrust into Lynx brutally hard, letting out a soft groan as his orgasm roared through him. Lynx wasn't far behind, muscular back tensing as he came on the ground.

Pulling out of Lynx, Bear rose to his feet and pulled his pants up. He watched the stranger watching him as he did up the laces. The man's lips curved into a knowing smile, and Bear had to look away. The fluttery feeling that smile generated in Bear's belly was not at all welcome.

Desperation for something to distract him drew Bear's gaze to Lynx still kneeling in the dirt, head resting on his folded arms and well-fucked ass in the air. "Get up and get dressed," Bear ordered, smacking Lynx's rear. "We need to move on."

Lynx glared at him, but pushed to his feet nevertheless and pulled up his pants. "How the hell do we get him home? He might be little, but he'll still be a bitch to carry that far."

"I can walk," the stranger spoke up. "Untie my legs. I promise I won't try to run."

Now that he wasn't shouting, the man's voice was soft and husky, sexy as hell. Bear's cock twitched in response. Fuck. His lust for this outsider confused him, and the confusion made him angry.

Bear shoved the conflicting tangle of emotions savagely to the back of his mind. Maybe if he concentrated on business, it would all go away.

Stalking over to the man, Bear frowned down at him. "You tried to get away before. Why should we believe you won't do it again?"

The man's smile was calculating this time. "I don't give a fuck if you believe me or not. You're the one who's going to have to carry me if you don't trust me to walk."

Bear frowned harder. He turned to Lynx. "I don't want to haul him all the way back home, Lynx." He didn't mention that the real reason for this had more to do with his body's traitorous reaction to the man than anything. The stranger would be easy to carry slung over Bear's shoulder. But that would put his naked ass uncomfortably close to Bear's face and his come-sticky cock flush against Bear's skin. Bear didn't want to tempt fate quite that hard.

Lynx walked over and stood beside Bear, regarding the stranger with a critical eye. "We could leave his hands tied, and put a rope around his neck. That way even if he did try to run, he wouldn't get far."

Bear nodded. "Good idea." He crouched on the ground and met the stranger's gaze, trying to ignore the spike of lust that pierced him when the smell of sweat and semen rose around him. "What's your name?"

The man licked his lips. They were, Bear noticed, plump and soft-looking. "Dragon."

Dragon. That was an animal name, which would mean ... "Are you part of a Pack?" It shouldn't have surprised him,

when he thought about it. The stranger was clearly a ferocious fighter as well as a lover of men.

Lynx laughed. "Dragons aren't real, Bear. No Pack would let its Brothers take names of animals that aren't real."

Dragon aimed a barbed glare at Lynx. "All of the Ashe Tribe Pack are named for mythical creatures."

"If you're Pack, what the hell are you doing here?" Lynx folded his arms. "The Ashe Tribe's way up in the mountains."

"It's probably no more than a three or four day hike," Bear mused, scratching at the week's worth of beard on his chin. "Kind of far for a regular patrol, but not unheard of for a special mission I guess, depending on what it is."

Lynx went still. "Fuck. If he's on a special mission, we can't take him home until we know what it is."

"I'm not on a fucking mission," Dragon insisted. "I'm not..." He fell silent.

"You're not what?" Bear prodded.

Dragon shot a sullen look at him, but didn't answer. Lynx made an impatient noise. "Tell us, or we'll leave you out here."

Bear's eyes widened, but he kept quiet. Their captive didn't need to know that Bear, at least, would never deliberately leave anyone tied up in the forest. It would be a certain death sentence, and that didn't sit well with Bear.

"I'm not Pack anymore," Dragon spat, fixing them both with a defiant glare. "They kicked me out. Banished me from the fucking tribe."

Bear blinked. Behind him, Lynx sucked in a hissing breath. Banishment was rare in most tribes, reserved mainly for

those found guilty of treason or heresy. Life without the protection of a tribe was dangerous enough that banishment was considered the worst possible punishment, even worse than death.

"What'd you do?" Bear asked.

"None of your fucking business." Dragon wriggled onto his back, scowling. "Are you going to untie my feet or not?"

Shaking his head, Lynx grabbed his knife handle where it stuck out above the waist of his pants and drew it from its sheath. "Don't make me regret this," he warned as he sawed through the rope around Dragon's ankles. "Bear, how much rope do you have?"

"Twenty feet. Maybe more. Plenty for this." Opening his pouch, Bear pulled out a coil of rope as long as he was tall. "Help him up and hang onto him."

Lynx positioned himself behind Dragon and hooked his hands under the smaller man's armpits, hauling him to his feet. Bear looped one end of the rope around Dragon's slender neck and deftly tied a slipknot. He wrapped the other end around his own wrist and held it up for Dragon to see. Dragon dipped his head, acknowledging Bear's power over him.

Something about that simple acquiescence sent a wash of desire through Bear's body. He wished that would stop happening. He couldn't have Dragon. No matter how good a fuck the man might be, it couldn't be worth dying for. Or losing his Pack for.

Now if only he could convince his cock of that.

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"Come on," Bear growled, giving the rope a tug. "Let's get going. I want to get home."

Peering up into the night sky, Bear oriented himself and started striding in the direction of Carwin.

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Chapter Two

They walked until the moon sank below the horizon. By the time they stopped, they'd left the trees behind and entered the empty lands between the forest and the Carwin Tribe's walled city. They made a primitive camp in one of the many ruined buildings scattered across the rolling hills. The ancient building was little more than a roof and three walls, made of the same rough stone-like stuff that composed much of Carwin itself. It was better than being out in the open, though, since some of the few souls who managed to survive in the wild had developed a taste for human flesh.

Inside, Bear laid his hands on Dragon's shoulders and steered him to the far wall. "Get on your knees, facing the wall."

Dragon shot him a wide-eyed look, but did as he was told. Bear smiled, following the sudden urge to ease the man's fear. "Lynx will untie your hands so you can eat. We'll have to tie your ankles again, though, and I'm keeping the rope around your neck."

Closing his eyes, Dragon leaned his forehead against the rough wall. "Please don't tie my feet. What if we're attacked during the night?"

"What makes you think we might be attacked?" Lynx's voice was carefully neutral as he worked loose the knot in the rope around Dragon's wrists.

"We're close to Char. Everyone knows there's cannibals out here."

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"The nightfeeders mostly travel alone." Pulling the rope loose, Lynx nudged Dragon's shoulder. "Okay, turn around and sit."

"We'll have a fire, so they'll leave us alone, unless there's a whole gang," Bear added as Dragon scooted around to sit facing him. "Me and Lynx'll keep watch in shifts all night, so they won't be able to sneak up on us. Even the gangs mostly only take people who're out alone. They don't usually like to take on more than one at a time."

Dragon's skeptical expression said he wasn't entirely reassured, but he kept quiet. He stared up at Bear while Lynx used the rope that had been around his wrists to tie his ankles. Bear shifted his feet and stared at the ground, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. The way Dragon looked at him made a dangerous heat pool in his belly.

"Do you have enough food for me?" Dragon asked as Lynx cinched the knot in the rope and moved off to find some firewood. "I haven't eaten since yesterday morning."

Bear sat against the wall, as far away from Dragon as the rope would allow since he didn't trust himself not to touch the man in ways he shouldn't want to. He pulled dried fruit and venison out of his pouch while Lynx got a fire going.

"Here." He held out two strips of cured venison and several chunks of dried apple to Dragon. "I have plenty for all of us."

Dragon snatched the food from Bear's hand and started shoving fruit into his mouth. Bear watched with a mixture of amusement and sympathy. He wondered what Dragon had done to get kicked out of his tribe, and if they'd really

banished him with nothing, not even clothes or weapons for hunting.

No one, in Bear's experience, had ever been banished without at least warm clothes, a hunting knife and a water skin. Such a thing was no better than a death sentence. A slow, cruel one at that. What horrendous crimes had Dragon committed to deserve such a harsh punishment?

Bear brushed his fingers over the handle of the knife at his waist. He and Lynx would need to find out what laws Dragon had broken if they could. In the meantime, Bear intended to keep a sharp eye on the man. He had no intention of letting this weird and unexpected attraction to a stranger—possibly a criminal—endanger his life, or his Brother's.

Once he had the fire going, Lynx plopped down on the ground on the other side of Dragon. Pulling his water skin off his shoulder, he took a long drink, then handed it to Dragon. "Here."

Dragon took the skin and drank. Water dribbled from the corners of his mouth and trickled down his neck, cutting winding trails through the caked dirt. He eventually lowered the skin and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Thanks." He held the water bag out to Lynx. "Sorry I drank so much. I haven't been able to find good water all day in those damn woods."

"It's okay. We have more, and there's a spot not far from here where we'll refill in the morning." Lynx took the skin back, raising his eyebrows as Dragon attacked a strip of venison. "Bear, hand me some of that, would you?"

Bear pulled out more cured meat and tossed it to Lynx. "Who's got first watch?"

