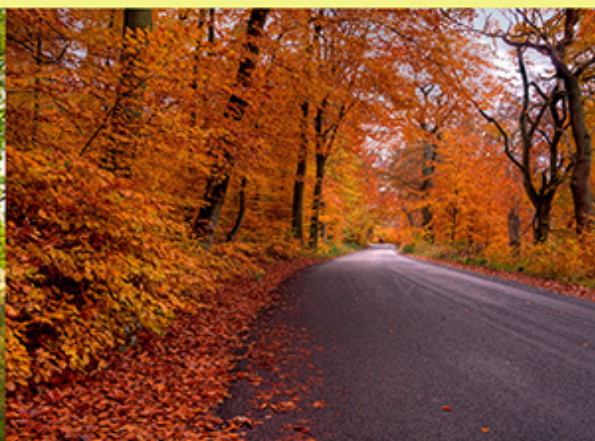
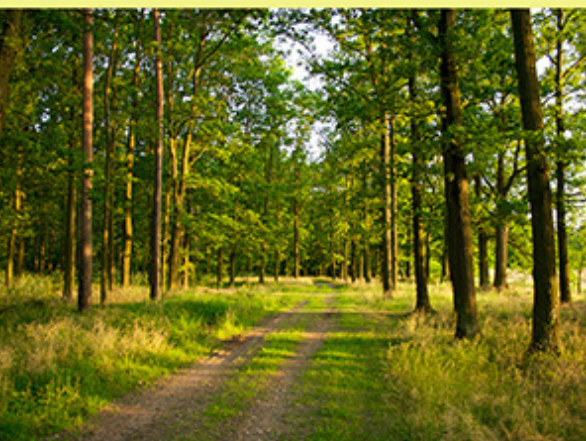


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

PROPHECY

Pelaam

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

PROPHECY

By Pelaam

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.

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PROPHECY

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Photo Description

Two men are wearing black body suits. Where the suits end their skin is coloured black to match. Over their heads are realistic horse masks, complete with bridles. One has a slightly lighter mane. They have body harnesses around their chests and waists, which loop underneath between their legs. You can also just see the first man's pony tail. They wear black boots to just below the knee, which are hooves at the shoe.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

my companion and I were born and marked at birth for this honor. The clans rebelled at the news of our births. We were torn from our families and secreted away in separate locations until we were placed together as a matched/mated pair when we came of age. We hold a position of high honor as leaders of the clans. There hasn't been a matched/mated pair for generations, and our birth has led to wars between the clans. Although there had been mated pairs of females only, male/female mates have been more common. We are the first pair of mated stallions to rule our clan.

Please tell our story.

Fantasy world please, No twins, No BDSM, Same-sex pairs accepted in society.

Thanks

A.L. Boyd

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, alternate universe

Tags: centaurs, warriors, royalty, first time, mythical creatures, shifters non-wolf/cat, soulmates/bonded

Word Count: 18,325

PROPHECY

By Pelaam

Chapter One

Waking with a yawn and a stretch, Gyllir eased from his bed and shuffled to the window. The sun had risen, although it seemed to him that it still had a reddish glow. He sighed heavily. Not long having returned to his family's palace, he would soon be married to a man he didn't know. Although it was a fate he'd known since childhood, somehow its very proximity now made him shiver—and not from anticipation.

Men of the Anund clans were rumoured to be big, brutish, and uncouth. His clan, although willing and able to fight if and when needed, preferred more peaceful pursuits. He sighed again. The choice was already made and had been since his birth. There was no escaping the prophecy that they were meant to be mates.

Kappi. The name caused Gyllir to shiver. When he and Kappi were finally married, perhaps then the clans would unite and there would finally be peace between them. Could he and Kappi succeed where others had failed?

With a shake of his head, Gyllir pushed thoughts of his impending marriage aside. He still had to learn all the complexities of the palace. The place was a veritable warren. And that was just those many winding corridors he could see.

Behind walls that appeared thick and solid was a maze of secret passageways. Although it was known they were there, no one had the ancient knowledge of where the entrances and exits were.

Legend had it that a map existed, or had at one time. It was created when the palace was built, and hidden away so successfully, that for over a century it had still not been found.

An image of Dreyi, the high priest, came to Gyllir's mind. The man made him feel uneasy and his knowledge of men's secret minds made Gyllir wonder about just how the priest managed to be so omniscient. Perhaps the secret passages were not secret to all in the palace. The priest was feared by many, especially since his rapid ascendancy.

A loud knock at his door drew Gyllir's thoughts back to the present. He opened the door. Dulfja stood with his breakfast tray.

She lifted it slightly. "Hungry? Or shall I take it back?"

According to his father, Dulfja's mother, Amma, had ensured he'd been safely taken from the palace when his fate had been announced. Gyllir's own

mother died in the process. While his father had not taken another wife, he did take Amma as a concubine and she'd ruled his harem until her death. Dulfja was their only child. She had the freedom of the palace, where she was treated like a princess, but that didn't extend beyond the palace walls.

He reached out to take the tray, and glanced into Dulfja's eyes. As always, the dark orbs were shuttered.

"Something wrong?" Her voice was clipped and cool, and Dulfja cocked her head to the side as she stared at Gyllir.

Her boldness still unsettled him. Only other royalty, the high priest, and the general of the palace army were permitted to meet his gaze. Gyllir shook his head quickly. "No. I think the impending marriage is making me nervous."

If he'd hoped the confession would warm her toward him, Gyllir was sadly mistaken. Her face remained impassive.

"Dreyi says that the best way to unite the kingdoms is to defeat the Anund in battle. Our army is far superior, especially with Laufi at their head. Marry Prince Kappi if it is your fate, but we should rule his people as their conquerors, not with them thinking they are our equals."

"But surely it's better to work with them for mutual benefit than try and put them under our yoke and have to force them into obedience." Gyllir shook his head. His father wanted unity, not dominance. The union between himself and Kappi was meant to, finally, achieve that goal.

"Those who fail to bow before us should be sacrificed to Humi. The old gods didn't give us the power we deserve, but Dreyi says that Humi will." She glanced around quickly. "Father wants to see you after you've eaten."

Shutting his door, Gyllir took the tray to his table. There was porridge, fresh fruit, and a golden goblet of *xocoatl*. The dark brew smelled deliciously sweet and Gyllir licked his lips. If not sweetened, the drink was harsh and bitter, but with the addition of honey and crushed *suchil* seeds, it became a delightfully rich, aromatic drink.

Settling down, Gyllir began to eat, and wondered about the stranger that would soon be his mate.

Chapter Two

As soon as he'd finished eating, Gyllir dressed more appropriately to meet his father. He picked a jewel-blue tunic with a belt of blue gems that he fastened at his waist, and a headdress with feathers of blue and green. He didn't bother with footwear. He wasn't leaving the palace or carrying out any duties.

He stared at himself critically in his polished metal mirror. He'd managed to match his eye colour to the jewels in his belt, and lined them with kohl as his father had shown him. He hoped his father approved of his efforts. The philosopher who'd raised him wasn't one for decorating his body. However, Gyllir had a sun tattoo on his hip and several piercings in his ears, although at present he wore just his favourite pair of bluestone earrings.

Making his way to his father's study, Gyllir kept his head raised and his gaze focused ahead. In the periphery of his vision, he was aware of the soldiers, as well as the occasional palace courtier, bowing as he passed. The recognition of his status was still unnerving for him. He wondered how Kappi had been raised and whether he also found suddenly being the focus of so much attention, and so many expectations, a heavy burden.

Tapping politely on the door, Gyllir waited for the shout from inside that prompted the guards to open them for him. His father, King Stillir, welcomed him with an affectionate smile and open arms. They hugged briefly and Stillir kissed Gyllir's brow before holding him at arm's length. He nodded.

"Very good, you look like a prince, my son."

Grinning widely, Gyllir nonetheless felt the heat of his blush burn his cheeks. "Thank you, Father."

"Prince Kappi arrived here before first light. He and his army camped outside our city walls. At first light I ordered that Kappi and a small retinue be brought into the palace grounds. His men are camped in the courtyard at the rear of the palace. A small suite of rooms opens out onto it. I thought it would be suitable accommodation for Kappi."

