



MOONDRAKE

ALEXIS WOODS

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

MOONDRAKE

By Alexis Woods

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 these authors 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 is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, 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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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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MOONDRAKE

By Alexis Woods

Photo Description

Filthy, naked from head to toe, nothing but a pair of cutoffs. His prominent erection tenting his pants. How did he wind up here? In this prison? Who did this to him? And who was he thinking of? His head is turned and our gazes met, his pupils blown inside green and gold irises. His hand extends, imploring, asking to be saved.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I once was a cargo ship captain, straddling the line between the law and the bandits that roamed the galaxy. I had a good crew and a simple life. That was until my ship was captured by an unknown alien race. They enslaved me and my crew and made us into pleasure slaves.

Here is where the story becomes yours—Was I sold and did I come to love my master? Did I find relief in my submission? Did I struggle and escape with the help of a secret lover that came looking for me? Was I rescued and come to fall in love with the military officer that liberated me? Or something altogether different?

No incest or cheating (though I don't think the story lends itself to either of these). It can be sci-fi or fantasy (with no humans at all and magic!). Have fun with it. I like humor as well as a dark edge. I want love and sexy times please!

Thank you!!

Teresa

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, paranormal

Tags: captivity, bondage, enemies to lovers, interspecies, M/M/M, shifters, mpreg, dubious consent

Content Warnings: violence, sex in shifted form

Word Count: 38,828

A glossary of terms may be found at the end of the story.

Author's Note

Much of this story has hints of Norse mythology and gods, and while mostly accurate, I took liberties with spellings and usage. The vocabulary consists of a mixture of both true foreign language words (misspelled or spelled phonetically) and words I created. I attempted to keep these creations sounding as close to the Norse stronghold of our world—Norway, Finland, Russia—as I could. A glossary is included at the end of the story. One note of pronunciation: An “ss” beginning a word denotes a slurring of the s sound and “sss” is for a hissing sound.

Acknowledgements

While I had the basic premise of Moondrake outlined in the early writing, it wasn't until I teamed up with the amazing brainstorming power of one, KC Faelan that it all came together. Night after night the two of us stayed up late (well, I did, she's three hours behind me), picking over whatever I'd written that day apart and putting it back together again. First person to third person to flashbacks to none, version after version, she stuck by me and already has me planning a sequel. Thank you, KC. You're the best!

I also want to shout out to Francú "Wulf" Godgluck, Jonathan Penn and Jacob Lagadi. Wulf likes to verbally threaten me with acts of punishment over 'shrugging of shoulders' and other silly mistakes, weeding out my problems and prodding me to be the best writer I can. It's a two-way street—I do the same to him—both of us benefiting and growing as writers. He also created the fantastic cover for Moondrake. So hugs, Wulf. Love you.

JP and Jake: Again, many thanks for your hours of reading and beta skills. You've been with me from the beginning too. *Toda!* Thank you.

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Prologue

Manning raced down the hall, heading towards the entryway. He slammed his palm on the release pad. “Come on, come on,” he yelled, banging on the door when it refused to obey. A hand grabbed his jacket’s collar, and his feet were swept out from under him. He dragged and kicked his legs to regain his footing, choking and fighting for breath. He grabbed at the wrist, trying to ease the tightness around his windpipe.

Tossed upon the bathroom floor, he rubbed at his throat, his heavy breathing echoing in the small space. Manning twisted away from the kicks aimed at his legs.

“What?” Manning growled. The set of his jaw and the way his attacker stared down at him, eyes cold and piercing, made him shiver. *He* stepped closer, shoving a boot hard into Manning’s legs and torso. “Stop,” Manning yelled, fury morphing to pain and fear. He curled on his side and covered his head with his arms.

“Why?” *he* sneered. “Why ssshould I ssstop? You tried to run. To essscape.” *His* voice hissed with anger. The cruel vibrations grated on Manning’s eardrums. “Do you think thiss isss sssome game to play?”

Manning grimaced, pressing his forearms tightly over his ears. He spied the open doorway... He scrambled to his feet, staggered across the room, and entered the smaller one. He spun around to find *him* standing there. He blew out a hard breath, straightened, and placed a hand on the door. His captor stared down at him, *his* lips pulled into a taut line. Manning returned it, sliding the door shut.

A solid *thunk* on the door jolted him, and he fell back a few steps, grabbing at his thundering heart, unable to make his body move or mind think. Once the adrenaline had finally run its course, he collapsed to his knees. *Why?* That’s what he needed answered. *Why his ship, his crew?* He needed to figure out how it all went wrong, and if there was a way to save them all.

Chapter One

Tolsu

Captain Manning Dagrson – Ship’s Log – Recorded on this, the fifth day of the seventh month, in the cycle Thirty-two of the Reign of our Mighty King Dagr.

Morning devotions and sacrifices made to Njor. We are two days’ passage out from the capital. My crew is restless, already looking forward to taking part in the King’s birth celebrations. With luck the skies will remain calm and uneventful for the remainder of our journey. Our supplies are holding steady. Even if we should experience an issue, we can survive until we reach safe—

“Captain?”

“Here,” he called out, pausing the voice recording. His first mate, Stig, rushed in breathless.

Manning Dagrson, Captain of the *Moondrake* rose from his chair, picked up a leather tie, and pulled his shoulder-length, dark blond hair back. “What is it?” What problem was there that required Stig’s speed in finding him? Stig’s decision to not use the coms added to the mystery.

“Enemy ship fast approaching, Captain.” His large eyes and clenched fists immediately put Manning on high alert.

“Do we know who it is yet?”

“That’s just it, Sir. It’s nothing we’ve seen before.”

“Bring it up on the monitor.” Manning indicated towards the vid screen to his right. Stig moved to turn it on, pounding on the adjacent keyboard to bring up the image. A massive silver-hulled spacecraft blinked into view, filling the monitor. “Blessed Odin!” he whispered, shocked. “What is that?”

“We don’t know. They’re closing quickly. She’ll be on us in less than an arn. Brandt tried hailing it, but didn’t receive an answer. Do you think pirates?” Stig’s white-knuckled fists revealed the anxiety he tried not to show in his voice. “There’s no way we could outrun it, Sir, with our engines and sails. We’re no warship.”

Manning huffed. *No we are not. Just a cargo ship heading for dock.* A single moonrise away and they would have arrived at the capital. He shoved aside the fleeting thought of never seeing home or his father again.

He growled. No way would he go down without a fight. He needed to prepare his crew, hand out weapons and, with Brandt's help, stage them strategically. He prayed to Odin this foreign ship contained only pirates out to plunder *Moondrake's* wares.

"Let's go." Manning led the way to the main concourse; Stig followed a step behind. Word had already spread, and by the time they reached the large open meeting space, a line of men waited and watched the unknown ship's image being tracked on a monitor. A few whispered with murmured speculation, not even noticing his entrance.

"Aye, Captain Manning, any idea who is it?" The head of tactical forces, Brandt, spoke aloud, gathering the attention of the rest of the crew who turned to await their captain's answer.

Manning frowned. "It's nothing I've encountered before."

Brandt stepped closer, brows drawn. "Your father's military Jarl never mentioned this?" He swept his arm up towards the vid screen. "He certainly never said anything to me," he growled. "How in Odin's name am I supposed to keep you safe if he's withholding information?" Brandt's ire intensely palpable, the closest crew members edged away from him.

"You know my father and his entourage do not always choose to tell me everything," Manning snapped. "I'm the youngest bastard of his brood."

"True—" Stig chuckled, drawing Manning's gaze "—but you are his favorite, even more than your brother, Prince Tore. He lets you get away with smuggling while he throws your competitors into the dungeon."

Manning cocked his head, choosing to let Stig's misconduct go for now. His words rang with truth, but now was not the time to deal with the squabbling of royal family matters.

He moved closer to the displayed image and looked up at the monitor again, collecting his thoughts while he read the scans of size and weaponry.

"Open the coms, Stig."

"Aye, Captain."

He turned to face the twelve or so crew members before him, another five were at their assigned stations. "Honored Crew of the *Moondrake*, the vessel

approaching does not appear to belong to any known race. Based on its size and scanned capabilities, Stig and I agree that we cannot outrun it. We do not know yet if they mean us fair or foul, but we will meet them with all the grace of our world and our country.”

Muttering and curses arose; he knew they would. A voice rose above the others. “What does that mean, Captain? Are we fighting or surrendering?”

His lips pulled back into a savage grin. “We fight. Brandt or I will inform you of your position once we have decided on the exact plan of action. Go now and prepare yourselves in whatever way you see fit. Dismissed.”

A chorus of “Aye, Captain’s” and “Yes, Sir’s” were called out, and the crew dispersed back to their rooms and stations. Brandt, however, stayed behind. Manning smiled ruefully at him, lips pressed tightly together. He stood still a tarran and committed Brandt to memory: tall and fit, his thick, dark hair cut close to his scalp. Manning always wished he’d let it grow longer, like his own, so he could tangle his fingers in it. He enjoyed gazing into Brandt’s eyes when they lay close in bed. Those depths of green and gold, like summer’s fields, often held him captive. He knew intimately each muscle of Brandt’s hard body and every iota of creamy skin.

“Come.” Manning inclined his head back towards his office. Brandt dutifully stayed a step behind and to his right. On the day Manning had turned eighteen cycles, he received *Moondrake* as a birth present and Brandt as his bodyguard. For ten cycles now—and countless nights—Brandt had protected him. Close proximity initially brought a burst of passion between them. Their mutual desire continued to flare bright and strong, and although he wasn’t sure it was love, it was definitely respect and admiration and a whole lot of lust.

The decision made, they swiftly devised a plan before falling into bed with the time they had left.

The strange vessel held them in thrall less than an arn later. Manning noted that frenzied lovemaking showed prominently in the flush of many members of the crew while he walked the halls checking on his crew’s positions. *Who am I to judge?* Brandt and he both bore the same guilty color. The men were dispersed throughout *Moondrake*, the engines locked in neutral. They were outfitted with stun guns, the only weapons they were allowed by law. Replete in bellies and groins, they waited anxiously to be boarded.

The airlock hissed open, and Manning joined Brandt out of direct sight when the first figure bent to enter. He appeared unarmed, his hands clasped

together, but following him were others, weapons pointed all around. Humanoid in appearance, and all male. But tall, taller even than Brandt's ten and a half hands, and much more than his own even ten. Their dark hair hung long, adorned in braided strands; their leader's the fullest with glass beads and glinting gemstones. Manning wondered if they wore their wealth and elevation in those ebony locks.

He couldn't stop staring at the intruder's beauty—flawless ivory skin, high cheekbones, full lips drawn in a straight line, and a square chin free of hair—a delicious specimen to admire. The man wore a tunic of some shimmering scarlet fabric, edged with gold embroidery that, even belted, hung to the top of his knees. A bit of black legging showed before knee-high well-worn black boots started. Smoothing a hand down the front of his navy, knee-length, silver-buttoned jacket, Manning studied the pirate. His fingertips stuttered over the metallic-threaded embellishment of his father's coat of arms. On top of it all, he wore his crimson sash emblazoned with a drakken and moon in pearls.

The pirate took a step towards Manning and Brandt's hiding spot, his head cocked, listening. His crew raised their weapons in the direction of his gaze. He tipped his hand out to the side to halt them, his fingers long and thin. Manning considered the man's height and smooth appearance attractive—He wrenched his errant thought back and swallowed the lump in his throat. This man was the enemy, come to capture his cargo—perhaps him and his crew.

“Where are you, Moondrake?” The man's voice, a pleasant tenor, dripped with honeyed sweetness, but Manning heard him fine with the dead silence around them. The only sounds were the nervous breathing and the rustling of fabric from the few crewmen nearby.

Manning straightened from where he leaned into the wall. If these pirates were human then all the better. His crew had a good chance of surviving even with their lesser numbers. They knew the ship and all its hidey-holes. They could use hit-and-run tactics on the enemy like Brandt had taught them. But Brandt must have thought differently because he placed a hand on Manning's arm, shaking his head. Manning peered at it, resolve setting in. If he could ensure the safety of his crew and mitigate the damage to his ship, he would. He covered Brandt's hand with his own and leaned towards him.

“Watch my back,” he whispered. Brandt huffed but nodded, his jaw firming. Manning holstered his weapon, turned, and stepped out into the open, palms up and hands empty. It didn't stop the dozen or so invaders from raising their weapons. He could feel Brandt's presence behind him. Before he could open his mouth, the intruder spoke.

“Are you Moondrake?”

“I suppose I am,” Manning replied.

The man cocked his head, his braids hanging askew. His brow furrowed, and Manning tried to make out his eye color. They seemed bright, maybe blue or green.

“You can shift?” the pirate asked, blinking in confusion, and puzzling Manning with his question.

“Shift? I don’t understand.”

He stepped closer and held up a hand, staring intently at Manning who could now see that his irises were a brilliant azure. “Shift.” Claws and scales appeared where his hand had been, his eyes flashing a dark citrine shade.

Manning stumbled back, and Brandt lunged forward to protect him. Bolts of light discharged from the weapons of two of the intruders, hitting Brandt in the chest and legs. His back arched, the stun gun falling from his flexed fingers. His arms flailing, he staggered backwards. Manning caught him and clutched at his lover. Lowering him to the deck, he watched Brandt struggle for breath. The sounds of weapons discharging were distant echoes as he focused on Brandt, his anger rising.

He clenched his teeth, sliding one hand low and cautiously pulling out his gun. The other hand he laid over Brandt’s heart, the steady beating reassuring. Pressure against the back of his head froze him in place; his weapon yanked away. He grunted in fury; his concern for Brandt had allowed him to be captured. He looked up to find the alien leader standing over him. Gasps from behind reminded him of his duty to the crew. He slowly rose to his feet, fists at his sides. The alien’s casual posture further irritated Manning.

“What do you want?” he spat. “My cargo, money, my ship? Yours. Leave us somewhere safe, and you can have it.”

The hint of a smile played on the alien’s lips, and Manning’s stomach dropped. “You misunderstand,” he said, his voice slow and even-toned. “I do not desire your cargo, your money, or your ship.”

Movement to Manning’s left drew his attention. His crew, every single one of them, had been caught and were gathered in a tight circle. A few were like Brandt, alive but immobile. He looked down at Brandt, who was attempting to sit up, the effects of the alien weaponry wearing off.

“Then what do you want?” He seethed at the treatment of his crew.

“What we want”—the alien shifter, a *skipan*, tapped his fingertips upon his own chest—“is you.”

“What?” Manning exploded, fury coursing through his veins. He glared at the shifter, his fingers flexing in agitation. “What do you mean you want us?” He could only imagine the worst and struggled to figure out how in Odin’s name he was going to get Brandt and his crew out of this.

The *skipan* turned towards his people and nodded. A sweet odor arose, a *tolsu* of vanilla and spice, reminding Manning of his favorite cake covered with powdered sugar that he enjoyed on his cycle celebration days.

His crew members began to relax, their irises dilating. Each *skipan* took hold of one of Manning’s men, drawing them apart. The crew looked at their captors with glazed eyes. The two shifters who had shot Brandt, knelt beside him, holding him effortlessly to the floor while he struggled to get away from them. Manning watched Brandt succumb, his body drooping, to whatever magic these aliens had. When Brandt began gazing at the mouth of the one in front of him, Manning gasped. He recognized the expression his lover wore: the parted mouth, the craven dilatation of pupils; he’d had that exact look leveled at him not an hour ago. He glanced back up at his crew and found them all with similar desirous looks.

He rounded on the lizard-shifter alien. “What did you do to them?” he demanded. *And why am I the only one unaltered by this magical pheromone?*

Startled, the *skipan* stepped forward and grabbed Manning’s upper arms, spinning him around. He pulled Manning’s back to his chest. Manning twisted, but his muscles refused to obey, his efforts lame and ineffective against the alien’s strong grip. Yet, his mind stayed sharp, and he realized, although affected by the scent, it was not in the same way as his crew. His men were utterly docile now. Many of them, including Brandt, had wrapped themselves around their captors, kissing them with abandon. Manning shuddered, and the alien holding him leaned down to place his mouth against his ear.

“Why are you not affected, little Moondrake?” Manning felt the hot breath of the *skipan*. His arms were pulled behind his back, and fingers worked to bind his wrists. His body turned sluggish. He struggled again, but he’d carelessly given the shifter enough time to subdue him. To work his magic on him. He panted, inhaling more of the pleasant *tolsu*. The effect stronger now, the fight fled his body, while his mind told it not to give up.

Manning had transmitted a message to his father and the High Council, informing them of the imminent contact with a possible unbeknown life-form.

He doubted they'd attempt a rescue. *I am only a bastard, not the heir, even if I am a favored child.* His father's love would not save him or his men. The council would rule against sending out anyone to attempt to retrieve him. He hoped a ransom might entice these aliens.

"Let my crew go," Manning demanded of the skipan. They said they didn't want money, but it deserved another shot. "Let them go, use me for your ransom. My father is King, he will pay for my return."

The leader shook his head, the stones in his braids clinking softly. "No."

He turned Manning to face him once more. His head tilted, studying him, one palm cupping Manning's chin. The shifter's hand was surprisingly hot against his skin. He figured if they were lizard-like, they would be cold-blooded, like snakes that must sun themselves to warm up. A large hand remained on his shoulder, the weight heavy upon his weakened frame. He wanted to escape the heat and *his* nearness. Only the powers of persuasion upon his own muscles kept him upright. *I will not fall before them.*

The skipan nodded towards the hatchway between the two vessels. The shuffling of feet drew Manning's attention, and he glimpsed his crew being led offship.

"We do not require your money." The shifter's features softened. He slid two fingertips down Manning's cheek, and then pulled the tie from his hair, letting the strands fall free. The alien's smile was thin and rueful. "We want you for pleasure."

Manning jerked his head away from the alien's touch. "What?" He struggled and squirmed, twisting to get out from under the alien's hand. "No!" He almost fell when his legs refused to hold him, but the shifter grabbed him, hauling him tight to his body, smashing them chest to chest. "Cursed Loki. What kind of vile race are you that wants us for your entertainment?" he spat into the shifter's clothing, his cheek pressed to the man's hard pecs. "Are you mad? Pleasure slaves!" He received no reply.

Heat radiated from the shifter's body, strong enough that Manning felt it through his jacket. The sweet scent and warmth worked their magic on him. The alien's question about why he wasn't affected like his crew, and Brandt's initial resistance to their drugging aroma hummed in his brain, before he eventually succumbed.

Manning slipped downward, his joints giving way. Strong hands halted his slide, tightening their grip on his arms. A hard lump pressed against his belly,

and he glanced down with a shudder. If this shifter's humanoid appearance was similar, then it had to be a... His mind went wild with bizarre implications. *Blessed Odin, do they even procreate like us?* All of these shifters were male, and he wondered what kind of relations they had. The skipan reveled in those kisses with his crew, many of whom he knew enjoyed both sexes. *Did those pheromones reduce proclivities and inhibitions?* Some of his crew preferred one sex over the other, but many were willing to get release with whomever was available at any given moment. Whatever it was, he didn't feel the same spell that overcame his crew. Lethargy had set in instead, and his mind began shutting down. He shook his head to try to clear it.

The shifter's right hand snaked into his hair, grabbing hold of the strands and pulling. He winced, and the alien's hold loosened minutely while he pushed Manning's face back against his torso. His left arm wrapped around Manning's back, pinning him. Clawed fingers dug into his flesh; he felt the heat right through his clothes.

All Manning was capable of doing was breathing until he slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter Two

Drottinn

Manning woke lying on soft cushions. He lay there unmoving, knowing he wasn't in familiar surroundings. The light was too bright, the air smelled strange, even the cushions he lay on felt different, less springy. He blinked his eyes, keeping his body still, and discreetly took in his surroundings. *Sweet Freya, where am I?* He tried to raise a hand to rub at his dry eyes and found them tied, wrists overlapping. Recall of the prior horrific hours slammed into him, and his gut twisted. *Helheim, I'm on their ship.* He covered his mouth with his wrists to hold back the bile that threatened. Once he had his stomach under control, he swallowed and rubbed at his eyes with the back of a hand.

“I know you are awake.”

That deep, silvery voice Manning remembered spoke from somewhere above his head. He craned his neck upwards, muscles trembling with the movement. When he shifted his legs, spasms ripped through them. He yelped and cursed, tendons screaming. He tried to curl into a ball to escape the pain. He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth to endure the ache.

Warmth penetrated into his trembling thighs and calves. Manning became aware of hands kneading into the stinging muscles, but many tarrans passed before he was able to relax enough that he could open his eyes. The alien who had held him captive knelt beside him, massaging his legs with strong, heated fingers. His whole focus centered on relaxing Manning, and it allowed him a moment to observe his captor.

Even kneeling, he was a large skipan—some sort of shifter—maybe lizard-like with those scales Manning remembered seeing. His ebony braids hung long down his back, and the small, colorful gemstones woven into his hair flashed in the light when he moved. They partially obscured his face, but high, pale cheekbones and a straight nose were quite visible. A quiet humming reached Manning's ears, and it surprised him to realize the shifter was singing. The words weren't in any language he knew, but he liked their melodic sound.

“What are you?” he asked once he was able to draw a steady breath. The singing halted, and the hands stilled on his legs. The skipan tilted his head to look at him from behind his braids, one blue eye visible and piercing, the other peeking through the strands.

“I am the Skeppare, Captain of this ship, the *Reykr*.”

“Reykr... Smoke?”

He inclined his head. “Yes, we appear and then disappear into the air.” He drifted one hand up off Manning’s leg, like ash and smoke vanishing into the night’s sky.

“A suitable name then.” It pleased Manning that his captor was answering his questions. He forged on. “And what’s your name?”

The twitch of a smile appeared on the shifter’s lips, his gaze never wavering from Manning’s. “I am the equivalent of one of your Jarls, so most of my crew call me Skeppare or Sir.”

Thoughts of Manning’s home and crew invaded, and his pain dissipated, replaced with full-throttled anger at being captured. He called out the shifter’s tease for what it was, struggling to sit up, his voice laced with venom. “Not the answer I was looking for.”

The shifter swiftly rose, frowning, and stood glaring down at him, his sharp azure stare threatening. He grabbed the front of Manning’s jacket, hauling him upright. Manning wobbled, pins and needles prickling his soles. The alien held on to him until he was capable of standing on his own.

“Ssset?” he asked, removing his hands from Manning’s upper arms.

“Yes,” Manning gritted, pain slicing through his calves.

“Good. Now kneel.” The shifter pointed to the floor before him.

“What?”

He reached and pushed down on Manning’s shoulders, fingers curling into his collarbone, directing him down to the wooden floor. Still not fully in control of his own body, the ache overpowering and his mind reeling, he allowed himself to drop. He put one knee down and then the other, his bound wrists hanging as he looked up at his captor.

“My name is Kayluth, but you will call me Drottinn.”

“Sweet Freya,” Manning choked. The shifter smiled crookedly having heard him. *He wants me to call him Master.*

A two-tone ping echoed in the room. The skipan hissed and spat out what sounded like a curse. He muttered unintelligible words before calling out. The

whoosh of an entryway's lock release preceded the clicking of approaching boots.

Two skipan led Brandt between them with chain leashes. His wrists and ankles were bound in heavy shackles, all linked together and attached to a braided metal collar around his neck. He stared at the floor, his head hanging.

Adrenaline and anger shot through Manning and he struggled to rise, but with limbs still unwilling to obey he fell forward onto his forearms with a loud smack. Brandt's head jerked up at the sound, and seeing Manning, his features hardened, hands balling into fists. Manning watched as Brandt peered at the skipan holding his tethers. He'd been with his bodyguard long enough to know he was weighing the options and calculating his next move. Brandt sprang forward, making it a few steps before his legs were pulled out from under him. He crashed to the floor, his eyes wild, a mere length away.