"Me. You had last watch before we got started this morning, so you need the rest more." Lynx tore off a hunk of meat with his teeth, chewed, and swallowed. "We'll leave at first light. That way we'll make it home well before dark."

Dragon's gaze flitted between them. In the firelight, his eyes were a pale, almost silvery gray. "I heard Carwin Tribe lives inside Char. That true?"

It didn't surprise Bear that Dragon had heard of the ruined city which surrounded Carwin's walls on all sides. By all accounts, Char was the place where the old civilization had made its last stand after the Change. They'd done their best to keep the old ways alive—evil, wicked ways, according to everything Bear had learned growing up—and keep the Mother's punishment at bay. It hadn't done any good in the end. Less than fifty years after the oceans first began to rise and the human race realized the enormity of its sins against the Earth Mother, Char had fallen into the same chaos that had already destroyed the rest of civilization.

All that remained of Char now was a sprawl of crumbling ruins and a large collection of machines and other artifacts which no one fully understood. Dangerous predators prowled Char's streets, which made traveling between Carwin's walled central city and the outlying tribal lands risky. At least it discouraged the nightfeeders and occasional bands of murderous outcasts from approaching Carwin City.

"Carwin's just inside Char," Bear confirmed. "It was a ruin before the tribe settled there and fixed it up."

Dragon's head tilted sideways. He shot a glance at Lynx, who was poking at the fire, then pinned Bear with a curious look. "So they didn't build it? It was already there?"

This was Bear's favorite story, and he couldn't see any harm in telling it. After all, it wasn't a story of the old world, was it? Tales of Carwin's settlement were allowed. Resting his elbows on his knees, he adopted the tone he half-remembered his mother using when he was a small child, before the tribe's Seer spotted him as Pack and took him from his home.

"When the founders of the Carwin Tribe were traveling through Char looking for a place to settle," he began, "they came to an old road, the kind people used before the Change. On the other side of the road was a huge, wide field, and in the middle of the field was a city inside a wall."

"Carwin." Dragon's eyes were wide, his voice no more than a breath.

Encouraged, Bear nodded. "This city was like nothing they had ever seen. Strange shapes rose up over the walls, like the skeletons of mountains. One shape pointed straight to the sky like a needle. The people were scared, of course, but the walls of the city were tall and thick, and inside were enough buildings to shelter ten times the people they had. And even then, the Carwin Pack was strong enough to defeat any enemy within or without the walls."

Leaning forward, Dragon stared at Bear with a strange fire in his eyes. "What did they find there? They must've found something from the old world. Books, machines, something. What did they find?"

Startled, Bear shook his head. "Buildings. Nightfeeders. Wild dogs, cats, other animals. Those weird metal skeletons, whatever they were. They're still there, actually. They're rusted, parts of them have fallen off, but they're mostly still there. There used to be little carts on them. Some of the carts are still inside ruined buildings at the base of the skeletons."

"And that's it?"

Bear chewed his bottom lip, torn. He'd seen the things the council and the tribe elders called *photographs*, some of them more than fifteen generations old. The first tribe members had encased them in a tough, transparent, flexible substance to preserve them for all time. The photographs depicted a world beyond imagination. A world where giant metal birds filled the sky and magic boxes could show a person things that were happening so far away it would take weeks to walk there. According to Mother Rose, the Carwin Tribe's founders had discovered the photographs in a pile of books, papers and clothes alongside four huddled corpses inside one of Carwin's many buildings.

The problem was, Bear wasn't supposed to know that. He'd overheard it at a council meeting when he was nine and he, Rabbit and Lynx had snuck into the council room and hidden in the wine cabinet. So he couldn't very well tell Dragon, in spite of the oath he'd taken as a Pack-Brother to be truthful. He doubted that oath applied to situations like this anyway.

"No," he said after a long silence. "They didn't find anything else."

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With a sigh, Dragon slumped where he sat. He picked crusted leaves off his knee. "I bet they did. Your Mother and your council just don't say so, because they don't want you to know. But they know something about it."

Shocked, Bear stared into the flames. He didn't dare look at Lynx for fear his expression would give him away. He often wished he could go back in time, just for a day, to glimpse a life that had vanished forever when the Earth Mother took back what was Hers.

He knew better than to express that desire. Lynx had never understood Bear's fascination with tales of the world before the change. *A Pack-Brother shouldn't walk around with his head in the clouds*, he always said whenever Bear broached the subject. But nothing could stop Bear from dreaming of that lost world sometimes, when the nights were hot and restless.

Glancing at Dragon, Bear saw a faraway look in the man's eyes. A look Bear knew he himself wore when he was daydreaming about the distant past. As if he could feel Bear looking at him, Dragon blinked and met his gaze. Bear smiled. Dragon smiled back, and Bear felt a jolt go through him. He looked away, heart racing. He didn't want to feel this drawn to a man he couldn't have. Especially a man who might be a murderer, or worse.

"I'm gonna get some sleep." Bear stretched out on his back, keeping Dragon's rope looped around his wrist. "Dragon, you might as well get some rest too."

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"You want me to take the rope?" Lynx asked, moving to a position where he could see into the darkness outside while still keeping an eye on Dragon.

"No. I'll wake up if he moves." Bear yawned and shut his eyes, trying to ignore Dragon's tantalizing nearness. "Don't forget to wake me up for my watch, Lynx. Just because you *can* stay up a whole day and night doesn't mean it's a good idea."

Lynx laughed. "Shut up and go to sleep, Bear."

Bear smiled. Just before he drifted off to sleep, he felt the rope move as Dragon shifted. His fingers tightened, making sure Dragon stayed close.

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Chapter Three

Bear's few hours of sleep were not restful. Visions of the distant past filled his dreams, intercut with images of Dragon and himself doing things they couldn't do and live. When Lynx nudged him awake for his watch, he stood gratefully.

"Remember, wake me at first light." Lynx nodded toward the rope curled around Bear's hand. "You want me to take Dragon's leash?"

Bear glanced at Dragon. The man lay curled into a ball on the ground, sound asleep. He looked peaceful, and very young. A surge of protectiveness rose in Bear's chest.

"No," he said softly. "I got it."

Lynx nodded. Walking to the opposite side of the room, he stretched out on the ground, rolled over with his back to the wall and was instantly asleep. Bear chuckled. Lynx had a gift for falling asleep anywhere, at any time. Bear wished he himself could do that. His vivid imagination often kept him awake.

Letting go of the rope he'd held for hours, Bear walked to the place where one ancient wall had crumbled, leaving the room open to the elements. Crickets sang in the darkness, blending with the swoosh of the wind-tossed grass to make a constant, soothing music. A lone cloud sailed across the sky, blotting out the stars as it passed.

Bear drew a deep breath. The scents of earth and grass filled the cool night air. Underneath, he could smell the damp tang of the river that passed less than a mile from their

shelter. He imagined he could hear the faint sound of the running water during the occasional lull in the breeze.

The coming day should be hot but breezy, the air clear enough to see the city of Char on the horizon before the morning was out. A perfect day for walking. Good. Smiling to himself, Bear went back to the fire and settled into his spot next to Dragon.

When he bent to pick up the end of Dragon's rope leash, Bear was startled to see the pale eyes wide open and fixed on him. Bear cleared his throat, his shoulders going tight. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"I was. I woke up when you dropped my leash." Dragon sat up, managing to move gracefully in spite of his bound ankles. "So. You're interested in the old world, huh? The world before the Change?"

Heat crept up Bear's neck and into his face. Ever since Rabbit vanished without a trace during a patrol inside Char two years ago, only Lynx knew how deep Bear's curiosity about the old world ran. If it got back to the council, Bear's position in the Pack could be threatened. He didn't like the idea of Dragon having that kind of power over him.

"Why would you say that? I'm interested in the history of the Carwin Tribe is all." Bear managed to meet Dragon's gaze. "Did you know we were the first tribe to settle after the Change?"

"Funny, so was the Ashe Tribe." Dragon let out a soft, sad laugh that killed Bear's automatic surge of indignation at the insult to his tribe. "I've always been interested in the old world. Ever since I was a kid. Always wanted to find out more

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about it." Sighing, he rested his head against the wall. "I wish I could've seen it, you know? Just once. I bet it was amazing."

The melancholy note in Dragon's voice tugged at Bear's heart. He turned to look at Dragon, moved by a sudden sense of kinship with the man.

"I dream about it sometimes." The words came out before Bear could stop them. He froze, dreading Dragon's reaction. What he thought Dragon might do, he had no idea. But he'd never told anyone about his dreams, even Lynx, and it scared him almost as much as the time he'd gotten caught in the streets of Char after dark when he was thirteen.

To his relief, Dragon's gray eyes lit up with childlike excitement. "So do I. My Pack used to laugh at me for it. I thought I was the only one."

"Me too." Bear gave Dragon a shy smile. "I'm glad I'm not."

