



CAGED

SKYE WARREN

THE DYSTOPIA SERIES

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

CAGED

By Skye Warren

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A battle-hardened warrior stares straight ahead with ferocity and a hint of confusion. He has black dreadlocks, bronze skin, and clothing of crude leather. Around him, a primitive room of concrete and metal holds him prisoner.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please help me. I woke up in chains and I hurt like hell, but I don't have a clue what happened to me. In fact, now that the pain in my head has eased a little, I'm coming to the conclusion that I don't remember anything. Not where I am, how I got here, or even who I am. The only other person I've seen is the pretty twink crouched over there.

Insert your own favorite twink image here, I'm not picky, long as he's cute and vulnerable looking... and has sad, dark eyes...

He's shivering in the corner, so afraid I can almost smell the fear coming off of him. He's dressed in rags and I can see bruises and welts on his pale skin... (did I do that?) Every so often he casts a furtive look my way, those dark, dark eyes silently begging me for something... but what? He hasn't spoken to me yet, and I'm not sure why. Am I supposed to know him? His eyes say yes, but his face doesn't do anything to my memory.

Are we lovers? Slaves? Enemies? Strangers?

Is it me he's afraid of, or just our situation?

Help me figure this out before it drives me out of my mind...

Dearest Author, I adore amnesia stories, so feel free to twist this up in any way you see fit. I would love it to be either fantasy or sci fi, post-apocalyptic

or dystopian is fine, and I don't mind me some hot slave-fic, either... Go ahead and make it as dark as you like— I'll be sure and wear my big-girl panties.

Sincerely,

Jaye

Story Info

Genre: postapocalyptic/dystopian

Tags: military men, sex industry, prison, captivity, amnesia, slave

Content warnings: violence and dubious consent

Word count: 18,616

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By Skye Warren

CHAPTER ONE

Cor woke up in the pitch black, his heart racing and muscles tensed for a fight. He heaved back, away from an unseen opponent. His hands slipped on loose gravel. The wall met his head with a blow that clapped his teeth together. He struggled to hold onto consciousness, managing by a thread, slumped against the cool, damp stone.

He regulated his breathing, taking shallow, even sips of air. He heard nothing. No one. Slowly his eyes adjusted, sketching a rectangular room with bars making up two of the sides and tall concrete walls closing in on him.

A cell. He was a prisoner. How had that happened?

Confusion hammered his brain, making him wince. Even reaching for the memory pierced his skull with sharp pain. *Think, damn it.* He remembered his childhood in the slums of Talon province. He remembered joining the gang with no political affiliation but a penchant for stealing. And he remembered striking out on his own.

And then nothing.

Confused, he put his hand to his head and found a large egg-shaped bruise on his forehead. That explained it. Head wounds sometimes resulted in memory loss. Temporary, he thought. A passing weakness, an injury that would heal. It must be so, because he sure as hell couldn't deal with missing a whole chunk of his life.

He did a cursory pat down and found several other bruises and cuts all over his body, as if he'd been in a fight. Correction: as if he'd gotten the shit beat out of him. Which never happened to him. Partly that was because he was big, mean, and handy as hell with a dagger in an alley. But mostly it was because he stayed out of everyone's business. So who the fuck had attacked him and thrown him in a goddamned jail?

Scuffing sounds drew his attention outside the cell. He forced himself to stand, albeit leaning back against the wall. He squinted into the gloom. Two soldiers emerged from the base of a stairwell, dragging a smaller man between them. The stiff uniforms identified them as Ke'lan. Cor could even discern their rank from the stripes on the collar, though he wasn't sure where he would have learned such things.

They stopped outside the door, but instead of opening it, one of the soldiers pressed their prisoner against the bars. The action pushed him into the dim light, giving Cor a good look. A slender body, sandy-colored hair, and lips wide and full. The white shift he wore was dirty but thin enough to see his pink nipples and the dark triangle below his belly.

Pleasing, he admitted. Maybe in another time and place Cor might have spent a few hours in a backroom to find out just how pleasing he could be.

The soldier behind the boy grabbed his hair and pulled back, then snarled in his ear. "I bet you like that, don't you? So fucking hot for it, aren't you?"

A strangled sound escaped the prisoner. Cor assumed that was a *no*.

The soldier laughed. He reached around and fumbled at the space between the prisoner's legs, grasping and tugging at cloth and soft flesh. The prisoner's eyes glazed with pain, but he didn't object. He didn't even seem surprised.

Cor's stomach turned. He mostly didn't care about other men, and this one was a stranger to him, but the violation still bothered him. Cor would kill anyone who looked at him sideways. But he wouldn't rape. A man had morals.

The taller guard seemed to grow bored. "You've had your fun, now let's go. What are they serving for dinner, you think?"

The stocky guard seemed reluctant, but he finally relinquished the prisoner. He unlocked the gate. Cor tensed, wondering if he should make a move now. He was at a disadvantage—a major one—but it wasn't like he could wait around for an engraved invitation.

The second guard seemed smarter than the first, though. He pointed his weapon at Cor's chest.

"Don't move a muscle."

Cor's eyelids lowered in an impotent threat, but he remained against the wall as the other prisoner was thrown inside. The cell was relocked with a twist of the guard's fingers and a smirk. They stomped back up the stairs, debating the merits of stew over meatloaf. Cor's stomach rumbled gently, reminding him that he had no idea when he'd last eaten. Technically he had no idea when he'd last done *anything*. Which he found really fucking irritating.

The younger man scrambled away from him, huddling into a corner between bars and concrete. His expression, his every movement spoke of his fear. The slender body was shivering though it wasn't that cold. Terror? Shock? What exactly had the soldiers done to him before bringing him here? Cor pushed that thought away. He didn't want to know.

Cor's stomach pinched, but he chalked it up to hunger and some very old, half-dead bit of conscience. He felt sorry for this man—for his imprisonment, for the cruel treatment he'd received. Even for the lithe, pretty body that made him a target. But not sorry enough to leave him alone. Cor needed to get the hell out of here, and right now, the prisoner was the only tool he had.

Besides, the boy kept sending him terrified glances—glances laced with curiosity. How was Cor supposed to resist that? Wide eyes, dark and fathomless. Cor wished they were also vacant. The boy wouldn't mind his abuse so much, and then maybe Cor wouldn't either. Unfortunately, wary intelligence shone there. A flickering candle the K'elan would delight in blowing out.

“What's your name, boy?”

No answer.

Ten heartbeats passed. Cor considered what pain he could inflict with only his hands, if it came to extracting information the old-fashioned way. A lot of pain. The young man seemed fragile, folded up in the corner. Cor could break him in two.

“Lack. My name is Lack.”

Weird. Cor had never heard anyone named that before. But then again, he might not remember if he had. “How long have you been here?”

Another pause, shorter this time. “Sixty rotations, I think. I’ve lost track.”

Sixty rotations was a long time to get pawed at by randy guards. Hell, even once was too much. If they tried that with Cor, they’d find their balls dislodged from their body and he didn’t care if they killed him for it. But Lack didn’t have that kind of strength. Just silky hair that looked like it would be soft to touch. He’d hold onto it, Cor decided. Run his fingers through it and then clench, while the man licked and sucked where he needed him to.

In a fantasy, of course. A few hours in a backroom somewhere. Not on a cold night in prison, especially when, for all Cor knew, the man was his enemy. Being thrown into the same cell didn’t make them friends.

“How long have I been here?” Cor asked.

Lack’s eyes flashed with surprise. “You don’t know?”

He shrugged. Information was leverage and he’d just given some away by revealing his amnesia. But he figured it would be pretty fucking obvious that he was clueless, especially when he didn’t even know where they were supposed to take a shit around here. The boy would tell the truth or Cor would hurt him until he did. He hoped the boy told the truth.

“Answer the question.”

“You... you just got here. I mean, you weren’t here when they took me out earlier.”

He supposed that made sense, with his injuries feeling so fresh. That still didn’t give him much to go on. Why had he been taken? What were they planning to do with him? He didn’t have to wonder that about Lack. It was obvious what they planned to do with him.

He approached the boy, who scooted up against the corner. Cor grabbed hold of his neck. A small squeak was the only response. So small beneath his hand, so soft within his grip. He could squeeze the life out of him in a second, with no one around to stop him. But he wouldn’t.

Anyway, a dead body would stink up the cell.

“Do you know why I’m here?” He tightened his fingers just a fraction. “And don’t lie to me. Do you know what they want with me?”

Lack swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, up and down—a strange and gentle caress on the callused skin of Cor’s palm. Soothing him when Cor was well past comfort.

Met with silence, Cor leaned forward, using his bulk and height to intimidate as he towered over the other man. Some sweet, musky scent teased his nostrils, and he turned his face into Lack’s neck, breathing in a lungful, enjoying the temporary reprieve from the moldy smell of their prison. He felt so small in Cor’s embrace—no, his stronghold.

“Answer me.”

“I don’t,” Lack said. His voice was thin, though it could have been from fear. Probably was, judging by the trembling in his limbs.

“You don’t what?”

“I don’t know why you’re here.”

He almost sighed. The odds of Lack knowing anything had been slim, but he’d had to ask. He eyed Lack’s face, looking for clues that he was lying. There was too much fear to see them if they were there. He supposed he could be a little more aggressive, see if any other information came out under duress. But it was unlikely such a lowly prisoner would be privy to anything useful. Besides, the boy would probably piss himself and the place smelled bad enough.

Lack whimpered. “Please.”

Cor released him, a foreign sensation of self-disgust bundled in his gut. He hadn’t enjoyed manhandling the smaller man—except when he’d enjoyed it too much. His body had stirred with the nearness. He put his hands on Lack’s shoulders and gently slid him down the wall. Then he returned to his own corner and sat down.

The guards would have to come back eventually. When they did, Cor would find a way to kill them. Two armed men against one hungry, injured

one was hardly a fair match, but he'd been found on a refuse transport as an infant. He was used to beating the odds.

Lack was a problem. His chances of getting free were drastically reduced if he had to take care of a weakling on the way. Even allowing Lack out into the compound to attempt his own escape would probably just draw attention to Cor's. And locking him back up in the cell, knowing what they would do to him, just seemed cruel. He could always put him down on his way out. A mercy killing? He tossed a glance at Lack in time to see the man's eyes dart away. Too messy.

Well, he'd have to deal with the guards first, so he focused his thoughts there. On fighting, on inflicting pain and damage and death. Like well-worn leather gloves, these thoughts. Familiar and perfectly formed for him.

Lack woke up to daylight. At least, the closest approximation to day there was in this cell, but he appreciated it anyway. The darkness was so absolute in the cell at night—terrifying. Now light struggled through the small, high window. The window was technically outside the cell, but it was still lined with bars. As if he needed any reminders about his situation.

He sat up and then froze. The other man was still there, and his ink-black eyes were trained directly on Lack. In the brighter light, Lack could see the thick braids of hair that fell to his shoulders. His skin was dark—a pink-tinged brown that Lack had once seen on the inside of a shell. Some areas were darker, bruised, while other flashed red with recent cuts.