Excitement and apprehension zinged down Gyllir's spine and he shivered. A frown crossed Stillir's brow.

"Are you well?"

“Yes.” Gyllir spoke quickly. “I think it’s just the realization that the time is almost here.” Stillir rested his hand on Gyllir’s shoulder and leaned in close, dropping his voice to a whisper.

“We have had so little time to know one another, but promise me that should anything happen to me, you will proceed with this marriage. It was meant to be. When you and Kappi are bonded, lead our people on the path of peaceful reconciliation under the worship of our Twin gods Dynfaxi and Eldfaxi.”

Fear washed over Gyllir and turned his blood to ice. He stared at his father. The old gods were out of favour now. Dreyi advocated Humi, a bloody and fearful god of sacrifice and pain. No one spoke openly of the old gods, but at the expression in his father’s eyes, Gyllir nodded.

“I promise.”

Stillir smiled and squeezed Gyllir’s shoulder. “Kappi’s clan still worships the old gods. Their reputation as warriors is well founded, but our army is superior, despite which, I don’t want the blood of our clans shed for this marriage. Dreyi may be high priest now, but once the bonding is complete then—”

Whatever else Stillir was about to say was cut short when the doors opened without warning and Dreyi walked in. Although he’d only been in the presence of his father for a couple of months, Gyllir had never seen such a look of fury on Stillir’s face.

Striding forward, Stillir swept past Dreyi without so much as a glance and shoved open his study doors. “You, you, come here.” He indicated his guards who obeyed immediately, dropping to their knees before their king. “Did Dreyi knock and wait for my response before being given entrance?” His voice resonated loudly as Stillir looked from one guard to the other.

Glancing nervously at each other and then from Dreyi to Stillir, one finally plucked up courage to speak. “No, my King, but he is the high priest—”

“And I am your *King*.” Stillir’s voice seemed to make the very air vibrate with his fury. “The next time you permit him to act with such discourtesy I will have your heads. Now go!”

Watching the scene unfold, Gyllir glanced quickly at Dreyi. The look from the high priest directed toward his father was one of pure hatred.

The look vanished swiftly as Stillir turned to face Dreyi. The priest inclined his head. “Surely as your high priest you have no secrets from me, Stillir?”

“No one is permitted within my private chambers unless invited by me. You included, Dreyi. Never attempt to enter without my permission again or you will spend time in the palace cells.”

“You dare to threaten me?” Dreyi drew himself to his full height and stared at Stillir.

“I am your King, Dreyi. Never forget that *I*, and not you, rule here. You are a priest, not a king.”

Something alerted Dreyi to Gyllir’s presence, and the priest glared at him with narrowed eyes.

“You didn’t tell me your son was here. He should not bear witness to our disagreements.”

“My son will rule the united clans when he becomes bonded to Kappi. He needs to know all that goes on here.”

A loud rap on the door stopped Dreyi from responding and Stillir called out for the door to be opened. Gyllir remained in the background as Laufi entered the room and bowed to both Stillir and Dreyi.

The general was handsome but taciturn. He’d never shown any warmth or friendship toward Gyllir, but he’d not been hostile either. Sometimes Gyllir felt he walked on eggshells, just waiting for the wrong step to send him tumbling.

“A messenger from Kappi seeks an audience with you prior to the pre-marriage ceremony.”

“Have him escorted to the old reception room. Gyllir and I will receive him there.” Stillir held out an arm to Gyllir who hurried over to stand at his father’s side.

“The old reception room still houses the sculptures of the old gods.” Laufi glanced at Dreyi whose face had darkened in anger.

“He should be taken to the new suites where our god Humi is present.” There was an ominous edge to Dreyi’s voice. “The old ones are abandoned as the gods we have left behind.”

“Since Kappi and his clans still worship the Twins, I made sure that the old reception room, as well as the old shrine, have been cleaned and readied for use. While Kappi is here, out of respect for him and his clans, we will be using them for all of the formal meetings and ceremonies.”

“What of Humi and the sacrifices demanded?”

For the first time since Dreyi entered the room, the priest took his hands from inside the sleeves of his robe and Gyllir saw the way they shook.

“While Kappi is here, there will be no human sacrifice. I will not have my guests look upon us as barbarians.”

“You will bring Humi’s wrath down upon you. What of Gyllir, what does he think of this foolishness?”

“What *do* you think, my son?” Stillir looked at Gyllir.

Despite the pounding of his heart, Gyllir took a steadying step and bowed to Stillir. “I think my father is very wise. We should make Kappi and his people welcome and show them every hospitality.”

“I see. I believe Humi will be displeased with your decision, Stillir. I suggest you think on it very carefully.”

“And *I* suggest that if it troubles you so greatly, you take no part in the ceremony. I grant you exemption, if you wish. Another priest may not have your standing, Dreyi, but can perform the ceremony which is purely symbolic.”

If Gyllir had thought Dreyi angry before, it was nothing compared to the way the colour drained from the priest’s face and his whole body shook. To his surprise, Dreyi didn’t immediately speak. Instead, he bowed low, and when he looked up once more, his face was calm and serene.

“I shall preside as expected. My god will not punish *me* for acting in accordance with *your* decision. Assuming he permits it to go ahead. I shall be in the temple should you feel the need of spiritual guidance, my King.”

Even to Gyllir’s inexperienced ears, the last words seemed mocking as Dreyi turned and left.

“You have my orders, Laufi. See they are carried out. Gyllir and I will await Kappi’s messenger.”

“Yes, my king.” Laufi bowed and followed Dreyi from the room.

“Come, my son. This is part of the palace not used at present. Dreyi insisted on a new shrine for Humi, far away from those used previously for the Twin gods. It suited me, so I permitted it.”

“It did?” Gyllir looked at his father as they walked.

“Up to now, the fact that the shrine to Humi was in another part of the palace ensured that when I wanted peace and solitude, I could seek refuge in

the disused shrine.” Stillir glanced at Gyllir. “I also knew I was free to speak my mind there.”

“I don’t understand.” Gyllir frowned.

“The palace is riddled with secret passages. My father was certain the high priest knew where they were. Consequently, I believe Dreyi knows where they are and that’s how he appears so omniscient. Then he claims the revelations are from his god.”

“You don’t share his belief in Humi?”

“I did at first, but my beliefs have changed. Dreyi was so convincing at the beginning, our army defeated all in battle and our crops flourished, and many of my people were swayed. Then I began to have my doubts. These were the same things we’d enjoyed under the Twins, but the people seemed happy, so I decided it was better to accept their wishes.”

“You did what you thought best for your people.” Gyllir touched his father’s arm.

“I wish I’d opposed him sooner.” Stillir shook his head. “No one, least of all I, knew just how bloody the worship of Humi would prove to be. I had no idea Dreyi would demand blood sacrifice. In his own way, Dreyi is almost as powerful as I am. But he rules with fear. Therefore those who choose to worship the Twins are driven to do so in secret.”

There was something in Stillir’s tone that made Gyllir look quickly at him. “You?” Gyllir gasped at the curt nod. To worship the Twins openly was punishable by flogging and imprisonment at best, or as a living sacrifice to Humi at worst.

“Yes. My hope is that under yours and Kappi’s joint rulership and guidance, Dreyi can be stood down as high priest, and our people will return to the peaceful worship of the Twins. Many people worship in secret. I couldn’t now challenge Dreyi because of the risk of civil war, so I waited for you to come home. I want your marriage to proceed. I want you installed as king. Then, perhaps, the clans can finally know unity, peace, and prosperity.”

“I did not realise.” Gyllir shook his head.

“Don’t let it worry you now. Your focus must be on the bonding with Kappi. Come, follow me.”

Chapter Three

Following his father into the old reception and throne room, Gyllir instantly liked it. The room had a much more soothing and uplifting feel than the one currently used. That one made Gyllir feel fearful and oppressed. There the throne was dark and foreboding, decorated with bones and skulls that made a gruesome sight, and the walls portrayed images of death and destruction.

In contrast, the throne before him was bright and light, decorated with gold leaf and semiprecious gems and on either side of it stood larger than life statues of the Twin gods. One dark, one light, the gods were the personification of the dual nature of man, enabling the king, through their benevolence, to balance his opposing personalities.