Dragon returned the smile, his face open and unguarded, and Bear's insides twisted. Dragon was the first person he'd ever met who shared his curiosity about the world before the Change. Most people weren't interested in learning more than they had to about it. The Elders, the council and even Mother Rose herself discouraged the tribe from any active interest in the past. A certain amount of history was taught to the tribe's children, but only so they would learn the proper moral lesson from it. The decadent society which had flourished in the distant past had brought about the Change by poisoning the Earth to the point that the Mother was forced to rise against them and take it back. According to the tribe's teachers, the

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only reason to study any part of that vanished civilization was to learn the value of humility before the Earth Mother. Next time, they warned, She would not be so forgiving.

Bear had always harbored his private doubts about that. But he'd never dared express them. Curiosity and a desire to learn were generally scoffed at and considered a weakness. Heresy, however, was punishable by banishment.

Banishment. Oh, Mother.

Bear moved closer, so that his leg touched Dragon's. He leaned close, ignoring Dragon's soft gasp and his own spike of desire at the man's nearness. "Why were you banished, Dragon?" he whispered, lips brushing the shell of Dragon's ear.

Dragon didn't move, but Bear felt the tremor than ran through him. Whether fear or lust triggered it, Bear couldn't tell. He could smell both on the man.

"You have to promise not to tell anyone." Dragon shot a pleading look at Bear. "Promise?"

Before he could stop himself, Bear laid a hand on Dragon's bare thigh and squeezed. "I promise." Not that it would matter, in the end, but Bear felt he would do anything at that moment to take away the fear in Dragon's eyes. "Tell me."

Dragon stared at Bear's hand on his leg. Then, to Bear's surprise, he rested his hand on top of Bear's. His fingers were long, fine-boned and delicate. Bear couldn't help wondering what it would feel like to have those fingers buried in his hair, or wrapped around his prick.

Stop it, Bear. You can't think that way.

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"I believe in the Mother," Dragon said, his voice soft and shaky. "But I never believed the old world was evil. They were just people, like us, I think. They just made mistakes. I figured if we could learn more about the old world, figure out what they did wrong, we could keep something like the Change from happening again, without telling people what they could and couldn't think, you know?"

Bear nodded. He agreed completely, even though he couldn't bring himself to actually say it. "Did someone find out? Is that why you were banished?"

"Yeah. I figured there must be others who thought like me. So I took a chance. I talked to a couple of people. Not anyone in my Pack. I didn't want to risk getting any of my Brothers in trouble. Not that any of them felt the same as me anyway." Dragon hung his head. A swatch of filthy, tangled hair fell across his face. "One of the people I told turned me in. The council stripped me, took my weapons and banished me that night. I didn't even get to say goodbye to my Pack."

Once again, Bear felt a stab of anger toward Dragon's tribe. Banishment was bad enough. Sending a person naked and unarmed into the wilderness was nothing short of inhuman. It would've been kinder if the Ashe Tribe Council had put him to death.

But then he wouldn't be here, the traitorous voice in Bear's head whispered. There wouldn't be anyone who really understood you, not even Lynx. You'd still be alone.

He gulped, fighting panic. Dragon was off limits. He couldn't afford to think of the man as a friend. Or, Mother forbid, a lover. He couldn't think of Dragon as anything but an

outsider, one who probably wouldn't survive long after they got to Carwin.

The thought made Bear sad, for reasons he didn't understand. This was the way of the world. It was the law. He'd known and accepted that his whole life, even if he didn't always agree with it. Why was he having such a hard time accepting it now?

He shook off the unwelcome thoughts. Pulling his hand away from Dragon's leg, he bent his knees until they touched his chest and wrapped his arms around them. "What made you come this way?"

Dragon shrugged. "I've always wanted to see Char. I figured I'd have a look at the city, then go on to the ocean."

"There's no life within miles of the ocean. Mother Rose says the air's bad. You would've died if you'd gone there."

"Probably. I figured I had nothing to lose by trying, though." Dragon laughed quietly, the sound sharp and bitter. "I don't guess I'll get the chance now."

Bear didn't answer. They both knew Dragon's chances of being accepted into the Carwin Tribe—or even being let go—were not good. A lifetime of slavery was the best he could hope for. An executioner's ax was more likely, since Dragon had been caught on the Carwin Tribe's lands. No tribe looked kindly upon banished members of other tribes trespassing on their land, and from what little Bear had heard of other tribes, Carwin was harsher than most in their punishments.

"It's not fair," Bear murmured.

Dragon gave him a penetrating look. "What?"

"It's not fair," Bear repeated, more firmly. "The laws. Banishing people just for disagreeing, or ... or killing them for being in the wrong place. It's not right."

The corner of Dragon's mouth quirked into a humorless smile. "Don't let your tribe's council hear you say that. They'll punish you too."

It was true. If Bear spoke up on Dragon's behalf, he was likely to face banishment himself. He hated it. Hated that he couldn't speak his mind without fearing for his life.

Driven by a strange sort of defiance, Bear laid a hand on Dragon's cheek, rubbing his thumb across the plump lower lip.

Dragon's eyelids fluttered, his cheeks flushing beneath the dirt. "Bear, what are you doing?"

"When I was ten," Bear said softly, tracing his fingertips down Dragon's throat, "me and Rabbit snuck out of the Pack training camp and into Char. We went all over, exploring, and after a while we found this place that was just full of books. All kinds of books. I never learned to read much, but Rabbit knew how. He read some of them to me."

Bear's fingers trailed down, found Dragon's hard little nipple and pinched it. Dragon arched into the touch, his head falling back against the wall. "Oh. Great Mother, Bear..."

"One of the books Rabbit found was about the laws in the old world." Bear tugged on Dragon's nipple and watched his cock rise in response. "There was no heresy for them. You could say what you wanted, and nobody could punish you for it." Bear let his hand wander lower, palm brushing Dragon's flat belly. The muscles flexed under his touch. "I've never

forgotten that. It's one of the things that made the old world so interesting to me."

Dragon gasped when Bear's palm brushed the tip of his stiff prick. "Bear ... you can't."

"I know."

"What about Lynx? He'll wake up, he'll hear."

"No he won't." Bear traced a fingertip down Dragon's shaft. "I'm on guard. He'll only wake up if there's danger."

Dragon's throat worked. His tongue darted out to wet his lips. "You can't," he repeated.

Trailing his fingers back up Dragon's belly and over his chest, Bear slid his hand around the back of Dragon's neck, tilting the man's face up. He leaned down until he could feel Dragon's quick panting breaths against his lips. "Let me anyway."

Dragon made a soft, needy little sound. He reached up to fist both hands in Bear's hair, then his mouth was on Bear's, warm and wet and open, and it was wonderful. Bear tumbled happily into it, savoring the spice of venison and apples on Dragon's tongue. Dragon smelled of dirt, sweat and need, and Bear's body responded. Growling, he hauled the smaller man onto his lap without breaking the kiss. Dragon's thighs parted, his ankles still firmly bound by the rope, and Bear couldn't resist sliding a hand down to cup Dragon's balls.

A breathless gasp escaped Dragon's lips. Bear swallowed it, moving his fingers up to toy with Dragon's foreskin. Dragon whimpered and shook in Bear's arms. Planting his hands on Bear's shoulder, he pushed until Bear was forced to draw back and look at him.

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"You can't do this," Dragon insisted in a rough whisper. "You could be executed if anyone finds out."

Bear let out a huff of frustration. He hadn't given much thought to that particular law before, having never felt the urge to take a lover who wasn't Pack. But now, with an irresistible desire crashing through him, Bear hated the fact that if he took this any further, he could die for it. That just wasn't right.

"Shit." Bear leaned back against the wall, forcing himself not to protest when Dragon slid off his lap. "I'm so fucking hard now it hurts."

Dragon snorted. "Me too, thanks to you."

"Sorry," Bear mumbled.

"It's okay." Resting his back against the wall, Dragon shut his eyes and took a few slow, deep breaths.

Bear watched with interest—and a little disappointment—as Dragon's cock softened. "You should get some more sleep now. We have a long walk tomorrow."

"Yeah." Dragon opened his eyes and gave Bear a faint smile. "Night, Bear. Thanks."

Not knowing what to say, or what exactly Dragon was thanking him for, Bear just nodded. Dragon lay down, curled up and shut his eyes. Within minutes, his breathing became slow and regular. Bear pressed his palms to his eyes and cursed himself for letting Dragon turn his world upside down and make him question everything he thought he knew.

Eventually, Bear's erection went away, for which he was profoundly grateful. He sat and stared into the flames until the sky outside began to pale.

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Chapter Four

Bear woke his companions as soon as it was fully light. After a quick meal of fruit and the last of the water, the three of them started across the fields toward a clump of willows in the distance. Bear had been there once before, on patrol with Lynx and Owl. A little river gathered into a still pool there under the branches before spilling out into the grass again. It was safe enough in the daytime, so Bear and Lynx had decided that since they had to go there anyway to fill their water skins, Dragon should get a bath while they were there.

Dragon hadn't liked it much when they explained that one of them would have to bathe him since his hands had to be bound again, but he'd agreed anyway. Bear didn't blame him. He'd been that filthy before, and it hadn't been pleasant.