No surprise there. The Ke'lan weren't known for being gentle, especially with an enemy soldier. Lack was neither enemy nor soldier, and they were fairly brutal with him.

Cor, that was his name. And he'd attacked the Ke'lan, which, in Lack's opinion, meant he wasn't very smart. No one came up against the Ke'lan and lived to tell about it. But the Ke'lan... They could attack whatever they wanted. Whoever they wanted, like Lack's master. And take Lack home as the bounty.

It really shouldn't matter. One master was as good as another. Or as bad, depending on the way he looked at it. And Lack preferred to be optimistic, but that was easier said than done when he was locked in a cage with a man like this. A wild animal.

“When do they come back?” Cor asked.

Lack shrugged. “Not sure when. Sometime today, they'll come.”

“They must feed you.”

“Not much.” And he'd learned not to look forward to that, no matter how starving he became.

A low sound rumbled through the air, and Lack was amused to realize it was Cor's stomach. The man was probably starving. It must take a lot of food to sustain the thick muscles of his arms, his thighs. The man was thick everywhere. Something fluttered low in Lack's belly. Lust. He was well trained enough to recognize it, even if it surprised him. So maybe their impending intercourse wouldn't hurt so much. He'd learned also that arousal could temper pain.

Cor stood and ran his large hands along the iron bars. “You ever try to escape?”

“You're kidding, right?”

Cor looked over, seeming to decide whether or not to be offended. His gaze slid down Lack's body, sending a lick of heat into his groin. Unimpressed, Cor snorted and turned away. Lack knew how he looked. Weak. Useless. Because that was exactly what he was. He'd been bred and trained for one purpose. At one time he'd been good at it.

His old master hadn't exactly been gentle, but he'd been fair. And more importantly, he'd had a large enough harem not to require his orifices every night. But now Lack belonged to the Ke'lan, who didn't keep sex slaves. There were admirals and generals and foot soldiers, all without a harem to serve them. Only Lack, which meant they had a lot of time and energy to administer punishment if he failed.

Gathering his courage, he approached Cor. It was a testament to how nonthreatening Lack seemed, because Cor didn't even move to defend himself.

“What are you doing?”

Lack smiled. “Since we're sharing this cell, I can think of a better way to pass the time.”

Cor raised an eyebrow. “And what might that be?”

Cor was all muscle and dark, scarred skin. His eyes burned with a feral, cunning light. He was the beast, and Lack was the sacrifice. *Don't be dramatic*, he chastised himself. But it was true. He was held in thrall by his captors and by the violent whims of this stranger.

Cor slid down the wall, bending one leg and resting his elbow. His head was cocked at an inquisitive angle. There was no fear in his eyes, no tremble of his limbs the way Lack had shook the previous night when Cor had approached him. This man had no reason to be afraid.

Lack's heart beat an unsteady drum. He tugged the knot of his shift off his shoulder, letting the fabric drop to the floor. A sharp intake of breath rent the quiet. He wished there were music or other sex slaves around. The atmosphere then had been accepting, even playful at times. Sensual. The cell was cold.

Cor's eyes were like marble. “Why are you doing this?”

“You don't wish me to stop.”

He knew Cor enjoyed his body. That much had been evident from the lingering glances and the hard line of his cock against Lack's thigh in their singular confrontation.

He ran his hands up his sides, ignoring the ridges of his ribs. He reached for his nipples, tugging lightly with dirtied fingers, rolling them into hard buds. Each twist sent a twinge of practiced arousal to his cock.

Practiced movements, practiced words. “How may I serve you?”

“I do not ask for your service.”

But Cor did want it. The slightest shift of his hips where he sat. A flash of silver in his eyes. Oh yes. Lack would bet there was a heavy cock beneath the leather of his pants.

He fisted himself, stroking roughly. He didn't expect to come, unless Cor allowed it. And he didn't expect Cor to allow it. The tight grip was almost painful. It was a show, an enticement. A blatant act of submission so that the other man would take what he wanted, use whatever force he desired.

“We are alone here. I would pleasure you.”

“That does not look like pleasure, young one.”

His hand faltered. He had expected to work hard, to endure pain. But not a complete refusal. Had the man not understood his little show? Did he think their caresses would be mutual, that Lack would expect to be serviced in return?

He fell to his knees.

“I'll suck you,” he said bluntly. “Run my tongue wherever you wish it, swallow down your seed.”

Cor's hips jerked slightly. Oh yes, he wanted that. But he made no move to open his pants. Lack reached forward. Bruising fingers grasped his wrists, and he was turned around, his back pressed up against the wall. All the air rushed from his body.

“I said no,” Cor growled. “Has their mistreatment confused you? It means I do not want this.”

Anger sparked within him. “You want me. I know you do.”

“As a lover.” Thick fingers ran artlessly down his side. “You would be sweet, but not as a sacrifice. When you come to me, I want you willing. I want you so desperate you're fucking the air in anticipation of my touch.”

His eyes fell shut. “Tell me how to be, and it will be so.”

“Why are you so desperate for me to fuck you? Do you think I would hurt you if you don't?”

Not you, them. “No.”

Cor reached down to Lack's half erect cock. His large fingers wrapped the tender flesh.

"If you want this so badly," Cor whispered. "You can have it."

"No," he gasped. He needed Cor's pleasure, Cor's trust.

But the hand on his cock had already sped up. Lack's body responded like a thunderstorm, tossing reason like a ship in a storm. His hips pushed greedily into the firm circle of Cor's fist, meeting each down stroke. A strange animal sound suffused the air—his voice, he realized. A moan of despair.

How long had it been since someone had touched him for pleasure and not pain? Since he'd been at the harem, putting on a show for his master. But this was different too, because instead of the soft, slender hands of a fellow slave, this was Cor. Cor, with a thick, meaty fist. There was no well-practiced flick of the wrist, no measured pace carefully attuned to his breathing. He was firm and harsh, working an irregular rhythm that had Lack on the edge. Being used, being fondled.

He let out a gasp. A large hand covered his mouth, tilting his head back and muffling his cries. Tears leaked from his eyes and spilled onto the fingers that held him, but his captor never wavered. Never slowed. Just pumped the cock he held, faster and harder, so roughly it brought pain, so cruelly it brought pleasure.

Lack's whole body jerked once, twice, and then a spray of white foamy cum spilled onto the blackened ground beneath them.

Slowly, awareness returned to him. He realized he was being held in a tight embrace—a chokehold without the pain. They were both breathing hard, and he could feel Cor's erection at his hip. He started to turn, but the grip on his shoulders and waist tightened. He was turned, and for a moment he was sure that Cor would take him to the ground and fuck him.

Instead, Lack was unceremoniously shoved to the ground. Alone.

Cor picked up the shift from the dirty floor and tossed it on him. Lack winced as the wet cloth slapped his chest.

"That will teach you to flaunt yourself," Cor said derisively.

Lack yanked the shift back on and scrambled back to his corner. He needed to think, to plan. It hadn't gone as he'd expected—not at all. Though what *had* he expected? For the man to fuck him and suddenly spill all his secrets? There were worse plans.

And it wasn't as if he had anything else in his arsenal, all alone in this cell. Only sex. His only currency and this man wasn't interested. No, Cor was interested. He just wanted... What had he said? A lover. Not a sacrifice. Lack had no idea what that meant. He'd spent his whole life training in the art of sex, but now he was finding there was so much he didn't know.

He kept his eyes on the ground for the next few hours, trying to think of how next to approach his enemy. Despite his anxiety over the task at hand, he was bored. He missed the chatter and music of the harem. Not that he expected Cor to fill such a role. He looked indisposed to anything fun.

Except for the hand job he'd just given Lack. That had been... well, fun. Also terrifying and mildly painful, but the most sensual experience he'd had in a long time. Maybe ever.

Watery beams of light appeared in the afternoon, highlighting the dust that floated in the air. Cor stood and rattled the bars, restless. When no one appeared, he sat back down. Finally dusk settled, bringing a cooling breath of air through the cell.

A shuffle of footsteps came from the stairs. Food. Water. Lack was starving for both of them. Dizzy with it. But his stomach clenched. If there'd been anything in his stomach, he would have emptied it. He hated the guards the worst. Even more so than the corpulent generals. The lowly soldiers were men of violence without extensive training to check their instincts. Men like Cor.

He felt Cor tense, though the large man didn't move from his position. Lack had no doubt he was keenly observant, that he would take any advantage that was opened to him. But the Ke'lan were too careful for that.

They were all smiles today, setting down the canteen and food rations by the wall. Where they would stay until Lack had performed. The taller one

grinned and waved him over. Lack blinked, stalling for futile seconds. The grin slipped away.

The other one was stockier. Shorter and thicker everywhere, even his cock. He sneered, banging on the cell door with his baton.

“Come, boy.”

Lack pushed himself up and crossed the cell, feeling the weight of Cor’s gaze. He wished Cor would not see this. A strange thought, since Lack’s goal here was to debase himself. If anything, seeing the guards’ use of him might finally spur Cor to use him as well. But his humiliation ratcheted higher.

“On your knees.”

Lack sank down, eyes lowered.

“Now beg.”

Practiced actions, practiced words. “Please, sir, may I service you?”

The rustling sound of belts undone and clothing pushed aside. In some ways their role was as practiced as his own.

“Go on.”

“I’m so hungry. So... so thirsty for your cock. Please may I have a drink?”

Soft chuckles met his question.

There was an erect cock directly in front of his face. He could see it through the bars. Clean enough, the tall soldier was. His cock was pink, its veins less visible than his comrade’s. The tip glistened golden with precum. The cock would be in his mouth soon, so why was Lack thinking instead about Cor? *Lovers. Not a sacrifice.*

“Come on, boy,” he beckoned. “Have a drink.”

CHAPTER TWO

Cor's stomach clenched, desperate for the rations the soldiers had brought with them. But the soldiers were being bastards again, using Lack. It was damned annoying. Not his business, of course, unless they tried to make *him* suck their cocks. Then they'd find out exactly how sharp Cor's teeth were.

Not Lack, though. He sucked on the taller soldier's cock, making slurping sounds that made Cor's own cock take notice. How good would that warm, agile mouth feel on his member? Heaven, he imagined. The soldier's expression was ecstasy. He grunted softly, thrusting into the head he held steady through the bars. A final, louder grunt and the man found his release.

Cor's empty stomach turned over. He felt aroused and... offended? It bothered him to see Lack used poorly even more than yesterday. He would have to be careful not to grow a conscience. More and more of his life was coming back to him.

Disjointed pieces, not enough for a full picture, but it was clear at least that he wasn't an upstanding citizen. He killed. He stole. And as of this morning, he held an unwilling body still and caressed it to climax. So much for morals.

The second soldier was meaner. He was taunting Lack, making him beg and other demeaning things. That was another thing that bothered Cor, how hollow Lack sounded when he said *How may I serve you?*

This was ridiculous. Cor needed to be concerned with a lot of things. Like the fact that he was a prisoner. That he didn't have his full memory back. That he was hungry and thirsty.