Looking at the murals and carvings depicting cornucopia, prosperity and happiness that adorned the walls, Gyllir felt a deep longing to return to worshiping the peaceful gods. Once the meeting with Kappi's man was over, he hoped he could spend some time in private with Stillir to ask more about the Twins.

Two burly palace guards stepped into the room, and stood either side of the open doors. Laufi came in next followed by an attractive stranger. Two auburn braids decorated with golden beads framed an angular face. His dark blue eyes held warmth and intelligence, and his lips were full and inviting.

Surprised at his reaction, Gyllir quickly looked down at his feet. The newcomer didn't look at all brutish, as he'd expected. The stranger dropped to one knee and held out a small chest.

"I am Brodir, a captain in the service of Prince Kappi. I bring his and our clan's greetings and gifts to King Stillir and Prince Gyllir."

"On behalf of my people, I welcome you, Brodir. But there was no need of gifts." Stillir indicated Gyllir. "My son is eager to meet Kappi. The formal pre-marriage ceremony isn't until tomorrow, but I would be glad if Kappi, and those of his retinue as he chooses, would join us for a banquet in his honour this evening."

"Thank you, King Stillir." Brodir dropped his head low.

"Please stand. We welcome you as a friend among us."

Rising to his feet, Brodir opened the chest. He removed a small pendant and held it out to Gyllir.

Taking it, Gyllir marvelled at the skill of the engraver. “This is Prince Kappi?” The carving showed a face carved into green semiprecious stone. Although it was impossible to see real features, the large, bent nose and a very square chin were very clear.

“Kappi realizes you have never seen him. He hopes that when you meet him, he makes a good impression upon you.”

Looking up at Brodir, Gyllir was sure there was amusement in the captain’s eyes. Almost as if there was a joke he wasn’t sharing. Gyllir smiled. It didn’t matter what Kappi looked like. Their fate had been sealed the moment they were born. He slipped the pendant around his neck. “Please convey my thanks to Prince Kappi.”

Grinning widely, Brodir removed a cloth-covered item before laying the chest at Stillir’s feet.

Calling upon his training as a prince, Gyllir was able to smother his gasp as he caught a glimpse of the contents of the chest. It was half-full with precious stones in a rainbow of colours. Then Brodir faced him and became serious.

“This is a gift that Prince Kappi was most anxious to know you liked.”

Taking the offered present, Gyllir unwrapped the cloth and, this time, couldn’t suppress his gasp. The gift was comprised of a golden diadem set with bluestone, and a necklace, the likes of which Gyllir had never seen. The beaten gold was in a half circle and deep enough to pass his collarbone. In the centre was a bird in flight inlaid with precious stones. The wings were also made of bluestone.

More than the obvious value of the piece was the knowledge that Kappi had clearly made an effort to gift Gyllir jewellery that featured his favourite bluestone. Gyllir wished there was something he could offer to show his true appreciation. Then an idea struck him.

Carefully he removed the long, jagged, bluestone earrings he wore. He reminded himself he wasn’t truly losing them and offered them to Brodir. “These were my mother’s. They are all I have of her. I gift them to the man who will become my bonded mate.”

Dropping back down to one knee, Brodir didn’t immediately take the earrings. “Are you sure of this, My Prince?”

“Yes. Please.” Gyllir held them out.

Taking the cloth that had held Kappi's gifts, Brodir carefully wrapped the earrings in it and tucked them securely into the pouch he wore at his waist. "You have my word that I will let Prince Kappi know their value."

A flush of delight warmed Gyllir. Although it was only his first meeting with one of Kappi's men, Brodir had presented himself as warm, friendly, and intelligent. Gyllir glanced down at his pendant. If Kappi led by example, Gyllir was looking forward to meeting his future mate.

"Is Prince Kappi comfortable in his quarters? The rear courtyard, onto which the suite opens, is spacious enough to allow for exercise as well as the camp for the rest of his men."

Looking around, Gyllir's heart lifted with happiness. His father looked more relaxed than Gyllir had seen him since returning to the palace.

"He is, King Stillir. You are a most generous host." Brodir rose to his feet and bowed. "If you will excuse me, I'll return to Prince Kappi."

"Indeed. Should you need anything, please be sure to let me know. Laufi, make sure our guests have everything they need. I leave their comfort in your hands. Do not forget the banquet this evening."

"As you wish, my King."

Waiting until Laufi left, Gyllir turned to Stillir. "Do you have time to talk in private?"

"Not now, my son. I want to make sure the arrangements for tonight are not affected in any way by Dreyi. Sometimes I wonder if he thinks he rules here rather than me."

Not really knowing what to do to distract himself until the time of the banquet, Gyllir ambled aimlessly through the palace. Shouts and the sound of sword on sword caused him to stop and gather his thoughts.

It took a moment for Gyllir to realize where he was. This was close to where Kappi and his men had their quarters, and the balcony just ahead overlooked the courtyard Stillir had mentioned.

Heading over toward a decorative column on the balls of his feet, Gyllir's heart began to race. If he was careful, he might be able to get a glimpse of Kappi's men. He pressed close to the stone and looked down.

Two centaurs in leather breastplates duelled as others, some in human form, some in centaur, watched. The duel looked as ferocious as it sounded, the

centaurs rose up on their hind legs, pawing at one another as well as using fast swordplay.

None of them looked brutish, as Gyllir had been warned to expect. They were powerful warriors, but still attractive. The duel apparently over, they were assisted out of their breastplates, and they embraced.

The centaur facing away from him turned, and their gazes locked. Sweat from his exertions ran down his face and body, and some of his auburn hair clung wetly to his face. As handsome as Gyllir had thought Brodir, this man was even more attractive. A slow smile spread across the man's face as he looked up.

With a start, Gyllir realized he had come out from behind the column and was in full view. A blush started somewhere near his toes, rising upward it heated his body and burned his face. Gyllir ran.

Running blindly around the corner, he bounced off a soldier coming in the opposite direction. To Gyllir's relief it was a friend of his. Riddari looked past Gyllir as if looking for whatever had made Gyllir run. He raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"I was looking at Prince Kappi's men train. I was, um, noticed."

A warm chuckle from his friend helped Gyllir relax. "Have you seen Kappi yet?"

"No." Gyllir showed Riddari the carved stone.

"Not quite in keeping with what I heard." Riddari stared at it for a moment and then shrugged. "But a good heart is more important. You and he have a prophecy to fulfil."

"We will unite the clans." Gyllir was certain of it.

"And rightly so. I'll be at the banquet tonight." Riddari slung an arm across Gyllir's shoulders. "So will Dulfja. Apparently, she will sit at one of the side tables with some of the courtiers. Stillir felt that it was the least he could do in honour of her mother."

"I don't mind. I just wish we could be closer. I'm glad I have a friend like you. Sometimes I wish you were my brother rather than Dulfja my sister. She remains so distant no matter what I do."

"Don't let it worry you. She forgets that Stillir gives her so much freedom despite being the daughter of a concubine. I won't be at all surprised if, once

your marriage to Kappi is concluded, Stillir doesn't find a man of reasonable rank to marry her to."

"I hope he considers what she feels." Despite her unfriendliness, Gyllir felt protective of his half-sister.

"I can't stay. There are duties I have to perform for tonight and I don't want to fall foul of Laufi. I don't know what his problem is, but he has a face like curdled milk and snaps at the least little thing." Riddari shrugged. "I don't want him punishing me by putting me on guard duty."

"I'm so nervous."

Riddari pulled Gyllir into a hug. "I have no doubts Kappi feels the same. Just remember, you are my Prince as well as my friend. Keep your head up and act with confidence."

"I will." Gyllir returned to his rooms, his head held high.

Chapter Four

“How did the meeting go?” Kappi asked, turning his head slightly as one of his men worked on massaging his back. He could just see Brodir lounging against the doorframe.

“It went well.” Brodir nodded. “King Stillir made me feel welcome. Prince Gyllir is very quiet, but I believe he has hidden strength.”

“We were raised to be whole when together. I was brought up by warriors. I understand tactics and warfare. He was raised by philosophers. He knows more about people. Our combined experiences will give us the knowledge needed to bring together our clans, which have drifted so far apart.”

“I think the two of you will make a great partnership.”