The day promised to be fine and hot. Sweat prickled between Bear's shoulder blades as the rising sun beat against his skin. Insects skittered around his feet. Overhead, birds trilled in a cloudless sky. Some of Bear's tension left him as they waded through the tall grass. On such a perfect morning, he felt invincible. Surely he could manage to bathe Dragon without losing control of himself. After all, he'd stopped last night, hadn't he?

He ignored the inner voice reminding him that he might not have stopped if Dragon hadn't made him.

By the time they entered the shade of the willow branches, Bear had his normal confidence back. He pulled off his soft

leather moccasins and started unlacing his pants. "Lynx, where's the soap?"

"Here." Opening his pouch, Lynx pulled out a small bag made of loosely woven cloth with a long drawstring attached. He tossed it to Bear, who snatched it out of midair with one hand. "I'm gonna go upstream and fill the water skins. There's some berries growing a little ways up river, I'll get some of those too."

"Okay. Be careful." Bear stepped out of his pants and kicked them aside as Lynx headed off upstream. He hung the bag with the soap in it crosswise over his chest and waded into the water, giving Dragon's leash a tug. "Come on."

Dragon followed him out to the middle of the little pool. "The water feels good. Not too cold."

"Which is why it's a good spot for a bath." Bear squatted down and submerged himself in the clear, brown-tinted water, enjoying its cool caress for a moment before standing again. He pulled on the rope around Dragon's neck, drawing him near. "Duck under for a second. I need you wet all over so I can wash you."

Stepping closer, Dragon sank slowly into the water, his gaze never leaving Bear's face. On his knees, Dragon leaned backward, closed his eyes and submerged himself completely. Bear stared, fascinated. Dragon looked serene and a bit surreal, with his face floating just under the water's surface and his long dark hair drifting in the gentle current.

Bear bit his lip. His palms burned with the sense-memory of Dragon's skin.

Ignore it. You can do this. Pretend it's someone else.

Nodding to himself, he gave the rope a light tug. Dragon obediently rose to his feet and stood gazing up at Bear with what could only be called lust. Bear's breath caught, the blood rushing from his brain and straight to his crotch. The water just lapped his balls, leaving his erection bare to the world. There was no way Dragon could miss it. Sure enough, the gray eyes flicked down and back up, widening just a bit.

Bear bit back a groan. *Oh Mother, he's thinking about me fucking him.* It was clear as day in Dragon's eyes. Afraid of what he'd do if he had to hold Dragon's gaze, Bear took the man by the shoulders and turned him around.

Dragon cast a hopeful look over his shoulder as Bear took the goat's milk soap out of its bag and dipped it in the water. "Would you wash my hair?"

"Sure." Bear worked a froth of creamy lather between his hands, then dropped the soap back in the bag. He dug his soapy fingers into Dragon's thick hair, working through the tangles as gently as he could. "Wow. I wish I had a comb. This is kind of a mess."

Dragon laughed. "Tell me about it. That's what sleeping on the ground for a few days'll do for you."

Silence fell. Bear rubbed his fingers in little circles on Dragon's scalp. The thick white lather swiftly turned black with grime. He scooped a few handfuls of water onto Dragon's head, pulled the soap out again and rubbed the bar directly into the man's hair.

Dragon hummed and leaned into Bear's touch as he worked his way through the waist-length tresses, careful not to dislodge the bits of colored cloth and leather. "Mother,

does that ever feel good. The itching's been driving me crazy."

"Mm." Bear shoved the soap back into its bag. "Kneel down. I'll rinse the soap out."

Dragon sank to his knees. Kneeling beside him, Bear put one hand behind Dragon's back. "Lean back. I've got you."

Dragon's pale eyes rolled up to meet Bear's. He arched backward until only his face remained above the water's surface. His hair streamed out behind him, trailing swirls of dirty suds into the water. Bear combed his free hand through Dragon's hair until the water ran clear. With the dirt gone, the dappled sunlight coaxed glints of red and gold from the floating strands.

"Beautiful," Bear murmured.

If Dragon heard, he didn't let on. Bear was grateful for that.

When the last of the soap had been rinsed away, Bear lifted Dragon's head out of the water. "There. That's got it."

"Thank you." Dragon smiled. "It's nice to feel clean again."

"I still have to wash the rest of you," Bear reminded him. "Stand up, and I'll get your legs."

With Bear's hand on his elbow to balance him, Dragon clambered to his feet and stood gazing expectantly down at Bear. His gray eyes were dark and heavy, his stiff cock bobbing just below the water's surface. Bear could smell his lust.

Bear looked around as he took out the soap and began scrubbing Dragon's legs underwater. Above him, the willow branches swayed and murmured in the breeze. The fields

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were alive with the sounds of insects and birds. Two squirrels raced in spirals around the willow's trunk, claws scrabbling on the bark. There was no trace of human sound or scent, not even Lynx. Bear knew exactly how far upstream Lynx would need to go, and about how long it would take him.

There's time, the breeze and the river seemed to whisper. *No one needs to know.*

"Oh," Dragon gasped, bringing Bear abruptly out of his thoughts. He glanced up, heart pounding. Dragon's head was thrown back, his eyes closed and his mouth open.

Oh Mother. Bear looked down, even though he knew what he would see. He could feel it. And there it was, his hand wrapped around Dragon's rigid shaft, stroking him with a practiced touch. Dragon's hips moved in tiny pulses, thrusting his prick into Bear's palm. He moaned, the sound low and rough, and the last of Bear's resistance fell away.

Letting Dragon's shaft slip out of his hand and ignoring the resulting whimper of protest, Bear laid his hands on Dragon's hipbones. "Turn around."

Dragon did as Bear said, kicking up a cloud of silt as he shuffled his feet. He craned his neck to give Bear a questioning look. "Bear?"

"It's okay." Bear rubbed the soap between his hands, working up a lather, then nudged the dwindling bar against Dragon's bound wrists. "Hold this."

Dragon obediently closed a hand around the soap. "Bear, no, you shouldn't."

"Shouldn't what?" Plunging his hands into the water, Bear planted his slick palms on Dragon's taut little ass before the

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soap could wash away. He began kneading the muscles with his fingers, working in slow circles. "I'm just bathing you. That's all."

"But it's against the law to..." Dragon's words slid into a sharp cry when Bear's thumb brushed his hole. "Oh! Bear, please..."

Panting now, Bear pressed his thumb against Dragon's entrance. The muscles loosened, opening easily, and Bear's thumb slid right in. Dragon was hot and silky inside, and so tight Bear could feel his own pulse where the ring of muscle gripped him. He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against Dragon's back, fighting the urge to spread those taut cheeks wide and plunge his tongue into the dark secret place between them.

"Let me fuck you," Bear said, his voice hoarse and tight.

A violent shudder ran through Dragon's body. The heady scent of desire poured from him, making Bear's prick ache with the need to be inside him.

"They'll find out," Dragon whispered. "They'll kill you."

"No one's here but us." Pulling his thumb out of Dragon's ass, Bear rose to his feet. He took the bar of soap and began washing Dragon's chest and stomach. "Lynx won't be back for at least twenty minutes. We have time. No one needs to know."

Dragon leaned against Bear's chest, shaking all over. Bear closed his soap-slick fist around Dragon's cock, sliding up and down the shaft, and felt the change in Dragon's body as he gave in to his need.

"Untie me," Dragon gasped.

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Seized by a sudden sense of urgency, Bear shoved the soap back in its bag and started working on the rope binding Dragon's wrists. He had the knot undone in seconds. Dragon whipped around, strands of wet hair slapping Bear's chest, and flung himself into Bear's embrace. Bear lifted him easily, one arm under his ass and the other encircling his chest. Winding his legs around Bear's waist, Dragon took his mouth in an aggressive kiss.

Bear kept his mouth locked with Dragon's as he shuffled across the pond and laid Dragon down on a grassy spot on the edge, where the water was just the right depth for Bear to stand. He tossed the rope from Dragon's wrist on the ground. The one still around his neck coiled at his side.

"Where's your oil?" Dragon asked, and bit Bear's lip.

"My pouch." Reaching behind Dragon's head, Bear snatched his pouch off the ground and pulled out his bottle of oil. "I'm big. Can you take me?"

"Yeah." Dragon let his legs fall away from Bear's body, pulling his knees up and apart. "Hurry. I want you."

The way Dragon looked right then, wanton and beautiful, stole Bear's breath. Opening the bottle, he slicked his fingers and plunged two into Dragon's dusky little hole. Dragon groaned, his body opening right up, and Bear couldn't wait any longer. He drizzled oil on his cock, corked the bottle, tossed it onto the ground and shoved his prick up Dragon's ass.

Dragon let out a strangled cry. He clawed the ground, digging gouges into the grass. "Oh, oh Mother, yes, Bear, yes, hard, fuck me hard!"