Blessed Odin, he looks wrecked, but still so damn beautiful.

"Manning? Are you all right?" Brandt asked in a harsh whisper, reaching out.

Manning slid a hand forward, but Kayluth grabbed his jacket's collar and hauled him back to his knees. He glanced up at Kayluth, rage filling him—his lover so close, yet his touch denied—to find the skipan staring down at him. There was an edge there he hadn't seen before. The capacity for violence of these shifters was an unknown variable. Kayluth released his collar and stroked down the back of his head, giving a little tug on the ends of his hair. Manning flinched and swallowed hard.

He looked back at Brandt, taking in his tensed muscles and the hard lock of his jaw. Brandt's steely gaze tore straight into his heart. He could see that Brandt was sound of body, mentally however... Brandt's concern for him appeared to be overriding his survival instincts.

Manning breathed in, bracing himself. He didn't want his lover to fight them and be hurt. *I want him alive, even if we aren't together.* "I'm fine," he lied.

Brandt relaxed marginally and pushed himself to his knees. His guards each placed a hand on one of his shoulders to keep him there. A flurry of hisses and clicks between the three skipan and the way they were gesturing at Brandt did not bode well. Kayluth made a motion between the two skipan, then down at Brandt, and they considered his words. They looked at each other, one shrugged while the other nodded.

“Try,” Kayluth said. They knelt down on either side of Brandt, linking their arms to encircle him. That spiced tolsu of vanilla drifted from the skipan flanking Brandt, and Manning watched Brandt’s demeanor morph. The concern and anger disappeared, a slack jaw and dilated pupils full of wonder replaced them. When one of Kayluth’s crew placed a palm to Brandt’s cheek, turning his head, he dove for the lips of his captor.

Manning turned his face away, a lump forming in his throat. He glanced back to see his lover twist to kiss the second shifter. Kayluth’s fingers returned to stroke and tug at his hair. He sat back on his heels, dropping his head to try and avoid the shifter’s hand. The fingers tightened into a fist, pulled his head up, and held him in place, forcing him to face the ongoing scene. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see. Kayluth’s hot breath blew on his neck. “Watch,” he said, his voice a commanding whisper, and Manning felt forced to open his eyes. The dreaded tolsu had started to turn his body traitor. He stared at Brandt, at how the two aliens had him twined in their arms, and blood rushed to his groin. His heart thundered and his mouth dropped open, gasping for air.

Kayluth stepped in front of him, blocking his view. He cupped Manning’s chin and pulled him up to sit tall on his knees before bending down to cover Manning’s mouth with his own.

Affected by the pheromone, Manning’s mouth readily opened to the invading tongue as it swept past his lips. The sound of scuffling distracted Kayluth and he softened the kiss. Manning hazily realized that Brandt had been led away. He shook his head, trying to throw off the hand holding him, but Kayluth tightened his grip on his chin. Manning fought back the only way he could. He shoved the unwanted tongue out of his mouth with his own and clamped his lips and teeth shut. A deep rumble sounded, and the shifter leaned back, his gaze a dazzling shade of blue. Manning locked his jaw, eyes blazing and defiant, earning himself a slumped-shouldered sigh from the skipan. He scowled at his captor, inwardly rejoicing in his small victory.

Kayluth straightened, his expression smooth, head tilted to the right. He studied Manning, a finger twisting into his braids. “Ssstand,” he instructed.

This time the shifter made no move to help him rise. He planted one foot before pushing himself up, groaning through clenched teeth. The tightness in his calves pulled his muscles taut with incredible pain, and he stepped in place to try and regain blood flow to his ankles and feet. His shoulders and neck ached, and he rolled them to ease the tension. A crippling spasm ripped through the back of his neck. He yelled, grabbing for the muscle to pinch it, grimacing and hissing a curse to Loki.

Kayluth's hands batted his away, and he laid those heated palms once more to aching flesh. The warmth quickly soothed the discomfort and eased the cramp. He rolled his fingertips in tiny circles that worked their own brand of magic, unlocking the tight muscle. Manning involuntarily sighed in pleasure, and the shifter chuckled.

Once Manning was able to stand upright again, Kayluth dropped his hands and stepped in front of him. "Come." He turned and walked across the room towards a hallway. Manning peeked over at the doorway Brandt had been led through and pondered his chances. *Where will you go? You're on a huge vessel in the middle of Odin-knows-where in space.* He glanced down at his bound hands and thought about the fact that he could barely stand with the pain slicing up his legs. He looked over to find Kayluth awaiting him. He bit at his lips, drew in a deep breath, and let it out slowly, before hobbling forward.

"Lead on, *Drottinn*," Manning sneered.

The hallway had several closed sliders, and as Manning shuffled his way down the corridor, he wondered what each hid. *Office? Library? Bedroom?*

Kayluth stood waiting at the extreme end of the hall. On all three sides were sliding doors, control panels beside them. He reached and, one by one, palmed the pads to open them. "Look," he said.

Manning took a step towards the room on the right. Tiny, it consisted of only a bed and small dresser. A manual pocket door, half-opened, led into another larger room beyond. "My room?"

Kayluth nodded and indicated to the room on the opposite side of the hall. Manning limped there and saw a standard bathroom: toilet, shower, and sink. An oversized bathtub sat at the back, large enough for four good-sized humans. He let out a breath, unhappy about his capture, but thankful that the facilities were familiar. Kayluth chuckled behind him.

"We are not so different than you in this form."

Form? Manning spun to face him, throwing himself off-balance again and leaning heavily against the jamb. He pursed his lips, stared, and debated how to ask.

The skipan inclined his head with a little hum, and then turned and entered the room behind him. Manning followed, hoping this would show him the answer to his unspoken question. He'd noticed the rounded outside walls of both the smaller bedroom and the bathroom and now saw why.

He stood in the center of the large, circular space and gaped at its size, enormous and open. Straight ahead, against the far wall, resided a four-poster bed lying low to the floor, the mattress easily able to accommodate ten humans. Large, colorful pillows and blankets in need of smoothing lay strewn upon it. Manning smirked, thinking of his own rumpled bed aboard *Moondrake*, but thinking of his ship turned his thoughts dark. He schooled his features, breathed in, and turned to the right, spying what would be his small room through the pocket door. Along the walls were several low cabinets and back to his left the bathing area.

“Moondrake?”

He shook his head free of errant thoughts and faced Kayluth. The shifter stood at the foot of the bed, holding on to one of the posts, pursing his lips. Manning’s nerves steeled at seeing this hint of nervousness on his captor.

Kayluth’s features suddenly hardened, and he pointed towards the bathroom. “Go. Strip, and I will join you in a tarran.”

Manning froze. *Strip?* He looked down at his hands, an idea forming. He held up his bound wrists. “Might be a problem.” Kayluth crooked a finger, and Manning moved to stand in front of him, hands raised. He was untied and spun around. With a slight push on his shoulder, Kayluth repeated the command. “Go.”

And Manning went.

He raced down the hallway, pain lancing up his calves with each step, heading for the entryway Brandt had been taken through. He slammed into it at full speed, bounced back and began beating a palm on the release pad. *Sweet Freya, let me out of here!*

“Come on, come on,” he yelled at the portal, banging on it with both fists. He stumbled backwards when Kayluth grabbed his collar and wrenched him away from the door. He kicked and stomped, ignoring the pain spiking up his legs every time his feet made hard contact with the floor. The high collar on his jacket choked him, and he clawed at the hand holding him.

Manning was tossed to the bathroom floor and lay sprawled a moment, gasping and massaging his throat. He was furious, but he didn’t dare look up at his captor, knowing he’d see a rage to match his own. His heavy breathing echoed loud in the small space. The toe of Kayluth’s boot poked at him, and he twisted, moving his body away from the hard, prodding toe. The skipan stepped

closer, pulled his leg back, and kicked him squarely in the ass. He slid a few hand-lengths across the floor.

“What?” Manning growled, glaring up at the shifter. He flinched under the cold piercing gaze staring down at him. Kayluth lashed out a bootheel at his leg, followed by several rapid, sharp strikes to his torso and rib cage.

Manning jerked his legs away, curling up into a ball. “Stop,” he yelled, his fury now pain and fear. He covered his head, huddling to make himself less of a target.

“Why?” Kayluth sneered, his sole biting deep into Manning’s hip, rocking his body. “Why ssshould I sstop? I assk for one sssimple ssshower, and you tried to run. To essscape.” His voice hissed with anger, the sound harsh and grating. Manning shuddered and covered his ears against the cruel sound.

“You think thiss isss sssome game to play? Ssseek to make a fool of the Ssskeppare?” His voice rose in volume. “You musst.”

Manning, grimacing and pressing his wrists over his ears, turned and spied the open doorway into the shifter’s bedroom. *If only...* He glanced up at the skipan, and seeing his face upturned, made that split-second decision. Scrambling and stumbling, he almost fell tripping over his feet. He staggered across the room and into the one Kayluth had called his.

He passed through the open door and spun to discover the skipan standing there, the pocket door half-closed between them. Manning hoped some good lived within the shifter and he’d leave him alone. He straightened and placed one hand on the jamb and the other on the indent on the door. Kayluth’s lips were pulled into a thin line. He looked as if he was going to say something, but held his tongue. Manning didn’t dare look away while he slid the door closed.

He stepped across the small space and palmed the control to slide the second door shut. A flash of Kayluth’s red tunic appeared before he cut off the view. A solid *thunk* on the door jolted him, and he fell back a few steps, grabbing at his chest, his heart hammering against his rib cage. He waited, frozen, for the skipan to enter, unable to make his body move. Once the adrenaline bled off, he collapsed to his knees and leaned his shoulder against the bed.

Breathe, Manning. You’re the Captain. A king’s son, damn it. Just... breathe. He tried to calm his racing heart, brain still short-circuiting. Centering himself, he pushed up and took a seat on the bed. He absently ran his palms on the blankets before grabbing up one of the pillows and hugging it.

A scream of frustration threatened, but he knew not to let it out. He stuffed the pillow's edge into his mouth and bit down hard, growling out his anger. Frustrated, he threw the pillow against the wall, picked up another one and punched it, imagining it was Kayluth's face. He watched it sail across the room, his mind still whirling. *Why?* That's what he needed answered. *Why my ship, my crew?*

Manning brushed at his cheek and his fingertips came away wet. *To Helheim with these tears!* They were unwanted and unneeded. He was determined to show no emotion to these wretched captors. He slid off the bed and collapsed to the floor, grinding his forehead into his knees and clutching his legs tightly. He had to figure out how it all went wrong, what happened to his crew and Brandt, and he needed to find a way to save them all.

Chapter Three

Resolve

The sound of scratching on the pocket door roused Manning from sleep. He rubbed at gritty eyes, his mouth dry. “What?” he called out, pushing himself up from the floor and wincing as a spike of pain near his waist stabbed him.

“May I come in?”

The shifter’s politeness unexpected, Manning stepped to the door with a frown. Standing put pressure on his bladder, and he wondered how many hours had passed since he and his crew had been brought aboard. He opened the door a few inches to glare at the skipan. It proved ineffective; Kayluth stood with his back to the door.

Manning took the opportunity presented and turned to exit into the hall, moving into the bathroom, closing both doors to the room. There were no locks, nothing to keep the shifter out if he wanted to come in. And it didn’t. While he relieved himself, the door leading in from the main bedroom opened, and the shifter stood there watching. He didn’t much care for the voyeurism, but wanted to save himself from getting kicked again. Ignoring the skipan and biting his tongue seemed the best option.

The alien paced closer, his footsteps quiet, barely heard over the splash of urine hitting the water in the bowl. Kayluth stopped directly behind Manning as he finished, and Manning moved his hands to protect his most precious aspect. The shifter took hold of the moon and drakken sash he wore and slipped it over his head. Removing one hand from his groin allowed Kayluth to draw it off. The skipan, with deft fingers, reached around him and began unbuttoning Manning’s jacket. He looked down at the slender, pale fingers, remembered the claws, and flinched.

Kayluth stopped unbuttoning the jacket and ran his palms up and down Manning’s upper arms. “Are you cold?” His breath was warm on Manning’s neck, his voice back to that honeyed softness.

Manning nodded, the warmth of the alien’s hands penetrating through his sleeves. *Better to let him think me cold than afraid.* Kayluth pressed his upper body to Manning’s back, the fronts of thighs to hamstrings and ass, fingers to collarbone. Fingertips dipped below the fabric of his undershirt, paths of heat

trailing in their wake. A shiver raced down his spine, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

The sweet scent of vanilla wafted around them. Manning breathed it in, vexed when his chest began to loosen and his muscles slackened. He growled, wishing the skipan hadn't done it, disliking the way it made him feel, and wondered if the aliens weren't able to control it. It infuriated him, knowing they could control his body while his mind remained sane... *If I'd gone mindless like Brandt had, or my crew, then what was I to care?* But no, he had the unfortunate ability to retain full use of his faculties, and that made it all the worse. Still, he steeled his thoughts, determined to fight every step of the way, even if it came with violence upon his body. His crew—Brandt—needed him to fight.

“Stop,” he said, voice low, his thoughts filled with images of Brandt. His head involuntarily fell back to the skipan's pecs while fingers resumed their job of undressing him.

Kayluth chuckled as he unfastened the last button and took hold of the lapels. “Why would I stop? I finally have you where I want you.” He slid the jacket off Manning's shoulders and halfway down his arms. The skipan nuzzled into his hair, breath blowing hotly onto his scalp, while eager fingers pulled his undershirt up and slipped underneath. The alien's warm fingertips ghosted over his abs, causing the muscles to tighten. Had it been anyone other than a captor he might have wanted it to continue. Had it been Brandt...

“I want to see all of you, little Moondrake,” he whispered into Manning's ear, pushing the jacket down and letting it drop to the floor between them.

Manning's undershirt was lifted, causing his arms to rise and exposing his half-hard shaft. Kayluth twisted the undershirt around his wrists, locking them, and pushed them behind his own neck. With one hand holding his wrist, the skipan bent to place lips on his skin. A fiery palm held onto one hip while a heated mouth licked and bit at his shoulder, and Manning's ire with his body's response grew, his cock lengthening of its own accord.

“Stop,” he spat.

His demand went ignored, and agile fingers pushed down his unbuttoned pants before gravity did the rest. Kayluth shifted and slipped a knee between Manning's legs. Heat from the skipan's body pulsed through his, turning him to putty. He thought briefly that his body might have melted to the floor if not for the skipan's hold on him. When gentle fingers carded through the hair at his

groin and a warm fist encircled his shaft, he ground his teeth, biting back a groan, distressed that his body betrayed him.

“What lovely sounds you make, pet,” Kayluth drawled, and Manning jerked, his eyes bulging.

“Don’t call me that,” he growled, finding the strength to twist to the side, arching his back to put some distance between them. His legs tangled in his pants, and he fell to his hands and knees. Manning dropped his head and shoulders, pressing his forehead to the floor, and repeated his plea. “Don’t.”

Kayluth crouched down in front of him, cupping his chin and forcing him to look up. “*Hm.*” He made a sound of noncommitment, inspecting Manning’s tightly pressed lips and locked jaw. He released his hold, rose, and scooped up Manning’s shirt, jacket, and sash. “Finish getting undressed and take a shower. I will lay out fresh clothes, then we will eat.” He left him there on the floor.

The faint vibrations through the floorboards into Manning’s hands reminded him of his days of flight school, the camaraderie of classmates, the rumble of a ship’s engine beneath his feet. His mouth dropped open and he gasped for breath, his heart still beating rapidly. He’d known that his father would never let him see battle. He’d be assigned to a merchant vessel, and he’d been all right with that. Every day brought something new, but now it appeared he was on the greatest adventure of all. A new species to learn about. Manning scoffed. If only it didn’t come at the expense of being slaves. He closed his eyes. Ah, Trickster, you sly, sly god of deceit. *Pleasure slaves.*

Angrily he slapped his hand on the floor a few times. “To the dark of Helheim with you, Loki,” he cursed the Trickster, fisted his hands, and pressed them to his eyes. “May you rot there for all eternity and never grace the halls of Valhalla. May Odin spit on your body and stomp on your grave.” There was only one way this skipan would have his submission. He’d have to bind him, and even then, he’d have a fight on his hands. *I’ll never give in.*

With a final slap to the floor, his resolve made, Manning pushed to his feet.

He stood under the spray of the shower for many tarrans, letting the hot water beat down upon his shoulders and upper back, massaging away some of the aches and tension. He stuck his head under the water, letting it run down the sides of his face while he examined the bruises Kayluth had inflicted. The ones on his legs and ribs were an astonishing bright red. Gingerly, he walked his

fingertips along his rib cage, thankful nothing felt broken, but growled knowing this heelprint would end up a lovely shade of purple and green before long.

“Oh.”

Manning spun to face Kayluth. He hadn't heard him return to the bathroom, nor open the shower door. The shifter studied his marks with parted lips, extending a hand to touch. Manning fell back, raising his hands to protect his torso, not bothering to cover himself elsewhere. Kayluth's gaze darted up to meet his, the skipan's hand dropping back to his side.

Manning stared back, scowling. “What? This?” He pointed at a spot on his leg. “Or this?” He pointed to his ribs, snarling. “Did you not expect to see your handiwork on my body? Where *you* kicked me?”

“I...” The skipan paused, then shook his head. “Are you done?”

“No,” Manning answered impassively. “I've barely started. Shall I show you each one? Shall I tell you what these will look like tomorrow? How I'll be stiff and sore?”

Kayluth hissed sharply and his upper body lurched forward. Manning pressed himself against the wall, relaxing only a fraction when it appeared that the skipan would not enter the shower.

“I asskasked not about your injuriesss, Moondrake. I asskasked are you done with your ssshower?”

Manning gestured to an array of bottles on a shelf. “I don't know what these are.”

“The firssst one there...” Kayluth started, then drew in a breath.

Manning pointed to a bottle, allowing his captor time to come down from his anger. “This yellow one?” He deliberately groaned loudly as he reached for it.

“Yes, yellow. Use it to wash your hair. Use the white one next to make your hair soft.”

“All right. This last one for my body?”

“Yes. A few more tarrans only. I am getting hungry. You must be too. You've been here a full one of your days.”

Manning gaped at him in disbelief. A whole day! The thought of food made his stomach growl. Kayluth chuckled at the sound. *At least his laugh sounds better than that awful hissing.*

“Quickly now, Moondrake.” Kayluth spun his hand, turned, and left him to his washing.

Chapter Four

Torque

Manning froze, about to push open the frosted shower door, when he saw the shifter's hazy form through the glass move forward. Swallowing hard, he shoved on the door, hoping to surprise his captor, but Kayluth caught it against his palm. He held up a towel in his other hand and gestured for Manning to step out.

"Dry off," Kayluth said, handing Manning the towel and watching him run it over his body. He placed the towel on his head to dry his hair and began rubbing the water out. Manning noted Kayluth's movement, inching closer to him, felt the heat thrown off the skipan's body onto his bare skin. He glanced down to see Kayluth had removed his boots—revealing striped stockings—and now stood before him in loose black pants. The incongruity of the stripes with his leadership position wasn't lost on Manning, and he wondered how many of Kayluth's crew knew he wore them.

Kayluth's hands pushed him away from the towel, and he continued the process of drawing the moisture from his hair. When he pulled the towel off, Manning shook his head, wet strands flying and catching the skipan in the cheek. Kayluth grabbed Manning's chin between the vee of his thumb and forefinger, not hard, but firmly holding him still. A flash of yellow invaded those blue depths, and Manning watched Kayluth's pupils dilate, the irises shifting into amber. He saw the way his captor's gaze flickered over his face and paused on his lips. He breathed in the faint aroma of cake and spice.

Arousal definitely brought that pheromone out; he knew that now. But these skipan were also able to turn it on at will. It was this knowledge that scared him. Were they capable of turning it off as easily? Or would they just turn it on, make him and his crew compliant and force them, use them, in whatever way they desired? That seemed to be the case with the rest of his crew, and although Kayluth may be above that, Manning had no way to know what would happen. But he needed to take a chance and ask.

"What do you want with me?" His words were hushed, his body frozen in place by the hand holding him. Already his body had fallen under the spell of that cursed tolsu.

The skipan brushed a few strands of Manning's long, damp hair behind an ear, before wrapping his arm around his upper back. The hand on his chin

pressed back to his throat, and then slipped slowly downward. Kayluth watched his own hand's unhurried path. When the skipan's fingertips grazed Manning's belly, his abs clenched and Kayluth paused, resuming once the muscles relaxed. The shifter's hand slid around Manning's waist, then down to cup his ass. With fingers spread wide, each of them a line of ardent fire projecting out from Kayluth's palm. Manning held himself firm while surrounded by the skipan's heat.

Kayluth lowered his mouth to Manning's shoulder, licked up a single errant drop of water, his tongue swiping smoothly along damp skin. "What do I want?" he said, his voice tremulous and thick. It was too easy to fall under his spell. Between Kayluth's warm skin, gentle hands, and talented tongue teasing at his flesh, Manning's body again fell victim to the pleasurable assault. The tension in his muscles drifted away like the steam from the shower. But his stomach had further demands, rumbling its disapproval of emptiness. The sound woke him from Kayluth's distraction.

Kayluth snorted, sliding his hand from Manning's ass to rub his belly. "I suppose I should feed you." He took hold of Manning's hand and led him across the hall where he lifted a light-gray tunic from the top of the dresser. Kayluth slipped it over Manning's head, and ran his palms down the flannel fabric. There were no sleeves, and a long slit in the front ended just below his pecs; the whole piece only came down to midhigh. The skipan picked up a length of braided fabric and tied it around Manning's waist with a simple release knot.

As Manning looked down at himself, Kayluth raised a finger to his face, gliding the side of it along his cheek, jaw, and neck. His fingertip rested in the hollow of Manning's throat a brief moment before it followed the cut down to its end. He reversed his movement ending at Manning's chin, which he lifted to meet his gaze, a lazy grin pulling at the corners of his mouth. Many of the studded braids had fallen forward along his cheeks. Manning raised a hand to touch them, but stopped. He inhaled, no longer detecting the scent of the tolsu, and a bubble of unease ran up his spine. The skipan cocked his head, studying him, his eyes having reverted to blue.

"I'm hungry," Manning said to break the silence. "Can we eat?" The skipan's grin returned, this time with teeth. He spun Manning around, stepped in front of him, snagged ahold of the belt, and pulled him down the hall.

Only Manning's desire for sustenance allowed him to do this.

They entered a great room and the area where Manning had last seen Brandt. The memory sprang forward of his lover kneeling there on the hard floor, shackled neck to ankle, and with it the arousal of watching him kiss his skipan guards. By the time they stopped in front of a small, blond wood table, Manning breathed shallowly. Kayluth turned to him, but to avoid his scrutiny, Manning twisted to look at the couch where he'd first awoken instead.

"Hm." Kayluth's hand cupped his cheek, guiding his face back around. "Is there a problem, Moondrake?" The skipan sounded sympathetic, which Manning found odd; he expected annoyance. Still, he didn't want to give the shifter any opportunity to try to endear himself. A day ago, he had been Manning Dagrson, captain of the *Moondrake*, and free.

Now he was nothing more than a plaything. There would be no willingness from him. He crossed his arms, straightened his spine, and looked Kayluth straight in the eye. "No."

Kayluth's brow furrowed, and he slipped his hand from Manning's cheek to thread into the hair at the base of his scalp. "No, what?"