“Praise indeed.” Kappi laughed, then, grew serious. “Did he like my gift?”

“Indeed. As we’d heard, he has a liking for bluestone. He gave me something for you.” Coming forward, Brodir held out the earrings so Kappi could see them.

“Pretty enough.” Kappi wasn’t a jewellery wearer, other than the gold hoops through his nipples. Jewellery wasn’t practical for a warrior.

“They were his mother’s.” Brodir spoke quietly. “All he has of her.”

Swinging up into a sitting position, Kappi took them reverently. “Then I will wear them in her honour and make sure to let my bonded mate wear them as he pleases after the marriage ceremony.”

“I think he’d like that.”

Looking up at his friend, Kappi inclined his head. “You like him? So soon?”

“I got a good feeling from him. Shame I can’t say the same for his general. He carries some darkness within him.”

“And the high priest? As far as I can determine he wields a great deal of power through his god.”

“I did not meet him.” Brodir shuddered. “I’m happy to delay that eventuality for as long as possible.”

Standing, Kappi came over to his friend and squeezed his shoulder. “You see those things men keep hidden. I know how draining it is for you. Rest for now. I want you there tonight. And I need you to see past the masks they wear.”

“I’ll be at your side, my friend.”

“Good.” Kappi hugged Brodir hard, slapping his back as they moved apart. When his friend left, Kappi looked down at the earrings in his hand and closed his fingers carefully around them. His earlobes were pierced, but if they hadn’t been, he’d have ordered it done. These held precious significance for the man destined to be his mate. Kappi intended for Gyllir to be proud to have him at his side.

Time sped past as Kappi prepared himself for the banquet. He bathed and then oiled his body. He applied a light dusting of blue powder across his eyelids before lining them with his usual black. Finally he dressed.

Once he was ready, he called for Brodir. He gazed down at his chest and then up at his friend as Brodir came into his room. “How do I look?”

A snort escaped Brodir, and then he nodded. “I never expected to hear those words from you. You look incredible. The bluestone added to your nipple rings is a good addition, as is attaching those blue feathers to your kilt and headdress. Gyllir will understand you’re honouring him.”

“I hope so. Unlike him, I wasn’t born a prince. I want him to look at me and be proud I’m at his side.”

“He will be, not because of how you look on the outside, but because of who you are on the inside. You and he will make an impressive couple. Are you ready to go?”

“Yes.” Kappi gave a curt nod. “Help me with the headdress.” The ornate creation had a crown of red and green feathers that sat tall on his head and then several strands of red, green and gold beads of varying lengths that flowed down his back.

“Done.” Brodir stepped back and nodded.

“Good. Let’s go.” Flanked by two of his personal guard, Kappi followed Brodir to the banquet hall. He’d never really given thought to his honorific title of Prince before. But the title was bestowed in deference to Gyllir’s status and their fated pairing. Kappi believed he’d lived up to the expectations of the title and that his adoptive parents were proud of him and his achievements.

His trail of thought was interrupted by a fluttering sensation in his stomach. In just a few minutes he would meet Gyllir face to face. His hand rose, almost unbidden, to fuss at his face and hair before he fingered one of the earrings gifted by Gyllir. How time had flown.

Tomorrow they would stand before the people of Stillir's kingdom and formally declare their intention to be bound. One week later, his clan and that of Stillir's, would meet at the sacred hill. The hill still bore the images of the Twins, despite Stillir's people moving away from their worship to that of Humi. Once he and Gyllir were a bound pair, they would fulfil the prophecy of uniting the clans. An arduous undertaking, but one he felt sure they would achieve.

Approaching two tall, ornate doors, Kappi realized he hadn't even been aware of his journey through Stillir's palace. The doors were guarded by two warriors who reached to pull them open as Kappi neared. Looking into the reception room beyond, Kappi saw Stillir and Gyllir. Stillir looked every bit a king. He wore a full-length golden chiton decorated with multi-coloured beads and tassels on the sleeves and hem, several strings of brightly coloured beads, and a fantastically plumed headdress in shades of orange and gold.

Then Kappi's focus was all on Gyllir. His mate-to-be wore his hair pulled back from his face in a bun, from which a few gold and blue feathers stood erect. The style emphasized Gyllir's fine bone structure. On his brow rested the diadem, and the necklace, that Kappi had also given him, adorned his slender throat. His chest was bare but oiled, and gleamed in the flickering light of the torches. An ornate loincloth, with intricate beading and tassels down both sides of the centre panel, displayed legs that were slender and smooth. Kappi had seen many beautiful men in his time, but none as beautiful as Gyllir.

Refusing to let his nervousness betray him, Kappi took another couple of steps forward and waited in the doorway as Brodir announced him.

"King Stillir and Prince Gyllir, I present to you Kappi, Prince of the Anund clan."

Moving forward, Kappi couldn't help but notice the second recognition dawned in Gyllir's eyes. He turned his attention quickly to Stillir. "I bring you the greetings and wishes for long life and happiness from my clan, King Stillir." Kappi bowed low to the monarch before him.

"Welcome, greetings, and wishes for long life and happiness to you, Prince Kappi." Amusement twinkled in Stillir's eyes. "It seems your appearance is somewhat different to that of the amulet you gifted to my son."

“Indeed.” Kappi smiled and fingered a slight bump in the centre of his nose. “I thought if my defects were exaggerated, then perhaps I might pleasantly surprise Prince Gyllir when he first saw me.” He took a couple of steps toward Gyllir. “I hope I succeeded.”

A pink flush stole across Gyllir’s cheeks. “I saw you in the courtyard, duelling. You looked up at me.” His eyes opening wider, Gyllir glanced quickly at Stillir.

“Yes. I saw you, too, but I had an advantage. I knew who you were.” Kappi moved a little closer. “You are very beautiful. I consider myself a very lucky man.”

“As do I.” Gyllir whispered the words and smiled at Kappi.

Lost in a slight haze as Kappi gazed into his fated mate’s eyes, it took a discreet cough from Stillir to break the spell. Gyllir smiled at him and stepped back a pace.

“May I?” Kappi held out his left arm. After a quick glance at his father, Gyllir laid his arm on top of Kappi’s forearm. A frisson ran the length of Kappi’s spine. The look in Gyllir’s eyes told Kappi he’d felt something too, before he interlaced his fingers lightly with Kappi’s.

To have Gyllir on his arm felt incredibly natural and the warmth in Gyllir’s gaze helped dispel the nervousness that had tormented Kappi.

“Are you ready?” Stillir stood before another set of doors, guards at the ready to open them.

“We are.” Kappi held his head high.

The doors opened and Kappi, with Gyllir on his arm, walked into the huge hall a few steps behind Stillir. Brodir and his own guards were close behind him. He was glad of their presence.

The assembled guests rose to their feet, banging their fists on the tables as Stillir made his way to the head table. Looking around as unobtrusively as possible, Kappi noticed that not everyone appeared either pleased or curious. A few faces looked less than happy.

Once at his own place, Stillir indicated for Gyllir to sit on his right and Kappi on his left. Kappi whispered to his guards so that they positioned themselves behind them. A space at a table to Kappi’s left had been reserved for Brodir. As Brodir took his place, the man he sat beside, offered him a smile.

One of the men seated at the table on Gyllir's right, who wore the headdress of a senior warrior, stood and pointed at Kappi's guards. "Surely my men should be there."

"In a week's time Kappi will be the bonded mate of my son. His people will be our people. The clans will unite. I am happy for his guards to be at my back, Laufi."

Stillir's answer thrilled Kappi, but Laufi's face clouded. He sat quickly, muttering to the woman on his right. Her face was one of the least friendly that Kappi could see. Even that of the high priest remained neutral.

The man was easily recognizable in his dark robes. He sat at the end of the table to Stillir's left, a small distance from the next courtier. A servant stood beside him. As though he was aware of Kappi's scrutiny, Dreyi turned to stare at him. A sensation of cold slithered down Kappi's back. The dark-eyed gaze was filled with such malevolence it was palpable. Then the look was gone and the priest's face was expressionless once more.

Glancing away quickly, Kappi looked for Brodir. His spirits lifted when he saw his friend in deep conversation with the man at his side.