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The breathless lust in Dragon's voice shattered any notion Bear had entertained of being careful. Leaning his elbows on the ground beside Dragon's head, Bear pounded into him as hard as he could. Dragon slung one leg over Bear's shoulder and hooked the other around his back. One hand slid into Bear's curls, holding on painfully tight. His eyes burned into Bear's.

Bear knew he wasn't going to last long. His orgasm was already coiling low in his belly, sending a wave of fire through his body. It should've been embarrassing; a Pack-Brother should be able to last longer. But he couldn't bring himself to feel shame, not when Dragon writhed beneath him, low moans and broken words testifying to how close he was.

When Bear felt the telltale tingling in his thighs, he wrapped a hand around Dragon's cock and started pumping. He angled his cock up, looking to hit the magic spot deep inside that could make any man lose control. Dragon's eyes went wide, mouth opening in a soundless scream, and Bear knew he'd found it. He hit it again, pressing the tip of one finger into the little slit at the tip of Dragon's cock.

"Oh..." Dragon whispered. For a second, he went perfectly still, staring at Bear with undisguised wonder in his eyes. Then his body arched, his hole clamping around Bear's cock as he came in a warm, sticky rush.

The sight of semen splashing onto Dragon's chest and the undulation of his insides sent Bear hurtling over the edge. Muffling his growl in Dragon's hair, he shot his seed inside Dragon's ass.

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Dragon raised up and met Bear's mouth with his, kissing him slow and deep. It felt good. It felt right, which made Bear distinctly uneasy. He was certain no one would find out about what he and Dragon had just done, but he didn't dare push his luck. This could never happen again. The logical part of his mind knew that. But the part of him that felt more connected to Dragon than he ever had to anyone argued that the two of them could be together always, if he dared to try. That Dragon could belong to him, and only him.

The idea was wrong in so many ways Bear didn't even know where to start. Still floating in the blissful post-orgasmic haze, he didn't want to think about it.

Wrapping his arms around Dragon, Bear pulled them both into the water. His shrinking cock slipped out of Dragon's body, and Dragon let out a squeak. Bear laughed.

"Mmm." Dragon wound his arms around Bear's neck and cuddled against his chest with a deep, contented sigh. "I haven't been fucked that good in ages."

"You mean I'm better than your Brothers? That's hard to believe." Bear nuzzled Dragon's hair. The sharp musk of sex nearly drowned out the fresh scents of soap and grass. "You should finish washing. Lynx'll be coming back in a few minutes. His sense of smell isn't as good as mine, but I don't want him to smell sex on you."

"We should both wash," Dragon pointed out, removing his legs from around Bear's waist and planting his feet in the silt at the bottom of the pool. "And yeah, you fucked me better than my Pack ever did. I still love them, I always will, but this? It was so intense." Dragon took the soap Bear handed

him and started lathering his arms, a pensive expression on his face. "I figure it's because you and me think the same way, you know? I think that makes the sex better."

Bear considered this. "I think you're right. I'm not sure *why* you're right, but I think you are anyway." He took the soap from Dragon's hand. "Turn around."

Dragon gave him a half-irritated, half-interested look. "There's not time to do it again."

Bear laughed. "I know, I just want to wash your back."
"Oh."

Dragon turned around and slung his hair over his shoulder. He let Bear soap his back, then squatted in the water. Once he'd rinsed the suds off, he took the soap and started washing Bear.

"How do you think they'll do it?" he asked, his gaze fixed on Bear's chest.

Bear's throat constricted. He wished he could pretend he didn't know what Dragon was talking about. "Beheading, probably."

Dragon's fingers faltered. "At least it's quick."

The faint tremor in Dragon's voice made Bear ache inside. "Maybe they won't—"

"Yes, they will." Dragon raised his gaze to meet Bear's. His eyes glittered with anger and resignation. "I don't stand a chance, and we both know it. I'm a banished refugee from another tribe, caught trespassing on Carwin lands. And I'm Pack, or I was. Your council isn't going to feel safe leaving me alive, not even out in the wild."

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Bear wanted to argue, but there was no point. Dragon was right. When they reached Carwin, the council would send Dragon for immediate execution, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. He hated that.

All his life, Bear had never questioned the laws, even when he privately found them less than fair. Maybe that was because he'd never personally known anyone who'd wound up on the wrong side of the law. Carwin was a big tribe, and the handful of people he'd witnessed executed or banished had been strangers to him. Faceless criminals, being dealt a harsh but just punishment. For the first time, the one on the receiving end of the executioner's ax was real to him. A living, breathing, thinking and feeling human being. One whose body he'd felt trembling under his, whose eyes he'd seen bright with fear and fury and excitement.

Dragon was no criminal, and he didn't deserve to die. That simple fact ultimately made Bear's decision for him.

"I'm not taking you to Carwin," Bear declared, taking the soap from Dragon and shoving it back into the bag.

Dragon blinked. "But you have to. It's the law."

"The law's wrong." Bear ducked into the water, rinsed and stood again. "I can't let you be executed. You haven't done anything wrong." He stared hard at Dragon. "You haven't, have you?"

"The Ashe Tribe Council would say heresy is wrong."

"You know what I mean."

Dragon shook his head, his expression solemn. "The worst thing I've done is to try and get people to see that the old world was nothing to be afraid of."

Nodding, Bear tossed the bag with the soap in it onto the shore. "It's settled, then. I'm not taking you to Carwin."

"Listen, if I don't go to Carwin, I'll die out here anyway, only it'll be slow and awful. Or the nightfeeders'll get me, which would be quicker, but even worse than starving." Dragon's mouth quirked into a bitter smile. "I think I'd rather have my head chopped off, if it's all the same to you."

"No, you don't understand." Bear cupped Dragon's face in his hands and stared into his eyes. "I'm not sending you out alone, with no food or weapons or anything you need. I'm leaving Carwin and coming with you."

Dragon's mouth fell open in an almost comically shocked expression. "What the fuck are you talking about? You can't do that!"

"I can, and I will."

"Bear, no, I can't—"

"You haven't asked anything of me," Bear interrupted. "I'm offering. I want to do this."

"But why?" Dragon's gray eyes pleaded with Bear, his fingers digging painfully into Bear's shoulders. "You don't even know me, why would you give up everything for me? It's crazy."

"Maybe it is. But this is what I want." Bear caressed Dragon's cheek, tracing the delicate line of his jaw. "I'm being selfish, really. I like you, Dragon. I like that you want to know about the old world as much as I do. I like that you had the balls to try and make people see your way of thinking, even though it put you in danger. And sweet Mother, I really like how my cock fits inside you."

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Dragon laughed and leaned against Bear's chest. Bear stroked his dripping hair. "I love my Brothers," he continued, "but you feel more like my Pack-Brother than any of the men who really are. I want us to be together, and I don't want to share you with anybody. No Pack, no tribe, just us."

Bear stopped, amazed with himself for saying such things, and even more amazed that he meant them.

"That's insane," Dragon observed, sliding his arms around Bear's waist and giving his collarbone a gentle nip. "Where would we go? And how the hell are we supposed to survive out here? What about the nightfeeders?"

"We could go north. There's lots of empty buildings and plenty of clean water in that direction, and I'm a good hunter. I think we'll be okay." Lifting Dragon's chin, Bear brushed a feather-light kiss across his lips. "There's supposed to be a tribe about a week's foot travel north of Char that'll take in anyone, even if you've been banished from another tribe. I heard their only law is that you can't harm another person."

Dragon's eyes searched his, and Bear held his breath. He'd never known any family but his Pack, and had never wondered before about the one-on-one, lifelong partnerships between those who weren't Pack. Many of those people had seemed happy, but he'd been happy himself, or so he'd thought.

It had taken a stranger to give him a glimpse of what it could be like with someone who shared his doubts, his dreams and his desires. And he wanted it.

When Dragon smiled, Bear suddenly felt lighter than air. "Okay." Dragon shook his head. "You're completely crazy to

want to do this, but okay. We'll head north and find this tribe of yours."

"Good." Bear lifted Dragon right off his feet and kissed him again, deeper this time. Dragon's kiss, he mused, could quickly become addictive. "Now I just have to figure out what to do about Lynx."

Dragon glanced over Bear's shoulder, and his body went rigid. "Yeah, well, you better think fast. Here he comes."

"Shit!" Setting Dragon on his feet again, Bear whirled around and scanned the riverbank. Sure enough, Lynx was strolling toward them along the bank, the water skins slung over one shoulder. He was still far enough away that he might not be able to see them through the willow branches, but he'd be there soon enough.

Bear turned back to Dragon, hating what he had to say. "I have to tie your hands again, Dragon. I'm sorry."

Dragon smiled. "Hey, it's fine. If it means staying alive in the end, I'm okay with it."

"Good." Bear lifted a lock of hair from Dragon's shoulder. "Thanks," he said, letting the heavy wet strands slide through his fingers. "For trusting me, I mean."

Dragon didn't answer. Leaning forward, he planted a soft kiss on Bear's chest, then turned and put his wrists together behind his back.