He did not need to concern himself with a weak young man. The soldier began slapping Lack's face with his erect cock. *Ignore it*, Cor told himself. He gritted his teeth. The soldier drew lines of precum of the younger man's cheek, laughing evilly.

Cor's whole body tensed involuntarily. He tried to rationalize it. This was a form of warfare. It was fighting. The same thing Cor did only this was with sex.

Then the soldier bent down. He spoke lowly but Cor could hear him clearly. “You’re nothing but a warm hole to us. And when we’re done with you, you won’t even be that. But I’ll still use you once more, for old time’s sake. We’ll leave your body for the birds with my cum cooling on you.”

Distantly, Cor saw the reactions. Lack flinched. The other soldier looked mildly scandalized. But Cor was already halfway across the cell, all the way to the door. He pushed Lack aside and grabbed the thick, grubby cock. The soldier squealed in pain, and Cor squeezed tighter.

“Let him go.” The taller soldier had a weapon pointed at Cor’s chest through the bars.

Cor narrowed his eyes at the man whose cock he held. “Your friend here is disgusting.”

“That may be so, but you’ll release him or you’ll die in that cell.”

A long moment passed. Cor imagined ripping the cock off this body. He would be killed to but in a way that would be a relief. Like he’d thought to do for Lack—a mercy killing. He wondered if Lack would also pay for this incident.

With a sigh, he released the soldier. The man stumbled back, grasping at his cock with both hands and whimpering steadily. He turned to the taller soldier.

“Give me the food,” Cor ground out.

The weapon lowered slightly. He seemed to be unsure... but hell, there were two inch iron bars between them. Even Cor wasn’t that strong. Finally he set down his weapon and handed a canteen and canvas bag out. Cor snatched them and looked inside. A few lumps of stale bread. Some cheese. He shook the canteen. A goodly amount of water, at least.

The taller soldier wasn’t particularly gentle as he pushed his friend up the stairs. When they were gone, their sounds faded from the stairwell, he took a hearty swig of the water. Then he handed the canteen to a wide-eyed Lack.

“Drink,” he said gruffly.

He took the larger piece of bread for himself, then passed the other piece of bread and part of the cheese to Lack. Lack reached out gingerly, as if he expected Cor to change his mind, as if maybe Cor would eat it all and let the boy starve. Now there was an idea. Still he'd already decided not to kill the boy, today anyway. That meant he'd have to stay fed.

The meager rations did illuminate things. He needed to get the hell out of here. But how could he do that? The soldiers came two at a time, heavily armed. And they were very cautious around him, the last incident notwithstanding. They would be even more cautious now.

He needed a distraction, an opening. He needed a weapon. He glanced sideways at Lack. And all he had was a cowed young man. His only possible use in a fight was as a human shield, his lithe body too small to even be used as a human shield. Pathetic... and intriguing.

How had he survived in this harsh environment? Cor might be an enemy of the Ke'lan but he was built the same. Tough. Cruel. But Lack was not cruel, though thinking back on how he'd accepted abuse from the soldiers, perhaps he was tougher than Cor had given him credit for. And besides, the sexual appeal he wielded was a type of weapon. The same thing that made him a target gave him power over the men around him.

Lack shivered. He supposed this was the closest he could come to contentment in his current situation. His stomach was not full but neither was it empty. No guards harassed him.

Not since his cellmate had practically twisted the balls off one of them.

He supposed there would be retribution for that, but no worry quickened his pulse. His eyes didn't dart into the shadows, his ears didn't strain for a whisper of their return. As stupid as it surely was, he felt safe around Cor.

Which gave a different meaning entirely to the job he'd been sent here for.

The Admiral had been very clear on his instructions. He was to ingratiate himself with the assassin and learn his target. Ingratiate himself with sex, he meant.

“Why don’t you just kill him?” Lack had asked. He normally wasn’t one to talk but he didn’t relish the idea of being placed in a cage with a trained killer. And it just made sense to him. If they had him prisoner, he could do no harm to them.

“Because they’ll just send someone else,” the Admiral answered, his jowls quivering against his neck. He lay on the gray sheets, his turgid body exposed. Pale skin sprinkled with silver hair. “If we know who they’re targeting, we can protect them.”

Lack’s head lay on the man’s thigh, while the Admiral stroked his hair. He was kindest after he’d come. His cock lay limp on his other leg. Lack’s mouth was thick with the old, salty flavor, but at least he wasn’t being beaten. His legs were curled up to his chest. The Admiral batted them apart, grabbing hold of Lack’s semi-erect cock.

“What is this? You want to play too?”

Humiliation heated Lack’s face. He’d always responded to the sexual stimuli around him. It didn’t matter whether he enjoyed it.

The Admiral stroked his cock in his beefy fingers. Steady at first, and then nothing. Lack pumped into his hand, whimpering softly. The hand lifted.

“Get yourself off, boy.”

Tears leaking from his eyes, he reached down and jerked himself quickly. In a matter of minutes, he was spurting over his hand and the sheets. The Admiral laughed, looking down at his own cock, now erect from having watched.

“Looks like you’re not finished here after all. You’ll suck me one more time before you go into the cell. And you’d better get the answers I’m looking for, boy, or I’ll send you into the barracks to service the guards. I doubt you’d make it out alive.”

The Admiral put his hand behind Lack’s head and directed his mouth to the sticky cock.

In the present, Lack sneaked a glance at his cellmate. In a way, he and the Admiral were opposites. While Lack had been willing to give him a show and

to service him, Cor had insisted on jerking Lack off. Cor had given pleasure, of a sort, and taken none in return.

As twilight fell over them, Lack began to shiver, discomfited by the utter black of night. Finally, he drifted off into an uncomfortable sleep. He woke with a start, as if he'd heard something. When he listened, only the soft sound of birds wafted in from the small barred window outside the cell. They never made sounds during the daytime, as if they knew better than to attract the attention of the Ke'lan. Smart animals.

A whimper came from the corner, startling Lack. He peered into the darkness, making out the large shape of Cor's body huddled against the wall. Cor whimpered again and jerked, but he was clearly in a dream. Lack shouldn't wake him. He should mind his own business.

But that was the problem. His business was getting to know Cor. The man put up a cold, dangerous front during his waking hours. Maybe he would be softer during sleep. Besides, Lack wouldn't mind the company. He hated the dark.

Lack crept over to him, wincing slightly at the moan Cor emitted. The hair on Lack's arms raised, some animal side of him recognizing suffering. The sound of danger, a sign that he should get away. But the true danger lay outside these bars so he scooted closer, placing his hand on Cor's arm.

With a roar, Cor lunged, shoving his forearm to Lack's throat. The crumbling wall ground against the back of his neck but the pain was nothing compared to the burn in his lungs as he struggled to breathe. His arms clawed uselessly at the immovable bar blocking his air. Cor's eyes were wild and distant. He was still lost to the dream world while Lack was running out of time in this one.

Desperate, Lack forced his remaining strength into a blow to the side of Cor's head. Cor blinked. His cat-like eyes cleared of their nightmarish haze... and then widened. He abruptly leaned back, and Lack fell to the ground, coughing and wheezing.

"What were you doing?" Cor demanded roughly.

Lack shuddered where he knelt on the floor. He'd caught his breath, but his body was still cramping. A large hand came to rest on his back. His body tensed, braced for another attack. But the hand only stroked gently from the top of his spine down the length of his back. His muscles calmed by degrees. After a few stuttering coughs, Lack fell back against the wall. His movement forced the hand that had caressed him away and for a moment he regretted the loss.

Lack's voice was still hoarse. "You were dreaming."

"I remember something. A task. A mission." Cor's expression turned dark. Not angry. Almost sad. "That's all. I can't remember the rest."

He couldn't remember his past or his dreams. How terrifying that must feel, like being adrift with only the waves to keep him company. Lack had no one to rely on, but at least his memories kept him warm. Memories of laughter and sexual play. Of friendship.

"It will come back to you," Lack said, though he didn't know if it was true or why Cor's memories had left in the first place.

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Thank you for waking me. I'm sorry I almost killed you."

"Of course." Lack paused uncertainly. He felt ashamed that he'd even considered leaving Cor in his nightmare. Hadn't Lack wanted friendship? Well, he would have to practice it, apparently. It had come naturally to Cor, when he'd protected him earlier. Even setting the Admiral aside, Lack owed this man.

"I can sit with you," Lack offered. He expected to be rebuffed like his sexual advance had been.

Cor considered him with a guarded expression. "I suppose if we are to share a cell, it wouldn't hurt to become more intimate."

Lack felt his eyebrows rise. "Yes, of course," he said faintly.

But Cor merely sat beside him, his legs bent in front of him. After a moment, Lack crossed his own legs, reminded of how he had explored the palace of his youth, where even the slave children were given the freedom to

roam. They were serenaded by the quiet sounds of their own breaths and the night birds outside. The urge to prod at Cor's memory rose up in him... and then faded away, like a shape seen in a cloud that could not be found on a second glance.

"How did you come here?" Cor asked.

"I was a pleasure slave in the lands known here as Carpathia. My master's home was raided... all the jewels and things of value were stolen. As was I."

"The Ke'lan do not keep pleasure slaves."

"I suppose they've made an exception. Just my luck," he said dryly, even though it probably was lucky. He closed his eyes in remembrance. Other servants were slaughtered in front of him. Men and women he'd grown up beside cut down because they served the wrong man. And Lack, kept alive because he knew his way around a cock.

"A hard life," Cor said evenly.

"It's different there," Lack said, his voice low. "Pleasure slaves are respected for what we can do. We are given room to play. It's deeply ingrained in the culture. Here I'm just..." He was just an animal. A warm, wet place for a man to release.

A tool for extracting information from amnesiac assassins.

Cor turned his head. "You miss it, then."

He swallowed. "The palace was destroyed, its owners killed." *Assassinated*, something whispered inside him. "I enjoyed my time there but it was the past. It no longer exists."

"Then we have that in common," Cor said. "My past no longer exists also. Although that is mostly in my mind."

"You have no memories at all? How you came here or what happened before?"

"What I do recall is drinking in pubs. Living alone. Nothing to miss or feel nostalgia for. I don't know how I came to be here."

But Lack knew how. *You tried to kill a high-ranking Ke'lan official and were caught. Once you tell me who it was, you'll mostly likely be executed and I'll go back to serving blowjobs at the military planning meetings.*

How depressing.

CHAPTER THREE

Cor tried to ignore the chill in the cell. It wasn't much colder than during the day—the climate was temperate these days. Always cool and dry no matter the season or the time of day. Besides, he knew this cold came from within.

The dream had rattled him more than he'd care to admit. A fight, a mission. There'd been a moment, as he snapped back to the waking, that he'd thought he was in battle. Lack had been a fallen soldier, crying out for him, dying in his arms. Kind of creepy, when he thought about it. So he tried not to think about it. Lack was a decent distraction with his warm presence and soft voice.