"His name is Riddari. He's a captain in my guard and a good friend to Gyllir." Stillir leaned fractionally toward Kappi, keeping his voice low. "He's a man who can be trusted."

Certain Stillir was endorsing the man, Kappi inclined his head. "Thank you," he murmured. It seemed to Kappi that there were factions even within the palace that opposed his and Gyllir's marriage. Leaning forward, Kappi looked over at Gyllir. Nothing was going to stand in the way.

And no one.

Chapter Five

Nerves made Gyllir's heart race, but he was ready to stand before the people of his clan and declare, publically, his intention to take Kappi as his mate. Everyone in the procession would walk in centaur form, to the sacred hill of the Twin gods. There he and Kappi would formally declare their intention to be bound.

He stamped his forelegs, eager to begin. A fanfare heralded Stillir approaching. As his father passed, Gyllir fell into step behind him and another fanfare sounded. From the other side, Kappi approached and took his place at Gyllir's side. The palace gates opened and Stillir led them through.

Everyone who lived in proximity of the palace joined the procession until the sacred hill was reached. At that point, Gyllir was led aside into a hut. His body was oiled so that his skin appeared a deep burnished bronze, and his loincloth almost matched the colour of his skin. A leather harness was fitted to his chest, and finally a headdress, in the image of a horse's head with a silver mane, was fixed in place.

Stepping out of the hut, Gyllir saw the same had been done to Kappi. His appointed mate looked incredible, almost a perfect representation of Dynfaxi with his dark mane. They both stared down at the lower steps, inscribed with words from a language long since dead. *Monarque des Chevaux*. The words still held power, although none knew their true meaning. Just that it related to the bound pair in some way and denoted a special authority within the clans. Standing side by side, he and Kappi ascended the steps cut into the hill to stand at the shrine at the top.

Standing there was Dreyi. He wore the same dark robes he had the night before and he glared at Gyllir and Kappi in turn. "Make your announcements, if you dare."

"Dare?" Kappi's voice was muffled as he still wore the headdress, but it wasn't yet time to remove it.

"Do you think the true god will bless your union when you make it before the old gods?"

"Unlike here, Dynfaxi and Eldfaxi have not been supplanted in my kingdom. I have no fears." Kappi turned to Gyllir. "Have you?"

“None. I’m ready.” Removing his headdress, Gyllir faced the crowd to a cacophony of sound. Cheers, roars, clapping, and the stamping of hooves rang out. “I, Prince Gyllir, before my people, do affirm I will be bound to Prince Kappi.” He grinned at the ecstatic reception from his people.

Taking his place beside him, Kappi made the same vow, to a similar reception, before holding out his arm as he had the night before. With a nod, Gyllir laid his arm on top of Kappi’s and laced their fingers.

They were almost at the bottom of the steps when Dreyi’s voice rang out.

“Against my advice you made your vows before the old gods. Humi will not ignore this insult. He will deal with your arrogance.”

The crowd fell silent and within seconds, Riddari and Brodir were at Gyllir and Kappi’s sides, their swords drawn.

“How dare you disrupt the occasion, Dreyi. You were given the option of being absent from this location.” Stillir joined them, fury on his face as his voice rang out.

“I came to remind people of Humi, as he asked me to do as his priest. The bonding of Gyllir and Kappi may have been expected for years, however, do you think Humi will take no action if you fail to give him the worship and sacrifices he demands?”

“Are you threatening the union?”

“I only speak as my god directs. I urge you to reconsider, King Stillir. Give Humi what he demands or he will show his wrath, rather than his blessing.”

Chapter Six

Once they were back in the palace, Kappi along with Gyllir, Riddari, and Brodir were drawn aside by Stillir.

“The palace is riddled with secret passageways. Regrettably, I have no idea how to access any of them. But no matter what happens to me, the bonding must proceed.”

“It will proceed.” Kappi laid a hand on the older man’s shoulder. “You think the priest will act in some way through these passageways?”

“I do.” Stillir nodded. “Perhaps I challenged him too soon in regards to Humi, or underestimated his fanaticism. His devotion cannot be faulted. I never intended to jeopardize the bonding between you and Gyllir. To act against Dreyi now, could tear my people apart in a civil war that we cannot risk.”

“Surely a guard can be with you?” Gyllir looked between his father and Kappi. “Or I can?”

“I will keep guards with me, but no.” Stillir reached to clasp Gyllir’s arm. “Not you. I would not knowingly endanger you. Whether I live or die, know you are, and always were, loved, my son. Bond with Kappi and unite the clans.”

Clenching his hands into fists, Kappi stood back while Stillir hugged Gyllir. He had no way to protect the king, but he would protect Gyllir. “Brodir, you and Riddari appear to have become... close.”

“Is that a problem for you?” Riddari scowled and stepped forward slightly. Brodir quickly reached out to hold him back.

“Not at all.” Kappi shook his head. “I hope that between you, something may be uncovered to help us. If Stillir must be alone at any time, we cannot prevent that. But nothing must stand between the union of Gyllir and myself, and I will allow no one to harm Gyllir.”

“We’ll do all we can, Kappi. Riddari is a good man, my friend.” Brodir smiled up at Riddari and then met Kappi’s gaze.

“I’m glad to hear it. I wish you both well. I intend to sleep with Gyllir from now on. I’ve read all there is about the ceremony and nothing forbids me sleeping with him before the official bonding ceremony.”

“You have my blessing to do so.” Stillir nodded at Kappi.

Leaning close to his friend, Kappi dropped his voice low. “Brodir, ensure the rest of the men are eyes and ears for us. It speaks volumes to me that Stillir did not bring his general here. There is no way for any of us to, truly, know friend from enemy. Take care, Dreyi strikes me as a man who will stop at nothing to get his way.”

“I will, My Prince.” Brodir nodded.

“And I will be at his side.” Riddari held out his hand and Kappi clasped it hard.

“Brodir is like a brother to me. It’s good to know there is someone who will watch his back.” Kappi released Riddari and turned back to Stillir and Gyllir. “Are there any here in the palace you trust, King Stillir?”

“At one time I’d have trusted Laufi, my general, but he seems completely devoted to Humi, and thus to Dreyi. Besides, the smaller the group, the less likely it is that Dreyi will suspect anything. I’d prefer you say nothing to Dilfja either. I have no wish to alarm her.”

“We’ll act only as you direct, highness.” Kappi bowed his head at Stillir.

“Nothing will be said to anyone outside of this room.” Kappi glanced at the men beside him who nodded their agreement.

“Thank you.” Stillir nodded at Kappi who reached to clasp the older man’s shoulders.

“It’s my intention to insist upon sleeping in the same room with Gyllir. There is nothing to prevent it, although I originally intended to remain with my men until the official bonding.”

“I’ll ensure there is a proclamation declaring that you have my blessing. I will also make it known that if anything should happen to me before the official bonding, Gyllir is my heir, and will assume the throne with you at his side, until the day you are wedded and can rule together.”

Chapter Seven

Standing by his bed, Gyllir shuffled from foot to foot. He'd never slept with anyone before and suddenly the realization of the physical aspects of his union with Kappi filled his mind.

"You're nervous." Kappi came close to Gyllir and ran his knuckles down Gyllir's cheek. "If you'd rather, I can sleep on the floor. I've done it before."

"No." Gyllir shook his head. "No. I just hadn't thought beyond our bonding and the need to unite the clans. Any other... considerations hadn't really entered my mind." Annoyed with his naivety he tried to turn away, but Kappi stopped him, holding his upper arms until Gyllir relaxed and looked into his eyes.

"Then I suggest we undress and settle in bed. I would like to hold you."

"I'd like that, too." Gyllir smiled, hoping his nervousness would settle. He focused on removing his jewellery, then his make-up, and finally his clothing. He braided his hair and finally turned away from his dressing table.

Standing on the far side of the bed, Kappi was already naked. He'd pulled his hair back into a single loose braid and looked breathtakingly beautiful. Turning, and fully facing Gyllir, Kappi showed no embarrassment at being naked. Gyllir swallowed and butterflies fluttered in his stomach at the sight of Kappi's thick cock.

"Don't fear me. Come here, my love."