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Chapter Five

During the long walk home, Lynx was unusually quiet. Not that he was one to chatter constantly, the way a few of the Pack did, but he and Bear would usually talk to pass the time on field missions. Today, Lynx spoke in monosyllables and often seemed distracted. Most tellingly, he kept shooting narrow glances at Dragon when he thought Bear wasn't looking.

They reached the ancient green metal sign proclaiming "Wecom t Char" a few hours before sunset. By that time, Bear strongly suspected that Lynx somehow knew what had happened between him and Dragon. By the time the walls of Carwin City came into sight, across a flat expanse of grass, weeds and young trees, he was certain of it.

"How'd you know?" Bear asked as they crouched in the shade of a tremendous oak.

"I saw you when I came back. I was still pretty far upstream but I could see you and Dragon were in the water, kissing. I hid in the bushes for a few minutes, then started toward you again and made sure one of you could see me. I didn't say anything then because I wanted time to think." Lynx gave him a sad smile. "I wish you hadn't done it, Bear. I wish you could've been happy with me and the Pack."

Bear glanced at Dragon, who wisely kept quiet. "I didn't plan on this. It just happened."

"I know." Lynx peered around the tree trunk, biting his lip. "I think I can get in through the Pack entrance, steal some

clothes, food and a knife for Dragon and be back before anyone notices. I know a few safe places to stay the night in Char."

Bear gaped at him. "What?"

"Well, you can't stay in Carwin now. Mother Rose'll have Dragon before the Seer, she'll find out what happened and you'll be executed right alongside Dragon. So you both have to leave." Lynx let out a soft, sad laugh. "It sucks, but I'd rather see you go than see you die."

"So you're helping us?"

"Yeah." Taking Bear's hand, Lynx gazed up at him with an unusually serious expression. "You're my Brother. I love you. I know what you did was against the law, but I don't think you should have to die for it."

Knowing that he and Dragon weren't the only ones who thought that way filled Bear with a sense of hope. He swept Lynx into his arms and kissed the top of his head.

"Thank you," he whispered into his Brother's hair. "You should come with us. We're going north."

Lynx drew back. The spark in his eyes said he'd guessed why they wanted to go north, but he shook his head. "Carwin's my home. It's not perfect, but I don't want to leave it."

Bear nodded. "Fair enough. What'll you tell them?"

"About Dragon? Nothing. They won't send me to the Seer, so there's no reason for anyone to know we even found him. About you?" Lynx flashed an evil grin. "A pack of nightfeeders attacked you during your watch last night, and you bravely sacrificed yourself by leading them away from me. I followed,

of course, but they tore you apart before I could get to you and I had to run for my life. You died a hero's death. Very sad."

Bear's chest went tight. Mother, but he was going to miss Lynx's sense of mischief. "You don't have to do this. There's still places in Char where we could find clothes for Dragon, and maybe even food. There's no reason for you to get involved."

"I want to help." Rising on tiptoe, Lynx kissed Bear's chin. "Let me."

If it had been anyone but Lynx, Bear probably would've argued. But he'd known Lynx most of his life. Lynx would be able to sell his story to the council and would take his secret to the grave.

"Okay." Bear tilted Lynx's face up and kissed his lips. "Go. We'll wait here. And for Mother's sake, be careful."

Lynx smiled, squeezed Bear's hands and trotted off into the dense greenery that edged the empty space around Carwin City. Bear walked over to Dragon, cut the ropes from his wrists and folded him into his arms.

"Can he do it?" Dragon asked, his voice muffled against Bear's chest.

Bear tightened his arms around Dragon. "I hope so."

* * * *

The sun still hung above the treetops when Lynx returned. He motioned them farther away from the walls with a look. Bear and Dragon followed him silently. They stopped in the

shade of a fig tree where the ruins rose with shocking suddenness from the tangle of trees, weeds and bushes.

"Here." Lynx tossed Dragon a pair of buckskin pants, a linen shirt, a pair of moccasins and a long knife in a leather sheath. "The clothes should fit well enough. Bear, I got you a shirt too. And blankets. I thought it might get cold. You have the water skins, and I brought you enough food to last you a few days."

Bear took the shirt Lynx handed him. A lump seemed to have lodged itself in his throat. "Lynx. I'll miss you."

Dropping the large leather satchel of food on the ground, Lynx grabbed Bear and hugged him hard. Bear clung to his Brother, one hand stroking the long golden braids. When Lynx pulled away, his eyes glittered wetly in the red orange glow of the sunset.

"There's an almost intact building a short walk north of here." Lynx's voice sounded suspiciously hoarse. "You can't miss it, it's taller than the trees. It's the safest place on this side of Char." He turned to Dragon with a solemn expression. "Make him happy, Dragon."

"Always." Dragon clasped Lynx's hand. "Thanks."

Lynx gave him a smile, turned and walked away without looking back. Bear watched him until he vanished into the undergrowth, then turned back to Dragon. Dragon had put on the clothes Lynx brought him. The shirt was too big, but the pants and moccasins fit just fine. Bear thought he looked absolutely edible.

Moving closer, Bear wrapped a possessive arm around Dragon's shoulders. "We should go. I know the place Lynx

was talking about. It's a few minutes' walk from here, and we need to get inside before the sun sets."

"Yeah."

"Grab the satchel. I'll get the water skins."

Dragon slid his hand down Bear's arm, winding their fingers together as they gathered their supplies. Bear slung the water skins over his shoulder and stood gazing north, into the broken remains of what had once been a city. A place full of people. Full of life.

There were other ruined cities out there, he knew. Places he'd wondered about all his life. Maybe he and Dragon could see those places, together. He thought of the long-lost secrets they might discover, and excitement curled in his belly.

He squeezed Dragon's hand. "Ready?"

Dragon tilted his head up and smiled, gray eyes shining. "I'm ready."

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About the Author

Ally Blue is acknowledged by the world at large (or at least by her heroes, who tend to suffer a lot) as the Popess of Gay Angst. She has a great big penis hat and rides in a bullet-proof Plexiglas bubble in Christmas parades. Her harem of manwhores does double duty as bodyguards and as sinspirational entertainment. Her favorite band is Radiohead, her favorite color is lime green and her favorite way to waste a perfectly good Saturday is to watch all three extended version LOTR movies in a row. Her ultimate dream is to one day ditch the evil day job and support the family on manlove alone. She is not a hippie or a brain surgeon, no matter what her kids' friends say.

To learn more about Ally Blue, please visit www.allyblue.com. Send an email to Ally at ally@allyblue.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Ally! groups.yahoo.com/group/loveisblue/.

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by Ally Blue

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Music. Sex. Fame. What's missing? Surely not the "L" word...

Adder

© 2009 Ally Blue

Adder has a plan for his life: play his music for millions of adoring fans, who will reward him with money, fame and as much sex as he can handle. It's a goal he's been working toward since his teens and is on the cusp of achieving. The idea of a relationship never entered his mind—until a new drummer joins his band. One taste of Kalil, and all he wants is more.

For Kalil, playing drums for Adder is a dream come true, the creative connection he's always wanted. What he never reckoned on is the deeper connection he finds with Adder. Kalil would rather avoid sexual involvement with a bandmate, but Adder seems just as determined to break through his resistance.

Attraction aside, music and sex are about the only things the hedonistic Adder and the increasingly jealous Kalil can agree on. Still, before they know it they're on the brink of something deeper, something lasting.

And it scares the hell out of both of them.

Warning: This book contains adult language, hot gay sex, weird bands, colorful prophylactics and unforgivable fashion crimes.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Adder:

Dragon's Kiss
by Ally Blue

For almost a month, Kalil had promised himself he wouldn't do this. Every morning when he woke up, every day when he tried not to stare at Adder during practice, every night when he jerked off to the hazy half-memory of Adder inside him, he'd sworn over and over that he was *not* going to give in to temptation. If he and Adder became lovers for real, it would fuck up everything. He couldn't risk it.

For twenty-seven days, he'd managed to stay strong. And now here he was, with his tongue in Adder's mouth and Adder's hands up the back of his shirt.

"Fuck you," Kalil breathed when Adder broke the kiss to bite his neck. "I can't believe—*shit*, God, do that again—can't believe you did this to me."

"My dearest K, you are the one who attacked *me*." Adder's tongue darted into Kalil's ear. He squeaked and yanked Adder's head back by the hair. Adder grinned. "Perhaps I should let Ms. Rivers coax me into bed. I think I like what jealousy does to you."

Kalil scowled. "I'm not jealous, asshole."

The grin widened, Adder's hazel eyes blazing with a combination of humor and lust which Kalil wished he didn't find so damn hot. "Of course not, darling." Dipping his head, Adder tongued the pulse point on Kalil's throat.

"I'm *not*." Kalil arched his neck and pressed Adder's mouth harder against his skin. "Can you shut up about your enormous ego long enough to fuck me?"

Shaking his head, Adder slid both hands down the back of Kalil's jeans. "I'm on the bottom."