"There is no problem," Manning answered, knowing full well he defied him. He grimaced at the painful grip tugging his hair, the pull stinging enough, but he continued to stare openly in defiance. Kayluth never looked away, but Manning felt his other hand slide down his arm, stop at his elbow, and then he gasped in pain, leaning down, sideways, any way to get relief. The skipan followed him until Manning's knees connected with the floor. There he tugged on the belt strap, allowing it to unravel, and stepped behind Manning, pulling his arms back. Kayluth secured his wrists with the belt, overlapping them to lie on his lower back.

"Orm!" Kayluth called out, and an armored skipan, tall and braided, appeared, pushing through a swinging door. Manning nervously watched the larger shifter approach and fell back onto Kayluth's legs, another knot of fear forming in his chest. Would he be passed off? Taken away? His heart thumped forcefully, blood pulsing, making him light-headed. At least, he thought, he had some small inkling where he stood with his captor, not so if he was dragged away by another.

He tilted his chin up to looked at Kayluth, finding him already staring down. Another one of those little hums came from the skipan, and he placed his palm under Manning's chin and held it. He hiss-clicked something to Orm without looking away, and Manning heard the shifter retreat and then return.

“I do not wish to hurt you, little one, but you are quite a handful,” Kayluth said, voice sugary, sickly sweet to Manning’s ears. He moved his hand from Manning’s chin to the top of his head, bending his neck forward, tucking chin to chest. “Keep your head down.”

Not that he could move it. Kayluth pulled back his hand, replaced swiftly by Orm’s, who wasn’t nearly as gentle as Kayluth had been, his nails digging into Manning’s scalp. How appropriate his name was Orm, a snake truly; his hands were like ice compared to the heat of Kayluth’s.

A second rope of braided cloth was positioned around Manning’s upper body and arms and secured behind him. Two more were added, one midchest and elbow high and another lower, encircling his belly and forearms, pinning his arms tightly. His heart thudded loudly, and he struggled to breathe, blood rushing in his ears. Each added rope made his skin ripple with goose bumps, and he broke out in a cold sweat.

Kayluth spoke to Orm, who moved off. Kayluth’s warmer hand returned to Manning’s head, stroking this time. He began humming that same melody from earlier, his fingertips carding through Manning’s hair. The tiniest bit of his pheromone was released, and Manning gulped it down, anxious to calm himself, barely able to think straight. The tolsu took hold when Orm paced back in.

“Here,” he said to Kayluth, standing to the side where Manning could see Orm’s calf-high boots, adorned with metal buckles. The hilt of a knife protruded out of the top of one.

Manning closed his eyes, debated about going for the knife, but since he only had his teeth, figured it wasn’t worth the effort. A cold thin circle of metal was placed around his neck. Kayluth pressed the ends together until they clicked, then spun it around.

“It looks good on him,” Orm commented dryly, bringing a sharp hiss from Kayluth.

“You may go, Orm,” Kayluth gritted, his voice full of tension. “Sssend Lian in with our meal.”

“Yes, Skeppare.” Orm retreated. He’d only been gone a few tarrans before someone else entered. Manning could only see slim, bare ankles, a woman’s feet, and hear her place something on the table.

“Thank you, Lian.”

Manning peeked up to discover her staring at him when she bowed low. She had big sapphire eyes and a pale, slender face, a single braid hanging on either side. Her mouth parted to speak, but then she clamped her lips shut, straightened, and hurried from the room.

Kayluth slid one hand under Manning's hair and caressed his neck. "I am hungry, Moondrake, and you have delayed my meal." He paused. Pressure on Manning's scalp made him lean forward until his forehead touched the cool floor. "Do not move." He pushed harder, carelessly grinding Manning into the wood to remind him of his place.

Manning gaped, his heart beating wildly in his throat, sweat beading on his temples. He tried to follow the skipan's movements, twisting his head slightly to watch his footsteps. He looked through the strands of his hair, saw striped feet move to the couch and then back to the table. The heavy *plop* of a cushion startled him.

"Kneel here."

Manning held still.

Kayluth stepped closer and Manning cried out, the skipan yanking on the torque, its edges biting into his throat. He clamped his mouth shut, rearing upwards to loosen the metal's attack. Kayluth let go once he was upright.

"Why do you ssspite me?"

Kayluth's question was valid: Manning defied him. He smirked at his captor. "Why would I not?"

"Drek!" Kayluth slapped his hands together and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. He spun and stomped a few paces away, placing his fists on his hips. He tilted his head up, his anger fierce, and Manning's smile fled when he realized what he'd done. Before, his arms had been free to protect his body. Now he had no way to defend himself if the skipan decided to lay into him again.

He dubbed himself an idiot, plain and simple. Taunting the skipan with words and actions without thinking about the consequences. He took the opportunity to curl up, his forehead almost to the floor, to make himself less of a target. His eyes, however, never left Kayluth's socked feet. He tensed when he saw those feet turn towards him. Booted or not, the strength behind them would inflict more damage.

Kayluth huffed and walked to the chair at the head of the table. Manning released the breath he held when he heard the scrape of its legs on the floor.

The metallic clang of what he supposed was a cover for the food echoed, and the aroma of cooked meat filled his nostrils.

Manning's stomach grumbled in response, but he doubted he'd be able to swallow anything the way his belly tangled in knots. He held his bent-over position and tried not to think about his hunger when the scents of the food caused saliva to flood into his mouth. His knees and back began to ache from kneeling on the hard floorboards. When he couldn't hold himself still any longer, he began curling his fingers.

"Moondrake?"

His movements must have drawn Kayluth's attention. "Yes," Manning answered, shifting again, but not moving from his spot.

"You hate me?"

Manning scoffed into the floorboards. "Shouldn't I? You have me on my knees and expect me to..." He growled and muttered under his breath. "Loki has set upon me and my men. Perhaps I should be content; we are alive."

"Hm..." came Kayluth's soft reply.

Manning pictured the skipan with those pursed lips again, not knowing what to do. Elation and dread warred within him.

"Come, kneel on the cushion, and I will feed you."

Manning froze at the imagery those words provided. Would Kayluth place the plate on the floor, make him eat like a dog? He slowly raised his upper body until he could look at the skipan. Kayluth held up a slice of something white, his brows pulling together.

Manning concluded that his captor would feed him by hand, which to him was only slightly better than eating it off the floor. Food sounded extremely good. And the skipan had spoken politely. He was willing to make this single concession in exchange for a full belly. He knee-walked, each placement of his joints on the floor sending fresh spikes of agony up his thighs, and needle-like pricks in his soles from the blood rushing in. His bound arms made balance impossible, and he wobbled, clenching his jaw against the pain. He bit back a sigh of relief once he'd settled on the thick cushion. His ankles were able to hang at a more natural angle and the prickles eased.

Kayluth reached forward with his empty left hand, and Manning leaned back to avoid his touch. The skipan, undeterred, waited and reached forward

again to tuck his hair behind his ears. He glanced at the shifter's plate, saliva filling his mouth again. There wasn't much food left on it.

"Open," Kayluth said, wiggling the slice of food.

Manning gritted his teeth, resentful, but with hunger gnawing at his gut, he complied. Kayluth swiped the piece along his tongue and mouth before pulling it away. His stomach demanded to be fed. He growled at the tease, licking at his lips, tasting the sweetness of the food.

"Your words rang with truth," Kayluth said. "You are not yet happy here. If you learn your place, little one, then I can reverse your lot. With acceptance will come pleasure." He held the morsel before Manning. "What is my name?"

Manning scowled, confused by Kayluth's speech of acceptance and pleasure, and his pride refused to give in easily. He smoothed his features, meeting the skipan's solid blue gaze and answered, "Kayluth."

The skipan's left hand snaked out, rocking Manning's head sideways. He blinked rapidly, trying to shake off the stars, while he watched Kayluth put the piece of food in his own mouth, chewing slowly.

Kayluth picked up another slice. "What ssshall you call me?"

"Skeppare."

Kayluth cocked his head, snorted, and slapped Manning again. This time Manning had heard the skipan's telltale lisp of irritation and prepared himself for the blow, leaning away from it and lessening its intensity, but it still hurt. He grunted, forced to watch the shifter eat the piece before picking up another.

"Come now, pet. Thiss isss all that isss left." He indicated to the plate. "Will you go hungry until the next meal?"

A shiver raced up Manning's spine. He needed to make a decision before his anger, and his pride, caused him to lose control. He had a crew to think about. Had Brandt to remember. He debated refusing the food. He'd hate every second of it, but he could deal with the hunger. He'd trained to go without sustenance for several days. But days without food would leave him weak, and his men would need him to be strong if they were ever to escape. He dipped his head to avoid looking at the shifter and pondered that line in the sand. How many more hours would he go hungry? And were those hours of discomfort worth it?

He looked up at the skipan, surprised to see a tilt of head and the softened edges of his face. The two images the shifter presented were like night and day.

One hard, one kind. One merciless, one full of compassion. It was the gentle expression he currently bore that allowed Manning to speak without remorse.

“Drottinn.”

Kayluth held the piece to Manning’s lips, the corner of his mouth twitching up. Manning parted his mouth only enough to allow the skipan to place the morsel on the end of his tongue. He tipped his head back to let the piece slide in, biting into it nervously. The juiciness surprised him, and he eagerly chewed and swallowed.

Kayluth picked up another slice when he had finished the first. “Again.”

“Drottinn.” And he received another bite.

He asked Manning to repeat calling him Master, a tiny smile appearing each time, until all the slices were gone. He might have liked this playful side of the shifter, if only there wasn’t a taskmaster on the flip side.

The food was barely enough to take the edge off Manning’s hunger, and he was still thirsty. “May I have a drink?” he asked, watching Kayluth wipe his fingers on a cloth.

His eyes snapped to Manning’s, blazing streaks of gold. “Did we not go through thiss?” Manning remained silent. Kayluth slapped the cloth onto the table. “You get nothing unless you assk properly. Ssstupid, insssolent pet!”

“May I have a drink, please?”

“Drek!” He pushed back from the table, standing and towering over Manning. The height difference and his bound arms reminded him that his captor had all the power; his resolve slipped.

“Drottinn,” Manning relented.

“Hm. Better.” Kayluth moved back to the table and filled his glass from a pitcher. Clear fluid ran from vessel to vessel. The shifter lifted the cup and stood before Manning, positioning it at his lips. He took a small sip at first, barely wetting his lips, taking only enough to affirm it was water. A larger sip then, and another, eventually draining the glass.

“More?” Kayluth asked, pulling the cup away. Manning shook his head. The skipan placed the cup down and called for Lian and Orm.

Lian returned to clear the cup and plate while Orm arrived with a thin, book-sized, glass tablet in his hand. Kayluth and Orm took seats at the table, leaving Manning kneeling on the cushion. Loathe to draw attention to himself,

he didn't dare move, sure he'd topple if he tried. His feet were numb again, and he'd stopped wiggling his fingers while eating. As their conversation lengthened, he relaxed his shoulders, slumping forward. The soft, hissing, hypnotic lilt of their voices, along with the feel of Kayluth drawing strands of his hair through long fingers, caused his eyelids to grow heavy. He made an effort to stay awake, reminding himself that he was here at the shifter's disposal—*his pleasure*. No matter that he thought the skipan handsome, his height and pale complexion, his dark locks... No. He'd enslaved Manning's men. His skipan crew doing Odin knows what to them.

Manning flinched, the movement firing his body's neurons, turning muscle twitches into full-blown spasms. His shoulders jerked, blood racing to locked joints. He grimaced, the pain excruciating, clenching his teeth, and curling up. He lost his balance and fell to the side, unable to catch himself, landing hard on his upper arm. Kayluth yelled for Lian, rolling Manning onto his stomach. Manning's jaw locked tight, and he bit back a groan and blew hard through his nostrils, determined not to show any weakness. His legs jerked, trying to pull into his chest, but heated palms grabbed at his calves and thighs and began kneading his flesh.

A flash of light and his arms thudded heavily to the floor, released from their bonds. He wanted to bring his arms up to his head, but his hands refused to do his bidding. Fingertips pressed into his palms, worked their way up his forearms to his shoulders. Manning focused on breathing and relaxing his muscles, letting the skipan work on his body. A deep inhale brought with it that drugging tolsu and he pulled it into his lungs, held it, and slowly let it out. Again he breathed in, and again, letting it work its magic. Letting it sedate him. Leading him into darkness.

Chapter Five

Dreams

The bed shifted when Brandt slipped in next to him. He lay sleepily on his side, warm fingertips touching the top of his head and ghosting downward, trailing lines of heat along his scalp and spine. His hair was brushed forward, the wispy ends tickling his cheeks and nose. Soft, delicate kisses alighted on each of his vertebrae. Manning sighed, his pulse increasing, blood rushing to the points of contact and filling his cock. He bent his head forward to give his lover's lips a greater surface area to work. The hand slid across his shoulder blades, leaving tingling dots ablaze wherever the fingertips momentarily paused. He hunched, pushing his skin and muscles out, demanding Brandt pay more attention to the entire surface of his back. The dry, chaste kisses began working their way southward, palms and fingers massaging into his rib cage and waist, turning him to lie on his stomach.

He pushed his face into the pillow, muffling his low moan of delight when a wet kiss graced his coccyx and fiery palms spread the cheeks of his ass. Warm breath blew over his hole followed by a long, slick lick. He raised his head, gasping in pleasure...

And froze. *Tolsu.*

Dreaming. It wasn't Brandt in bed with him; it was the skipan. He'd been dreaming and the shifter took advantage of him. He slowly turned to find Kayluth straddling his legs, licking his lips, eyes bright and wide, smirking with pride, his gaze raking over Manning's naked body. Manning placed his palms on the skipan's muscular pecs. He leaned upward, a tiny smile on his lips and, with a growl emanating from his throat, shoved Kayluth off the bed.

"Get out!" Manning demanded, that small smile now a vicious scowl. He jerked the blanket up, covering his legs and ankles, afraid that Kayluth would snag one. He felt humiliated and furious. And disgusted with himself. To think he'd enjoyed the feel of the skipan's hands and mouth, until he realized who'd done it.

Kayluth chuckled, but didn't move to leave. He straightened his tunic and belt and met Manning's gaze with an equally intent one of his own.

"Out of bed now, Moondrake. It is time to break our fast."

Manning glared up at him, making no move to rise. The standoff continued for a long tarran, until Kayluth had obviously had enough. He seized the blanket and snatched it from Manning's grip.

Manning grumbled, but slid off the far side of the bed, needing to put space between them. He covered his groin with one hand and walked backwards out of his room into the hall, where he spun and entered the bathroom, ensuring the door slid shut behind him.

Kayluth did not bother him this time, leaving Manning bewildered, sure the shifter would barge in again. A large rectangular mirror hung above the sink and he studied his reflection. He palmed the light brown scruff on his cheeks and chin, dismayed at his bloodshot blue eyes with their flecks of gold. A mess of brown and blond tangles crowned his head, and he dragged wet fingers through it in an attempt to get it into some semblance of order. He took a cursory glance down his body, checking on the damage done to him. Manning stretched up on his toes and reached for the ceiling trying to work the kinks from his muscles. When the door opened behind him, he dropped to his feet and twisted to look over his shoulder.

The skipan stood in the doorway with another gray tunic and belt draped over one arm. Behind him was Lian with a hairbrush grasped tightly in her hands. Manning searched quickly for a towel to cover himself, frowning when none were visible.

Kayluth hiss-clicked to Lian, his gaze firmly locked on Manning's ass, and she turned around. He stepped forward, and shook the tunic out, holding it open for him like he was a child that needed help getting dressed. Manning's brow furrowed, but then he shrugged. His captor clothed him at least, not forcing him to remain naked for his ogling pleasure.

Gah! Manning breathed in deeply, blowing it out upwards. *Pleasure*. He rolled his eyes at the thought.

"Tsk, tsk, little one. Do not roll your eyes at me."

"I wasn't roll—" He cut himself off, shaking his head. He refused to act like a child arguing with Daddy-dearest. There was certainly no love here. He allowed the skipan to tie the belt around his waist and direct him into the large bedroom.

Kayluth sat on the bed and moved back, pulling Manning down into the space between his legs, his back to the skipan. The shifter held out his hand and Lian placed the hairbrush in it. Kayluth ran the brush over Manning's head,

stunning him. He never expected the Skeppare of a space vessel would be the one brushing out the knots in his hair. Lian knelt on the bed beside Kayluth, rebraiding some of his locks that had come undone.

Her questioning hiss, and hand coming into Manning's view, had him turning to look at her. She snagged a section of his hair only to have her hand slapped away by Kayluth. Manning snorted at the move of jealousy. He'd done it to more than one of his own crew who had dared to lay a hand on Brandt. The smile that had crept up on him died then, and he looked away.

Fingernails scratched down the back of his scalp, pulling a sigh from him. A sigh of frustration.

"What have you done with my crew?" he asked, leaning forward, away from the skipan's claws. He stood and crossed his arms, determined to put both some physical and emotional distance between himself and Kayluth. "Where is Brandt?"

The shifter regarded him, his lips a tight line. "Who?"

Vexation rising in his core, Manning glared at the two skipan, brow furrowed. "Brandt. My bodyguard, my lov—logistics expert. The one who was brought here."

Kayluth's head tilted and he squinted at him. "Here?"

Manning rolled his eyes. "Yes! Here!" He pointed to the floor. "By your two crewman."

"Ssu. He did not behave, much like you are doing, Moondrake." Kayluth shifted to the edge of the bed, placing his feet on the floor. He rose gracefully, and Manning took two steps back in alarm at the tight-lipped, hard edge in Kayluth's expression. The skipan advanced upon him, and he retreated until he bumped into one of the cabinets. Still Kayluth came forward, sliding a knee between his thighs. Manning arched back, trying to keep some distance between them.

Kayluth threaded the fingers of his right hand into Manning's hair, combing them through, unencumbered by tangles. He tugged on the ends before releasing them and repeating the affectionate gesture. The skipan turned his head to the side, gemstones clinking. He hissed at Lian, and she scurried from the room, taking some of Manning's courage with him. A small whimper escaped.

His captor peered down at him, fingers still locked in his mane. The grip tightened, pulling on the strands.

“You sssingle thiss human out. Why?”

Manning pressed his lips together, shaking his head. The grip on his hair increased, tilting his head back, exposing his throat. He swallowed hard, feeling his Adam’s apple moving under his skin. He stared up at the ceiling, conscious of the warm breath being blown on his flesh. Forcing his eyes to cross, he glanced down along his nose to see the top of Kayluth’s head. The skipan’s braids all fell forward, the ends tickling his neck, but unable to hold the view for long, he looked upwards again.

A thin line of wetness started at his collarbone and rose in a winding way up his throat, leaving a cool path in its wake. He startled at the single hot breath blown on his damp skin. Kayluth added his left hand to Manning’s hair, fingers curled, their tips cradling his head and neck, holding him in place.

“I like the way you taste, little one,” Kayluth murmured into Manning’s flesh, his words burning both skin and mind. “And I am hungry.”

Manning gasped, getting a mouthful of tolsu, and slammed his jaw shut with an audible click. Kayluth raised his head, bright-blue irises wandering over Manning’s face. The skipan studied him a tarran, head cocked, his eyes darkening before releasing him with dark brows raised.

Kayluth stepped back. “I frighten you.”

Manning heard both the statement and the question. Was he or wasn’t he scared of this skipan? Of his capture? Of being a slave? Although so far he’d done nothing that he would have thought of as servile. There’d been no preparation of food, no serving of drinks, no dressing or undressing the shifter. He shook his head.

“You do, but...” Unsure what he wanted to say, he held his tongue and dropped his gaze from Kayluth’s.

“The other members of your crew are not cowed by their masters. They thrive here, are loved here.” Kayluth stepped forward, and Manning stepped to the side, sliding along the cabinet towards his tiny room. “But not you. Why?”

Manning snapped his gaze up to meet the skipan’s, eyes wild with disbelief. “Sweet Freya! Unbelievable! Do you really not know?” Anger bubbled in his core and seized control. He straightened off the cabinet, rolled his shoulders back, and advanced on Kayluth. When he stood before the skipan—no longer caring about the danger he was putting himself in—he jabbed a finger into Kayluth’s sternum.

“You,” he snarled, his lips curling in disgust, “—whatever you are— captured my crew at weapon-point, drugged us with some cursed tolsu, turned my men into zombies lusting for lips, knocked me unconscious, beat me, and bound me.” Kayluth retreated under the onslaught of words and finger-jabs, and Manning stayed right with him. “I’ve suffered your boot, your hand, your mouth. For what?” One last stab and Kayluth fell back onto the mattress.

As he fell he snagged Manning’s belt and pulled him down. Manning landed with his knees between Kayluth’s legs, hands braced on the skipan’s firm pecs. Kayluth rolled, putting Manning on his back beneath him. Fiery palms pressed down on his biceps to keep him immobile. He hooked his ankles over Manning’s to keep him from kicking.

Manning shrank back into the bed, looking up into eyes more yellow than blue. This shifting of color, the shifting of nails to claws, skin to scales, this is what frightened him. And not knowing when the skipan would eventually slake his thirst for pleasure on his body. He shuddered with the thought.

“Just get on with it,” Manning gritted, closing his eyes and turning his face away. Better to get it over with now. Maybe the skipan would be disgusted with his body and want to get rid of him, and didn’t that raise a whole new set of questions.

The sudden release of his biceps surprised him. He pulled his arms in, crossing them on his chest. He felt Kayluth rising off the bed, watched him stare at the floor, breathing deeply. The skipan eventually glanced at him, a frown marring his handsome face. Kayluth sighed, turned, and exited the bedroom, leaving Manning confused concerning what the skipan had said regarding his crew and frustrated at the lack of answers to his questions.

Manning had no idea how long he’d lain there. When his stomach started gnawing he sat up. He stood and walked into the bathroom, emptied his bladder, washed his hands, and splashed water on his face. His haggard reflection stared back at him from the mirror, his skin pale and eyes red-rimmed. He cupped his hands, filling them with water from the sink, and drank before smoothing down the tunic and adjusting the belt around his waist.

While he’d lain there, he’d given thought to his crew. Were they happy here, like Kayluth had said? The skipan believed it to be true, but he had his doubts. The way the tolsu had worked on them, were they kept in some perpetual state of bliss? Addicted to some drugged high, never to break the

habit? He'd seen people in the capital lost to a new breathable pain medication. When used sparingly, it gave immediate relief, but larger amounts brought on a mild euphoria. Over time, more and more was needed to feel the high, and a huge dose would stop the heart. Too many citizens had died before his father's men were able to put a halt to the drug's production.

Manning ran his fingers into his hair, tugging it, and trying to pull his thoughts into submission. Another growl from his belly decided matters. Food first, questions second with, hopefully, answers after.

He stepped into the hallway and paced down the wooden floorboards. He admired them; they had nothing similar to this on *Moondrake*. He sighed, missing her greatly.

“Moondrake?”

Manning halted and looked up at Kayluth, finding him sitting at the table, a plate half full of food before him.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. Manning nodded. “Come. Kneel here.” He gestured to the same cushion that Manning had knelt on the day before. He hesitated, but another fierce rumble drove him forward. Still he refused to kneel and stood next to the cushion instead.

The skipan tilted his head, and Manning chuckled to himself, picking up on the tells in the skipan's body language. He smothered his humor and took a step back when a shot of gold streaked into Kayluth's darkened gaze.

Kayluth tsked. “Again? You must wish to go hungry. Soon you will be ‘little one’ in more than name. Is that what you want?”

Manning fisted his hands at his sides, bouncing them lightly against his thighs. “No. That's not what I want.”

“No? Then kneel and I will feed you. Let me take away those loud noises coming from your belly.”

Manning shook his head. “I can feed myself, Kayluth.”