The warm tones of Kappi's voice helped dispel some of Gyllir's nerves, and he looked up to see Kappi's hand extended toward him. Then his eyes widened. "Love?"

"Of course. You are the most beautiful man I've ever seen, but your beauty is as much within as it is without. You're intelligent, caring, and brave, how could I not love you? I am indeed, the most blessed of men."

The heat that burned Gyllir's cheeks equalled the warmth that spread through his body. He came around the bed and took hold of Kappi's hand. At Kappi's urging, he came closer to be enfolded in strong arms.

Ducking his head slightly, Kappi kissed Gyllir's cheek and then nosed him gently until Gyllir faced him. Gyllir had been kissed before, but never with love

or with the flame of passion burning within him. As Kappi kissed him, Gyllir wrapped his arms around Kappi's neck.

He opened his mouth when Kappi swiped across his lips with the tip of his tongue. The sensation of Kappi's tongue rubbing alongside his was indescribable. A moment passed before he realized the soft whimpering sound came from him.

"Hush, my love. I'll take care of you." Kappi whispered the words against Gyllir's cheek as they moved to the bed.

Held in Kappi's arms, Gyllir nestled against his chest. Warmth and protection enveloped him. He'd never doubted Kappi was to be his bonded mate, but it had always been abstract. Now, here, held close enough to hear Kappi's heartbeat, Gyllir *knew* this was where he was meant to be. His nerves ebbed away and he kissed Kappi's jaw.

"You feel less tense." Kappi's whisper broke the silence.

"It feels so right to be in your arms." Gyllir kissed his way across Kappi's cheek and claimed his lips. His cock was aching hard, and as he moved, it brushed against Kappi's and he groaned.

"It does, my love. Have you ever touched or been touched by another?"

"No." Gyllir shook his head, even though Kappi wouldn't see in the darkness. "My foster parents told me I needed to give myself only to my mate."

"We both give, Gyllir, and we both take. Love, pleasure, enjoyment—they're for sharing. My foster parents were warriors. I spent a lot of time in the company of other warriors. I *have* known another man's hand, but I've never slept with anyone like this. Nor have I wanted to. That part of me, the full sharing of my body, heart, and soul, was for *you* and you alone."

The initial shard of jealousy was soothed by the rest of Kappi's words. No one had ever known him like this. And no one would.

He gasped as Kappi moved, sliding on top of him and aligning their cocks before grinding down. "Kappi." He moaned his lover's name as his dick was taken in hand alongside Kappi's in a firm grip.

"Relax, my love. Let me share this with you." Kappi stroked the flesh in his hand and kissed Gyllir's face and throat.

Wrapping his arms around Kappi's shoulders, Gyllir quickly fell into a rhythm that harmonized with Kappi's. The pleasure was too much to resist. The

touch of his lover, strong, steady, insistent, was too much to resist. His body trembled as his seed flowed, and his heart soared as Kappi jerked, a deep groan of Gyllir's name falling from his lips.

Gradually Gyllir's wits returned and his breathing slowed. A deep sense of contentment settled over him. Kappi's body was slumped on top of him and Gyllir traced his fingers in abstract patterns on the warm skin of his lover's back.

"I have never felt such a sense of completion, my love."

Kappi kissed his shoulder, but the words he murmured caused Gyllir's heart to fly with joy. "I love you, Kappi. I love you." Gyllir laughed softly as Kappi rolled their bodies so that he now stretched over his lover.

"I love you. Truly the gods *must* have blessed our union." Kappi tightened his hold around Gyllir's waist. "You are perfection."

"As are you." Gyllir yawned as lethargy followed on from their shared ecstasy. He smiled when Kappi moved them onto their sides.

"Time to sleep, my love, there is still much to do before our union takes place."

"I want to leave a gift for the Twin Gods tomorrow, to show my thanks." Gyllir snuggled in Kappi's embrace. "I am quite certain that the dark god Humi had no part in bringing us together."

"Whatever you wish, my love."

Chapter Eight

Waking up with Gyllir in his arms, Kappi experienced a sense of belonging that he'd never known, even with the foster parents in whose care he'd grown up. He'd been loved and he'd loved them deeply in return, but the love he felt for the man in his arms went beyond that. Despite knowing Gyllir for such a short time, already Kappi knew his heart was held fast by the other man.

He kissed Gyllir's bare shoulder and then smiled as Gyllir shifted even closer, pressing back against Kappi's chest with a drowsy murmur. The subtle shift resulted in Gyllir rubbing against Kappi's already risen manhood. As much as Kappi wanted to progress their lovemaking, he determined to wait until after the bonding ceremony. Their bonding would have the ultimate sharing of their bodies as its culmination.

A sharp rap on the door distracted him from his more pleasurable thoughts. Slipping from beneath the covers as Gyllir started to wake, Kappi grabbed a simple kilt to wrap around his waist. Pulling open the door, Kappi stared at the woman before him. He recognized her from the banquet. She'd sat with Laufi. Her name came to his mind, *Dilfja, Stillir's daughter from his concubine*.

She held a tray laden with Gyllir's breakfast. There was only food enough for one and Kappi assumed that Stillir hadn't informed his kitchen staff to provide food for two to Gyllir's room. He was about to reach for the tray when he saw Dilfja's expression and his temper rapidly rose as she wrinkled her nose and curled her lower lip.

"Is there a problem, *woman*?" He stuck his head forward, purposely growling the words at her. He'd heard she tried to pass herself off as a princess. Something that Stillir indulged her in. She was no princess as far as Kappi was concerned.

Her face paled, her eyes widened, and she took a step back, but she quickly recovered. She stood tall, attempting to look down her nose at Kappi. "I understood the bonding was meant to be performed in purity." She spat the last word out, her gaze dropping to the kilt wrapped at Kappi's waist before meeting his gaze with contempt in her eyes.

"And so it shall. I have the blessing of King Stillir to sleep with Prince Gyllir to ensure his safety in the days preceding the bonding." When Dilfja's expression didn't change, Kappi leaned forward again. "Ask him yourself if you doubt *my* word."

“It’s true.” Gyllir peeked from behind Kappi. “Father wished it.”

“Does he not trust Laufi and our guards to protect you? Or is it that his conscience is unsettled by his refusal to act in accordance with our god’s wishes, as Dreyi says?”

“He expects the man who is Gyllir’s bonded mate, to take care of him. Not that it is of any concern to you.” Kappi was not in a mood to discuss things further. Dulfja might be Gyllir’s half-sister, but she was not her brother’s equal, and he had no desire to justify himself to her. “You can take that back to the kitchens.” Kappi indicated the tray. “We will eat elsewhere. Hurry and dress, my love, I’d like you to meet some of my men.” Deliberately closing the door on Dulfja, Kappi ushered Gyllir back into the room.

“Kappi, she’s my sister.” Gyllir looked so upset that Kappi immediately drew him into an embrace.

“I know, my love. But she does not have the right to question us, or your father. She oversteps her boundaries. Things will be very difficult when you’re king if she doesn’t accept that now.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Gyllir didn’t look any more convinced than he sounded, but this was an issue Kappi intended to stand firm over. He’d find out whether Dulfja was being courted. If she was, he’d be more than glad to provide a generous dowry to accompany her away from the palace.

“Hurry and dress. I want to breakfast with my men and for them to get to know you.” Kappi patted Gyllir’s pert buttocks as he herded his beloved toward the bathroom. He smiled and nodded, and then scowled at the door.

Chapter Nine

To Kappi's pride and delight, his men were as enchanted with Gyllir as he had been. Breakfast passed swiftly in a mix of tales and jokes, and Kappi relaxed while Gyllir was the centre of attention.

"Gyllir! Come quickly! Something's happened to your father." Riddari arrived in the courtyard at a run, with Brodir at his side.

Looking at his friend's grim face, Kappi didn't need to be told how serious this was. Gyllir was already on his feet, running to meet Brodir. Kappi hesitated for a moment. He looked around at the men sitting closest to him.

"I fear treachery of some kind. Be on your guard and use your eyes and ears well. If I don't come back with an update on the king, Brodir will keep you informed. Keep your swords sharp and at your sides. Spread the word here, and to the men we have camped outside the palace."