"I don't top."

"I don't either."

Unbelieving, Kalil grabbed Adder's arms and pushed him away, holding him at arm's length. "You do too, you fucking liar. You topped *me*, unless you lied about that."

"You were far too drunk to top. I was forced to."

"Yeah, well. I've seen you top other guys."

He got an arched brow in answer. "Oh? Do tell."

Kalil ground his teeth. "I caught you. Remember? When we shared a room in Greenville just before the Tabernacle gig and you brought that ridiculous little queen back with you? I walked in on you, you were pounding his ass so hard the headboard knocked a hole in the wall."

Adder's brows drew together in the stubborn expression Kalil had come to know and dread. "That was a girl."

"Well, 'she' had a pretty big dick for a girl."

"The sex change was still in process, you cretin."

Kalil sighed, wondering how weird it was to be this turned on right now. "Okay. Fine. So explain to me why you don't top."

"Why don't *you*?"

"I asked you first."

Adder flashed his unhinged grin, sending Kalil's hormones into overdrive and temporarily blotting out his irritation with the crazy green-haired bastard. "If I want to fuck someone, I'll go find a female. Which is, of course, the beauty of being bisexual. Honestly, what's the point in being with a man if you can't get a cock up your ass?"

Kalil thought about pointing out that *he* wasn't going to get a cock up *his* ass tonight, but let it drop. Adder would just

point out that Kalil was gay and therefore was not sexually attracted to women, so his only opportunity of sticking his cock in anyone lay with the male of the species. Specifically, one particular male who was currently offering his own rear passage for Kalil's enjoyment.

Fucking shit, I'm thinking like him now. This cannot possibly be good.

Irritated and so turned on he couldn't see straight, Kalil grabbed Adder by his stupid orange and green paisley tie, pulled him across the room and shoved him onto the sofa. "Fine. Get your fucking clothes off."

To his relief, Adder seemed to have temporarily run out of teasing smiles and droll one-liners. He loosened the knot on the hideous tie, pulled it over his head and threw it on the floor. They both attacked Adder's black shirt at the same time. Kalil was pretty sure a couple of the buttons got torn off in the process of removing the shirt. He was also pretty sure he didn't give a shit. Hands clasping Adder's rib cage, he bent and dug his teeth into one pink nipple.

Adder's pained groan almost made up for Kalil's twenty-seven days of suffering all by itself. Long fingers wove into Kalil's hair. "Ooooooh, gods. I could fall in love with your tongue."

Kalil, who had been working Adder's pants open, shoved a hand inside and pinched his hip to make him shut up. Adder hissed, but stopped talking, for which Kalil was grateful. The unexpected mention of falling in love—even though it was just with his tongue—made his stomach turn backflips.

It took a while to get Adder's pants off, partly because the satin stuck to his sweaty skin and partly because he was trying to take Kalil's shirt off at the same time. Eventually, though, Adder lay naked against the cushions, one leg thrown over the back of the sofa and both hands working to remove Kalil's jeans. Between the two of them, they managed to get Kalil's pants partway down. Kicking off his shoes, he squirmed out of the snug denim and pressed his body between Adder's spread thighs.

He couldn't help his sharp gasp when his erection aligned with Adder's. Grinning like the demon he was, Adder hooked a leg around Kalil's waist and thrust up. Kalil let out an embarrassing whine. "Jesus fucking Christ. Uh."

"Mmmm." Rearing up, Adder fastened his mouth to Kalil's neck and sucked so hard Kalil figured he'd see a blood blister there next time he looked in a mirror. "Fuck me, Special K."

Kalil shook loose of Adder's grip and sat back on his knees. He was about to shove a finger up Adder's butt when a thought struck him. "Goddammit."

"What?" Adder curled his fingers around his prick, not stroking, just holding on as if he was afraid it would fall off if he didn't.

"No rubbers. Hell, no lube either." Frustrated, Kalil raked a hand through his hair. "Shit."

"Use saliva, it works well enough."

"Yeah, for lube. But not for protection."

Adder quirked an eyebrow at him. "You wouldn't fuck me bare, darling?"

"Are you crazy? As much as you screw around? I don't think so."

If Adder was offended by that, he didn't let on. The tip of his tongue came out to tease the corner of his mouth. "As it happens, I have a few condoms and packets of K-Y in my bag."

Torn between relief and annoyance, Kalil gave Adder's thigh a resounding smack. "Why the fuck didn't you say so before?"

"I would have told you eventually. I simply wanted to see when you would notice the lack of proper supplies." Adder let go of his cock, leaned sideways and rummaged through the yellow and teal flowered satchel beside the sofa. He emerged with a condom and a packet of lube, which he held out to Kalil. "Here you are, darling."

Kalil shook his head. The condom was *orange*. Who used orange condoms?

He took it anyway. He'd cope with having a Day-Glo dick if it meant getting said appendage inside Adder sometime in the next two minutes.

Ripping the packet open, Kalil rolled the slick latex down over his cock. He snatched the lube from Adder's palm and tore it open. Adder helpfully drew his legs up and apart to expose his rosy little hole. His hand shaking with eagerness and lust, Kalil squeezed some of the K-Y onto his fingers and slid two into Adder's ass.

Adder moaned, eyelids fluttering and mouth falling open. "K. Yes."

Gnawing his lower lip, Kalil pushed his fingers deeper and twisted, searching for Adder's gland. His fingertip nudged a firm spot. Adder keened and clawed at the sofa. "Oh gods, oh. Oh. Please."

Kalil swallowed a whimper. "You ready?" He left the "please be ready or I'm gonna come without ever getting inside you" unvoiced. What Adder didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Adder nodded, breathing hard. "More than ready."

Resisting the urge to shout "hallelujah", Kalil spread the rest of the lube on his disturbingly colorful prick, scooted forward on his knees and poised the head of his cock at Adder's hole. He grabbed hold of Adder's hips and pushed. There was a second's resistance, then his cock slid into Adder's body.

They both groaned. Kalil shut his eyes and held still for a second, trying to gather the scattered shards of his control so he wouldn't come right away and embarrass himself. *God*, Adder was tight, tighter than Kalil had expected, and so hot inside Kalil feared the condom might melt to his skin in permanent citrus-colored patches.

A hand caressed Kalil's jaw. His eyes flew open. Adder was watching him with a sweet, solemn expression that made him feel like someone was tugging on his heart with a fishhook. He turned into the touch before he could give it too much thought, rubbing his cheek against Adder's palm.

"My darling Kalil," Adder purred. "If you don't start moving *immediately*, I'll be forced to leave you for my dildo."

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For two years the agency has controlled Josh Mackay's every move. But his real nightmare begins when Brad, a Minder, makes Josh his zombie. Kiran Brunner decides it is time to meet Josh again—and save him.

Zombie

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The Minders Series, Book 2

Two years after Minder Kiran Brunner abducted Josh Mackay, Josh's life is in ruins. The agency controls his every move. He is essentially their prisoner. Josh dreams of escape. Instead, a nightmare arrives in the form of Brad.

When Josh becomes Brad's zombie, Kir rescues Josh from the amoral Minder and the agency. Now Josh knows what Kir is and how he was used two years ago. Their relationship is built on hatred and fear, no matter how badly Kir wants Josh to trust him.

Kir is patient and protective. However, Kir may not be able to protect Josh, and himself, from those who wish them harm.

Warning: Due to the serial nature of these stories, the author recommends reading the series in order. This title contains the following: violence and explicit male/male sex.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Zombie:

They went for short walks together to build up Josh's strength. They played cards—there was an old cribbage board

under the broken TV. And they worked on small repairs. The cabin wasn't in the best shape.

"We need paint." Josh surveyed an outside wall. Bits of dirty white paint flaked off at his touch.

Kir scratched his cheek, as if he hadn't noticed the cabin's state of disrepair. "Okay. I'll get some when I'm next in town."

He'd been twice to stock up on supplies. The first time Josh had seriously considered escape, but had been too weak to make the attempt. The second time, he couldn't face leaving. He had nowhere to go. Now, he wanted to stay. Despite his initial terror, this cabin of Kir's had become Josh's safe place.

"We can scrape off the old paint first," he told Kir.

"Yeah?"

Josh smiled. "Have you never painted?"

Slightly abashed, Kir shook his head.

"You're a cook, but not a fixer-upper. Well, let's see what tools we have."

They stepped inside. Kir pulled the box off the shelf and opened it up. He stood there, fists on hips, surveying objects that were obviously odd and strange to him.

Kir glanced up, questions in his eyes. "Anything useful? Lots of rust, if nothing else."

Josh didn't look away and Kir blinked, uncertain.

They hadn't touched since the punch three days ago, although Josh had brushed past a couple of times and Kir had moved out of the way, unaware Josh made contact on purpose.

He still didn't want Kir to reach for him, but Josh couldn't resist lifting his hand towards Kir whose eyes widened. As if conducting an experiment, Josh carefully placed his palm on Kir's shoulder. The T-shirt was damp. Kir had jogged this morning.