The skipan launched himself out of the chair, and Manning stumbled backwards, eyes wide. He growled in frustration when he backpedaled into the couch, the surface catching him in an already bruised spot on his thigh. He sidestepped along its edge, holding out an arm to keep his captor at bay. Kayluth batted his arm away and gripped the front of his tunic with his left hand, halting Manning's retreat. He snapped the belt free from around Manning's waist and spun him, pushing him down over the couch back. The

skipan pulled on his arms and holding them with one hand, looped the belt around his wrists with the other.

He slid two blazing fingers underneath the torque and hauled Manning up. He gasped, the collar cutting into his windpipe, sucking in air as soon as he was able. He twisted to look at the skipan, but one glance into those golden eyes had him quickly averting his gaze, wincing when Kayluth grabbed a hunk of his hair. He leaned into Manning's ear, his breath steaming the sensitive skin of his scalp.

“Thiss musst be what you want, then. To be tied up, forsssed to ssubmit to your Drottinn.”

Manning closed his eyes, his mind screaming *no* and *yes*. No, he didn't want to be forced, but yes... Tie him up, bind him tight, because that would be the only way the skipan would get any type of obedience from him.

Kayluth dragged him back to the table and pushed him to his knees. Scalding fingertips held his chin to his chest. He could hear the skipan's ragged breathing, even through the blood pounding in his ears. He strove to bring his own breathing under control, sucking in the tolsu that seeped from the skipan. He continued to ball his hands, tightening and loosening the fists, pulling on the belt, feeling it bite into his flesh, struggling to stave off the weakening of his muscles.

Those heated fingers began their journey through his hair. Each stroke drawing off the anger and anxiety, subduing him with gentle caresses, soothing away the tension. His shoulders dropped first, his vertebrae no longer bothering to hold his head up. His fingers stilled and his back curled, his forehead heading for the floor. He lost the fight, feeling Drottinn kneel behind him and cover his body with his own.

He drifted, surrounded in a warm cocoon, letting go of the anguish and the light.

Manning rubbed his left cheek into the toasty warmth of Brandt's leg. Had he fallen asleep on his lover again? A gentle slide of fingers flowed down his torso. He sighed, relaxing into the couch, listening to Brandt hum a strange tune. He recognized it, but couldn't place where he'd heard it before. A fingertip ran along the edge of his exposed ear, teasing his skin. He flinched at the light touch and smiled.

“No tickling, Brandt,” he whispered.

The hum cut off and the fingertip disappeared from its spot on his neck. Manning frowned and rolled to his back, finally opening his eyes to look at Brandt, a crystalline gaze staring down at him instead. He raised his hands, the belt pinching his wrists, sleep instantly wiped away. He rolled off the couch, landing hard on his knees next to Kayluth’s right leg. The skipan slipped a finger under his torque, tugging, applying only enough pressure to hold him in place, its thin, twisted coil hugging the back of his neck.

Deceitful Trickster, fooled me again.

He held still, caution warring with the need for action. The need to put distance between the skipan and himself was overpowering, almost overriding his common sense. He hated that his body enjoyed the sensations, even for that one brief tarran, when his crew might be suffering. No matter what Kayluth said, until he saw them with his own eyes there was no truth in his captor’s words. He had only the vision of his men lying unconscious after being struck by the skipan’s weapons, and the memory of Brandt being led away in chains.

Fingertips brushed back his hair, tucking it behind his ear. They slid down along his jaw and under his chin. He flinched when his face was tilted up for Kayluth’s inspection. Kayluth’s eyes flickered over him, pausing on his lips when he licked at the dryness. His stomach complained loudly, bringing a lopsided grin to the skipan’s mouth.

“Has your Brandt fed you before?”

Manning frowned, not expecting this question. He opted to answer it truthfully, for what did it matter? He shrugged and shook his head.

“No? Well, it would please your Drottinn to feed you.” A bright spark alighted in Kayluth’s gaze. “May I?”

Manning’s belly growled its acceptance, and he seconded his agreement with a nod.

“Yes, Drottinn?” Kayluth prompted with a little tug on the torque.

“Yes, Drottinn,” Manning answered with no hint of enthusiasm.

The skipan kept the forefinger of his right hand securely looped around the collar, reaching with his left to a table beside the couch. He lifted a plate of food from its surface and placed it on his lap. He picked up a slice of food, milky white with a red mottling skin on the largest edge.

“Is it meat or fruit?” Manning asked, eyeing the food skeptically. Kayluth frowned and raised an eyebrow. Manning’s forehead creased in puzzlement. “What?”

“Ssu, little one. You test my patience. Do you require more punishments to learn?” Kayluth’s light tone almost teased as he studied Manning with a sparkle in his eyes. He placed the piece of food into his own mouth and began chewing. The look spoke of relaxed dominance, and Manning worried his bottom lip.

He didn’t want to give in, the test of patience his own. He was the son of a king—bastard though he may be—the master of his own airship. An alpha! Speaking the words Kayluth wanted to hear grated on him. Giving this shifter dominion over his speech would be the first step in a downward spiral.

Having his wrists tied needed to be addressed. Plus, all the bruising from the assault on his body. The repeated bindings had caused strained muscles, tight with knotted tension. Those episodes of spasms were still fresh in his mind, his limbs sore and throbbing. He could endure whatever the skipan decided to dole out, but was it worth it? A small amount of self-preservation as easy as repeating the one word Kayluth desired. Should he do it?

Manning dropped his chin down, staring at his wrists encircled with the braided belt. He tested the strength of the knots, crinkling his nose, the belt biting into his skin. He glared at it, knowing the skipan dressed him with the belt first. Appalling, like the choke collar he was forced to wear. Kayluth slid his hand out from under Manning’s chin, and scissored a lock of Manning’s hair with his fingers, giving a quick tug on the strands. Manning peered up at him.

“You continue to defy me, Moondrake.” Kayluth spoke low and even-keeled. “I offer simple pleasures, but you do not want them and that saddens me.”

“What simple pleasures have you offered?” Manning met that sapphire gaze. He saw the distress in Kayluth’s down-turned lips, but refused to halt his tongue. The coil of anger had quickly returned, and he let his ire lace his next words. “A metal collar, a heelprint on my ribs, wrists ruined from these tight bindings? The loss of my ship, my crew, my home? These are not pleasures I seek. I desire to be clothed respectfully, eat food from my own hand, find my pleasure in one I love. My freedom.” He turned his face away, unable to take the sight of the skipan anymore. “I am no longer hungry, *Drottinn*, and it would *please* me to return to my room.”

The clink of the plate being returned to the table echoed loud in the silence of the great room. Manning bit the inside of this cheek, his muscles tense as he waited for Kayluth to either speak or punish him. Tarrans passed with only the sounds of his blood pulsing in his ear and the thudding of his anxious heart.

“You may go,” Kayluth whispered, reaching down for his wrists, “but let me untie you first.” He allowed the skipan to remove the belt, and once freed he stood, but was still held in place. Kayluth gripped his right forearm and spent a tarran inspecting his wrist. It had severe abrasions and hung limply. He yanked his arm free, stumbling backwards, unprepared for the skipan to let him go so easily. He stepped towards the hallway, cradling his arm, retreating to the relative safety of his small room, refusing to take his eyes off Kayluth. Once he lost visual contact he spun and made his way swiftly inside, shutting the door behind him.

Chapter Six

Revelation

Manning's stomach ached. He rubbed his belly with the palm of his working hand, ordering it to silence. Stupid organ refused to listen. He lay down on the bed, staring up at the mottled ivory and gray ceiling, and debated about the simple defiance of moving to the floor and not using anything of the skipan's, but decided it wasn't worth the effort. Taunting Kayluth had spiked his adrenaline, and now that it wore off he felt drained. And hungry.

He tried to organize his thoughts, working his way through the events with the skipan. Kayluth confused him, his words and actions. He couldn't figure out why the shifter hadn't used his body for his supposed pleasure. He seemed to be waiting for permission, but... Manning scoffed. Not knowing what kind of skipan Kayluth was bothered him. Was it a form he could subdue? How could he put up an effective fight with this unknown variable? And did he need to? His damaged wrist certainly didn't help matters. Kayluth's behavior this morning only made the situation more perplexing. He also had a gentle side, evident in the way he took care of Manning, dressing him and brushing his hair. But still, there resided that ruthlessness he'd seen yesterday, that spitting hiss when Kayluth became angry.

Manning turned on his side, trying to get comfortable and not inflame his right wrist. He flexed his fingers and slowly twisted his hand—a few twinges, but already it felt better. Bored and with nothing to do, he gave chase to thoughts of Brandt and his crew's well-being. Was Brandt still with the two skipan? Being drugged and raped? He slapped the palm of his left hand on the bed. Maybe with the tolsu Brandt enjoyed it? Any man would fantasize about being with two others, wouldn't he? Manning switched the image around, picturing himself and Brandt and... He bolted upright, cursing the Trickster and Kayluth for invading his fantasy. He tried to push it away, but those warm fingertips kept sliding down their torsos, threading fingers into their hair, pushing them together until lips met skin...

A knock on the door snapped Manning from his reverie. He sat up, shaking the vision from his mind. "What?"

He received no answer, only another timid knock. Manning rose from the bed and opened the door to see Lian making her escape down the hall. He

stepped forward to call to her and stubbed his toes. He hissed and peered down to see what had hurt him this time. Books. His books, from his room aboard *Moondrake*, and a plate of food. He looked right and left, searching for Kayluth, sure he watched, but didn't see him. Squatting, he picked up the plate, setting it on the dresser before returning for the books. He turned back into his room, palming the door's control to close it.

He sat on the bed, leaning against the wall, and spread the items in front of him. Seeing the food caused his stomach to raise a disgruntled fuss. A demand easily met; Manning tossed a piece of the food into his mouth, chewing slowly to savor the tart taste. Apple, or something close enough to it. He studied the covers of the three novels. None were his favorites, but he hadn't read any of them recently. They would at least be something to pass the time. The fourth book he didn't recognize, the line drawing on the cover graphically horrid, yet beautifully done at the same time. Two creatures fought upon it, claws extended, teeth ripping into flesh, crimson blood evident on both beasts. He'd seen these images before when he had been a child: one a mythical creature called a dragon and the other, similar to a large dog, a wolf.

Manning tossed another piece of the sour fruit into his mouth in response to his belly's gurgling. He pushed aside his books and pulled the new one forward, flipping open the cover. Inside were pictures, mostly pencil drawings, black and white with gray shading. But a few were in color, the hues vivid and soul-stirring. The story started with small dragons. Babies? Always a wolf watched over them. When the dragons gained in size, manacles and collars were added. There were morphing images of men becoming wolves, and detailed, green-eyed dragons turning into blue-eyed men. Pictures of the men lying together were frequent, some simple, some eye-poppingly candid in their sexual nature. Always one wore a collar and one did not.

Manning leaned his head back against the wall. *One wore a collar and the other did not.* He closed the book and fingered the torque around his neck. Kayluth's claws had looked more lizard-like than paws. Did he remember correctly? Yes, and the skipan's hissing speech seemed more in line with the way he imagined a snake's speech to be.

He pushed the empty plate away, hadn't even realized he'd consumed every morsel. He rose from the bed and paced the tiny room thinking about those shifter claws, and that he still hadn't seen the skipan's true form. A loud sound, like a sneeze came from Kayluth's room. Manning halted, nerves tingling. And now that he stood, his bladder begged for mercy. He stepped to the hall door leading to the bathroom, but found it locked.

Trickster Loki was cursed to Helheim yet again. He turned to the door leading into Kayluth's room. The door slid open and he froze in body and breath at the sight before him. Images of his childhood flashed forward, curled up in his father's library and dreaming about being friends with the mythical beast in his storybooks. He rubbed at his eyes, but the vision before him did not change.

Crimson scales bled into golden edges. An enormous dragon lay curled in Kayluth's bed, its head resting on front legs. A long thick tail tapered to a point wrapped around its body, the end hanging over the edge of the bed. Positioned as he was, he still barely fit on the immense mattress.

Manning stood stock-still in the doorway taking in the size of him, afraid to move and attract this dangerous creature's attention. One large jade eye opened and peered intently at him. The dragon raised its head and tilted it forward, both of its large, open eyes narrowing in on him. It blew out a loud huff of air from its nostrils, jaw dropping open to reveal rows of sharp, white teeth. The blood-red beast cocked its head to the side.

"I n-need t-to use the..." Manning stuttered, pointing to the bathroom.

It jerked its snout towards where he wanted to go, and he needed no further invitation. He scurried across the room, hurrying the door shut behind him, and leaned back against it. Sweet Freya! Manning's heart beat a wild staccato. He rubbed at his chest, determined to make it slow down.

He stumbled forward, the door sliding open behind him throwing him off-balance. Kayluth walked in, naked, his blue eyes studying him. Was he dreaming? Had he fallen asleep and imagined all this? He peeked around the skipan into the bedroom, searching for the monster, trying to assure himself that what he had seen had been real. There was no dragon there.

Manning's hands flexed and curled into fists. He looked from the empty bed to Kayluth and back again. Kayluth watched him, the corner of his mouth turning up, irritating Manning. The shifter's humorous expression did nothing to alleviate his anxiety.

"Where?" Manning asked, looking back at the bed.

Kayluth tapped his breast in answer.

"Kay—" Manning cut himself off. He needed to get out of the habit of calling the skipan Kayluth if he wanted to avoid a repeat of punishments. "Drottinn?" he asked. "I don't—Are you telling me the dragon was you?"

Kayluth nodded. *Blessed Odin*. His true form a dragon! Manning stared at him for a full tarran, until the skipan chuckled, breaking his spell of bewilderment and shock.

“Go,” Kayluth indicated to the toilet, “then get in the shower, Moon Drake.”

Manning turned, following instructions, his mind still swirling. When the water hit his face, he snapped out of it with a full-body shudder.

“All right, little one?” Kayluth spoke from behind, startling him.

“Sweet Freya, don’t do that,” he said, spinning to face him. Kayluth stood outside the edge of the water’s spray pouring shampoo into his hand.

Kayluth looked at him and smiled. “Close your eyes.” He scrubbed at Manning’s hair, washed his body, conditioned his locks, combing his fingers through to get out any new tangles. All the while, humming a simple repetitive tune.

Manning allowed the music and pampering to loosen the tension in his body while his mind wandered in its attempt to decipher his captor. He’d attacked this dragon shifter and offered his body up to the skipan, only to be left lying there. The punishments were random, and although uncomfortable, other than the initial beating after trying to escape, they did no lasting harm. Even his wrist seemed recovered, except for the abrasions. Kayluth had appeared surprised at the damage done to Manning’s body both times.

The skipan dried him off and ran a brush through his damp mane, led him back into the bedroom, and dressed him. Manning’s heart rate increased, but he put up no resistance; no need to fight someone who currently pampered him, but that didn’t mean it felt right. The shifter was an enigma. The book he’d been given only provided some of the answers, leaving many more questions.

Kayluth’s fingertips slid down the length of Manning’s bare arms, gently touching the wounds around his wrists. He turned Manning and gently prodded him forward to the bed. The skipan stopped him at the edge, and placed a hand on his shoulder, pushing downward.

Manning sighed, bending to his knees beside the bed, watching Kayluth lower himself to the mattress. Considering the low height of the bed, the skipan performed the move with exceptional agility.

“I left you a book,” Kayluth said.

“I saw it.”

He cupped Manning's face and slid a thumb across his cheek. The hand moved lower, fingertips trailing warmth down his neck and stopped when they reached the torque. Kayluth tapped his fingers on the metal, and Manning looked away, certain his tight lips and frown would give away his unease under the skipan's soft-eyed contemplation.

"A long time ago, we were the ones wearing the collars, but we threw off the Fenrir. Now we are the ones in control. We choose who we will please."

Manning looked back at Kayluth, under hooded lids, and held his tongue. He wanted to shout at the skipan, demand answers to unspoken questions. One rose above the others... *How?* How could a race once enslaved enslave another?

Kayluth's fingertips danced along the collar's length, dipping occasionally to touch flesh. Manning let his eyes drift shut, momentarily sure that the skipan would not cause him any harm, assuming he behaved himself. The lack of sight heightened his other senses. He breathed in the underlying sweet vanilla tolsu, which never fully vanished from Kayluth's skin. He suspected the skipan didn't even realize he always wore it.

The path of heat snuck under his tunic, caressing the skin over his heart. Kayluth's other hand pulled on the tail of the rope belt until the knot fell apart. Manning opened his eyes and stared into the skipan's brilliant sapphire ones, flecks of gold dotting their surface. He caught sight of Kayluth's tongue swiping at his lips and unconsciously mirrored the movement. His vision drifted lower again, across the broad expanse of toned muscles, lower even to finally take in an endowment that rivaled Brandt's, standing at full mast. A flash of the ménage fantasy sprang to the forefront of his mind.

Hands ablaze cradled the sides of his face, drawing his gaze back up to the skipan's. "We choose who we please. Do you understand?"

Manning shook his head although he had a fairly good idea. Kayluth pushed up from the bed and stood, his erection falling parallel to the floor and staring eye to eye with him. *This is it*, Manning thought.

He stepped around Manning and stopped behind him. Manning's brows creased in puzzlement, until they lifted in fear when fingers tugged on the torque forcing him to stand or choke. He rose, feeling a burst of adrenaline hit his heart, and readied himself to run. Kayluth turned him around and held the forefinger of his right hand up in Manning's view. He watched that finger descend in a slow arc. Losing sight of it, he felt it come to rest in the hollow of

his throat. Tiny little strokes, featherlight upon his skin. The strokes moved outward, sliding along his collarbone and returning to their home. Downward now along his bicep and up, then elbow and forearm, shoulder joint to hand, Kayluth's fingertip left a path of fire wherever it touched. A second joined the first. And then the fingertips of his left hand. Tendrils of heat coiled in Manning's belly, and blood pooled in his groin.

The wordless hum began again as his tunic was lifted and removed from his body. This time the tune soothed and aroused at the same time. A lilting melody that relaxed his muscles one moment and stoked the fire in his belly the next. His hips wanted to sway with one beat and thrust with another.

Kayluth's fingertips, all of them now, danced along the sides of his abs. Each stroke caused the muscles to contract. Manning's skin pebbled behind each warm touch, the cooler air in the room meeting his heated flesh. A wet fingertip slid down his breastbone, dipping into his belly button then out and along the side of his engorged shaft.

Manning opened his eyes, not even realizing he had closed them. Vivid citrine impacted his gaze. Large, dark pupils flickered over his nakedness, taking him in. He reciprocated, wanting to know everything about this new master of his body.

Kayluth's ebony braids hung along his cheeks and shoulders. Even the tiniest of gemstones woven into them reflected the light in the room. Manning placed a hand on a firm pectoral muscle, curling his fingers into the warm, solid flesh. Not a single hair graced Kayluth's upper body, much like Brandt's. He did like a smooth-chested lover. Always enjoyed it when not a single strand blocked his view of solid, toned musculature.

Manning drifted his fingertips down to a darker nipple, a deep brown that tempted him, but he held himself back. He felt an inkling of desire for Kayluth, born of new respect and the recent acts of goodwill. He'd heard of prisoners falling for their captors when they were treated better than in their previous lives. Did he suffer this same syndrome? He brushed the thought away. No, he was still the prisoner here. Still captive. Forced to kneel at his feet, eat from his hand, but Kayluth hadn't forced him to his belly, to offer up his ass. Kayluth had only said that *he* chooses who to please. So very confusing. Did he want to please Manning, bring him pleasure? That didn't seem right at all.

"I don't—" Manning began, but lips meeting his cut his words short. He froze, letting Kayluth do what he wanted, unsure how to respond, if he should, or even if he wanted to. A warm tongue darted across his mouth, prodded at his

lips, but he denied it entrance. Heat covered his chest and thighs when Kayluth pressed into him, driving him backwards. One step, then two, then he fell to his back on the bed, the skipan immediately taking up residence over him.

“We choose who we please,” Kayluth said. “The Fenrir gave us no choice. They conquered, forced themselves upon us, took our innocence, stole our children. Collared and subjugated us.” Kayluth’s mouth descended, but Manning held his hands up to deflect him. Shoved on his shoulders until Kayluth lifted up.

Manning shook his head. “And yet you collar me? Do you not see the irony of your actions? The hypocrisy of your words?” The thought crashed into him that if the skipan’s tolsu worked on him they wouldn’t even be having this conversation, that already he’d be a slave to this shifter’s pleasures. He wriggled himself out from under Kayluth, putting space between them.

Kayluth had the good manners to look away, a red hue tinting his cheeks. He turned and lay down on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“I see them,” he whispered, the words catching in his throat. “That history is thousands of years old, but when we, the Drakken, gained our freedom, we were twisted. Our lives had become those of servitude, but we vowed that we would be the ones to choose.” He rolled to his side to look at Manning. “Our tolsu, as you call it, makes it easy for us. We can overwhelm our enemy, distract them. Kill when necessary. When we took captives in the past, we would use them and discard them. Now we are kinder, leaving those that are no longer of use, or who no longer wish to be with us, at major spaceports with enough currency to make their way home. While we initially overcome with the tolsu, we do not rule by it. Everyone gets to choose.”

“My crew...?” Manning asked, his voice hushed.

“I assume they have all agreed to stay with their masters, I have not heard differently. But I will make inquiries and take you to see them.”

Manning sat straighter. “When?”

Kayluth chuckled and pushed himself to his feet. “Would it please you to see them now, Moondrake?” Manning nodded. He needed to see to his men before he gave thought to his own welfare, before he even let the idea take root, before he asked for his freedom.

Kayluth circled the bed to stand near where Manning sat. He held out his hand. “Then let us go.”

Chapter Seven

Reunion

Manning scowled at the leash attached to the torque around his neck. Being led like a dog amounted to abject humiliation. Oh, he'd played puppy with Brandt in the confines of his quarters, but it'd all been in jest. The memory brought a smile to his lips. Harmless fun between lovers where they'd used no collar or leash, only played at fetching, head scratches with "good boy," and ended with fantastic sex. Here, there was no love, only distrust. His lips fell. He'd suffered the kicking, the binding, and being hand-fed. What other distasteful acts would Kayluth make him do?

They stood in front of the entryway with Manning's knees locked. Kayluth tugged on the leash, but he refused to budge.

"Come, Moondrake," Kayluth said, glaring back at him.

Manning shook his head with his jaw clenched tightly like his knees, hands fisted at his sides, knuckles white. The shifter, all Drottinn now, stepped in front of him, gripped his chin, and forced him to look up. Manning knew this controlling side of the skipan would balk at being called anything other than Master. He much preferred Kayluth's gentler side. Drottinn's narrowed gaze tore into him, and he flinched, tensing for the slap to the back of his head when the skipan raised the hand holding the end of the leash. Manning watched as he spun his wrist to take up the slack. Once Drottinn had it wound, he slipped a finger under Manning's torque and pulled upwards causing him to rise up on his toes.

"I have let you run rampant in here, little one, but I cannot outside these doors. It would be unseemly for me to have a disobedient pet. There is no choice in the matter if you wish to see your crew. You must go where I want you to go, do what I want you to do. You obey, you get rewarded. You do not..." Drottinn let the implication of his words lie there a moment before continuing. "I do not wish to keep you bound, but you leave me no option with your stubbornness." He released the torque and Manning dropped back to his feet, his mind reeling in confusion. *Run rampant? How? When?* He was captive!

Drottinn snagged one end of the belt around his waist and, with a sharp tug, snapped it free. He swiftly tied Manning's wrists with a much looser knot than

he'd used before, threading the leash through the knot and placing a section of it into Manning's hand. Now, when the skipan tugged on the leash, his bound hands were pulled forward first. Off-balance, he was forced to walk or be dragged. While he followed along the corridor he made the swift realization that if his hands had not been added, Drottinn would have been yanking him by his neck.