A soft murmur rose from his men as they nodded, one or two casually rising to their feet, laughing and acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had just taken place. Kappi's chest swelled with pride. They were good men. All of them. Turning away from those still sitting, he ran after his lover. Riddari had hung back, while Gyllir had run on with Brodir.

"It's bad." There was no preamble, just cold words as Riddari led Kappi into the palace. "The attack took place in Stillir's reception room. Two guards were on the door and another two inside. The two that were in the room are dead, stabbed, one from behind, straight into his kidneys. The other tried to raise the alarm. He's close to the door with a dagger in his back, a dagger from Humi's shrine. Stillir lives, but is incapable of movement."

"Poison?" Kappi didn't believe that the gods acted in such ways. This sounded far more like a human agent.

"Could be. Brodir says this place is riddled with hidden passages, and that their secret is long since lost. But perhaps not to all."

"Dreyi?" Kappi dropped his voice.

"He's claiming his god has struck Stillir silent for daring to speak against him. He wields a great deal of power. Some of it comes out of fear, and some of it comes from those who support him. Laufi for example; he's actually dared say your and Gyllir's bonding should be delayed."

“Has he?” Kappi growled the words. No one was interfering with his bonding to Gyllir. “If he tries to stop me in any way, I’ll demand he prove himself in battle. Nothing is going to stand in the way of my bonding to Gyllir. Not even Dreyi, should he have a horde of demons at his beck and call.”

“Remain calm, Kappi. Anger is also an enemy.”

Remaining silent, Kappi was led to Stillir’s private chambers. He stood close to the door as Gyllir knelt at his father’s side. Kappi’s heart constricted at the sound of Gyllir’s grief. Across from the bed, Dreyi stood looking like a bird of ill omen in his black robes and headdress decorated with long black feathers. Laufi stood like a silent sentinel at his side.

“My sympathies, Prince Gyllir.” Dreyi bowed, and his voice, slick and oily, made Kappi’s stomach churn. “However, I did warn your father about the consequences of ignoring Humi. Such is his punishment.” Dreyi gestured with his hand to the bed, even though Gyllir didn’t look at him.

“Humi has shown his wrath. Perhaps your bonding with Prince Kappi should be abandoned, or at least delayed, while Dreyi makes sacrifices to our god to regain his favour.” Laufi stepped forward toward Kappi, his arms folded, and his face grim.

“Or maybe someone would try and use whatever has befallen King Stillir to their own advantage.” Kappi mirrored Laufi’s stance.

“How do you explain this? It must have been Humi.” Laufi glared at Kappi as if daring him to argue.

“As yet, I do not explain it. But I would be more of a mind to blame human agency, especially when knives and daggers are used.” Kappi remained calm as Laufi’s face reddened with fury.

“No dagger was used with Stillir.”

“No. But we are warriors, Laufi. We know that poisons exist.” Kappi glanced over at Gyllir who looked back at him, his eyes red, and held out his hand. There wasn’t much he could do for his beloved’s father, but he could comfort Gyllir.

Chapter Ten

“I see no reason for me to remain here.” Dreyi pulled his cloak tightly around him as he turned away from Kappi and Laufi. “I will be in Humi’s shrine. I shall pray for his mercy, and ask of him what can be done for King Stillir.”

Waiting for the priest to leave, Gyllir rose from his father’s side, walked over to Kappi, and took the proffered hand. He tilted his head high and took a deep breath before finally speaking. But it was his friend he addressed. He looked past Laufi.

“I want four men in here at all times and another two outside. Riddari, you will hand pick the men personally and ensure there are enough chosen to have men in here continually. I also want all drink brought to my father to be tasted both before it leaves the kitchens, and again before it’s given to him.”

“It shall be done, My Prince.” Riddari bowed then looked at Brodir and jerked his head toward the door. Hesitating, Brodir glanced at Kappi who nodded his approval.

“When that’s done I wish to speak with you again.” Gyllir shouted out as the men reached the doorway.

“Yes, My Prince.” Riddari bowed again and hurried away.

His face contorted with fury, Laufi stepped closer to Gyllir. “*I am your general.*”

“Yes, you are indeed *my* general, and you, like Riddari, will do *my* bidding.” Gyllir stared at Laufi, and when the other man made no further comment, Gyllir nodded. “If Dreyi feels he is able to walk out of here certain the attack is the work of Humi, then that is between him and his conscience. I, on the other hand, am yet to be convinced of a supernatural cause. As such, *you* will investigate this as an attempted assassination. You will leave no stone unturned. The bonding of Kappi and myself is not open for debate or delay. Now leave us. There are guards outside and Kappi and I will remain with my father until Riddari sends the men he’s selected.”

“Yes, My Prince.” Despite his bow, Gyllir was certain Laufi had no desire to be taking orders from him. But Gyllir didn’t care. Acting out of his normal character had confused the other man. Which was exactly his intention.

Waiting until the door closed behind Laufi, Gyllir then pulled Kappi to Stillir's bedside, and whispered into his ear. "I think Father can hear and understand. I just don't know how to communicate with him."

Dropping to his knees, Kappi peered closely at Stillir. "Is there any part you can move? Some way you can let us know?"

Leaning against Kappi, Gyllir suddenly gasped. "His eyes, he's not just blinking. Watch carefully. Father, can you understand? Close your eyes twice if you can." A sob of relief escaped Gyllir's lips as Stillir deliberately closed his eyes slowly, twice as Gyllir had asked.

"Poisoned." Kappi growled the word and Stillir again blinked twice.

With agonizing slowness, they established that some kind of dart had been used to poison Stillir. He did not see his attacker, but he did hear Dreyi's voice. And the priest had someone to assist him. Stillir had seen a stranger throw the dagger that killed the guard raising the alarm.

Gyllir turned to Kappi. "What can we do? If I try to arrest Dreyi with no evidence against him, the other palace courtiers may not support me. Dreyi wields a great deal of power here."

"We remain on our guard and make sure Dreyi is aware that there is no change to our plans. In two days' time you and I will ascend the sacred hill and become bound under the Twin gods." Kappi pulled Gyllir into a deep kiss. "If Dreyi wants a battle, he will get one. And I have never yet lost a fight."

Chapter Eleven

A full day had already passed, and Gyllir sat alone. Kappi had gone to his men, hoping that one of them may have seen or heard something to help them. He'd also sent for his family's personal physician. Gyllir was in a guest room, and his personal guard was at the door. No one would suspect he was here unless they saw his guard, but he was not to be left unprotected.

He frowned at the tap on the door. He approached cautiously and shouted out. "What is it?"

"It's me, Dillfja. I have some *xocoatl* for you."

Surprised she'd found him, Gyllir opened the door a crack to see her looking at him, her lips pursed in her usual irritated expression. He stood back and let her inside, before swiftly closing the door again.

"Here." Dillfja held out the goblet. "I hope you enjoy it. So why sleep here?" She waved her hand around as she moved toward the door.

"Kappi thought it safer while he couldn't remain at my side." Gyllir took several sips of the drink. He looked at it. The drink seemed more sweet than usual.

"He still refuses to believe that Humi struck down Stillir?"

"We both do." Gyllir sighed. He sipped at the drink again, but the cloying sweetness was too much. "I don't think Humi responsible either. But we will find out the truth."

Putting his drink down, Gyllir rubbed at his eyes. Tiredness threatened to overwhelm him. He staggered to the bed and sat down heavily. "Sorry. I don't know what's come over me."

"Don't be sorry, *brother*. I'm certainly not." Dillfja pulled out a dagger and her dark eyes glittered as she advanced slowly.

Despite fear coursing through his veins, Gyllir's body refused to obey his mind's order to run, to move, anything to defend himself. "I don't understand." He'd used words as weapons before. He prayed he could do so again. Surely, Kappi wasn't too far away.

"My mother wasn't trying to *save* you. She wanted to kill you. *Your* mother died protecting you. Mine quickly changed her story when challenged. As I

grew, so did my hatred for you. I prayed you'd never return. But you did. Then Dreyi told me of his plan. I went along with him, as it suited me, but it will take too much time. First, let you bond with Kappi. Then kill Stillir, finally kill Kappi so you'd lean more on Dreyi. He'd guide you to take Laufi as your mate, and then we'd kill you. And then *I* would finally take my rightful place as queen. But Dreyi's plans would take months, maybe even a year to come to fruition."