Kir sucked in air but didn't move.

"A wire brush will do the trick," Josh informed him. "But we might want to buy a paint scraper."

"Okay, so..." Kir watched as Josh lifted his left hand and placed it on Kir's right shoulder. "Um, what are you doing?"

Josh slid his hands over Kir's shoulders and rubbed his upper arms, all the while breathing in Kir's distinctive scent. "You've been good to me, Kir. And I've given you little except a black eye. I wanted to say thank you."

Kir swallowed as Josh's hands came back to rest on his shoulders again. "You're welcome, I mean—"

Josh ran thumbs over Kir's collarbones. Kir vibrated under Josh's palms and Josh remembered Kir's past.

"Are you okay?" Josh didn't want his actions to be unwelcome.

"Yes, I'm okay. I just—" Kir broke eye contact, looking down.

"This isn't going anywhere." Yet Josh slid one hand against Kir's neck. "I'm not hurting you somehow, am I?"

"No," said Kir, fervent.

Josh laid a palm against Kir's cheek. "You're so beautiful. I just want to touch you."

Kir stood there while Josh stroked his face, tracing cheek and brow, even his eyes though so gently, before running his

hands through Kir's thick, gorgeous hair, caressing Kir's scalp, his neck, the tendons that reached into his powerful shoulders. All the while Kir shivered and his arms hung at his sides.

Then it was too intense and Josh couldn't move forward to take the next step. Nor could he stay where they were with Kir relaxing into his touch. Josh leaned down, kissed Kir's forehead and stepped back.

Kir's eyes were wide open and dark, but not demanding.

"Sorry," said Josh.

"Don't be sorry," Kir whispered, his voice husky and appealing.

Abruptly, Josh crouched down to look through the tools. If he could have control, if Kir wouldn't mind ceding that to him, Josh thought they might become more than roommates. The idea made him dizzy. This intimacy was not to be rushed.

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In hiding who he was, Payton found himself ... and the man
he would grow to love.

The Englor Affair

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After his brother is kidnapped, Prince Payton Townsend masquerades as an Admiral's assistant in order to track the culprits through the tangled mysteries of the planet Englor. He finds way more than he bargained for in the form of Marine Colonel Simon Hollister.

Simon is no ordinary soldier. He's heir to Englor and his life is mapped out for him: throne, bride, and eventually an heir. He never expected a dalliance with Payton to blossom into love, or that the organization that taught him to lead would threaten that love—and their lives.

Danger and intrigue abound as they learn more about their shared enemy, and about each other. What they learn could help them rise above to an enduring love—or pull them apart.

Warning: Hot sweaty manlove of the interplanetary kind.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Englor Affair:

Six. Payton grunted and hefted the bar up again. He hadn't worked out his upper body yesterday and now he knew why. *Seven.* His upper body strength was next to none. After hoisting the bar back onto the stand, he left his hands on it. "Eight." At least no one was here to witness him struggling with such miniscule weight. Pulling his feet up onto the

bench, he lay there staring at the staggered white tile and fluorescent light ceiling. It was ugly. The gym looked like a gym, not the pristine workout room at home.

Good grief, he was becoming a whiner. He huffed out a breath, making the hair on his forehead flutter, and closed his eyes. First, he was melancholy over not having a consort. Which was stupid, he didn't *want* a consort. It was just from watching Nate talk to Aiden, and witnessing how happy they both were. Second, he didn't want to work, which he really needed to do. The guilt was gnawing at him. That was also stupid because as soon as he figured out why Benson was on Regelence, he was going to go home and back to being under constant surveillance. He actually had a bit of freedom here ... and he was using it to lift weights. Yeah, he was whining, most unbecoming, but he couldn't seem to help it.

"Lifting free weights by yourself is a very bad idea."

Payton sucked in a breath, dropped his feet back to the floor and opened his eyes.

Si stood at the end of the bench, his hands on the bar. How had Payton not heard him come in? He loomed over Payton with his brow furrowed over crystal blue eyes. "No more lifting weights on your own. It's dangerous." A couple strands of auburn hair fell onto his forehead.

Payton let go of the bar and suppressed a shiver. His mood was suddenly looking up. This was the reason he'd come here in the first place. To hear that voice again and see if the man was as handsome as he remembered. Last night, he'd dreamed of that smooth sexy voice whispering unspeakable things in his ear while they did unspeakable things to each

other. Good grief, he was getting aroused. He was obsessed. How pathetic. All it took was a perfect body, a handsome face and someone to be nice to him for no particular reason.

Si crossed his arms on the bar, leaned over toward Payton and grinned. "How many are you doing?"

Galaxy, the man was every bit as gorgeous as Payton remembered. The clothes emphasized his masculinity. Red hair peeked out from under his arms, not concealed at all by the white sleeveless shirt he wore. His gray shorts were practically threadbare and very short, the hair on his legs visible right up to his upper thighs. There was almost nothing covering him. Unlike Payton, Si didn't seem the least bit embarrassed by wearing so little. He seemed quite secure and sure of himself.

That confidence made Payton's cock even harder. He swallowed the lump in his throat and hurried to sit up. He barely noticed his aching thigh muscles as he turned toward Si, hoping he hadn't spotted Payton's growing erection. "I— You—you don't have to help me. I'll slow you down. You—I—" He groaned and bit his bottom lip. There was just no way to get around it. "I'm not up to your"—he waved his hand, searching his brain for the right word—"standards."

Chuckling, Si darted a gaze down Payton's body then back up. "You are definitely up to my standards." The gleam in his eyes made it clear he wasn't talking about working out and weight limits. "Besides, I need a workout partner, my friends abandoned me tonight." Si pushed himself upright and grabbed the bar, ready to spot him. "Now lay back down and finish your set. How many?"

After hesitating for only a second, Payton decided the hell with it and lay back down. Si hadn't even tried to hide his erection yesterday in the shower. Either he'd ignore Payton's or—Payton didn't know what, but he was willing to take the chance. He knew he wasn't reading Si wrong. The man was definitely interested in him and Payton had nothing to lose. After all, wasn't this what he'd come here hoping for? It wasn't like anyone would find out. What was a little flirtation? "Three sets of eight, I've done one set." He got his hands on the bar on the outsides of Si's and pushed up.

Si didn't let go of the bar until Payton held it steady above him.

Payton brought the bar down then back up easily.

"One." Si's hands hovered above the bar. His legs were so muscular and—*dust, his shorts are short.*

Doing another rep fairly easily, Payton let his attention stray upward.

"Two."

Si's prick was right there, in his face. Payton couldn't *not* look.

"Three." Si stepped closer, his legs against the edge of the bench. He wore something white under the loose gray shorts. Underclothes, but none like Payton had ever seen. It only covered the genitals, with bands around the waist and each leg, leaving the arse bare. "Four." The garment cupped Si's testicles and outlined his prick.

Payton's cock twitched.

"Five." Si dipped toward Payton, his hands ready to catch the bar. His groin was scandalously close to Payton's face.

"Come on, Payton. Three more." Was his voice more raspy than before?

Shoving the bar up, Payton ignored the burn in his arms. That was really not the way to get him to do three more. He had the insane urge to nuzzle his face into Si and see if he smelled as good as he looked. Whoa, where had that come from? Thankfully, his face was already heated from the strain of moving the weights, because after that thought he was surely blushing. He shouldn't think things like that, but dust if his cock wasn't throbbing and straining against his shorts.

"Six. Two more."

The weights were getting really heavy. His heart was thrumming in his ear.

Si scooted forward, his legs now straddling the edge of the bench. Payton could feel the heat of Si's thighs on his ears as Si took some of the weight of the bar, making it easier on Payton. Sweat and a musky warm scent teased Payton's nose as Si dipped again, following the barbell.

"Seven. Come on, do one more." His blue eyes glittered down at Payton, and his voice was definitely lower and huskier than before.

Gulping in a breath, Payton steeled himself for one last rep. He was not going to notice the thick cock outlined in those strange underclothes. He wanted to bury his nose there and—oh galaxy, he wanted to know how Si tasted. Payton gasped, shocked at the admission. He wanted to taste and touch and do whatever Si would—*Oh*. Payton's arms buckled.

The bar never touched him.

Dragon's Kiss
by Ally Blue

Si hauled the bar up like it weighed nothing, making the veins on his forearms obvious, and set it on the stand. He leaned his forearms on the bar and looked down at Payton.

At least Payton thought he did. His attention stayed focused on Si's erection, outlined through the thin gray shorts. Payton made a noise halfway between a gasp and a growl. He reached up, his hand hovering in front of Si's groin, before he came to himself and stopped.

Groaning, Si caught Payton's wrist and pressed his palm against the hard length of Si's cock.

Payton curled his fingers, and Si's cock jerked under his hand. It was so odd touching someone else like this. He squeezed.

Making a strangled noise, Si tugged upward on Payton's wrist. "Sit up."

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Dragon's Kiss
by Ally Blue

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