They walked along corridors and through doorways, and Manning wondered about the rewards. He'd had quite a few of the punishments already, bore the purple and green bruising in many spots. His knees were the worst; the kneeling had taken its toll. When they stopped at an intersection of hallways, he looked around and cursed himself for not paying attention to where they were going. He glanced at the stark white walls, noted the signs in illegible runes and arrows, but unable to read them, they'd be no help. He needed a crash course in their language. Mentally he added learning the skipan's tongue to his list of escape tactics, not convinced Kayluth had spoken the truth about returning those who did not wish to stay.

Passing rights and lefts and unmarked doorways left him bewildered with a complete loss of direction. Several of Kayluth's crew members nodded or spoke what he assumed were greetings. Manning studied each skipan they passed, trying to decipher a rank or insignia or significance on each one.

"Skeppare!"

Kayluth stopped and turned towards an open doorway where Orm stood behind a desk. He stepped into the room, leading Manning to stand on his left. They exchanged greetings and Kayluth stood relaxed.

"Kneel, Moondrake," he said, but Manning did not hear. Oblivious to those around him, he stared at a window projection of the stars on the far wall. Two bony fingertips were jabbed behind his collarbone, the stab of pain driving him to his knees with a hiss. Drottinn leaned over, blowing a breath of heated air into his face. He spoke quietly, his warm hand now covering the spot where his fingers had pushed. "When will you learn?"

Manning glared at him and gave a tiny shake of his head. Drottinn threaded his fingers into Manning's hair and gripped the strands firmly, forcing his chin down. He heard the small huff from his captor and allowed himself a tight-lipped smile, one that wouldn't be seen with his face turned down. *Reward, zero. Punishment, one.*

Drottinn sat in the available chair, pulling on both the leash and Manning's hair to move him closer. Once satisfied with his placement, Drottinn's grip

loosened and he dragged his fingers through Manning's locks, tugging on the ends. A breath of heated air blew across his ear, and he tilted his head to hear the softly spoken words.

"Orm expects your disobedience and has urged me to cast you off. I hope you will give thought to what I have told you, and allow me to please you."

Manning kept his head down, allowing his hair to fall forward and mask his features. Drottinn continued to card his fingertips through Manning's hair, an occasional scrape of nails on his scalp keeping him firmly in the present while Kayluth and Orm conversed.

"Herra, you sent for me?" a voice purred above Manning. He snapped his head up to see who had entered. He only got a quick glimpse before he received a light slap to the back of his head, and it was shoved roughly back down. *Punishment two*, he snorted quietly, and tilted his face for another look, sure his eyes had deceived him. A catlike creature stood covered in downy fur. Its voice sounded feminine, and he shook a few strands of his hair back under the guise of irritation to get a better look. He was afforded a profile view of her as she stood with her head bowed, hands clasped in front. Thin and waif-like, her fur covered her from head to toe, a mottling of browns, some areas dark, others tan fading into white. One shoulder shown through slits in the light-blue tunic she wore, and a braided belt similar to his encircled her tiny waist. A torque, intricate in design hung around her neck, but while his was a full circle, hers had a gap of several fingers width.

Manning had never seen a species like her. He wondered if she might be a type of skipan too. Could she shift into a fantastic feline form? He'd never seen a real tiger or panther before, only in books. And only once had he encountered a small house cat. He'd come home covered in shed fur and his father's nose became red and he had a fit of sneezing. Father had been furious, and he'd learned that lesson the hard way—*after* he'd changed his clothes and washed. He smothered the chuckle threatening to escape at the memory. A sharp tug on his hair further reversed the direction of his thoughts.

"Seraphina," Orm said, "the Skeppare's pet wishes to see the men brought aboard with him." Manning drew in a sharp breath and squeezed his hands into fists in surprise. "Take him to the *aphena*, he should find a few there."

The leash lost its slack when Kayluth rose and handed her the end. He nudged Manning's shoulder with his knee. "Go on, little one. You have my permission to ask whatever questions you'd like of your crew." Manning stood and took a single step forward before he felt the barest amount of pressure on

his throat, one of Kayluth's hot fingers snagging hold of the torque. He held still while Kayluth dragged heat-filled paths down his back, slipped under the bottom edge of the tunic, and traced their way up his thigh. They teased at the sensitive crease of skin joining the top of his leg with his ass. Manning's nostrils flared and he bit his bottom lip. If Orm and Seraphina had not been staring at him, he might have bent himself in half. He squeezed his hands together, cursing Loki again to Helheim for allowing the skipan to find one of his sweet spots.

As if knowing the effect he had on Manning, Kayluth withdrew his hand, placing it on his ass overtop of the tunic while encircling Manning's chest with his other arm. He pressed his torso into Manning's back, flooding it with fire, then leaned down and licked at his ear.

"Rewards are so much better, yes?" Kayluth whispered. Manning nodded and received a pat on his ass. "Go."

Seraphina stepped into the hallway, Manning on her heels to keep the leash from pulling. He studied her fully now and wanted to ask her the million questions racing through his mind. He nibbled on the inside of his cheek, staring at her. She stalked the corridor, his leash held loosely in her fingers. She stopped suddenly, and he almost ran into her. He turned to see the closed door of a lift.

"Ask," she said, blinking large, golden, tear-drop shaped eyes at him.

While Manning desperately wanted to find out more about her and her race, his first concern was the safety of his crew, and whether or not Kayluth had spoken the truth.

"Do you enjoy being a pleasure slave?"

She blinked again, and cocked her head to the side. "Slave? I am no slave."

He tsked and tried a different tack. "Orm is your master?"

"Yes."

"He keeps you for his pleasure?"

Seraphina's smile seemed genuine. "No, Skeppare's pet—"

"It's Manning," he cut in to correct her.

"Manning. Did not Skeppare explain all this to you?"

His irritation grew. Why would no one tell him what in Helheim was happening? "All he said was he chose who to please. What does that mean?"

She tucked Manning's hair behind an ear and allowed her fingers to trail down his scruffy cheek and neck.

"Does he keep you at his beck and call?" Manning went on when she stayed silent. "Does he force you to please him? Use your body against your will? Are you able to leave if you want, because—"

Her finger pressed to his lips stilling his next question. "I keep my Herra company, warm his bed at night." The lift arrived and they stepped inside. She waited until the door closed before resuming. "I kneel at his feet, eat from his hand, allow him to run his fingers through my fur."

"Why?" he interrupted again, touching her arm with his fingertips.

She glanced down at his hands and he removed them, pulling them to his belly. She placed two fingers under his chin and made sure their gazes met before she spoke again with a sharp-toothed grin.

"Because he chose me."

The door slid open and Manning blinked in the bright light of the aphen. Ebony-haired Drakken sprawled in large, cushioned chairs scattered around in groups of two or four, conversed with those nearby. Representatives of a dozen different alien races were collared and sat in laps or knelt on the floor beside most of the shifters. Where no collared slave knelt, a smaller skipan similar to Lian stood in attendance.

"Captain!"

Manning whipped his head in the direction of Stig's voice. He spotted him on the far side of the room, bouncing on his knees, while the skipan next to him had a hold of his torque. Even from this distance, he could see that not only did Stig not have a closed circular collar like his, no leash was present either. Stig straightened and spoke to the skipan holding him, indicating towards Manning. Stig was released with a caress on his cheek, and he made his way across the room.

Manning grinned widely at his approach. "Stig! Are you well? Unharmred?" He reached out to touch him, needing to assure himself that his first mate and long-time friend was whole and healthy. His hands were caught by Stig's, who looked at his bound wrists, fingered the rope, and followed the leash's path upwards to his neck. Stig frowned as he inspected all of him.

"It would appear, Sir, that I need to ask the same of you."

Manning brushed off Stig's concern. "Stig, please, I need to know if you and the crew are all right."

“We’re all well, although I haven’t seen Brandt since the first day. And I worried about you.”

Manning could always count on Stig’s happy-go-lucky personality to liven up a place. This concern felt oddly misplaced.

“It seems my fears had grounds.” Stig looked away momentarily and then back up at him. “Will you be leaving us, then?”

“What? No.” Manning shook his head vigorously. “A captain does not abandon his crew. We had that drilled into us in flight school, did we not, dear friend?” He smiled at Stig who responded in kind, shaking their joined hands.

“Aye, Captain. That we did. But if you’re not happy here...”

“What did they tell you?”

“Only that if we are not happy, that they would provide our passage home. Dropped at the closest spaceport.”

Manning nodded. “That’s what I was told. Are you going to take their offer?”

“Me?” Stig leaned back. “No, but several of the crew will be departing in the next few days. What have I to go back for anyway? Besides—” his toothy smile one of the biggest Manning had ever seen him wear “—my master is incredible.”

“Truly?” Manning threw all the skepticism he could muster into his question.

“Hasn’t your master chosen you?”

“Stig”—Manning rubbed at his forehead, his mind spinning—“this ‘choosing’ doesn’t make any sense. I don’t understand.”

Stig placed a hand on his shoulder. “We are their possession, but they want nothing more than to choose us, to please us. Doesn’t your master please you?”

“What do you mean? Please me?” Manning asked confused.

His first mate cocked his head and chuckled. “Oh, Captain, you are fighting against your Drottinn, aren’t you?” He shook his head. “You are denying yourself and him. They only want to give us pleasure. You must have your master explain it to you. Has he tried?”

“I... We haven’t had opportunity. Won’t you just tell me?” Manning pleaded, disliking the way his voice sounded and beginning to doubt he would ever receive the information he sought.

“Stig!” The drakken who had touched Stig called out for him to return.

“No, you must find out for yourself. Go back to your master now.” Stig turned away, took several steps before he spun back and advanced on Manning, gripping his arm. Stig’s lips pulled into another grin full of white teeth, and then he sucked in his lower lip. He raised himself up on his toes to whisper in Manning’s ear. “Stop fighting him and his passion will ignite you.” Stig glanced over Manning’s head, turned and hurried back to his master, sinking to his knees before the skipan. The shifter palmed Stig’s cheek, and he leaned into the touch.

“Do you believe me now?” Kayluth’s silvery voice blew hot on his neck. A shiver raced up Manning’s spine. He hadn’t heard the skipan step up behind him. “All your crew is fine.”

He huffed. “I see only a handful of my crew here. And yes, they all appear well, although obviously under your thrall.” He peered around the room a second time. “Where is Brandt? I want to see him.”

Kayluth placed his fingers along the back edge of Manning’s torque. He circled around in front, dragging his fingertips, paths of searing heat, along the metal, warming it with his touch.

The shifter stared intently at Manning. He returned the intensity until he saw the skipan’s irises dotting with amber flecks. It panicked him and he looked away, equating those yellow eyes with anger. His chin was forced back and he peered into golden depths. Manning saw something he hadn’t noticed before. In his fear, he hadn’t seen the concern that now rested there. Stig’s insistence on an explanation pressed forward in his mind.

“Stig seemed to think I am owed some knowledge.”

A smile curled the corner of Kayluth’s mouth, but he did not acknowledge the statement with words. Distressed, Manning turned his focus back to escape and studied the skipan’s body type and strength, trying to note any possible weaknesses he might use against him. He hadn’t been this close before while he was in the right frame of mind. Kayluth’s smooth, pale skin and large, expressive eyes were paired with carved cheekbones, full lips and jeweled braids of ebony hair. Manning felt his tension drain away in the presence of the skipan’s calm demeanor and the way his warm fingertips were gliding up and down the sides of his neck. He drank in the handsome image.

Kayluth retrieved the end of the leash from Seraphina, thanking her for her time and sending her back to Orm for her reward. Manning watched her scurrying away with a spring in her step, bright eyes and a playful smile.

“I have a task to complete before we return to my rooms,” Kayluth said, sliding his fingers down Manning’s cheek. The affectionate gesture growing on him, he wished he could shave, remove the unwanted hair preventing skin-to-skin contact. “Will you follow if I remove this?” His fingers tapped on the junction of torque and leash.

Manning held his tongue. What would he do if he found himself suddenly freed? *Run? Fight?* No, he couldn’t leave, not until all his men were accounted for, either safe and willing to remain on this ship or placed on a spaceport to return home. And certainly not until he found Brandt. He mentally renewed his commitment to comply only if the drakken bound him. He looked up into Kayluth’s narrowed gaze and shook his head. He watched the shifter’s expression harden in resignation.

Kayluth dropped his hand from the torque and took up the leash, turned, and led Manning down the hall.

Chapter Eight

Ssobroke

Manning held the leash tightly in his hands. Kayluth had told him to hold it after they'd passed through a locking portal, the skipan knowing he couldn't escape. He followed a few steps behind Kayluth, glancing to the right and left, peering into the open doorways. All of the rooms were dimly lit except for two. When Manning reached the first brightly lit room, he froze. He recognized the blue beams of light crossing the threshold barred him entry; he dropped to his knees.

"Brandt." The word came out on a breath of air. His mind spun in shock. His lover lay on the floor, stripped except for his pants, which had been cut off high on the thigh. His whole body was covered in filth, a combination of dark spatters and patches of a crusty, white film coating his belly and arms.

"Brandt," Manning called to him, but Brandt took no notice, intent on the task of cupping his groin and sliding his palm over the prominent erection tenting his pants. Manning covered his mouth, gasping, then cursed the Trickster to the deepest of Helheim when he detected tolsu scenting the air. Sweet Freya, were they keeping him in some state of high arousal? No matter how dirty he was, a single glance at his love flooded Manning with erotic memories, and his own cock twitched in response.

"Moondrake? What are you doing?" Kayluth asked from the end of the corridor where he stood before the second illuminated room. Manning quickly glanced at him before returning his attention to Brandt. His lover had slid his hand under the waistband, and Manning could see the movement of his fingers along his shaft, could feel the ghostly touch of Brandt's fingers on his own.

"Come here, little one," Kayluth called, but Manning ignored him. His whole awareness narrowed to watching his lover. He could hear the panting breaths, the subtle moans, stared as Brandt pinched and pulled at a nipple, rolling it between his fingers. His own heart rate increased in response to the vision before him, and he spread his own thighs, sliding a palm down along his now blood-filled cock.

Jerked upwards, Manning squeaked and clawed at the torque, legs kicking. He was pulled away from the open doorway, catching sight of Brandt extending a hand to him before the view cut off. Dropped a few lengths further down the

hall, he curled up, eyes squeezed tight, sure Drottinn would start with the kicking again. He covered the torque with his hands and forearms, hoping to avoid a repeat of the sting of metal against his throat.

When the beating didn't come and the blood rushing in his ears diminished, Manning heard instead Drottinn's angry drakken speak. He peeked out between his arms and saw what looked like Drottinn dressing-down one of his crew. Fingers pointed, first towards him and then at his lover's cell, and he wondered if Drottinn hadn't known Brandt was there.

The crewman showed Drottinn something on a handheld tablet, and the drakken huffed in response, palming the back of his head. Aggravation rolled in waves off Drottinn, and his crewman cowered before him with hunched shoulders.

Drottinn spun and looked down at Manning. He stepped forward and crouched beside him, reaching out. Manning flinched and Drottinn froze a moment before continuing to reach out and place a hand on his hip. He didn't meet Manning's gaze, only followed the path of his hand as he slid it down Manning's leg, moved back up to his hip, and repeated the movement. His attempt to soothe Manning, belied by his hard swallowing.

The drakken appeared to gather himself with a deep breath, and he ran his tongue over his lips. Manning had seen him do that same act many times, usually in advance of stalking him, but this time... This time Manning sensed the nervousness in the gesture, and he dropped his hands from his throat, no longer afraid that the shifter might do him harm.

Kayluth finally peered up at him. "I did not know."

Manning's brow furrowed. He heard the truth in the drakken's words. Many strange activities had happened on his own ship that he hadn't been aware of until much later. "I believe you." Three little words and the light that had dimmed in Kayluth's eyes sprang back.

"You want your people safe."

"I do," Manning said. "They are my responsibility." He pushed himself up to lean against the wall. "But Brandt means more to me."

"You care for him?"

Manning nodded, his throat suddenly thick with emotion. He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. He glanced up and held Kayluth's gaze for a moment before looking away. A hand slipped under his chin and brought him back.

“He lost the appeal he had among the masters. He changed hands several times, but no one could control him for long. He is stubborn like you.” Kayluth smirked. “He attacked his last Drottinn.”

Manning frowned. Brandt had worsened his lot by fighting. Could there be a way to earn his freedom?

“What do you want me to do?” Kayluth asked. Manning tilted his head as he regarded the drakken. The open and relaxed expression Kayluth wore was an invitation that he never expected, an answer to his unspoken question.

He went straight for the kill. “I want him released.”

Kayluth chuckled, shifting to kneel and sitting back on his heels. “Of course you do, but you know that will not happen. His release must be contingent on something else.”

Manning pursed his lips. “What do you want from me? Tell me and I’ll do it.”

“I already made my choice.” Kayluth scissored a section of Manning’s hair and slid it through his fingers. “I wish you would accept, but it must be you who decides and says the words.”

“I...” Manning started, but trailed off. Brandt would be released if what? Only if he did... *Ah, Loki. You fiendish trickster.* “If I agree,” he said, “then I want him with me, with us.”

“You think you can control him when others have not?”

Manning moved to kneel before Kayluth. “I know I can.”

“How?”

He stroked the back of his fingers along Kayluth’s cheek. “Because we care about each other. And because...” He picked up the end of the leash and held it out to the drakken. Once the skipan held it, he continued, “...we respect each other.”

“You truly will do this?” Kayluth asked, a note of awe in his voice. With Manning’s silence he continued, “Why do you care so much for this man? What did he do to earn your respect?”

“When I was ten,” Manning began, “my older brothers, Tore and Bjorn, decided it would be fun to play kidnappers with their little bastard brother for their victim. I was pulled from my bed, a hood placed over my head, and my hands tied. When I cried out for help, they rolled a piece of cloth and tied it

around my mouth as a gag. They held me hostage without food or water all day. I had no concept of time under that hood. Only blackness. Only fear and anxiety.

“It was Brandt who found me. Who let a little boy cry on his shoulder, who carried me back to my father and told him what I could not. My father officially positioned him as my bodyguard on my eighteenth birth celebration, but Brandt has watched over me since that day. He only left me to train, to be a better guard.” Manning turned his head towards the cell holding Brandt.

“You care for him a great deal,” Kayluth remarked.

“I do.”

“And if there is room in my bed for two?”

Manning’s head snapped around to stare at the drakken. “We’ll see. It wouldn’t be only me anymore, but I *will not* leave this ship until I know that each and every one of my men are safe and content. Whether that is here or going home...” He shrugged.

“You will not fight me anymore, little one.”

Manning shook his head and a short bark of laughter escaped. He looked down at his hands. “I can’t promise that, but I’ll not fight you today.”

A warm palm cupped his chin and tilted his head up. Streaks of gold and a brilliant smile greeted him.

Manning rocked to his feet. He stood with his head bowed and hands clasped in front. Kayluth untied his wrists, unhooked the leash, and waited for Manning to speak the words. But Manning held back, another question niggling at his mind. He raised his head.

“You are trying quite hard to hold on to me... Why? You should have told me I was free to leave.”

“Yes. I should have. I cannot apologize enough for my actions. You saw only a cruel kidnapping, but that is not how it usually goes. Our technologies did not mesh. We could not hail you and you did not know us. It went very wrong, and I have continued to make mistakes. We want to treat our potential *ssobroke* with kindness.”

“Sobroke?”

“The one to complete us. Orm has that in Seraphina. They are beautiful together.”

“And you think I’m your what? Mate?”

Kayluth nodded and Manning exploded.

“So you choked me and kicked me?”

“You ran off, defied me,” Kayluth responded. “You scared me.” His voice thick and tremulous. “I have already apologized, what more do you want from me?”

Manning, empowered by this show of regret from Kayluth, took full advantage of it. He sliced into the drakken with his sharp words of want. “Brandt. My crew, *Moondrake*, our freedom. Shall I go on, *Drottinn*? How about feeding myself, the removal of this cursed collar, and to sit in a chair. My knees are killing me.” The corner of his mouth turned up. He stepped closer to Kayluth, placing his hands on the skipan’s chest. “A real bed and a decent meal.” The smile grew and was reciprocated. Kayluth laid one hand over Manning’s and threaded the other into his hair.

“Brandt. Your crew’s safety, a chair, and a meal, all easily done,” Kayluth agreed. “I do not wish to give up feeding you, it pleases me greatly.”

“So you said. What about my ship?”

“She is safe, but I don’t want you to leave. I have high hopes that you will give me another chance which will fulfill your demand for a bed.” The quick raise of the drakken’s eyebrows stunned Manning into gaped-mouth silence. Kayluth chuckled. “I underestimated you, little prince. I treated you as weak when you are strong, acted as though you were a child, when you are my equal. It would give me pleasure to have you by my side, wearing my torque of possession in place of this collar.” He flicked at it disdainfully.

Manning’s brow creased. “Possession?”

“Ssu. Did you not see the one Orm wears?”

“No.” Manning’s grin turned sardonic. “I always seemed to be looking at the floor in his presence.”

Kayluth tapped on Manning’s lips and smoothed the smirk away. “I, Kayluth, Skeppare of the *Reykr*, choose you, Moondrake. As your ssobroke, with respect and honor will I care for you, please you. In return, I ask you for the same, and that you open yourself up to the passions that bind us together, Ssobroke to Ssobroke. Will you accept?”

Manning studied the drakken with an open mind and careful consideration. The drakken's touch was divine, and with apologies and pledges given... But was it enough? First in his heart was Brandt, was there room for another?

"I will not call you Drottinn." Manning finger-poked him.

"Agreed."

"We will see that my entire crew is taken care of."

"Yes."

"Take off this collar."

Kayluth slid those deliciously warm fingers under the torque and, after pushing Manning's chin up out of the way with his thumbs, a click sounded and the collar sprang apart. Manning's hands flew to his neck, shoving Kayluth's away, to verify the collar's removal from his skin.

Manning glanced around on the floor and spotting the braided belt went to pick it up. He tied it in a secure knot around his waist before coming back to stand before the skipan. He swallowed back his rising anxiety.

"In exchange for the release of Brandt Wardman into *our* care?"

"Yes."

"Then I, Manning Dagrson, accept your oath as Sobroke to Sobroke. I will respect you and honor you. Allow you to—" he smiled up at Kayluth "—please me. In return, I ask that you allow me the same, and that you remain open to the possibilities that the three of us may join."

"Ssu," Kayluth purred, pulling Manning into his chest and laying kisses on the top of his head. Manning inhaled his sweet scent before pushing himself away, only to have his face peppered by the drakken's lips. "You will not regret this, I promise. Let us gather our charge."

Manning took the lead, stepping in front of the barred threshold. The beams of light disappeared with a wave of Kayluth's hand across the small panel beside the doorway. Points of heat touched Manning's collarbone, drew up and around his neck, under his hair, and rubbed at his nape.

"Go on," Kayluth said, nudging him forward into the room.

Manning spied Brandt at the rear in his cell, staring back with eyes clear and bright. He noted that the air had cleared, the tolsu already releasing Brandt from its hold. Manning stepped to the center of the room and dropped to his knees,

grimacing at the contact. Brandt crawled forward and head-butted his stomach. He instinctively curled his fingers into Brandt's hair, pulling gently, telling him without words that he was real, and here, and wasn't going to let him go. He bent his torso over Brandt's back, shielding him with his body, protecting him until he fully recovered from the tolsu's effects.

Tarrans passed with only the sound of muffled sobs. Brandt's arms circled Manning's legs, his hold firm, fingers gripping into whatever muscle they touched. Manning endured the painful grasp and ignored the twinges in his knees. He spoke soothing words and ran his palms across Brandt's shoulder blades and spine. He avoided touching the wide metal collar around Brandt's neck, scowling at the bright red marks it had made on his lover's skin.