It was a pleasant way to pass the time. More pleasant than sitting alone at the bar would have been, more pleasant than a drunken fight spilling into the street. Would it be more pleasant than a detour behind the pub with another man? Considering Lack had been a sex slave, he assumed so. Strange, to find more pleasure in confinement than freedom.

“What did you do for work?” Lack asked. He added hastily, “If you recall.”

Mostly illegal smuggling. Cor had never felt ashamed of that, but for some reason he didn't want Lack to know. “Transport,” he said curtly.

This answer seemed to puzzle Lack. “Hmm. You weren't in the resistance?”

“No. Never. “He'd done work for them, but that was unavoidable. Anyone who wasn't Ke'lan was considered resistance these days, anyway. But he'd always kept himself clean. Move the goods, get paid, and get out.

That face again. It swam in front of his eyes, wavery and ghost-like. He still couldn't place it.

“Perhaps your family's lands were taken by the Ke'lan?” Lack asked.

“My family was gypsy. They had no land.” Now that was a lie. He couldn't remember his family at all, but he found the gypsy thing worked better for warding off questions. In the beginning, men would rag on him for his lack of

roots. That was before the Ke'lan had taken all the land, making everyone a drifter just like him.

Lack was insistent. "There must be some reason for you to be angry with the Ke'lan."

"I am angry with the Ke'lan. They're keeping me in this cell."

"And you're not curious about why they're doing that?"

Cor shrugged. "I find curiosity to be a waste of time. When there's an opportunity to escape, I'll take it."

"I see."

"Don't worry. I probably won't leave you here." Unless that figured into his escape plans.

Lack frowned, seemingly displeased with the idea of freedom. "Do you really think escape is possible? How would that even happen?"

"I find guessing to be—"

"A waste of time," Lack finished for him.

Cor felt a smile tug at his lips. If he were forced into captivity with a stranger, he could have done worse. Lack was sexy, all right. Fun to look at. He also knew how to carry on a conversation when he wasn't trembling with fear like a rabbit. Unfortunately, Cor had a tendency of scaring people, but he'd try to restrain himself for now. Just to make the time pass more comfortably with his cellmate.

"Are you tired?" Cor asked.

"Not really. Why?"

Because now he could do this. He put a hand behind Lack's neck and pulled him close. Cor's lips were already parted, his tongue ready for the kiss. Lack kept his lips together. At first Cor thought he was resisting and he was ready to pull back. But then he realized that Lack *was* kissing him back, even though his mouth closed.

Cor was experienced. Counting all his partners? Made his head hurt. But they usually skipped kissing altogether. And when they did kiss, it was with lips and tongue and even teeth all mashed together, their mouths fucking along with their lower halves. But hey, Lack was the expert, right? A bonafide pleasure slave, at his service. So maybe Cor could try something new. And yeah, there was something about this. Not outright stimulation but something... sweeter. He felt every contour of the smaller man's lips, felt the soft puff of his breath against his face. His taste was only a hint, making him hungry for more.

Eyes closed felt like some sort of dream—a soft, plush place where Cor had never been. But eyes open was a game changer. He met Lack's gaze. Wide eyes, long lashes. Soul deep. Cor felt his own eyes widen. He broke the kiss and wrenched his head away.

“Gods,” he said, panting lightly. “You got lessons on how to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Kiss.”

“Yes,” Lack said seriously.

Well, shit. His whole chest felt hollowed out and raw. As if he'd been carved up, spilling his guts onto the floor. A messy picture. He should probably avoid this pleasure slave. Wasn't nothing his hand couldn't do if the hard-on didn't subside in a few minutes.

But he found himself reaching for Lack again, pulling him close by his neck. Lack responded with the same gentle, nibbling kisses. Impatient, Cor pressed his tongue inside, exploring the unique flavor of this man and imagining his cock making a return trek here later. Lack was well schooled in this more carnal type of kissing as well. He accepted Cor's invasion with eager surrender, offering placating caresses with his tongue and soft moans that vibrated the wet slide between them.

He put his hand on Lack's thigh, as he shivered in his arms. Cor wondered whether he minded the touch. Was he as bad as the guards who mauled him? Did Cor even care? He had stopped being the kind of man who did the right

thing a long time ago. He'd never been that man, in all the time he could remember.

"Say no if you don't want this," he muttered.

Lack shivered again.

"I won't beat you if you ask me stop." One of the few promises he could make.

"No, I—" Lack paused, and disappointment filled Cor. One sip of heaven and it was over. But Lack said, "I'm thankful for what you did. I want to... to please you."

Cor paused. Gratitude wasn't the same thing as lust, as mutual attraction. Neither was it as bad as coercion. The middle ground, a gray area. Cor could live with that. He pressed their lips together before working his mouth downward, along the smooth jaw, down the soft skin of his neck. Meanwhile his hands worked their way from the bottom, sliding up along Lack's legs and beneath his shift. Lack's legs fell open, giving him permission to explore.

Cor pushed the fabric to his waist, feasting his eyes on the erect cock beneath. At least Lack's body would find pleasure in this. And what a body it was.

It fascinated Cor. The smooth velvet encasing his cock. He was used to cocks more like his own, thick and veined, dark-skinned. Slightly bent when erect. But this was a pale ivory, almost the same as the skin on his thighs. And though rather small—especially compared to Cor's own—it was perfectly circular, a uniform width down to where it flared at the head. Cor explored every crevice with his hands and his gaze. The skin did change color at the head, an enticing pink. Cor's mouth watered. *Not yet.*

His fingers looked impossibly thick against the cock he held, as if he were some sort of freak, a monster. He glanced up at Lack's face to see if he minded. Lack's eyes were unfocused, his mouth open. The picture of lust. Cor would have accepted boredom, so this was a bonus.

He gave himself permission to explore lower. The sack was a tan color, closer to the skin of Lack's fingers. It burned hot in his palm when he rolled

the balls gently. Then lower, to the tight pucker beneath. Lack tensed but he curled his hips up, giving Cor more access.

“You get fucked here?” Cor asked, even though it was a stupid question. Of course he got fucked there.

“Yeah, yeah,” Lack murmured, although Cor wasn’t even sure he’d heard the question. The words sounded more like a chant of pleasure, of wanting. That was good. Arousal would help ease the way.

“I don’t have any grease.”

“Just spit,” Lack gasped. “It’s okay.”

He still wasn’t sure about that, but the idea had merit. He allowed a portion of saliva to gather, then opened his mouth over Lack’s cock. Saliva dripped from his mouth onto the pretty cock. Cor used it to as lubrication, stroking more forcefully. Lack threw his head back and gasped.

“Please. Please.”

“What are you asking for, little slave?”

“So good. Please, master.”

“I’m not your master. And I don’t know what you want unless you tell me.”

He moaned. “Can I come? Please?”

“No way. We’re just getting started. I like the begging, though. You can keep that up.”

He dribbled more spit onto Lack’s cock, working it down over his balls and pushing some into the crack. He slipped his forefinger into the hole, measuring the resistance. Gods, that was tight. It would feel so damn good. No, he decided. He wouldn’t fuck this ass tonight. As randy as he felt, he was liable to tear something.

Cor stood and removed his pants, sighing in relief as his cock sprang free. Lack stared at the bobbing member and licked his lips, his pink tongue darting out over a plump lower lip. Cor groaned.

“Show me how thankful you are.”

Thankfully, Lack knew exactly what he meant. He knelt in front of Cor and took his cock in hand. His mouth followed, and Cor’s cock was engulfed in hot, wet heat. His tongue was the most skillful Cor had ever encountered, more amazing than Cor could have imagined. He was lost in a miasma of pleasure, fighting to hold it in.

“Hands behind your back.”

Lack obeyed readily. Cor liked the way it thrust his chest out, and he couldn’t resist tweaking the small nipples. Then pinching... twisting. He was a bit of a bastard. The men he slept with figured that out pretty quickly. They selected him for that reason. Something held him back with Lack. Maybe a concern about consent, a lingering worry that the man wasn’t a willing participant even though his talented tongue and firm cock spoke otherwise. Or maybe Cor didn’t really want to see the pain in his face, knowing he’d suffered already.

So he dug his nails into the pebbled brown skin until Lack winced, and then he let go. Again and again, a rhythmic tug until Lack’s hips jerked in tune. The pleasure slave was well versed in pain.

“Hold still,” Cor ground out.

Lack stopped moving, his cheeks still hollowed out around Cor’s cock. Cor grasped the back of Lack’s head and pushed in. Then pulled out. In again and then out. Deeper each time, faster every thrust, until he was fucking Lack’s mouth like the smoothest of asses. Yeah, this was what he’d needed. To fuck something, to just let go for a little while. He pushed deeper and Lack gagged.

A pleasure slave with a gag reflex? Cor raised an eyebrow.

Lack looked apologetic, at least it seemed that way. He tried to say something, too, mumbling something that might have been *I’m sorry* but came out only as *mm fnmm*.

“Try harder,” Cor said.

He pushed deep again, until Lack’s nose touched his belly. Again and again. The third time Lack gagged again. Disgruntled, Cor released him. Lack

lunged for him, trying to take him deep again. He wanted to take Cor's whole cock, but he couldn't. Well, that was okay. They'd just have to find a new position.

Cor lay down on his back, ignoring the cold concrete and pebbles beneath. He patted his chest.

“Get on.”

Lack looked at him suspiciously.

“Come on, little slave. Either you're on top or I am, and I weigh a hundred kilograms.”

Lack scrambled onto him, slinging a knee over his chest. Cor pushed him off.

“The other way.”

With a bemused expression, Lack sat on Cor's chest again, this time facing Cor's feet. Really, for someone with professional training he seemed a bit innocent at times. Cor grabbed his legs and dragged them up around his shoulders. A little maneuvering and he slipped Lack's cock into his mouth. His eyes fell shut at the first taste. Smooth, salty. Sweet.

Cor sucked the cock in his mouth and used his hands to hold Lack's legs down, to caress his balls. Lack gave soft, hoarse cries from above him. Between the angle and the comfortable size of Lack's cock, it slid all the way inside his mouth, bottoming out at the base.

He pulled away long enough to order, “Suck my cock.”

Lack scrambled to obey. He bent across Cor's chest and took the cock in his mouth. They were bound together that way, Cor's mouth on Lack's cock and Lack's mouth on his. A strong suck provoked a deep moan, and the vibrations of that sound delivered pleasure to the cock it surrounded. Neither of them worked in that old rhythm. They just pleased one another and took pleasure in their tasks. Time stretched. Minutes, hours. It all fused together in one sensation-soaked night.

Finally Cor held back no longer. The taste was too good, the feel of Lack's mouth too enticing. He gripped Lack's thighs and pulled him down tight. With a low grunt, muffled by Lack's cock, he came. The orgasm, too, was endless. A burst of lights and a falling of stars, a peak, and a tumble into the inky black depths. His cock still twitched in the aftermath when he slipped his finger in Lack's ass, finding the small nub that would give him release. Lack sobbed quietly around Cor's softening member as he spurted a watery ejaculate into Cor's mouth. Cor drank it down, licking up the excess from around the head.

They took their time cleaning off their cocks, licking and suckling with leisure as their breathing and cocks returned to normal. Finally Lack slumped over Cor's body, exhausted and sated. His breathing was even, his weight rather heavy for a small man. Cor stared up at the pale curves and puckered balls that rested on his chest and realized Lack had fallen asleep. On top of him. His ass facing Cor's face.

What an intimate and vulnerable position to be asleep in. And somehow, it pleased him. A little strange, sure, but it showed how much Lack trusted him. How thoroughly he'd been pleased and worn out. Besides, the warm weight was kind of like a blanket, and there were no other blankets in the cell. Cor closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Lack was in the courtyard. McKenna and Rory stopped to kiss in an alcove, their hands roaming, bodies writhing together in the shadows.

"Come on," Lack called. "McKenna, you just came in my mouth a few moments ago."

McKenna pulled away long enough to laugh. "I'm not trying to come, Lack. Just messing around."

Lack snorted. Oh, he'd come again. So would Rory. What else was there to do, anyway? He watched them for a moment, his cock growing heavy at the sight. But inside he felt hollow.

"I'm going back to my room," he called.

Rory flicked him a dirty hand sign, presumably for not joining in. Lack returned the sign, but they were too engrossed to notice. He headed down the dirt path, thinking of a warmed bath and a nap before the night's festivities.

Sunlight streamed through the leaves, dappling the flowers that bordered the walkway. Birds were singing. That was strange. He didn't remember that particular call from the birds around here.

Time slowed as he heard a scream. He ran back the way he'd come. The alcove where McKenna and Rory had been was now empty. But he found them soon enough, lying on the path to the palace, bloody and gasping.

Rory's eyes were glazed with pain and shock. Lack knelt beside him, shaking.

"Run," Rory gasped. "Run!"

Lack stumbled back, his hands sticky with blood. He ran. Away from the palace, toward the annex where the pleasure slaves lived. There was nowhere else to go. If there had been more warning, he could have taken the boats. The caves were hidden, impenetrable, and well-stocked. They were heaven, if only they'd had the time.

His small room contained only a sleeping mat and the chest with his clothing. He squeezed his body between the silks and, holding his breath, lowered the lid.

Darkness. Complete darkness that sucked all the air from his lungs. He was going to suffocate. He put his face against a beaded veil and panted, wishing he could pass out. His heart pounded in his ears for what felt like an eternity.

He tensed as he heard the sound of booted feet on the floor. The lid was lifted. Light spilled over him. A face blackened with dried mud leered down at him.

"Look at this, boys. A real treasure."

Rough hands pulled him out. They pushed him to the ground. They invaded him, they violated him, and for the first time, Lack learned that sex could be a form of torture. But even under the weight of degradation, he felt relief to be in the light again.

He woke up, gasping. His eyes slowly cleared of the images of his old home and the pain of his last days there. He was in Ke'lan territory now. A Ke'lan slave now. And he was in a cell, with Cor. Morning again.

Cor slept on, unaware of Lack's disturbing dream. A sleepy snuffling sound came from him, incongruous on such a large and fierce man. Everything had changed yesterday. When Cor had defended him, he'd bound them together. Lack owed him loyalty, though he wasn't sure how he could ever repay it. And their sex had only strengthened the strange connection.

The sound of booted feet came from the stairs. Cor scrambled to sit up, wiping the sleep from his eyes. Their guards had returned. Lack tensed. Would they deliver retribution for what Cor had done to them? The guard who'd been attacked glared at Cor, clearly well recovered.

"Come on." The other guard held open the door and gestured to Lack.

Lack spared a quick glance to Cor before scrambling to obey.

"Where are you taking him?" Cor asked. He stood but remained in the corner, rightfully wary of the weapon pointed at chest.

The guards ignored him and dragged Lack away.

Cor shouted after them. "If you touch him again, you'll answer to me."

An empty threat, but it lightened Lack's heart. He had a friend. A protector. And from such an unlikely source. Whether they were truly concerned about Cor's threat or whether it was just too early in the morning, they dragged Lack through the hallways without incident. Their grip was too tight, their pace a bit fast considering Lack had subsisted on crusts of bread for the past few weeks. But they didn't touch him anywhere but his arms.

The Admiral stood when Lack was tossed into the room. He approached, wearing an expectant expression. "So, have you found out who he was after?"

Lack's stomach hollowed out. So much for making a new friend and protector. Now he was the disloyal one. "No, sir."

"Do you at least know who he was working for?"

"No, sir."

“Well, what did you find out?”

“He hasn’t told me much, sir. Just that he’s lost his memory.”

The Admiral looked annoyed. “You’ve had days, boy. Or didn’t I explain how important this was to your health?”

Fear panged alongside the guilt. “I’m sorry, sir. He told me he’s lost his memory.”

“A lie. He told us the same thing. That’s why I sent you in there.”

“I tried to get him to... to open up. To trust me.”

A bushy eyebrow rose. “Did he fuck you?”

“Uh, not exactly. I mean, we... I used my mouth.”

He smirked. “I bet you did.”

Anger flared in him. Wasn’t that what he’d been told to do? Trained to do? So why did he feel ashamed? Maybe because for once he’d enjoyed it. Their encounter had felt unlike anything in his wide expanse of experience. Not lighthearted play... not dutiful application... not suffering forbearance. This had been something else. Something mutual.

“I don’t know how to make him tell me anything.”

“I suggest you figure it out quickly, son. I’ve already had a request from a soldier who wants to purchase you instead of sharing you with the group. You have one more night.”

Fear knotted his stomach. He could guess who had made such a request. Yes, retribution would come. It would be painful... and lethal. The guard leered at Lack as he was escorted back to the cell. His animosity was as strong as ever, yet he made no attempt to touch him. To hurt him. Was he really so wary of Cor, even though the man was locked up? Then again, all the guard really needed was patience. Once Lack failed, he could buy the right to punish him. To kill him.

So Lack shouldn’t fail. Yet he couldn’t succeed either. How could he convince Cor to tell him his deepest, darkest secrets—ones that would get him

killed? Especially considering Cor might not even remember them. It was an impossible task.

And even if Cor confided in him, how could Lack rat on him, knowing it would lead to Cor's immediate execution? Cor was coarse and crude. He was the only man who'd ever treated Lack like a human being.

Cor was pacing the cell when the guards shoved Lack down the last few steps. He stumbled and fell before they dragged him the rest of the way. Cor had retreated to the corner again, by now aware it would be demanded under threat of a weapon before the gate would be opened. However, the rumbling growl that resonated throughout the chamber made it clear how he felt about that.

As soon as the guards retreated again, he picked Lack up like he was a doll. A quick inspection proved he hadn't broken any limbs. A smile threatened to break Lack free from his worries. It felt good to be worried over, even if the hands doing so were rough and harsh. Especially when the hands were rough and harsh. Cor's hands.

"Did they hurt you?"

"No."

"Did they touch you?"

"No. Not like that."

Cor growled again. "I'm sick and tired of these fucking games they're playing. The fucking Ke'lan think they own everything."

As far as Lack could tell, the Ke'lan did own everything, but he kept that to himself. "Maybe... if you tell them what they want to know."

Cor grunted. "I can't even remember how I got here. What information could I have?"

He still felt torn about giving information to the Ke'lan, about betraying Cor, but he had to at least try and live. Survival was all he knew. Besides, he was curious. They couldn't remain in this stalemate forever. If Cor could remember something, maybe it could help them both find a way out of this.

“Try to think. What’s the last thing you remember?”

Cor seemed thoughtful. “A mission. It sounds stupid.”

A mission could be the assassination he was supposed to do. “Maybe you already tried?” he suggested.

Tried and failed. And was captured instead.

Cor frowned. “I’m not sure. It feels more like a compulsion. Something important I need to do.”

He was definitely touched in the head if he thought he’d get a chance to kill a Ke’lan official while being held prisoner in their cell. “Can you remember anything else, like someone you knew before the mission?” *Like a rebel commander who gave you a suicide mission?*

“No.” A cloud passed over Cor’s face.

Unexpected tension spiked through Lack. Something like fear. What if he remembered? What would happen to them then?

“Thinking about the past may tax you,” Lack said gently. “Try not to think about it anymore today.”

“Tell me something about you.”

He was nothing. A coward. A weakling. “I’m... I’m afraid of the dark.”

“I’m here with you. Close your eyes. Just feel me.”

Lack obeyed, letting his eyes fall shut.

Cor covered him with his body, touching him everywhere so that Lack’s mind was consumed with the sensation of rough fingers and a heavy, warm body. Wrapped him up in a smaller, tighter cage where Lack didn’t need to break free, because he was safe.

A gilded cage was nice and all, but all he’d ever wanted was a tight one. Cor obliged him with a natural, easy possession. He arranged Lack’s limbs spread eagle on the concrete. He explored him, every nook and shadow, with crude hands and a hungry gaze.

Cor trailed his sandpaper fingertips over Lack's calves, stroking upward along his thighs. He tensed, eager for contact, but Cor was cruel and cold as he looked, bypassing Lack's cock in favor of his abs, his chest. Cor's body followed his touch, and he straddled Lack's chest. The head of his cock nudged Lack's lips. He dutifully opened, accepting the invitation of service.

As he sucked, he looked up into Cor's eyes. Black brown eyes. A hard expression. No outward sign of the pleasure, no signal of impending rapture. Except for the sweat that beaded his tanned brow. Lack pointed his tongue at the slit of Cor's cock, desperate and eager to extract a little more.

Silver flashed in his eyes, light trapped in the dark. Cor pulled back, leaving Lack's mouth open and empty. He rolled onto his back, tugging Lack onto him.

“Ride me.”

Lack positioned himself but his body was tense, no give at all. He spit on his hand, working himself to ready. Luckily, a lifetime of spontaneous sex had prepared him for this. What a strange thought. All that training just so he could fuck a prisoner on the floor of a Ke'lan jail cell.

A sharp slap on the inside of his thigh. He gasped at the sting.

“I said ride me. If you wait any longer, I won't let you come.”

Lack's eyes widened. He positioned himself and sank down on the thick cock, wincing at the pain. Not enough to really hurt himself, just enough to burn. He pulled up again and pushed back down. He didn't know if Cor was serious about not letting him come. They had played denial games, but everyone always got their pleasure in the end. He wasn't sure Cor was so egalitarian about orgasms.

Cor's eyes were slitted as he watched his cock disappear into Lack's body. Lack found a smooth and fast rhythm. His mouth fell open at the exquisite friction. Cor adjusted Lack's hips, hitting a certain point deep inside him. Acute pleasure vibrated through him to the tip of his cock.

As if he knew that, Cor grabbed Lack's cock, prolonging the ache.

Lack shuddered. “I'm going to...”

“Yes. Do it.”