Manning glanced over his shoulder to see Kayluth standing in the doorway, watching. He saw the frown and clenched fists and stifled a snort of laughter when he recognized the jealousy radiating off the skipan.

"Take this collar off of him," Manning said, making sure the underlying demand could be heard in his tone.

Kayluth's eyes softened before he cast them downward, sighing. He shook his head. "He cannot leave here without it," he said sympathetically. "Until I—we—are sure of his desires, he must wear it."

"Very well," Manning huffed, "but it doesn't need to be this one, does it?"

"No."

"Good, then bring the one you removed from me."

Brandt lifted up, his eyes huge, to stare at Manning's neck. His rough and filthy fingers rested on Manning's bare collarbone. He looked up into Manning's eyes. "Later," Manning told him in response to the unspoken question in Brandt's expression.

Brandt nodded and held still while Kayluth opened the torturously biting collar and replaced it with the thinner one Manning had worn. The drakken retreated to the doorway with Brandt watching the whole way before his gaze settled on Manning again.

Manning pushed his hands into Brandt's hair and held him. "You're going to come back with us, and we will take care of you. All right?"

Brandt nodded, and Manning slid his fingertips down to catch up Brandt's hands. He rose and pulled his lover up with him. They held onto one another,

wiggling feet and ankles, shaking out the pins and needles in their soles. He dropped one of Brandt's hands, turned, and led him to the doorway. Brandt's docile behavior did not sit well with him, but he let the feeling go for now, intent on getting Brandt back to Kayluth's room and into a shower.

Hopefully with clean skin, a clear mind, food, and rest, the man he loved would return to him.

Chapter Nine

Legacy

When Manning entered his room, a shot of adrenaline rushed through him, finding Brandt sprawled on the small bed, an arm thrown over his face. He appeared thinner from his imprisonment, but it only served to make his muscles more prominent.

“What happens now?” Brandt mumbled, his voice barely audible. Manning licked his lips, choosing to slide to the floor by the bed instead of speaking. The mattress shifted at his back, and Brandt’s head came to rest on his shoulder. Manning leaned into him, reveling in being able to feel his lover’s skin once more.

“Now, I care for you.”

“You what?” Brandt flipped to his stomach. He caught Manning’s chin, turning it to face him.

“You’re my responsibility now. Well, ours.” Manning tilted his chin out of Brandt’s grasp and looked away.

“There’s more, I can tell. What is it?”

Manning shook his head, drawing his legs up and wrapping his arms around them. How could he tell Brandt of the growing respect and affection he had for the drakken? Kayluth’s honesty and heartfelt apologies for his actions had altered his image of the shifter. His declaration that Manning was his sobroke so unexpected; he clasped this knowledge close to his breast. He had room in his heart for two, but after all Brandt had been through, he might not understand.

Brandt slipped off the bed, kneeling next to him. He brushed a lock of Manning’s hair back and tucked it behind his ear.

Manning smiled at the affectionate gesture so often repeated over the last few days, but relented under Brandt’s harsh gaze. “I haven’t actually been with him, yet. It’s part of the deal I made with Kayluth to free you.”

Brandt stood, his hands balled into white-knuckled fists. “You made a deal with the skipan to get me out of the prison cell. Sweet Freya, Manning! How could you do that?” he asked, outraged, pointing his forefinger at him. “You

should have left me to rot, not given yourself to him. I saw what that tolsu does to our crew. It affected me, not as continuously as the others, but still..." He glanced up a moment, running his hands through his hair, the strands sticking every which way. "I don't know why we are not affected like they are. Stig seemed fully enthralled. He had no desire to leave his master. Most of the others I spoke to said the same. They fed off the pleasure, wanting nothing more than to please their masters, receiving sexual favors in return. It didn't take long for these skipan to not even need their tolsu."

"Is that what's happening?" Manning asked, twisting to his knees, staring up at Brandt. "I saw Stig once, and you're right, he had no desire for escape. The tolsu makes my body sluggish, but my mind is not affected. Perhaps it is something in our genetic makeup. We are distant cousins."

"Hmm. I hadn't thought of that, you might be right. The tolsu makes me like the others, but doesn't hold me for long. Once it stops, I snap out of it quickly. Our men, however, are addicted to the contact. Not that I blame them. It's a heady experience." Brandt paused, crouching down. "Manning?"

Manning looked at him expectantly.

"Has your master explained what he expects from you?"

Manning shook his head. "He is not my master. You wear the collar I once wore." He tapped the torque around Brandt's neck, but could still feel the weight of it around his own.

His lover blew out a harsh breath. "Cursed Loki," he mumbled.

"What?" Manning twisted onto his knees to face Brandt, a lump forming in his throat. "Brandt, what is it?"

"Moon Drake." Kayluth stood in the hallway. Manning peered up at him, noting that the skipan had not entered the room. He absorbed Kayluth's disheveled appearance: the wrinkled tunic and skewed leather belt. Several braids were coming undone, and Manning's fingers itched to fix them, to feel the texture of the drakken's hair. He had the fleeting image of Kayluth pulling on them in frustration, and he wondered why.

"We have a guest that would like to speak to you." Kayluth paused, his gaze traveling to Brandt and then back to him. "And Brandt, if you are able."

"We'll be there in a moment," Manning answered for both of them, watching Kayluth leave. He made to rise, but the cool pressure of Brandt's hand on his arm held him back. "What?"

“We?” Brandt’s brows were raised, his brown eyes alight and focused on him. “We have a guest, we’ll be there? He owns you already,” he growled.

Manning pushed Brandt’s hand off him, schooling his features. He rose and regarded the man at his feet a tarran before extending a hand to help him up. He trapped Brandt’s hands in his, running his thumbs overtop of them, and wet his lips, deliberately buying time. He caught Brandt’s gaze with his own, securing his full attention.

“I am owned by two.”

Brandt’s head snapped back, gaping. “No,” he choked, shaking his hands free. He covered Manning’s lips with one hand, and the front of his neck, the torque included, with the other. “No. You cannot be owned by me. I am yours to command. Always.”

Manning removed Brandt’s hand from his mouth and guided it to his heart. He then laid his hand atop Brandt’s. Not bothering with words, he chose instead to lean forward and bestow a single kiss on Brandt’s lips.

“Possessed by two, then. You already have my heart; Kayluth has claimed a part too.” He grinned, pulling Brandt closer. “My love is not limited, there is plenty to share.” He leaned into a new kiss, letting his joy show in a quick tangle of tongues before he stepped back. Manning pulled Brandt from the room, holding tight to his love’s hand.

They emerged into the great room to find Kayluth with an older drakken, several of his braids laced with silver, speaking to each other in low tones. Lian knelt by the couch, arranging several plates of food on a small table.

Brandt let go of Manning’s hand and knelt beside the table, displacing Lian, his hands in his lap. She rose and moved to stand by the older drakken. A quiet growl escaped from Manning, but before he could say anything, Kayluth stepped to Brandt’s side. He lightly stroked his fingertips over Brandt’s head, and Manning swore he heard a hum of contentment from both human and drakken.

Kayluth scooped up Manning’s left hand and drew him closer. The spike of jealousy in his chest dissipated. He’d grown fond of Kayluth’s soothing strokes through his long locks and scratches on his scalp. The anticipation of indulging in Kayluth’s pleasures hit him low in his belly, and tucked as he was into the drakken’s warmth, blood rushed southward. A small sound of want passed his lips, and Kayluth bent to rub his cheek against Manning’s, and he could finally

feel the smooth, warm texture having at last been given a razor to rid himself of his stubble. He raised his right hand to his cheek once Kayluth straightened, trying to retain the heat and tenderness another tarran more.

A polite cough drew his attention back to their guest, and Manning startled at the mirror image of Kayluth's eyes.

"Moondrake, this is Lyurn. My father."

"I am pleased to meet my son's ssobroke. I doubted he would ever find his complement." He smiled conspiratorially. "He was never happy with the easy ones."

Manning grinned back. "I've already made his life miserable."

"So I have heard. I am extremely interested in learning more about you; to discover why you are immune to our—what was that word you used, Kay?"

"Tolsu, Father."

"Yes, our tolsu. Do you know your home world's history?"

"Not as well as I should," Manning admitted. "But between Brandt and I..." He turned to Kayluth. "I believe I had a history book among my personal effects."

Kayluth nodded and called to Lian, instructing her to bring the books he had stored. "Let us sit and eat while we wait."

Before Manning could take a step, Kayluth sat on the couch, pulling him down onto his lap. He laughed until he caught sight of Brandt's distress. He slid off Kayluth's legs to sit on his left, leaving Kayluth in the center between Lyurn and himself. He reached forward and ran his knuckles down the side of Brandt's cheek. "Come closer."

Brandt shifted until his side was flush with the couch and rested his forehead against Manning's thigh. Manning settled his left hand on Brandt's head, drawing his fingers through the short, thick mane Brandt preferred. He extended his right hand for a bite of food, only to have it slapped away by Kayluth. He shot him a look of disgust.

Kayluth returned the stare with an unrestrained, hungry gleam in his eyes. "My pleasure."

"What if I was getting it for you, or Brandt?"

The drakken pulled back, brows uplifted and mouth dropping open, as if that thought had never occurred to him. Manning chuckled and picked up a

piece of the tart fruit he'd liked. He held it out for Kayluth, teasing him with it until Kayluth snapped his jaws and he relented. He took up a second piece and leaned down to Brandt's ear. He coaxed him upright enough to place the food in his mouth then he turned to find Kayluth waiting with a bite for him.

Manning took hold of Kayluth's wrist, guiding his hand to put the food between his lips. Held him while he chewed and swallowed, then tugged his sobroke closer. "It pleases me for us to feed each other," he whispered.

Kayluth snagged a handful of his hair and tilted his head back. The briefest of heat had touched against his throat when another choking cough from Lyurn interrupted them. Kayluth's grumble of annoyance was adorable, Manning's answer of equal measure. They directed their attention back to Lyurn, who sat staring at them with a huge grin on his face and Manning's history book in his lap.

"Did you find something of note, Father?"

"What? Oh, ssu. Ssu. Here." He opened the book to a drawing of four kings, each wearing a different style of crown. They stood with their arms folded upon their breasts, sets of sharp claws clearly visible.

"I know who they are," Manning said. "The Dragon kings." He paused, clutching Kayluth's arm, the words echoing in his head. "Wait. You mean?"

Lyurn nodded. "Ssu. When we broke free from the reign of the Fenrir, four brothers settled on one planet, dividing it and ruling as kings. They copulated with the inhabitants who were similar in appearance to our secondary forms, bearing children who could not shift but retained other aspects of our genetics."

"My father is king." The words were barely audible, but all heard Lyurn's gasp. Brandt placed a hand on Manning's ankle, and he resumed carding his fingers through Brandt's hair. "Brandt is a cousin to our house."

"Descendents of the Vidar," Lyurn whispered reverently. "It explains why you are not affected by the tolsu, and why Kay was so taken with you from the start."

"Father!" Kayluth blushed a brilliant red.

"Husssh. He should know if he does not already. It also reveals why this one"—he motioned towards Brandt—"did not mesh with any of the others who tried to choose him. Alpha to alpha... They were not worthy of him."

"Ssu, you are probably right."

“I don’t understand,” Manning said. Kayluth rotated to face him. His lips parted, but before he was able to speak a word of explanation, his father cut him off.

“I will leave you to explain.” Lyurn rose, fingering the torque around his neck. “I have my own ssobroke to see to.” He dipped his head in a wordless good-bye.

Chapter Ten

Vidareem

“Alpha to alpha?” Manning asked once Lyurn left, reaching for a few pieces of food. He offered one to Kayluth and tickled Brandt’s ear to give him the other. Brandt raised his head for the piece, but then returned his forehead to Manning’s thigh.

Manning stopped Kayluth from speaking, a hand on the drakken’s leg. “Wait.” He twisted his lips, gazing down at his lover, not pleased with this fearful, submissive Brandt at all. He’d not been like this when they were alone in the bedroom. He cupped the sides of Brandt’s face and tilted his face up. Red-rimmed eyes met his before they snapped to Kayluth, then away from both of them.

Kayluth leaned across Manning and ran his right hand through Brandt’s hair. He slid two fingers under the collar, letting the heat in his hand penetrate Brandt’s skin. “I am surprised, Sundrake, I did not expect you to act like this.”

Brandt peered up at him, and when he spoke his voice came out hoarse. “What did you expect, *Drottinn*?”

“Alpha to alpha to alpha.” Kayluth pointed to each of them. “I expected you to be strong and belligerent, like our ssobroke. I do not expect you to call me *Drottinn*. Moondrake does not, so you should not.”

“You want to choose me.” Brandt gripped the tops of Manning’s legs, his eyes narrowing to piercing slits of anger. “Why?”

“Our ssobroke has made it clear that there cannot be one without the other,” Kayluth answered, laying his left hand on Manning’s thigh, letting two of his fingers cross on top of Brandt’s hand. “I hoped you would desire both of us.”

“Why would I want you?” Brandt asked, each syllable gaining in volume. “How can I respect your kind who treated me like an animal, collared me, caged me? You’re insane if you think—”

Manning halted Brandt’s tirade with fingertips on his mouth. “No one is forcing you on this. The decision is yours. I hoped too.” He dropped his hand from Brandt’s mouth to overlay the two already on his leg. He slowly curled his fingers around them both. He inhaled through his nose and smiled when he did not detect any presence of Kayluth’s tolsu.

Brandt looked at Manning, confusion showing clearly. “I don’t understand.” His gaze flickered back and forth between Manning and Kayluth, then down to where they all touched.

“Do you trust me?” Manning asked him. Kayluth’s choosing of Brandt—as he’d chosen him—filled him with joy, but Brandt’s confusion and resistance began to drain that euphoric feeling away. He knew if he could get Brandt to understand how Kayluth differed from the other drakken—gentler, kinder, devoted—then with Freya’s blessing they could be together. He hoped Brandt would allow the drakken to please them both.

Brandt nodded. “You know I do.”

“Then breathe in, my sobroke.” Manning demonstrated again and again. After several tarrans had passed with nothing but the sound of their breathing filling the room, Manning turned to Kayluth. “Kiss me.” Kayluth threaded his fingers into Manning’s hair and bent his head back.

Heated lips connected intimately with Manning’s throat. Full and damp kisses ascended his neck, rounded his jaw, and Kayluth licked at his mouth. He gave Kayluth open entrance, parting his lips at the demand of his sobroke’s tongue. He’d been denying himself the pleasure of the drakken’s kiss, and now he let himself be overwhelmed with its intensity.

A whimper compelled them apart. Manning turned his face towards Brandt, finding him with glazed eyes and blown pupils. He released the left hand hold he’d had on Kayluth’s tunic and slid a finger under Brandt’s torque, drawing him slowly forward.

Brandt’s tongue snaked out and dampened his lips. Manning wet his own in response. Brandt planted his palms on Manning’s thighs, pushing himself upwards to press their mouths together. Manning cupped the back of Brandt’s head and held him firmly, refusing to let Brandt pull away. He teased Brandt’s lips open with his tongue, swallowing each murmured sound as they came. The rough warmth of Kayluth’s hand enveloped his, helping him hold Brandt steady, and he felt the subtle touch of the drakken’s nose at his collarbone.

Manning blinked open his eyes, trying to commit this first time to memory. He broke off the kiss to grab onto Brandt’s tunic, hauling him forward and managing to get Brandt to straddle him on the couch. Kayluth lavished attention to the side of Brandt’s neck, growling with gentle bites, licking and sucking at his flesh. Manning began his own assault on the other side of their sobroke’s throat, planting open-mouth kisses and nibbling at his skin. Brandt’s

hands came up to cup each of their faces, tilting his head back and riding out the sensations.

Lost in each other's skin, they ignored the first two-tone ping. A second one sounded, soon followed by a scurrying of feet and a shout of "Skeppare."

The three of them bolted upright, glaring at Orm who took a decided step back. Manning glanced at Kayluth to witness a dreadful scowl and tensing of muscles, elated to not be on the receiving end of that stern gaze.

"What?" Kayluth spat at their unwelcome visitor.

Orm tugged on the front of his tunic and straightened his belt. Manning snorted at the drakken's apparent unease, earning himself a sneer from the skipan. *Serves him right for coming in without an invitation.* Brandt placed a hand on each of them. Manning did the same, making sure to cover the one Brandt had on Kayluth. Orm stared at the three of them, making fists, and wrinkling his nose.

"I spoke to your father," Orm said. "He told me you had taken a ssobroke. I did not believe him."

Kayluth leaned back into the couch. "He spoke the truth, but not all of it."

"Obviously. I see no possession around your neck." Orm made a dismissive gesture that had Kayluth charging. Orm retreated, only stopping when his back hit the wall beside the door. Kayluth's clawed right hand wrapped around Orm's throat, his left ripping into his officer's tunic at the shoulder.

A vicious chuckle emanated from Kayluth. "Oh, *drakeen*, do you think I am ssstupid? Think I mussst not be in my right mind because I have taken a sssobroke who cannot be controlled? Sssu, perhapsss you are right because I choossse not one, but two."

"Two?" Orm goggled.

"Sssu, two desssendentsss of the Vidar."

"The Vidar?" Orm breathed out in awe. Then his eyes narrowed. "Are you certain? That would make them—"

"Sssu. Drakken royalty."

Manning glanced at Brandt, glimpsing a stunned expression he felt sure he mirrored. He looked back to discover Orm's whole body drooping, trembling hands covering Kayluth's.

"My apologies, Skeppare."

Orm drew in a long breath before meeting Manning's gaze. "My apologies, Vidareem, Ssobroke of Kayluth." He knelt down on one knee in supplication. Kayluth placed his hand on Orm's head a moment before swiping the door's control panel.

"Go," Kayluth said. "We are not to be disturbed until tomorrow. I have ssobroke to please." He allowed Orm to make his escape.

Kayluth advanced upon them, and Manning's gut tightened, catching sight of the swift infusion of gold in his sobroke's eyes. Brandt squeezed Manning's upper arms, his body twisted to watch the drakken's approach. Manning slid his hands under Brandt's tunic, palming his ass. Kayluth stopped before them, laying a hand on Brandt's face, sliding his thumb along his cheek.

"Ssobroke Sundrake, you have heard my claim. I offer you the same as our Moondrake. With respect and honor will I care for you, only asking in return that you allow yourself to revel in the pleasure that will bind us together, Ssobroke to Ssobroke to Ssobroke. Will you accept me, accept us?"

Brandt relocated his grip on Manning to take up Kayluth's hand. He shifted off Manning's lap and sat beside him on the couch, tugging the drakken forward. Kayluth dropped to his knees, Manning and Brandt blinking at him in surprise. He waited expectantly for Brandt's answer, laying a hand on each of their thighs.

"I... You expect too much from me, Drottinn." Brandt raised his hands to halt the rebuttals from both of them. "Wait!" He drew in a breath, moving to rub the back of his neck. Then he bit at his lips while fingering the torque. "You have convinced Manning of your sincerity, but I... can't."

Kayluth frowned, casting his eyes to the floor. Manning spoke for both of them. "Why?"

Brandt's cheeks reddened. "Things happened. Your crew..."

The drakken froze. He peered at Brandt, eyes pale glinting crystals. Manning winced when Kayluth's claws pierced his leg.

Brandt shook his head. "I know you are sorry, but that doesn't absolve *them*." Anger laced his voice. "And now you say I'm a prince among you." His cynical laugh sent a chill down Manning's spine. "Where was the respect and honor before? Your people must have none, seeking pleasure without consent."

“I did not kn—” Kayluth protested—momentarily halted by a spearing glance from Brandt—before his displeasure got the better of him. Brandt’s treatment equally enraged Manning.

“What happened to you—” Kayluth growled, rubbing Brandt’s thigh. “—and you will tell Moondrake if not me, should not have happened. I will discover who was involved, but ultimately I am responsible. I do need to say the words. My preoccupation with Moondrake caused me to overlook how you were being treated. The chains should have been enough for me to stop and reassess your situation. I failed you, and I am sorry.” He lowered his forehead to Brandt’s legs. “I hope you can forgive me.”

Manning gasped at this show of the drakken’s submission, so unlike his race, and he realized that Brandt didn’t know about Kayluth, his race’s history, nor even that they were Drakken. He gazed at Brandt to find him staring down at Kayluth. He took Brandt’s right hand between his own, gaining his attention, and tried to keep his tone even and gentle. “You have questions, we have answers. We haven’t had a chance to tell each other our stories.” He ran a hand over Kayluth’s braids. “Will you kneel there the whole time, or would you prefer to join us on the couch?”

The drakken turned his face so he could see Manning. He smiled cheekily. “I would prefer we move to my bed where we can spread out and be able to see one another.”

Manning and Brandt glanced at each other. Manning shrugged; the decision had to be Brandt’s. He gave a barely perceptible nod, and Kayluth rose, pulling them to their feet. He dumped the food onto two plates, and then led the way to his bedroom.

Chapter Eleven

Drakken

It took most of the next two arns for Manning and Brandt to recount what had happened to them since coming aboard the *Reykr*. Kayluth spent much of the time in a state of embarrassment. Between the teasing he received for his striped socks—he'd removed his boots—and Manning's description of his blatant show of possession in Orm's office, Kayluth's cheeks ranged in color from pale pink to bright red. Manning hoarded the plates of food and hand-fed his sobroke while Brandt and Kayluth learned about one another. He also brought out the Drakken history book and showed Brandt its pictures with Kayluth explaining them and describing how the Vidar were able to defeat the Fenrir.

Brandt wished to see Kayluth's drakken form and Kayluth agreed. His sobroke's consent surprised and pleased Manning. He hadn't yet seen him shift or been able to touch the dragon. Since he first saw Kayluth's true form, he'd wanted to compare his height to that of the drakken's, run his fingertips along the scales and explore their texture, feel the sharpness of his claws and teeth. Kayluth's offer for Manning to strip him had him bounding off the bed.

He began by untying his sobroke's belt, sliding the softened black leather through its bindings. Holding the silver buckle in his right hand, he let the belt dangle to the floor, but didn't drop it. Instead he slid his left hand along its length, stopping at the end. He flipped it up, over his head, allowing it to lie across the back of his neck and shoulders. He glanced up under hooded lids to note flecks of gold returning to Kayluth's irises. Manning paced forward with a cocky smile, and placed his palms on the drakken's pecs. Heat poured through the tunic into his hands as he slid them down Kayluth's torso, hips, and thighs. He gathered the hem of shimmering red fabric into his fists and raised his arms. The drakken had to bend over for Manning to pull it off him.

Kayluth's fiery eyes caught him, held him in thrall, and he closed the space that had appeared between them. When Manning felt wandering fingers on his waist, he tsked, scolding his sobroke to keep his hands to himself. It didn't stop him, however, from letting his own fingers meander over Kayluth's warm flesh when the drakken positioned his arms behind his back. With his shoulders pulled back, Kayluth's broad chest pushed out and into Manning as if seeking more of his touch. He gladly gave it, teasing the skin around each brown nipple.

Kayluth's responding growl morphed into a contented purr when Manning leaned in and licked one erect nub.

A groan sounded from the bed. Manning turned his head to look, finding Brandt lying on his belly, his chin resting on the heels of his palms, nibbling on his bottom lip. He observed the large, dark pupils in wide-open eyes and a tiny shift of Brandt's hips.

"Mmm," Manning hummed. "Would you like a taste, Sundrake?" he cooed at Brandt. "Our sobroke tastes as good as he smells."

Brandt shook his head and averted his gaze, his cheeks flooding with color. His refusal disappointed Manning, but he still had a task to complete.

He inched back from Kayluth, sliding his hands along the waistband of his leggings, and picked up the ends of the cord tying them closed. He tugged on them playfully, slowing letting the bow come undone. Kayluth stepped back, striving to move Manning along quicker, but he kept pace, forcing the drakken to wait, as he had been forced to wait, bound in ropes.

He held still a moment until Kayluth leaned down and nuzzled his hair. "Are you all right, Moondrake?"

"Yes, I..." He met Kayluth's worried gaze. He cupped the drakken's cheeks, gliding his thumbs over Kayluth's frown, attempting to reverse it. "You tied me up."

"I did."

"Why?"

"I could not let you go. I knew without knowing that you were my ssobroke. I only wish"—he looked at Brandt—"that our Sundrake hadn't gone through what he did. I am sorry, my Vidar." Kayluth bent his knees and would have dropped to floor, but Manning held him in place.

"No," he said sharply. "We are done with subservience. We are equals. The only bending of knee will be in pleasure. I want you to remove Brandt's collar."

"No," Brandt responded, sitting up and covering the torque with his hands.

Manning frowned, stepping away from Kayluth to stand in front of Brandt. "What? Why?"

"It was yours. I am yours." Brandt fisted Manning's tunic, earnest and sure, holding him in place.

Manning ran the fingers of his right hand down Brandt's cheek. He covered Brandt's grip on his tunic with his own, leaned in with a smile and licked at his lips. Brandt gave him entry and he delved deeper, their tongues tangling as they lost themselves in the kiss. Kayluth pressed himself to Manning's back, laying his left hand on Manning's hip. He followed the path of Manning's fingers with his other hand, overlaying them both on top of the torque.

"Now," Brandt said, with a satisfied sigh, "finish getting our drakken undressed. I was enjoying the show." His eyes brightened. "And I'm desperate to see the dragon."

Manning snorted and turned in Kayluth's arms, positioning them in profile to Brandt. He laid his palms on the drakken's hips, then curled his fingers down under the waistband. With the cord already undone all he had to do was loosen the fabric. When it had been sufficiently pulled out, he stopped and smiled impudently. He stepped closer and peered down, groaning. The drakken's cock rose to half-mast, gaining size at a swift pace. He moved to stick his hand inside Kayluth's pants when Brandt halted him.

"Stop. No touching yet," he said sternly.

Both sobroke growled and focused perturbed looks at Brandt, who laughed. Manning let Kayluth's leggings fall, and the laughter cut short as Brant stared. "Sweet Freya," Brandt whispered, his green eyes ogling Kayluth's thick cock. Full, it hung parallel to the floor, pinker than the drakken's normal pale tone.

"Sweet Freya indeed," Manning agreed, the corner of his mouth turning up. "Can I touch now?"

"You touch, and I'll never see my dragon." Brandt frowned, but his chuckles belied the expression.

Manning raised a brow in amusement. "My?"

"Our." They grinned at each other.

Kayluth held silent during the verbal volley. Having stepped out of his pants, he stood wearing only striped stockings and a grin. He cleared his throat, gaining their attention. "I will take off my socks, and then—" Before he could finish, Manning dropped to his knees, his hands at the top of one stocking, pushing it down, and tapping on the drakken's foot to get him to lift it. He removed the second one and crawled up on the bed beside Brandt.

"We're ready," he declared, taking Brandt's hand in his.

Kayluth flushed. "I am not accustomed to having an audience."

Manning's smile fled. "Do you want us to leave?"

"No, it is all right. Give me a tarran to get myself under control." He indicated his erection, earning sniggers from his sobroke. He took a few deep breaths. The change happened faster than Manning thought it would. He'd barely saw Kayluth's head enlarge, when his legs swelled and became disjointed. An elongated neck sprouted golden scales darkening to burnt red except along their edges. A tail thumped beside them on the mattress, startling both men. Brandt reached out to touch, but Kayluth pulled his tail back and waved it. Manning laughed at the obvious tease. *No touching.*

They scrambled off the bed and cautiously approached. Manning placed his fingertips on the drakken's shoulder, drawing them lightly over a pebbled, crimson scale. Flecks of colors—citrine golds, sapphire blues, amber yellows and darker oranges—dotted the surface of them. He ghosted his fingers across the rock-hard scales as he circled around Kayluth's bulk. From tip to tail, each scale shading from red to gold made Kayluth shimmer. He touched the leathery wings and the bony brow ridges highlighting the drakken's elongated head, all crowned with a smooth set of short, curved horns. Manning inspected his claws and sharp teeth, feigning fright when Kayluth playfully snapped at him.

The drakken's magnificence overwhelmed Manning, and he praised his beautiful sobroke. Kayluth huffed proudly, nosing at them both with his snout. Manning snuggled under a wing, surrounding himself in the warmth and smell of the drakken. The sweet tolsu scented the enclosed space, relaxing him and tipping him into sleep.

He emerged a short while later, rubbing at his eyes, to find Brandt kneeling beside Kayluth's enormous head, scratching between some scales, and Kayluth purring with pleasure.

"He wakes!" Brandt declared. The drakken snorted in amusement and knocked Manning sideways with his nose.

Manning bopped his snout, grinning. "Watch it." He stepped into the bathroom, sliding the door closed behind him.

When Manning returned to the bedroom, Brandt left Kayluth where he rested, still in dragon form on the massive bed, and rose to meet him. He took hold of Manning's hands, transferred them into his left hand, and placed his right over Manning's heart.

“I’m going to bed,” Brandt said, indicating with his head towards Manning’s room. “I’m looking forward to sleeping on a mattress.”

“There’s one here,” Manning replied.

“I…” Brandt swallowed. “I can’t. Not yet.” He cast his gaze away momentarily. He met Manning’s concerned expression with determination, his lips shut tight. “While you slept, Kayluth lay content to not move or shift, and I asked him many yes or no questions.” Brandt smiled. “I enjoyed getting to know him better, and I see what you see, but I still need time.” He halted Manning’s retort with a chaste kiss. “Maybe not so much time, though.”

Manning grinned and grasped Brandt’s tunic, tugging him into a deeper kiss. He held tight to his lover, licking at his mouth, touching tongues, nibbling on his jaw, all the while directing him towards the smaller room.

At the doorway Manning stopped and leaned away. “You’re sure?”

Brandt laughed and laid one more swift kiss on him. “I’m sure. Good night, my sobroke.” He called to Kayluth, “Good night, Stardrake.”

“Stardrake?” Manning asked with an uplifted eyebrow. Kayluth huffed behind him.

“Well, if you are Moon, and I am Sun, then that must make him Star.”

Manning chuckled, “So true. Good night, my sobroke.” He placed one more peck on Brandt’s lips, pushed him into the room, and slid the door shut.

He spun, finding himself the target of the drakken’s discerning focus. “What?” Manning asked. Kayluth answered with a raise of his wing, inviting him back underneath.

“I’m not tired,” he said, thinking the drakken must expect him to be sleepy too, but the nap had revived him.

Kayluth flapped his wing and Manning smiled. “All right, all right.” He stepped up onto the mattress and pressed a kiss to the drakken’s browridge. “You want me where?” he teased. Kayluth snorted and with a twist of his neck, pushed him in the direction he wanted. Manning lay down, mumbling, “Yes or no questions was a good idea. Although if I’m down here, I can’t see you well.”

Kayluth tucked his back legs underneath him and leaned to the side, pushing Manning against his softer underbelly with a curved claw. He pressed himself to the drakken’s delicate scales, the ones here smoother to the touch, almost like human flesh. He rubbed his cheek against them, and slowly drew his

fingertips along Kayluth's belly. A low rumble echoed around him. Six protrusions poked through between scales, two vertical rows of three. Manning circled his fingers around each one, Kayluth's purrs gaining in volume.

"Like that, do you?" he whispered. Kayluth swiveled his head to view him with one jade eye. His snout nudged at Manning's shoulder, making him slide farther down the bed until he lay near the drakken's rear legs. Kayluth positioned his wings to the bed, closing Manning off from the room. The temperature level spiked, and he grew uncomfortable with the heat. He debated taking off his tunic, and chuckled, thinking it likely what the drakken had in mind.

"If you want me naked—" he pushed up on Kayluth's underbelly "—you have to give me a little maneuvering room." The drakken grumbled, but lifted on his back legs giving Manning space to strip. He pulled off the tunic and folded it, placing it under his head for a pillow. Kayluth tucked his wings in to his body, letting the cooler air in the room raise goose bumps on Manning's flesh.

"Now, I'm cold," Manning grouched, extending his arms out and snagging his fingertips on the edges of scales, trying to pull the drakken down like a blanket. Kayluth settled lower, putting Manning in full contact with his underbelly.

"Hmm." Manning wiggled, his cock rubbing against silky scales, hardening in the warmth of Kayluth's body. He felt an odd poke against his hip, and unable to see, he bent to the side and craned his neck. His eyes flew open, and then he squeezed them shut. "Sweet...sweet..." He couldn't even get the goddess' name past his lips. He opened his eyes to verify what he'd seen. He pushed up on the drakken's belly. Kayluth rumbled annoyance, but complied.

He propped himself up on his elbows and gazed down at Kayluth's enormous cock. He thought the man-form's had been impressive, his drakken's was... Kayluth's snout swiveled and his long, rough tongue slipped out and licked at Manning's shaft. The light teasing touch had him dropping flat to his back. He watched his sobroke's tongue darting out to lap at his cock, breath quickening with each slick caress.

"That feels wonderful," Manning whispered, his eyelids falling closed, indulging in the pleasure his sobroke gave. Kayluth lowered himself and began rubbing his erection against Manning's legs. The drakken's satiny underbelly stroked Manning's cock, and he reached over his head and let his fingertips

play with the small protrusions. Kayluth's purrs grew in volume, vibrating his body and sending a pleasant tingle into his skin.

The rubbing increased in speed, and Manning suddenly found his cock encased in sleek warmth. It hugged him, putting the perfect amount of pressure and friction on all sides of his erection. The smooth membrane slid back and forth with his sobroke's motions, delighting him. He groaned, not knowing what surrounded his shaft, but knew he wanted more of that blessed sensation. He thrust his hips upwards into that exquisite, tight heat. Kayluth swung his head down and nuzzled Manning with his snout. He huffed a hot breath of air over Manning's skin, sending his body soaring with pleasure. He seized two of the fleshy nubs between his fingers, the tug earning him a growl from the drakken and faster rocking of his body.

Manning had been primed and ready for hours, starting with those kisses on the couch between the three of them. The image of him and his sobroke together, pleasuring one another simultaneously, pushed him over the edge, calling out an "Ah" of rapture, spilling his seed into Kayluth's body. A long rumbling purr from Kayluth followed, the wet splash of his release coating Manning's belly and legs.

The drakken's tolsu surrounded him, and Manning pulled it into his lungs with each deep breath, the overdose swiftly sending him into oblivion.

Chapter Twelve

Possession

Manning awoke encircled by powerful arms carefully holding him, his back pressed to an extremely warm Kayluth. One long leg trapped his, and the drakken had interlaced their fingers. He'd never had a chance to wake like this with Brandt aboard the *Moondrake*. Surrounded, cherished, he could get used to this very quickly. He sent a silent prayer to Freya that soon Brandt would join them. He smiled indulgently at the thought of being sandwiched between his sobroke.

He turned slowly in his sobroke's arms. Kayluth slept on, his ebony braids hanging in disarray. Manning snuck a hand out to touch them, examining the polished gemstones of yellow and orange amber, citrine and quartz, green emeralds and blood-red garnets. He recognized the colors from the drakken's scales and smiled. *One mystery solved.*

The drakken blinked open his eyes, allowing Manning to meet his sapphire gaze. Manning pushed back the braids, one catching his attention. He slid his fingertips down its silvery length, lingering on the polished multihued stone it held. He'd never seen a gemstone like it before.

"My ssobroke," Kayluth whispered, bringing Manning's attention back to him.

"Ssu," Manning said.

A single laugh burst from Kayluth. "You learn quickly."

"I must. I've got some catching up to do on our people's history," Manning replied, with full sincerity.

"True, Vidar. I have enlisted help already. My fathers will be joining us soon to break our fast."

"Is our time almost up? You told Orm until tomorrow."

"We have some arns left, my ssobroke." Kayluth trailed his fingertips down Manning's arm.

"You like saying that, don't you?" Manning teased.

"Ssu, I have waited a long time for you." His hand slid to Manning's ass, then traveled up his back, leaving those paths of fire he delighted in.

He felt the glide of Kayluth's thumb down his spine, bumping over each vertebra, and along the crack of his ass. He hummed his approval, bending his neck and letting his forehead rest on Kayluth's firm chest. His sobroke leaned up on an elbow, his palm and spread fingers laid on Manning's coccyx, like a starburst, radiating heat outward. He guided Manning to lie on his stomach, straddling his legs, pressing fingertips gently through his hair to his scalp. Warm palms massaged his shoulder blades, kneading muscles still relaxed from sleep, except for one growing rapidly harder under the ministrations.

"My ssobroke," Kayluth whispered again and again, with each pass of his hands across Manning's back.

Manning turned over, laying his hands on Kayluth's thighs and licking his lips. He stared at the drakken's engorged shaft and the bead of moisture at its tip. Sliding his right hand up Kayluth's leg, he let his fingertips dance at the crease of skin between thigh and torso. He tickled the muscles of his sobroke's abdomen, tiny snorts escaping when Kayluth flinched.

"Moondrake," Kayluth said in a firm tone, grabbing Manning's hands.

Manning figured he must have had enough of his sobroke's brand of torture. He could think of a thousand ways to tease the drakken once he enlisted Brandt's help. He smiled coyly up at Kayluth. "Ssu?"

Kayluth growled, leaned down, skin meeting skin, and drove his tongue into Manning's mouth. Manning struggled, his sobroke's hold firm, guiding Manning's hands above his head and pinning them to the bed. He squirmed, arching his back to rub his sparsely-haired chest against Kayluth's hairless one. His lips were abandoned, the drakken moving on, licking at his jaw and earlobe. He tilted his head to the side, giving his sobroke room to work. Kayluth took his time, tasting all of Manning's skin; he lay helpless to do anything to stop him.

Kayluth inched backwards down Manning's body, reverently laying pecks with his lips and wet, open-mouth kisses along Manning's throat and collarbone. Manning's breath quickened and his heart pounded. Kayluth swiped his tongue across Manning's nipples, the stiff nubs demanding attention. He spent tarrans worshipping them, Manning panting between groans of delight when Kayluth suckled on them, pulling them taut, and moaning in near bliss when his sobroke grazed his teeth over the sensitive buds.

The drakken descended farther. He let go of Manning's hands, but ordered him to keep them there.

“No.” Manning chuckled, pushing himself up, interrupting Kayluth in his task of outlining his sobroke’s abs with his tongue.

Kayluth looked up, head tilted and blue eyes wide. He leaned forward to press his forehead against Manning’s. “No?”

Manning went cross-eyed trying to stare back at the drakken. “No,” he repeated. “I want to touch you.”

Kayluth sat up and moved to kneel beside him, instead of straddling him. He nodded, spreading his arms open. “Ssu. Touch me.”

Manning bit at his lower lip, debating where to start. He reached out a hand only to have his wrist grabbed and pulled, his body twisted, his chest suddenly meeting the bed. He grumbled, growled, and writhed beneath the drakken straddling him once again. Kayluth had tricked him, rolled him! One heated palm pushed down on his back, preventing him from rising. The other had a firm grasp on one butt cheek.

Kayluth laughed, gyrating his hips, grinding Manning’s cock into the mattress. “You think you can escape me, my ssobroke?” He playfully slapped Manning’s ass. “Now that I have found you, I will never let you go.”

Manning felt the tips of Kayluth’s braids tease his skin, heard the gentle clinking of gemstones over the pounding in his ears. A breath of heated air blew onto his balls, spilling into the seam of his ass. His sobroke’s palm dragged down his back, sharp nails scratched at his muscles. Red-hot hands cupped his ass, drawing the cheeks apart. Another wash of warm air preceded the swath of moisture laid over the entrance to his body. Manning groaned, spreading his legs as far as he could. Kayluth’s tongue licked at his hole, the tip dancing around its edges, pulsing in and loosening the muscles. All of it delighted him, and when Kayluth stopped, he lifted his hips in a quest for more. Not receiving any, he pouted, craning his neck to look back at the drakken.

Kayluth knelt with his head bowed, his claws biting into Manning’s ass. They weren’t painful, but he could feel each sharp point.

“What’s wrong?” Manning asked, bringing his arms forward and propping himself up on one elbow with a twist of his torso. He studied Kayluth intently.

Kayluth looked up, his lips in a faint smile. One side of his mouth pushed up. “Forgive me, my ssobroke.”

“What’s to forgive?” he asked, brows drawing down.

“I forgot the oil.”

Manning flopped to the bed. “Blessed—”

“Here.”

Manning twisted to see Brandt standing beside the bed, holding out a small jar to Kayluth. The drakken ignored the jar and laid his fingertips under Brandt’s chin. He gently drew Brandt forward until their lips met. A rush of blood flooded Manning’s cock and his abs clenched at the sight. His anticipation of the three joining had him turning quickly over and kneeling beside them.

With Brandt standing on the floor, he and Kayluth were of even height, Manning coming only up to their shoulders. He inched forward, placing a hand on each of their asses and, leaning in, stuck his head between their chests. He ran his tongue over Brandt’s nipple, then licked his lips, savoring the salty flavor of Brandt’s skin. He squeezed their asses, alternating adoration of smooth flesh and hardened nubs. Two hands lay upon him, Kayluth’s in his hair, tugging on the strands, Brandt’s on a shoulder, sliding down his arms and upper back.

Kayluth’s grip on his hair tightened, pulling his head away from their bodies and tilting his face up. He brought his lips down hard on Manning’s, thrusting his tongue inside, stealing the taste of their skin with a satisfied growl. Kayluth broke off abruptly. Manning had a fleeting glance of Brandt’s hand on the drakken’s chest before the view cut off, Brandt’s lips and tongue taking over where Kayluth’s had left off. Manning moaned into Brandt’s mouth, reveling in being the object of their affection.

Manning tried to secure his grip on their asses, curling his fingers into sturdy muscles, but Kayluth moved away. The drakken’s heated palms rested on his shoulders and eased him back to rest between his legs. Brandt followed, refusing to give up his possession of Manning’s mouth, nipping at his lips, tangling their tongues, never giving him quarter to take control.

Manning cupped the back of Brandt’s head, allowing his lover to own him. Brandt shifted down his body, pushing his legs apart. Kayluth, supported by pillows, cradled him to his solid upper body, driving his heat into Manning’s back, while Manning gripped the top of Kayluth’s thighs, digging his fingers into the drakken’s muscles.

Brandt lapped along the ridges of Manning’s rib cage and abdomen, leaving damp swirls around each nipple and dipping into his belly button. He made his way southward, the tip of his tongue darting to taste the precum at the slit of Manning’s cock.

Kayluth's rumbling purr reverberated through Manning's body. The vibrations stirred his soul and his passion, turning want to desire, to hunger. He shuddered with an eagerness he'd never experienced before, craving Kayluth's heat and Brandt's control, his sobroke's possession.

"Please," Manning whispered.

Brandt lifted his gaze to Manning's, mouth poised over the head of his cock. He grinned, white teeth biting at his lower lip, his green eyes wide and burning with desire. He dropped his mouth open and extended his tongue, placing it at the base of Manning's cock. Never taking his eyes off him, he licked up Manning's shaft. Brandt lifted Manning's cock and, finally looking down, engulfed him in his mouth.

Manning refused to look away, wanting to commit it all to memory. Brandt's head bobbed on his shaft, wet heat sucking at his hard flesh, his tongue pressing and torturing all around the ridge. Kayluth's thumbs flicked at his nipples, fingertips gliding on his skin, playing with the hair on his chest.

The drakken's hand extended in front of Manning, palm upward. "Sundrake," Kayluth called to Brandt, "give me the jar."

Brandt's brows raised, the tops of his irises peeking up from his task. The pressure of Brandt's mouth increased around Manning's cock, and he tipped his head back against Kayluth with a growl. Brandt slapped the jar onto the drakken's palm. Manning watched Kayluth open the small bottle under hooded lids.

Kayluth hooked his heels on the inside of Manning's thighs, forcing him to open his legs further. He held the jar out, allowing Brandt to dip his fingers in. Manning's mouth dropped open, panting, anxious for Brandt to prepare him. One slick finger circled his entrance, tapping on its center before easing inside.

Manning closed his eyes, absorbing the feel of Brandt's finger inside him. The tiny fullness, moving quickly to deep insertions, combined with Brandt's mouth around his cock, already caused his balls to tighten. He bit at his lip, pulling himself together, breathing deeply, refusing to fall when there was so much further to go.

Brandt added a second finger, pumped in and out of his body. Breathing hard and groaning, he white-knuckled his hold on Kayluth's legs as Brandt stretched him,

"I'm ready," Manning said breathily, wanting Brandt to enter him.

Brandt sucked on the head of his cock, concentrating his attention there. Kayluth's arms raised, Manning followed their path, watching the drakken pour oil onto a hand before stoppering the bottle and placing it beside him on the bed. The slickened hand surrounded Manning's shaft, taking over the strokes, and Brandt released him.

"I'll go slow," Brandt said, shifting upwards and letting Kayluth cover his shaft in oil. He placed a hand on Manning's hip, the other on Kayluth's shoulder, and leaned down to swipe his tongue across Manning's mouth.

Manning gripped the sides of Brandt's face, holding him still, pulling him in for a deeper kiss. As Brandt edged his cock inside his body, he drove his tongue into Brandt's mouth. Both of them groaned as Brandt's oiled shaft slipped fully inside him. He slid his hands down to Brandt's shoulders, and they grinned at one another, delighting in the pleasure of their joining.

A tilt of Brandt's hips had him tipping his head back again. Brandt and Kayluth met for a quick, chaste kiss, the position awkward for both of them with him in the middle. He nipped at Brandt's skin when it pressed close. Brandt drew back, laughing and thrusting, changing Manning's laugh to a drawn-out moan.

"Ah, Bran..." Manning sighed, grasping on to Brandt's shoulders as he took up a steady, pulsing rhythm. Kayluth's slick right hand between them stroked counterpoint to Brandt's thrusts.

"My ssobroke," Kayluth whispered, low and thick, into Manning's ear, laying his left hand on Manning's heart.

"My sobroke," Manning answered, his voice tremulous and breathy, covering Kayluth's hand with his own, interlacing their fingers, and staring up at Brandt.

Brandt's hand covered theirs, his fingers curling around them. Manning looked up at him, seeing his gaze wander back and forth between Kayluth and himself. He wanted Brandt to say the words, knew Kayluth wanted to hear them too, but for now, this would be enough; his joining with them in pleasure only the beginning.

A long, hard, fleshy lump poked Manning in the back, and he wiggled against it. He halted Brandt with a squeeze to his bicep when Kayluth let out an agonized groan.

"Silly, drakken," he scolded his sobroke, leaning forward and twisting to look at him. "Come lie beside me." Kayluth nodded.

Manning turned back and threw his arms around Brandt's neck, peppering him with kisses while Kayluth slid out from behind him. He adjusted the pillows for Manning, then stretched out on Manning's right side, stuffing a pillow under his armpit to raise himself up. Manning lay back, cupping Brandt's cheek, smoothed his thumb across Brandt's lip. He gasped, groin clenching, when Brandt snapped his hips forward. Kayluth pressed firmly with the open palm of his right hand on Manning's cock, and then, enclosing it once more in blazing heat, resumed his steady strokes.

Manning looked down his body, savoring each deep thrust of Brandt's hips, relishing the heat and friction of Kayluth's hand around his shaft. The shift of Kayluth's hips caught his attention, and he glanced over to view his sobroke's magnificent cock. He held his palm out to Kayluth. "Give me some oil." Kayluth snatched up the jar and poured a generous amount onto Manning's hand, earning a snort from Brandt.