A few more thrusts and he was coming, spilling over Cor’s hand and abs. His body began to slow, growing uncoordinated. Cor gripped his thigh, holding him down as he fucked up into him. With his other hand, he scooped up the come on his abs and forced three fingers into Lack’s mouth. Moaning, Lack sucked off his own ejaculate as Cor spurted deep inside his body.

When Cor’s face smoothed out in the aftermath, Lack fell to the side. He scooted up against Cor, a little uncertain. Cor opened his arm and gathered him close. Lack sighed and closed his eyes in pleasure.

Booted steps shattered the fragile peace. Cor stood, and Lack scrambled up beside him. They held food and water again. Tension weighted down the air... after what happened last time. Would they make Lack fuck for his food? Would Cor let them?

One of them threw the canteen of water inside. It rolled to Cor’s feet. He didn’t move. The meaner guard held up the bag of food and swung it, taunting.

“Do you want this?”

The other guard sighed. “Not again.”

“Shut up, Joseph. What can they do from inside there?”

“You were limping for two days.”

The mean one sneered. “So why the hell should I give them this?”

“Orders,” Joseph reminded him.

“Fine.” He threw the sack inside, hitting Cor square in the chest. Cor still didn’t move as it fell to the floor beside the canteen. The guard snickered. “Have fun, Corinth.”

They turned and headed up the stairs. As soon as they were out of sight, Cor stumbled back. Had they actually managed to hurt him?

“Oh fuck,” Cor groaned.

“What’s wrong?” Lack asked.

Cor put a hand to his head. “I remember. Gods, it hurts. But I remember.”

“What is it?”

He looked up. The expression on his face was shock... and devastation. It must be bad, whatever it was. Really bad.

“Tell me,” Lack murmured.

“I can’t.”

He almost vibrated with tension. A large man, a strong man. He could inflict so much pain. A flick of his hand and Lack would go flying across the cell. But he wouldn’t. Lack trusted him now. He gently pulled Cor’s hands into his own. Such a contrast, dark against pale, scarred against smooth.

“You might feel better if you tell me. Unburden yourself.”

And whatever he said, Lack wouldn’t share it with the Admiral. He already knew that. Had decided that at some earlier point without conscious thought. He couldn’t betray Cor.

Cor looked up. His eyes were haunted. Sadness and something else. Something strange. Understanding.

“It’s okay,” Cor said, as if he were comforting Lack. “I’ll make it okay.”

Confusion kept him silent. He searched Cor’s expression for a clue. Cor returned the gaze, looking him over as if he were memorizing Lack’s face. He brushed his knuckles over Lack’s cheek.

Suddenly Cor stood. He banged on the bars with his fists, shouting for the guards. “Come back, you bastards. You fuckers. Get back here.”

Lack’s heartbeat raced. What was happening?

Then it hit him. Cor was going to confess. Maybe not with remorse, but he would expose his identity with whatever rebel faction he was with. Maybe he’d even expose his target. Would they torture that information out him? Either way, Cor would not survive the encounter. Lack had failed to retrieve the information and now Cor would die.

He grabbed Cor’s arm. “Wait. Don’t do this.”

Cor gave him a strange look. Then he brushed him off and yelled again. No matter how Lack begged and pleaded, Cor called until his voice was hoarse. The guards came down and took him away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cor stood at attention in the Admiral's office. He was still wearing the civilian pants along with a few days' worth of dirt and grime. Not like usual. Not his uniform neatly pressed. Not his boots. And he preferred to be clean shaven.

He disgusted himself, but it wasn't only his physical state. It was what he'd done. Exploited a prisoner. Fucked him under false pretenses—which was rape, almost. All under orders by the man in front of him.

"I won't do it," Cor said.

The admiral turned back from the window. "What did you say to me, Sergeant Corinth?"

Now that his memory had returned, the weight of that day struck him full force. He'd received the orders to extract information from the prisoner. Normally he would use torture, deprivation, that sort of thing. But the admiral wanted the prisoner's body left intact. It wasn't hard to guess why. So they had settled on this plan, to gain his trust. Cor would stage a break out and Lack would lead them to the treasure.

"I said I won't use him that way."

The admiral didn't yell or throw anything. He was calm. Contemplative. That disturbed Cor more than his temper would have. The admiral was not known for taking bad news well. Which meant he had a trump card.

"Would you care to elaborate on *why* you are aborting your mission and disobeying a direct order?"

Cor stifled a wince. He prided himself on his professionalism. His work ethic. And—something he had in common with Lack—his obedience, at least when it came to military matters.

"Lack isn't a soldier, sir. He's just a pleasure slave."

The admiral smirked. "I know that. I've used his services enough to confirm his position. No soldier would be that well trained. Or that pretty."

Rage tightened his gut. He forced it back, deep beneath the surface where it couldn't be used against him. Or against Lack.

Something else had surfaced with the full memory of his identity. He remembered the briefing before he was to go into the cell. The admiral had suggested he get roughed up, so as to appear more authentic. A few bruises, scuff marks that would prove he was a prisoner. He'd let Ames take a shot at him. Then another. And another, until Cor had ground his teeth against the desire to fight back. Finally, he'd fallen to the ground, losing his pride and his memory in the quest to be a good soldier.

This was why the Ke'lan liked to pick their academy recruits from the gutter kids. They were tough and desperate for even a gram of fucking approval. Knowing that hadn't kept Cor from falling for the same shit. But he saw it now, and he didn't want any part of it.

“Did you intend for me to lose my memory?”

“Not even I could have planned that. It did make things more... interesting. You were supposed to pretend to make nice with him, not actually do so. No matter, we can break him anyway.”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, adding “sir” as an afterthought.

The admiral's eyes bulged. “I don't need a reason, but if you insist... Because I can. Because I am the Ke'lan. Because I am strong and he is not. Because he is one of the few left alive after the raid of that palace and he knows something.”

“What if he doesn't?” Cor asked quietly.

The admiral shrugged. “Then he dies. He's a good fuck, but the upper levels want blood. The raid was an embarrassment.”

The fucking raid. What was the excuse for it again? He couldn't even remember. They were encroaching on Ke'lan territory, but were they? They hadn't seemed like invaders, playing their goddamn lutes and fucking each other when Cor and the other soldiers barged in. No, Cor had been the invader.

“We returned with two ships full of treasure. Jewels and sculptures. Silks.”

“Where was the gold?” The admiral shed his aplomb. “That ship should have come back full of *gold*. Not fabric and a fucking pleasure slave.”

At least he was being honest now. “I won’t help you do this.”

The admiral smiled a sickly smile. “Oh yes, you will.”

Lack paced the cell, walking the same tracks in the dust that Cor had made. Night had fallen. He despised the dark. He huddled in the corner that had been Cor’s, trying to soak up the residual heat from his body. He hadn’t realized how much Cor’s presence had made him feel safe. He dozed in fitful slumber, dreaming of gilded treasures and coarse, scarred skin.

Dawn broke none too soon. Lack stood at the gate, holding the iron bars in his hands, wishing he had the strength to rattle them like Cor had done. Cor, who still hadn’t been returned. What were they doing to him?

Heavy footsteps signaled the guards’ return. For once Lack felt anticipation. At least then he might find out what happened to Cor. He might be taken to him. Neither guard met his gaze. These men had no compunction beating him, using him sexually, but now they were shrouded by guilt. Whatever had happened to Cor, it must be very bad.

The mean one unlocked the gate and held it open. “Come on.”

“What have you done with him? Is he—?” Lack couldn’t say the word. *Alive*.

The taller one’s eyes were soft. “We’re taking you to him.”

They were the most gentle they had ever been for Lack, and it terrified him. They led him through the hallways, passing the one that would take him to the admiral’s bedroom. They continued down a long corridor. He squinted as the light above them flickered. The air felt heavy, somber, and laden with foreboding.

A large metal door was coated with rust—or some dark substance. Ames rapped on the door. The sound of shuffling came from inside and then the door creaked open.

Lack felt himself pushed inside. He stumbled at first, lost in the dark. He blinked, then gasped at what he saw.

Cor was there, strung up in the center of the room. Chains bolted him to the ceiling by manacles on his wrists. His body was covered in bruises, glistening with blood and sweat. He looked up, eyes fierce. Ripped fabric was forced between his lips, serving as a gag.

They had treated him like an animal. Lack tried to go to him, but Ames held him back. His expression was impassive now, devoid of any of the sympathy Lack had glimpsed earlier.

The admiral strolled out of the shadows. He walked up to Cor and ran a hand over his sweaty brow in a parody of caring. He looked sharply at Lack. "I understand you've come to care for our mongrel."

Anger surged inside him. Empty, pointless anger. He jerked against the hands that held him.

"Let him go."

"Tell us where the gold is. We've searched the whole palace."

The gold? They meant the caves. "It's not mine," he ground out.

"No, it's not," the admiral agreed pleasantly. Suddenly he snapped a blow to Cor's temple. Cor's whole body jerked in the manacles that held him up. He slumped down again.

The admiral strolled toward Lack. "You're right about that, boy. It's not yours. It's mine."

It was his master's. He was given the codes for the caves for the same reason all of them knew it—so they could come and go as they pleased. The trust was implicit. None would take what didn't belong to them.

The admiral swung back, striking Cor with an elbow to the chest. A cough and rattle of chains.

Then again, his master was dead now. And maybe there was a way Lack could use them... the caves were a cunning weapon all on their own. He'd

have to be careful, making sure that he and Cor were not killed in the process. It was a risky plan... but the only one he had.

“Do not hurt him,” Lack said quietly. “I will take you to it.”

The admiral smiled.

The ship departed that very night. It was only a day’s trip to the palace by sea, and the winds were favorable. They didn’t bother with chains for Lack, rightfully assuming there was nowhere for him to go, no way for him to escape as the vessel raced along the open waters.

Cor was a different story. He wore the bruises they’d given him, as well as the chains they kept him in. He was dragged to the center of the ship and tied to the mast, his arms hugging the rough beam.

The admiral kept Lack busy that night in his quarters. When the admiral drifted off to sleep, his snores loud and regular, Lack peeked outside the door. No guard was stationed. He crept down the hallway and climbed the rope stairs that swayed gently in tune with the water beneath.

Lack glanced around the deck, finding no one. He suspected someone manned the lookout far above them, but he couldn’t see anyone and the roar of the wind offered a modicum of privacy. He knelt by Cor’s side, his heart sinking at the state of him. His body was soaked with sea spray. His bruises were purple and swelling. His wrists were bleeding from the chains.

The cloth that pried Cor’s lips apart was blackened with blood. Lack gently pulled the cloth down. Cor stirred slowly. He looked up, his eyes glazed with delirium.

“I’m so sorry,” Lack whispered.

Cor licked his lips. His mouth opened and closed. He was clearly struggling to speak after having been gagged for so long. After having been beaten.

His voice was hoarse, like gravel. “No. It’s my fault.”

Hot tears filled Lack's eyes. How had he ever thought this man was cold? He was hot, passion and loyalty, sexy and true. Like a mirage in that dark cell. Even now, the moon offered only a faint, pale light, but he felt safe with Lack.