"Our Stardrake is anxious," Brandt quipped, laying a hand on the outside of Kayluth's thigh after he had settled himself back on the bed.

Manning hummed his agreement, and bit at his lips. He ran his slick palm around Kayluth's cock, coating it in the oil. "I may need help, Sundrake," he said in the same light teasing tone, making a circle with his fingers and thumb around the base of Kayluth's erection and drawing them up the length of him. "He's very big."

Kayluth blushed the darkest red yet, burying his face between Manning's shoulder and the mattress. When Manning took a firm hold around his cock, his head came up with a gasp, then a groan spilled from his lips. He let himself be stroked for a full tarran before reaching for Manning's shaft.

This time Manning gave up all semblance of control, letting his sobroke have their way with him. He gave himself over to the pleasure they provided, and provided pleasure in return. Each thrust of Brandt's shaft sinking inside him pushed his cock into the tight heat of Kayluth's hand. His own firm grip on the drakken's erection sliding involuntarily as his body rocked. Each groan echoed times two, each taste of lips given to another. Together they spiraled higher, reaching for the Moon, the Sun, and the Star, joined in their possession.

Gathered, grasped, exalted, they floated higher, peaked, and then drifted down in each other's arms.

Chapter Thirteen

Joining

A knock on the door, and Lian calling to Kayluth, woke Manning and Brandt from where they napped against Kayluth's body, wrapped in his warmth. Manning rubbed at his eyes and pushed himself up to look down at his sobroke. Brandt blinked sleepily at him, and Manning reached over Kayluth to run his fingertips across Brandt's cheek. Kayluth's expression was... euphoric. His lips pulled into an accompanying grin.

"What is it?" he asked Kayluth.

"I am content."

"Content?" He laid his hand on Kayluth's chest. "That's an odd word to use."

"Ssu, but it is how I feel." Kayluth shrugged. He ran his fingers through Manning's hair, pushing the strands away from his face. "I would like to decorate you."

Manning laughed. "Decorate me?"

Kayluth bopped him on the nose with his finger. "I used the wrong word. Dress you up. Braid you, adorn you. It befits your station as Vidar." He sighed, untangling himself from Brandt and sitting up. "My fathers will be here soon. Stay awhile longer in bed, I will wash first." He pressed his lips to Manning's before turning to Brandt. Kayluth leaned down and nuzzled him, bestowing a kiss on his nose.

After Kayluth rose from the bed, Manning flopped to his back. Brandt shimmied over next to him, shivering, and they lay on their sides facing each other. Manning rubbed his hand down Brandt's upper arm.

"He's so warm. Our own personal fireplace," Brandt commented, shifting closer and throwing a leg over Manning's.

Manning snorted, and then frowned when a nagging question popped to the front of his mind. He tossed the question around for a few tarrans in silence before he spoke. "Did you notice the silver braid?"

"Yes. Many of the older skipan—"

"Drakken," Manning interjected.

Brandt rolled his eyes. “—drakken I saw had them. Like Kayluth’s father.”

Manning nodded. “But he didn’t have it yesterday.”

Brandt pulled his head back, surprised. “That is strange. Maybe something happens to them when they choose their sobroke. What else changed since yesterday?”

“Well, we...” Manning blushed. He shouldn’t have felt embarrassed, especially after their joining.

“My ssobroke,” Kayluth called to them from the doorway. Manning heaved a sigh of relief: saved. He pushed up to his hands to watch Kayluth stride across the room stark naked, braids heavy with moisture and skin glistening. Brandt made a happy noise beside him with which he agreed wholeheartedly.

The drakken stopped in front of a cabinet and opened the top drawer. He pulled out three sets of smalls and pants. Socks were launched backwards over his head towards them, and Brandt laughed, snatching them from the air. They avidly enjoyed the show Kayluth performed. He stretched and bent, showing all of his best attributes while he dressed.

“You do realize,” Manning commented, chuckling, “that you might have turned me sooner had you shown me this side of you.”

Kayluth turned to face them, tying his leggings closed. He shook his head. “We, Drakken...” he placed his hands on his hips, giving them a clear view of his muscular torso “...are a serious race. We do not—” he stalked forward, staring at them like prey “—tease or jest or play.” He leaned down, placing his hand on the bed, wrinkling up his nose and rubbing it against Brandt’s, who was closer.

Manning snagged a fistful of Kayluth’s braids and tipped his head back. He pressed his body to his sobroke’s and gently bit his earlobe. “You leave me no option with your stubbornness, Drakken.”

Kayluth laughed hearing his own words thrown back at him. “What will you do with me, my ssobroke?” He turned his head, sliding his cheek along Manning’s. “If I obey, will I be rewarded?”

Manning gasped, all the implications in that one little question had his groin tightening and cock growing.

Kayluth disentangled Manning’s grip from his hair, hauled him close, and took the breath from his lungs, breathing his own back in. Manning held on for the ride, determined to not let go for anything. Except...

He reached out and felt his hand clasped in Brandt's. Manning tugged him forward, breaking the kiss from Kayluth with a turn of his head and sharing the taste of the drakken's lips with Brandt.

The bed shifted beneath them and they looked to see Kayluth slipping off the mattress and heading for the clothing. Manning grumbled, ready for the next round. Brandt too, by the feel of the hard shaft pressing against his thigh.

He pouted as Kayluth chose a tunic, a shade of dark red wine, and pulled it on. "Playtime is over, my ssobroke," he said turning. "I need to make sure everything is ready for my fathers."

"Fathers?" Brandt asked, mirroring Manning's own thought.

Kayluth smiled and shrugged. "Shower, dress." He indicated to the clothes. "Then come find me and I will explain." He came back to the bed and planted a chaste kiss on each of their mouths. "Shower," he commanded one last time before leaving.

Manning watched him go, raising a hand to his lips. Powdered sugar and cake... He could almost taste them. He stuck his fingertips in his mouth and bit down on them, growling.

Brandt sniggered, sliding off the bed. "I know just how you feel. Come, *my* sobroke"—he held out his hand to Manning—"we must shower." Manning grasped his hand and let himself be pulled from the bed.

Considering the plethora of kisses and massaging of body parts, it took tarrans longer to shower than normal. There were no words spoken while they scrubbed and dried, even helped each other dress, always touching, occasionally spilling a small moan of pleasure. Manning had never been happier, his smile constant. A last pull on the embroidered hems of their tunics, a cream silk for him, dark forest-green for Brandt, and they stepped out into the hall. He slipped his hand into Brandt's and led him into the great room.

They arrived to find Lian in Lyurn's arms. Manning narrowed his eyes at them. Lyurn hadn't said Lian was his sobroke, and she appeared quite young for him.

"Vidar?"

Manning spun to face another drakken, the tallest he'd yet seen. He wore a crimson tunic edged with gold detailing, the color similar to the one Kayluth had chosen. Sharp cheekbones highlighted his pale complexion, and his jet-black hair held intricately woven braids each adorned with multiple gemstones.

If what Manning thought about the stones morphing into the scales held true, then he figured this drakken's shifted form must be enormous.

When Manning looked into the bright-blue eyes, he startled momentarily. His hand still clutching Brandt's, he glanced to Lyurn who watched the encounter between him and this new drakken with interest, the corner of his mouth turned up in a small smile. Lian had her head pressed to Lyurn's breast, his hand wrapped around her waist. A flash of red caught Manning's attention, and he turned to see the drakken dropping to one knee.

"Stand," Manning said quickly, stepping forward. He discouraged those on Volé, his homeworld, from genuflecting, always feeling it to be false—him no better than any other. A few did bend their knee before him, mostly his father's servants, for fear of punishment even though he always told them there would be none forthcoming. His father's Jarls looked down their noses at the bastard prince and refused to bow unless the king presided. *Lowly, illegitimate child. Unworthy of the rank given him.* He shuddered; he'd heard it all. As Vidar, Brandt's position elevated, he would be content, but his...

The Jarls would still despise him, sure to say that the Drakken only bestowed their favor upon him because his father is King, Vidar in his own right. Any elation he had at being a prince among the Drakken fled. He could hear their cruel words: unfit to hold the honor of Vidar, of Sobroke. A lump formed in his throat and he turned away, bumping into Brandt who wrapped him in his arms. He buried his face in his sobroke's neck.

The rustle of fabric sounded behind him as the drakken rose. "I apologize, Vidar, if I have upset you. I meant no disrespect."

"None was given," Manning choked out, speaking into Brandt's chest but loud enough to be heard. "It is only me being... a stupid, silly brat of a child."

"Manning!" Brandt admonished. He pushed Manning away from him a few inches and cupped his cheek, tilting his face up. "Look at me." Manning blinked damp eyes at him. "Words such as those have no place here. You left off being a child a long time ago." Brandt smiled lasciviously. "I remember that night quite vividly."

A bubble of laughter escaped Manning. He wiped at his eyes with the back of his right hand, grinning, and then gathered a fistful of Brandt's tunic. "I'm worried about what will happen when we return home? Will my father accept us? I already picture the Jarls' sneers and snide comments, demanding my father take action against me, for usurping his authority."

“Even if we go back,” Brandt said, “your father has no sway. Yes, he is also Vidar, but has no power here. You—we—belong to the Drakken now. Besides, he’ll not want to leave Volé to rule here.” He leaned in to whisper into Manning’s ear. “Banish those childish thoughts. Be Vidar, Moondrake. *My sobroke.*” He smashed his mouth to Manning’s as if trying to drive his love into him. Manning took it all, wanted more, clapped his left hand on the back of Brandt’s neck, and opened his lips to Brandt’s demanding tongue.

“What did I miss?” Kayluth asked entering the room with a sigh, his appearance breaking Brandt and Manning apart to look at him. He placed a platter of food on the table.

“Oh,” Manning said, his happiness returning, and not wishing to spoil the mood any further, “only that Drakken are no fun.”

Kayluth paced over to them, but looked at the still-unnamed drakken. “What say you, Father? Are we Drakken too serious, unable to jest and play?”

Manning’s eyes widened. Father? He’d forgotten that Kayluth had said fathers, and he’d meant to ask. Lian was the only female drakken he’d seen. Was she part of their sobroke?

“Serious?” Kayluth’s father said, tapping a finger on his chin, his lips pursed. He nodded. “Who let you ride the ‘draggie’ when you and Lian were babes?”

Babes? Kayluth and Lian? Siblings?

“You.” Kayluth pouted, a touch of pink in his cheeks.

“And who taught you how to trick your friends at academy?”

“You, Father.” Kayluth smiled.

“And who bought you your first pair of those ridiculous striped stockings you so wanted?”

Kayluth’s grin showed all of his teeth, and he stepped up to the drakken. “I believe that was Father Lu.”

“Ssu, ssu. Too much silliness for me.” He placed his hands on Kayluth’s shoulders. “Onnesski, my son.” He pulled Kayluth in for a brief hug, and then slapped his upper arm. “Go greet Father Lu, he is bouncing. Then you shall introduce me properly to your ssobroke.”

Manning turned and, sure enough, Lyurn rocked on his heels, biting at his lower lip, eyes shining. Lyurn didn’t wait for Kayluth, instead he quickly stepped forward and took Kayluth in his arms.

“Onnesski, Kay.” He ran his fingers down the silvery braid Kayluth now had. “And to Father Tai and me too it seems. I did not expect to become *Tassair* so soon.”

Kayluth squinted at Lyurn. “What are you saying? I am...?”

“Ssu, why else would you have the *Ssol*. Like me, you are *seeta*, a bearer.”

“*Ssol*? You never said they had significance.” Kayluth took the braid from Lyurn’s fingers and examined its silvery length and colorful bead. “How can I be?”

“Sobroke,” Manning said, “what’s going on? Is there a problem?”

“No, Moondrake”—Kayluth turned to face him—“there is no problem. Only...”

“Joy,” Tai said, a note of pride in his voice. He moved to stand next to Lyurn and placed a hand on his lower back. He turned Kayluth to face him and tapped him on his breastbone. “Your drakken knew it was *seeta*; it guided you.”

Lyurn slid his hand down the silver braid once more. “Did you never think to question why I have the *Ssol* and Father Tai not? We are *seeta*.” He waved his hand between himself and Kayluth. “We are blessed.” Lyurn placed his hand on Kayluth’s right shoulder.

Tai laid a hand on Kayluth’s left shoulder. “Do your *ssobroke* know why we are here?” Kayluth shook his head. Tai peered at him, displeased. He reached behind him and pulled three torques from the belt at his back, handing them to his son. “What’s that Father Lu always says? Ssu, you’d forget your tail if it wasn’t attached.” He gave Kayluth’s shoulder a shake, turned him around, and gently shoved him forward. “Ask.”

Kayluth moved to stand in front of Manning and Brandt. He opened his mouth to speak, took one look at Manning, and snapped his mouth shut with a frown. “What is wrong now, Moondrake?”

“Already you know me.” Manning chuckled. “I want to know what that discussion was about.” He spun his hand to include the three drakken.

Kayluth looked down at the torques in his hands and sighed. He didn’t speak for a full tarran, running his fingers along the braided metal from end to end, each capped by a representation of the drakken. Three colors wove through their lengths: argent, gold, and a pale sanguine. When he looked back up, his gaze shifted between Manning and Brandt. “It is good, just... unexpected. It

surprised me, and will take time to fully explain. I would prefer to do it when it is only us three.”

Manning’s eyebrows raised, and he glanced at Brandt who shrugged. “Very well, but I’ll hold you to it.”

“I am counting on it,” Kayluth replied with a snort of laughter. “Your hand, Moon Drake.” Manning gave it and Kayluth molded his fingers around the coils. “Your hand, Sundrake?” Kayluth asked hesitantly. Brandt gave it, his fingers joining beside Manning’s on the torques. Kayluth covered their hands with his.

“What are we doing?” Manning asked.

“Torque Joining Ceremony,” Kayluth answered plainly.

“A torque ‘possession’ ceremony?” His brows raised. Kayluth nodded. “I see what your father means. Although on Volé we say you’d forget your head.” Manning gently prodded his sobroke’s forehead. Tai and Lyurn chuckled, and Lian laughed loudest. That striking blush returned to prominence on Kayluth’s cheeks.

“Quiet, Lian,” Kayluth scolded, glaring at her.

“Never, Kay. Who else would keep you in line? Your ssobroke? Perhaps. Manning is decidedly shrewd. I like him. A good choice for you.”

Kayluth tilted his head, his lids lowering as he peered at his sister. “I will take that for the underhanded compliment it was.” Manning and Brandt snickered, until Kayluth brought his gaze back to them, amber pinpoints blazing, full of desire and want, and their laughter cut off.

Manning released the torques, pushing them down, and pressed his hand to Kayluth’s breast. He gazed into his sobroke’s sapphire eyes a tarran. “Ask me,” he finally said.

Kayluth nodded. He turned and handed the torques back to Tai, and took Manning’s and Brandt’s hands, sandwiching them between his own.

“Ssobroke to Ssobroke to Ssobroke,” he began, gazing into their eyes. “Asking for possession is not something simply done. Many take years before willingly giving themselves to another. We three are an anomaly. A joining of equal possession. A new beginning of trust. A faith in each other and of what is right and true. Strength to endure the naysayers and to love each other always. Will you, Manning, my Moondrakken, and you, Brandt, my Sundrakken, join with me? Be my possession, let me be yours? Wear a torque as a sign of our joining?”

Kayluth's words sounded sincere, spoken from the heart, and Manning wanted it all, with both of them, his sobroke. He nodded, then pivoted to face Brandt, pulling his right hand from the pile he raised it to his love's cheek. "Will you join with us? Sobroke to Sobroke to Sobroke?"

A slow smile spread across Brandt's face as he covered Manning's hand with his own. He turned his head to kiss Manning's palm. "I will."

Lyurn and Tai stepped behind Kayluth and together they pushed him to his knees. "Sobroke of Kayluth, kneel here," Tai said, indicating the space in front of Kayluth.

Manning sank to his knees drawing Brandt down with him, joining their sobroke. A joining of equals. He affirmed his vow. "I, Manning Dagrson—" he grinned "—known as Moondrake, accept the possession of my sobroke, Kayluth and Brandt Wardman, and ask for yours in return." He held each of their gazes as he spoke their names.

Brandt made that soft hum of happiness Manning adored, then spoke. "I, Brandt Wardman, accept the possession of both my Moondrake, Manning Dagrson, and my Stardrake, Kayluth, and ask for yours in return."

"Sobroke to Sobroke to Sobroke," Kayluth now spoke, his voice thick with emotion. "I asked for your possession and you have freely given it. You have accepted mine in return. Will you wear a token of our joining?"

"We will," his sobroke responded in unison.

Tai cleared his throat a few times, and when Manning looked up at them, both his and Lyurn's eyes glistened. Tai held one of the torques up. "Possession asked, possession granted. Our torques are circular to signify love's continuous cycle. However, we cap each end because this love starts and stops with each of you. One to one to one. Sobroke to Sobroke to Sobroke."

Kayluth took the torque and turned to Brandt saying, "Help me take possession." Brandt nodded and he covered Kayluth's hands as he opened the torque, then closed it around Manning's neck. He took back another from Tai and turned to Manning. "Help me take possession." Manning covered Kayluth's hand as he positioned the torque on Brandt.

Tai handed the final torque to Manning, already pulled open. "Lu and I will help."

"Thank you," Manning said, holding it out so Brandt could share it with him. They spread their fingers allowing space for Lyurn and Tai to place their fingertips between and push the ends of the torque together.

“Ssobroke,” Kayluth marveled, beaming at the two of them, laying his hands over theirs.

“Sobroke,” Manning and Brandt responded together.

Epilogue

Kisses given from one sobroke to another, and words of congratulations—onnesski—spoken, before official family introductions finally occurred. Tailyn, Lyurn, and Lian said their good-byes soon after, but not before Lyurn fingered Kayluth's silver braid one last time. Kayluth palmed the entryway closed behind them and spun with a smoldering gaze for his ssobroke. He stalked forward.

“Wait.” Manning halted him with a raised hand; Brandt groaned and Kayluth grumbled. “You promised,” he said with an admonishing finger-point at Kayluth.

“I did not, but,” Kayluth said, crossing his arms, “I also cannot keep this from you. We progress too fast.”

“Progress?” Brandt asked, taking a seat on the couch. Manning sat beside him and Kayluth came to kneel at their feet. Manning smiled at the remembered image.

“It seems I am seeta, a bearer. Drakken do not know if they are until they bond with their ssobroke. The drakken reveals it if the time is right. The Ssol, this silver braid—” he drew it forward “—is a mark.”

“A mark of what?” Manning asked, taking possession of the braid from his sobroke's hand.

“A child.”

Brandt's eyes grew wide. “Sweet Freya! Manning's?” Kayluth nodded.

But Manning's brow furrowed in confusion. “I don't understand,” he said.

Kayluth took hold of Manning's hands, scooping up Brandt's along the way. “My dear, sweet ssobroke.” He laughed with a little shake of his head. “You are going to be a father.”

“Me?” Manning slumped back on the couch. “I...” Stunned, his mind went blank.

“Do not worry, Moondrake. There are three of us to raise our child.” He stood and pulled Manning and Brandt to their feet. He walked backwards, leading them towards the hallway and their bedroom. “There are few drakken born, our child will be spoiled. A new Vidar!” Kayluth grinned madly. “Think

of the celebrations, they could go on for a full moon just for the hatching. He or she will be lavished with gifts. Would you hope our child to be male or female?" They reached the edge of the bed, Kayluth already working to free Manning from his tunic and belt while Brandt stripped off his own clothes. "No, do not answer that! I will be upset if my sobroke is unhappy with our child's sex. And there is still the most important part to tell you: we do not have much time."

Manning stood dazed, letting his sobroke free him from the clothing. "Why?"

"We Drakken have fast gestational cycles. One month still in this form, one month drakken before we drop the egg. One month drakken while I nest and another while I nurse."

"Our child will be born in a shell!" Manning slapped his hands to his face. "Blessed Odin, Freya and Njor. No," he tugged at his hair, "you must think I'm gullible. Three months in drakken form! How will we communicate?" He poked Kayluth in the chest, only to have his wrist grabbed. At Brandt's bark of laughter, he rounded on him, thumping a hand to his chest. "You're laughing at me. Do you hear what he's saying? *Our child*. That means you too."

"Accept my words as truth, my ssobroke," Kayluth said, taking Manning into his arms. "In three months' time, we will add to our family."

The way Kayluth gazed at Manning, eyes intense and predatory, a touch of the tolsu in the air and the shot of amber gold invading Kayluth's irises, all served to help him forget his anger and focus on the rising passion between them.

Brandt pressed his naked flesh to Kayluth's side, whispering into his ear. "I accept. I've always wanted children. Being a guard, I never thought I'd have one of my own."

Kayluth raised Manning's finger to his mouth. He sucked hard on it, nibbled along its length. Brandt snatched up his other hand and proceeded to bite at the pad of his thumb.

Manning's eyes rolled to the ceiling. "You... trick... me," he panted.

Kayluth pulled off Manning's finger with a pop. "I do not. We Drakken are a serious race," he teased. He wrapped an arm around Brandt's waist, holding him tight to his side, then threaded his fingers into Manning's hair, cupping the back of his head. He guided Manning closer until no distance remained

between their bodies. The heat of his skin escalated Manning's already rising desire for his sobroke.

Manning placed a hand on each of their cheeks, laying his thumbs on their lips. "I accept," he whispered. He drew each of his sobroke in for a kiss, turning them so their backs were to the bed.

"I accept," he repeated once more, with a coy smile, and pushed.

They fell to the bed, a tangle of arms and legs, with nothing between them except three torques and bare skin and the kisses they lavished upon them.

Forever the Sun, the Moon, and the Star

The End

Glossary

ss – slur the s sound

sss – hiss the s sound

aphena – recreational area/arena

arn(s) – hour or hours

drakeen (dra • keen) – “little dragon,” an insult when spoke to an adult

Drakken (dra • ken) – race of dragon shapeshifters, used both singular and plural

Drek – a sound of annoyance, similar to Bah!

Drottinn (dro • tin) – master

Fenrir – race of wolf shapeshifters

Herra – master

onnesski (on • ness • key) – congratulations

seeta (see • ta) – bearer

skipan (skip • an) – general term for a shapeshifter, used both singular and plural

Ssol – a silver braid, mark of pregnancy

Ssobroke or *sobroke* (so • broke) – mate, used both singular and plural

ssu – yes

tarran(s) – minute or minutes

Tassair (Ta • ssair) – Grandfather

tolsu (tol • su) – scent

Vidar (Ve • dar) – A dragon king

Vidareem (Ve • dar • eem) – plural – dragon kings

Volé – Manning and Brandt’s homeworld

Author Bio

Me? Well, I do a bit of everything. Read, write and beta top the list, of course. I'm a part-time, licensed drug-pusher by day and a homework checker by night to three amazing children. If I'm lucky, my husband lays off the gaming soon enough in the evenings to crawl into bed and snuggle up for back rubs. I recreate the medieval ages with the Society of Creative Anachronism and guide young ladies on their path to become leaders with the Girl Scouts.

It has been one incredible year since I participated in last year's Don't Read in the Closet with Starlight and Constellation: Gemini. Opening Day, the first M/M story I ever wrote, was published along with two more, with another planned for release in June of this year. I've several projects in the works as well, including book four of my Southern Jersey Shores series and a second angel/human holiday story.

The most amazing part of all of this: the friends I've made around the world: South Africa, Romania, Australia, Sweden and Great Britain. And those far across the United States: from my home in southern New Jersey clear to Maine, Georgia, and California with many in between. A true four corners, full of color and life.

Forever and Always,

Alexis

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