"Listen to me," Cor said, finding his voice. "You can't give them what they want. They'll kill you after. Or just... just hurt you. You need to escape. Right now. This is your best chance."

"I can't leave you here with them."

"That's not important. Lack, I'm serious. You need to go now and—"

"I wish I could untie you. It must hurt so much." The weather, the chains. The beating. He traced a line of tanned skin around the bruises, landing at the waist of Cor's pants. He met Cor's gaze. "I can't do that, but I am good for one thing."

One and only one thing. Sometimes it sucked to be a pleasure slave, having only one function to serve in the world. Other times it sucked in the best possible way. His fingers made short work of Cor's pants.

"What are you—"

Lack's fingers closed around his cock. His eyes glazed over. He stuttered a breath. Cor's member was still soft, sweetly so. He didn't want to harden it with his hands first, knowing they were cold and less nimble now anyway, stiff and slippery from the damp ocean air. He bent his head and sucked the flesh into his mouth. Because Cor didn't say no, and if he really didn't want this, he would have.

Or maybe he wouldn't have. He seemed a little dazed. A little lost. Lack wanted to ground him with this earthly pleasure. He wanted to feel grounded in the familiar act, to imbue it with all the words he couldn't say. *I'm sorry you're hurting. I'm sorry we're going to die. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

An apology fuck with his tongue and his lips, only it felt more like gratitude. Like worship. Like kneeling at the altar of this man, this ship, of the strange and terrifying vortex that swirled around them, menacing and black.

Lack was a pleasure slave. Meaningless.

His only value was his looks and his use, like one of the silks he used to wear. But here he was, leading a whole ship of soldiers across the sea. A lodestone. It seemed important, but then a compass could do the same thing.

He was still an object.

Something to be seen and used. Cor looked at him through slitted eyes. He shuddered with the pleasure from Lack's mouth. Seeing him, using him. Just like the others.

Until Cor murmured, "Let me. Stand up. Let me touch you."

His hands were lashed to the mast of the boat, his wrists raw and bleeding, but he wanted Lack to use him anyway. To fuck himself in those hands that must be aching, and then he knew it was different. Cor saw him as a person. There was so much they didn't yet know about each other, but Lack wanted to give him pleasure and Cor wanted to give it back—and that made this different from any relationship he'd never known or seen before.

Lack locked his lips around Cor's cock, determined to help him ride out the storm on the wings of an orgasm. To soften the pain of his injuries and the harshness of his captivity through the blurring lens of pleasure.

A soft groan came from Cor, rumbling through his chest and to the muscular thighs beneath Lack's palms. He bobbed his head, sucking Cor's cock in deep before pulling back to tongue the tip. It was wholly erect now, hard, and pulsing in the vein underneath.

"Please," Cor gasped. "I need... I need..."

Lack grasped Cor's balls, fondling them gently before reaching back and slipping his forefinger between the slick cheeks of his ass. He rubbed it gently, then more forcefully, sucking harder until Cor bucked and let out a strangled groan.

"Touch yourself," Cor gasped.

Lack put his hand on his hard cock. It only took one flick, two, and then he was coming even before Cor had let go, at the very same time, because Lack let out a moan around Cor's flesh and Cor spilled hot seed into his mouth.

Lack swallowed it down three times before his mouth was emptied and he could lick Cor's cock clean.

“What is this?” The admiral's booming voice came from across the deck.

Lack righted Cor's pants and scrambled back, heaving in the rain. “It was me, sir. I did it.”

Attracted by the admiral's shouts, the deck soon swarmed with soldiers. Some were in full uniform dress, thundering across the glistening deck, while others wore only their pants, clearly wakened from sleep.

The admiral gestured to his erstwhile guards. “Sergeants, hold him.”

They grabbed Lack's arms and dragged him away from Cor. Lack struggled, unable to feign obedience any longer.

“No,” Lack shouted. “It was me. I was the one who... Punish me!”

His words were lost on the wind, his struggles feeble and impotent against the rigid arms that held him.

“Fifty lashes,” the admiral announced.

“No,” Lack shouted. “Why? I was the one who...”

“Shut up, Lack,” Cor ground out. His voice was low, almost a growl, but Lack heard it.

A whip was produced, a thick handle with three long cords made of leather and barbs. The admiral had whipped Lack before, in the privacy of his bedroom, but nothing like this. Even that had hurt so much, but this would kill him.

“Please. No.” Lack was pleading now. Crying, he realized.

The barbs glinted in the air, reflecting light off the droplets in the air before it landed in three red stripes on Cor's back. His body remained rigid on impact and then shuddered in the aftermath. The whip was pulled back before it struck again, crossing three more lines. The beating continued, opening skin and raising welts, while salty rainwater fell onto Lack's tongue. He was open mouthed in shock, wide-eyed in horror.

The admiral wandered over to Lack and slid his thumb into Lack's mouth. "Suck," he said.

Lack wanted to bite down. But he had learned his lesson now. His disobedience would be taken out on Cor. He sucked.

The admiral grinned, keeping his thumb just inside Lack's mouth. "Don't worry, this wasn't just because of you. There are consequences for soldiers who disobey their commanding officers."

A chill ran through Lack, more acute than the rain could have done. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you know? Sergeant Corinth here was one of my best soldiers. I recruited him myself. Pity it's come to this, but you know what they say. You can take the rat out of the street..."

The admiral wandered back to Cor, leaving Lack to struggle for breath. Cor was a Ke'lan soldier. How was that possible? The cold wind carried no answers, but the viciousness of his fellow soldiers was even more chilling. Why had he been in the cell with Lack? Any way he twisted the puzzle in his hands, it still looked like betrayal.

Lack clenched his teeth against the lingering flavor of Cor's cum and the admiral's skin. He closed his eyes but the slice of the whip still coursed through him. He lived each agonizing strike vicariously, feeling the lashes inside him. In the small, tender place that had trusted a man who had lied.

Cor struggled to remain conscious. He'd slipped in and out of fevered dreams the rest of the night. Land had been sighted early morning. Whatever happened, this would end today. Hopefully he'd at least be awake for it.

The ship groaned as it butted up against the anchor's lead. The next few meters were traveled in fits and starts as the heavy iron dragged along the shore before hooking onto something solid. The whole boat swayed slightly before settling into the gentle rhythm of the waves.

Ames untied Cor from the mast, making sure to knee him in the back before allowing him to stand on shaking legs. They didn't bother to tie his hands behind his back. It was clear he had no strength to do anything, and with ten armed soldiers in the landing party, no chance to succeed if he did.

Two boats carried them to shore. Cor sat between Ames and Joseph while the admiral sat opposite them, keeping a firm hand on Lack's nape. Lack refused to meet his gaze. The admiral's eyes gleamed with anticipation.

They were close. Even Cor could smell it after years of bounty hunting. They were supposed to be peacekeepers, the treasures they found a small recompense for their work. But he understood now that they had been nothing more than thieves. Violent, underhanded thieves. Powerful ones.

They stepped out into the shallow water. The soles of his feet slipped on the sharp rocks, tearing the skin and leaving ribbons of red behind them. Once on the pebbled beach, Lack pointed up a steeply inclined cliff. It was basically pure rock dotted with the occasional resilient weed.

Their procession started up, headed by the admiral and Lack. Ames and Joseph dragged Cor between them, almost completely supporting his weight because damned if he could do it himself. The rest of the party fell back, slowly picking over the unstable ground.

Lack pulled to a stop beside a rockface. He pushed aside heavy brush, revealing a door. It was the same color as the rock and stained with the same moss as its surroundings. No one would have stumbled upon it here.

"Stand clear," Lack murmured.

The men holding him shuffled back along with the procession of other soldiers. Only the admiral remained near Lack, perhaps worried he would try something. Most likely, he was damned excited to see what was behind that door.

Gold.

For Lack's sake, Cor hoped it was gold. Otherwise the admiral was going to be pissed. And Cor wasn't really in a good position to kill anyone. His breathing was labored, his vision occasionally blurring and then focusing

again. But if it came to that, he'd give it his best shot. There were worse things he could do with his dwindling life.

The surface of the door was etched with an elaborate decoration of curls. Lack slipped his nimble fingers through the designs, like playing an instrument with no sound. Cor realized it was more than a sculpture, it was a locking mechanism.

A loud click came from the door. The whole frame seemed to shudder as some of the curls twisted in place.

Laughing, the admiral shoved Lack aside, right into Cor's chest. The admiral pushed at the door, so lost in his eagerness that he didn't see the glint of the swords before they thrust into his belly. A high gasp cut off abruptly. From behind him, Cor could see the bloody tips. How had he been stabbed... by a door? He must be delusional. Five blades jutted out from the door, forming a star, though only two made it through the admiral's body.

A rumble came from above, and rocks began to rain down on their heads. He looked up to see boulders tumbling down the mountainside above them, ready to land on them. The soldiers holding him let him go and ran back. Gods. They'd never make it in time. They'd be crushed. He glanced back in time to see a large chunk of rock clock Ames in the head. He stumbled and fell. Joseph made it a few more steps before a rock slammed into his back.

Cor stumbled, reaching for Lack. He tried to cover him with his body, shielding him. But he was still weak. For once, Lack was stronger. He dragged Cor into the alcove of the door.

"No," Cor mumbled. However the hell the demon door worked, it was dangerous.

Ignoring him, Lack reached across the admiral's gurgling body and drew another design through the curls. This time the door swung open. Lack dragged Cor's body inside and slammed the door shut.

Cor fell clumsily to the ground, heaving dry, dusty breaths against the ground. He didn't know how long the avalanche would keep them at bay or

how long the demon door would hold. Consciousness was fading fast. Who would protect Lack? He felt himself turned over.

Lack's face swam in front of him. He was laughing with a kind of jubilant relief. "We made it."

"Run," he gasped.

Sudden grief flickered in his eyes, startling and intense. The smile faded. "You're safe now."

His body lolled against the dirt, finding relief in the coolness of the rock at his back. He was burning up. He was falling down into the fiery pits, unable to keep his eyes open. Darkness claimed him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cor woke up to a muted light, as if the lamp was strained through a glass of clear, clean water. Beneath him, he felt plush cushions and soft furs. Jewels and mirrors glittered from the walls. The last time he'd ever been this comfortable was... never.

He struggled to make sense of it. Was he dead? His whole body hurt like a motherfucker, so it didn't seem likely. Then again, what did he know about metaphysical shit?

Lack bustled into the room, bearing a tray. Colorful silks draped his body, and his hair shone like golden wheat. The broth smelled delicious, savory with a hint of spice.

So, probably dead.

Which he wasn't really too broken up about. What could he do about it, anyway? Except he was worried about Lack. The real Lack, not the fake dream one. Who would protect him now?

Dream Lack set down the tray and glanced over. "Ah, you're awake again," he said cheerfully.

"Have I woken before?" His voice was gravelly.

"Yes. Your memory appears to be spotty." Dream Lack looked thoughtful. "I wonder if you'll always be like that or if it will fade with time. I hope you don't decide I'm an enemy one of these days and strangle me."

Dream Lack laughed. It was fucking weird.

Cor narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "What's going on?"

"You're healing. And so am I, though I didn't have near as many injuries. But I guess we'll both be right as rain in a few revolutions."

"The admiral. The Ke'lan. That was all real, then?"

Now Lack narrowed his eyes. "You don't remember that either?"

"No, I do. I just wondered if maybe I'd... never mind. So what happened to them? How did you... how did *we* escape?"

“The door took care of them.”

“The door?”

“Yes. The message I entered was one of danger. That was why it didn’t open regularly. But once we got inside, we were safe. The avalanche continued into the night. The door is well covered, and even if they managed to get through it all, they’d never open the door.”

“They?”

“All the doors.” Lack gestured at the large room. “We’re in a series of caves. There are several exits, though each one is secret and requires a special trick to get in.”

“We are safe?” What a strange concept for a soldier. Even stranger for a boy who’d grown up on the streets of Ke’lan territory.

“Drink,” Lack said, lifting the cup of broth to his lips.

Cor obediently swallowed the warm liquid down. It was either that or panic. He couldn’t believe he was actually free of the Ke’lan. Refused to believe. Hope meant disappointment. Lack may have held the title of a slave, but Cor’s life had been one of servitude. There’d been no playful sexual pleasure to offset the wounds, no silks or jewels to pretty it up. Only boots and belts. Leather and metal forged to kill.

“We should get going.” He struggled to sit, wincing at the sharp pain in his head.

Lack rolled his eyes. “They’re not coming back.”

“You don’t know that.”

“They wouldn’t even find it again without my direction.”

“You can’t be sure. We have to leave now. Get to a safe distance.”

Lack stroked gently along Cor’s forearm. The gesture brought him up short. Lack’s smile was a little sad—and indulgent.

“How long do you think we’ve been in here?” Lack asked.

Cor rubbed his eyes, trying to remember. He glanced down, disconcerted to see the bruises on his legs had faded. His back hardly stung and they'd whipped it to shreds.

He cocked his head. How long *had* they been in here?

"A month," Lack said softly. "They aren't coming back. They won't find us. We're completely safe here."

Cor shut his eyes, overwhelmed.

"We have enough supplies to last us some time," Lack continued. "Clothing, food stores, and a natural spring with a well for water."

It was a form of dying, this paradise. Like being reborn. He was still having a hard time believing it, but it sounded like they had more than enough time for him to come around.

Except there was a snake in this garden, something that could ruin everything. It would be so easy not to tell him. All he had to do was say nothing. They'd never go back to Ke'lan territory and Lack would never have to know.

Lack was humming a small tune, straightening the tangled bedclothes around Cor's feet. And Cor couldn't go through with it. His whole life he'd stolen what wasn't his. Food when the shopkeepers weren't looking. Then gold and land as a soldier. He wouldn't also steal this.

He put his hand on Lack's wrist to still him. "There's something I have to tell you. I'm one of them. The Ke'lan."

Lack gave him a droll look. "Yes, I figured that out, Sergeant Corinth."

He frowned. "How did you know?"

"Your admiral was kind of enough to inform me. I've decided to forgive you for that. I know what it's like to follow orders."

Cor thought about that. And about the battles, the raids, the lives he'd taken. The metallic scent of blood and smell of fear and despair. He'd thought he'd found a place to belong in the Ke'lan. The most fucked up part was that he had. He'd grown up a thief and a bastard, so he'd fit right in.

“I’m not sure I can forgive myself.” He also wasn’t sure how to live without fighting.

Lack’s eyes brimmed with understanding. “There’s time to figure all that out too. But I’ll be with you.”

He ran his knuckles along Cor’s rough, battle-scarred cheek, mirroring the caress that Cor had once given him. He was accepting him, the touch said, the same way Cor had accepted him back in the cell. Cor sighed, letting his eyes fall shut.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” Lack asked. He’d seen Cor pause in pain just two days ago when lifting something and he just didn’t know if—

“I’m fine,” Cor murmured, continuing his exploration of Lack’s collarbone. He drew lines with his tongue, teased with his teeth.

Lack’s body responded with sudden and intense heat, having gone so damn long without relief. He’d rubbed quick ones out behind the privacy screen when Cor was sleeping. At first Cor had slept a lot, his body still healing. Now, though, he was healthy. Restless. And, apparently, horny.

“We can wait,” Lack gasped as Cor’s hands roamed lower. “I can... I can service you.”

A low growl emanated from Cor’s chest. “Will you strip for me? Will you take me in your mouth and not come yourself? Because we’re both stuck in here, so we might as well be friends. Isn’t that what you told me that first day in the cell?”

His heart clenched. “Don’t be angry. I never meant to...”

He’d never meant to hurt Cor. Only Cor had gotten hurt and it was all his fault.

Cor’s eyes softened. Not with emotion or anything sappy. They just got less angry, the ice thawing just a little. “I’m not blaming you for what they made you do,” he said. “But this was never what I wanted. Not then and not

now. I want your participation or nothing. I want you—” He grasped Lack’s cock in a firm grip, and Lack gasped. “I want you begging to come.”

Lack groaned. He was moments away from that point. “At least lie back. You must be tired.”

Cor snorted. “Tired? We’ve been cooped up here for... forever. If you think a few cuts on my back are going to make me an invalid, you obviously have a lot to learn about me.”

The whipping had been more than a few cuts. It had been inhumane. Even now, the thought made his breath catch. But Cor wouldn’t appreciate his sympathy. So Lack smiled. “If I have a lot to learn, I’m sure you can teach me.”

Cor raised an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“That’s flirting. Why, you don’t flirt either?”

“No.” He reared back and flipped Lack onto his belly. His lips hovered by Lack’s ear. “I don’t flirt, young one. I fuck.”

Heat raced through his body, and he rutted against the sheets. Cor slapped his ass, and he yelped at the shock of pain.

“Control yourself or I’ll have to restrain you. I’m sure we can find some silk ties around here.”

Gods, there was an entire room full of sex toys that Lack hadn’t even showed him. Anal beads and glass cocks. Rings to hold the orgasm in and metal tongs to squeeze erect nipples. He groaned at the thought of Cor using them on him.

But later. Now he needed more than glass. He needed Cor’s cock inside him. That hot, pulsing member large enough to make him burn every time. He thrust his ass against Cor, testing his resolve.

“Hands behind your back,” Cor snapped.

Lack rested his cheek against the bed and reached back. Cor grasped his wrists and held them against the dip of his lower back. The other broad hand

skimmed Lack's inner thighs, teasing him, skating up the sensitive skin and down again.

"Please, please."

"Please what?"

Cor reached underneath him and pinched his nipple. Lack gasped in pain while his cock twitched. Maybe they wouldn't need that room after all. Cor seemed to have things well in hand. Lack cried out again as his other nipple was tweaked and twisted.

The broad palm skimmed over Lack's abs and grasped his cock. A sudden thrust had Lack almost spilling too soon. He gritted his teeth.

"Not yet," Cor warned, while his hand played dirty tricks down below, running up and down Lack's cock. His forefinger swiped the slit, damp with precum.

Lack moaned, his cries muffled by the bedclothes. Cor was above him, restraining him, fondling him. Lack felt surrounded, unable to move or breathe or come like he so badly wanted to. And yet he would change nothing. This was what he'd craved and he could do it anywhere, as long as Cor was there.

"You were wrong before," he gasped out.

Cor paused. "About what?"

"About being trapped here. As if this was a cell, like before. But it's not."

Cor flipped him over, "And where should we go?"

The inquiry was too polite, like asking what they'd have for supper.

Lack smiled. "You didn't think that was the only door, did you? There are tunnels leading out in every direction. One leads onto a private dock with a ship. We can sail to places even the Ke'lan could not go."

"Oh fuck. I thought I was going to go crazy in here."

"I thought you were going to drive *me* crazy." Cor wasn't an animal meant for captivity, he realized. Lack was more flexible that way, but he could go anywhere if he wore the shackles of Cor's control. "All that pacing."

Cor looked sheepish. "I don't like being closed in."

"We'll find land," Lack promised. "Wide open spaces."

He smirked. "There is one small space I like to be inside."

Lack grinned. He started to turn over, but Cor stopped him. Instead Cor was the one who turned, straddling Lack's face while he pulled Lack's cock into his mouth. It was the same position they'd used before in the cell only now the tables had turned. Now Cor was on top. He kept most of his weight on his elbows and knees, but Lack still felt the heft of him, the gravity. He sucked Cor's cock into his mouth and bobbed his head up and down, bracing himself by holding on to Cor's thighs.

Below, Cor applied his tongue to Lack's slit, teasing more than sucking, playing more than fucking. Lack moaned around Cor's cock and thrust his hips up, asking for more. Cor obliged him, swallowing him deep. Lack shuddered, almost coming right then. He probably would have but Cor's fingers were wrapped tightly around the base of Lack's cock, keeping his orgasm at bay.

Lack sucked on Cor's cock eagerly, relishing the salty precum that flooded his tongue. Suckling him was heaven while down below was a sort of hell, needing to come so badly it hurt.

"Come on," Cor muttered. "Make me come and then you can."

Lack moaned again, his whole body rendered helpless and shivery under the imminent orgasm. He tugged on Cor's legs, pulling him down farther, until he could swallow Cor's cock to the hilt.

Cor's body went rigid inside and around him. Salty jets hit the back of his throat and he gulped them down. Something shifted below, a loosening of Cor's fingers and then the warm suction of his mouth returned. Gasping for air and finding none, he came into Cor's mouth, still gulping down the creamy liquid and crying out his pleasure around Cor's cock.

Cor remained on top of him, licking Lack's cock in lazy strokes. Lack did the same, cleaning the essence of his pleasure from his softening cock. From this angle, Lack had a prime view of Cor's ass. The bronze cheeks and darker

pucker. So pretty, though he'd never tell Cor that. He wondered if Cor would let him put something inside. The beads, perhaps?

He was still smiling when Cor lifted from him and turned around.

Cor raised his eyebrow, "What were you thinking about?"

"Just something I'm going to show you."

"The path leading out of here?"

"Fine, I'll show you that too. But there are some things you're going to want to pack. Trust me."

The corner of his lips tipped up in a smile and erstwhile salute. "Oh, I do."

Lack did show him the pleasure room and all the instruments they had used to prolong and heighten the experience. But Cor was already ready to give back as much as he took, inventing new ways to apply them and unabashed in his pursuit of Lack's torment... and eventual climax.

Their journeys carried them to lands of whimsy and hardship, of pleasure and pain. Cor, ever eager to break free of this cage and move on to the next. And Lack, grateful for the leash that let him follow. And together, traversing the world and finding a home between them.

THE END

Author Bio

Skye Warren writes unapologetic erotica, where pain and sex and love collide. She has been called “a true mistress of dark and twisted erotica.” Her books have been Amazon Erotica Bestsellers and been a Night Owl Reviews Top Pick.

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