"All these years, you hated me?" The revelation would have been unbelievable if it weren't for the way Dylfja's face contorted with loathing as she looked at him.

"Not a day went by I prayed you'd never return. Not one." Dylfja looked at the dagger in her hand and then smiled.

The smile was cold, menacing, and Gyllir was certain it held madness. "Father would have let you marry Laufi. You only had to say."

"I wanted *more*." Dylfja stopped her relentless advance and stamped her foot like a petulant child. "If the old priest hadn't come along and found mother, you'd be dead anyway. I should be next in line for the throne, but because mother was a concubine, I'm not good enough. Dreyi said it was time for a new lineage. *I* was to be at its head. Well, I'm not waiting any longer. I will kill you now, Laufi will kill Kappi, and we *will* start the new dynasty."

"Dylfja, please, don't do this." There was nothing Gyllir could do. The drug in his drink had made his body leaden, he could barely move as she advanced once more, dagger raised. Something black fluttered behind her and she froze, her eyes widening. The dagger fell from her hand and she coughed. Blood ran from her mouth as she swayed for a few seconds before crumpling to the floor.

"Dreyi!" Gyllir gasped the priest's name as Dreyi wiped his knife on his robes.

"Foolish, wayward child." Dreyi toed Dylfja's unmoving body. "Far too ambitious for her own good, but it made her so much more pliable. I was always certain this would be her end. Albeit, not quite so soon. Now, I have to change my plans. She's ruined what I had schemed from the day I learned of the secret tunnels and passages."

"You schemed?" Gyllir was struggling to keep pace.

"I am a man of infinite patience. Dylfja believed I would let her and Laufi rule. Not so. *I* want to rule, not be subservient to kings and queens. Yes, I was

going to make sure Stillir died, and Kappi. But as to Dölfja ruling? No. That was a mere ploy. Now I need to take care of you. Such a pity, I dislike making changes at such short notice.”

Unable to protect himself, Gyllir expected to feel the bite of Dreyi’s blade. Instead, the priest sheathed the knife and shouted a name Gyllir didn’t know. He lost the ability to remain sitting upright, falling back onto the bed as a tall, skeletal man emerged from a secret opening in the wall to the side of his bed.

“Bring him. Humi needs blood sacrifice. A prince’s blood will appease him very well, I think.” Dreyi waved a hand in Gyllir’s direction.

A grunt was Dreyi’s servant’s only reply to his master’s command. He headed to Gyllir, scooping him easily into his arms, despite his thin build. Dreyi came to stand beside his servant and smiled at Gyllir.

“He’s a perfect servant. Silent since his tongue was cut out. Hurry, Mani, all my plans need to change. Laufi will believe me when I say Kappi is to blame for Dölfja’s death. Things can get back on track. Yes. Yes, they can.” Muttering to himself, Dreyi led the way into the passageway, tapping on a couple of stones to close the doorway behind them.

Unable to do anything other than lie helplessly in the grip of Dreyi’s servant, Gyllir prayed fervently for Kappi to find him.

Chapter Twelve

Interviewing his men had taken Kappi longer than he intended. He hadn't wanted to leave Gyllir alone, but at least he wasn't in his own room.

He hurried back to Gyllir. A feeling of cold dread spread through his veins when he caught sight of the guard laying lifeless outside the door. Drawing his sword, he rushed inside.

On his knees, Laufi held Dulfja's lifeless body in his hands, and his low keening sound of grief filled the air.

"Where's Gyllir?" Kappi demanded. He didn't have time for Laufi's sorrow, nor to worry about the dead woman. Only Gyllir mattered.

Looking up at him from where he knelt, Laufi's eyes were filled with hate and he drew his lips back over his teeth. "He's with Dreyi. He'll meet his fate on the sacred hill dressed as one of the false Twin gods while Dreyi personifies Humi. You may have killed the woman I wanted as my wife, but you'll not bond with Gyllir, and neither of you will rule our clans."

"Where is he?" Kappi moved into a fighting stance, and ground the words from between clenched teeth.

"There's a secret passageway from here that leads down into an underground tunnel and connects the palace to the sacred hill. No one will see Dreyi, only the dark god Humi, when he removes the beating heart of Eldfaxi."

"I didn't kill Dulfja." Kappi tried to reason, but doubted Laufi would listen. The man trusted the priest, and now his mind was clouded with grief.

"Of course you did. Who else? Prepare to die, Kappi. I will avenge Dulfja and when Gyllir is dead; I will be king and lead my army to take your clan under my dominion."

"I've heard of your reputation, Laufi, but mine is equal to yours."

"We shall soon see." With a yell, Laufi rose to his feet, and for a couple of minutes, it was all Kappi could do to defend himself. Falling back toward the bed, Kappi somersaulted across it, and faced Laufi.

His reputation as a fighter was indeed well deserved. Moving back into the centre of the room, Kappi circled Laufi cautiously. More than just his life depended on him defeating his enemy. Charging at him, Laufi fainted at the last

moment and Kappi managed to duck aside, rolling forward and up onto the balls of his feet, then he swung his sword around, but Laufi had already moved.

Touching a finger to where his side now stung painfully, Kappi grimaced at the wet stickiness the digit encountered. But it could have been worse.

“I am the best swordsman in my kingdom.” Laufi smirked and rotated his sword.

“*Your* kingdom?” Kappi laughed, deliberately taunting Laufi. The man might be talented with his sword, but his temper was unstable. “The kingdom will be mine and Gyllir’s.”

The barb hit its mark and Laufi’s smirk morphed into a snarl. “Gyllir has no right to the kingdom. He doesn’t know anything of being a king. I’ve protected its borders and its people. It should be mine. It *will* be mine.”

This time when he charged, Laufi was more careless. His swing was wilder. Kappi parried it easily, slicing downward and catching Laufi’s hip. When Laufi turned to face him this time, the man’s face was twisted and red. His eyes glittered.

Taking a deep breath, Kappi balanced his stance, ready, and waiting. “You don’t have what it takes to be a king. You’re much better as his guard dog, where you belong.”

“I’ll kill you for what you did to Dillja, and then I’ll take care of Gyllir.”

Rage clouding his judgment, Laufi slashed left and right, trying to defeat Kappi through sheer brute force. The reaction was exactly what Kappi had hoped. Ducking, twisting, and parrying, Kappi looked to wear out his opponent while he waited for the moment Laufi would give him the opening he wanted.

The second Laufi dropped his guard, Kappi struck. He drove his sword deep into Laufi’s unprotected abdomen. His opponent’s eyes bugged wide, and he looked down at where Kappi’s blade pierced his flesh.

“Kappi! Look out!” His attention on Laufi, Kappi looked up at the warning yell. Riddari barrelled across the floor, hitting Kappi and driving them both to the floor.

From underneath the other warrior, Kappi instantly knew something was wrong. Riddari was slumped over him, not just shielding him. Reaching around the other man Kappi’s eyes widened as he felt the blood soaking his friend’s side.

“Riddari!” The man’s pained groan in response to Kappi’s urgent cry, although a concern, was also a blessing. *Thank the Twins. He’s still alive.*

“A door opened, to the side of the bed.” Riddari whispered the words.

Following the direction of Riddari’s trembling finger, Kappi saw a fragment of cloth trapped and left behind when the hidden door closed. He’d return to find the way in once Riddari was being treated.

“Let me take you to Stillir’s room. My physician arrived in the last hour or so. He can tend to you. Dreyi will pay heavily for what he’s done today.”

Chapter Thirteen

Unable to move, Gyllir endured the humiliation of Dreyi's servant oiling his body. The harness he'd worn on the day of the formal announcement of his binding with Kappi was fixed next, and he'd already seen the horse mask with the long silver mane. The question was, why was he being dressed like the god? Since Dreyi wasn't there to ask, he kept silent.

Instead, he focused on trying to make his body function. A sound caught his attention, and he saw Dreyi appear.

"Why? Why are you doing this?" Gyllir managed to loll his head to the side to look at Dreyi, but despite the pins and needles he felt heralding the return of feeling and some control to his body, it was going to be too little too late.

"Why?" Dreyi came close and hissed the word into Gyllir's face. "Why? You think you suffered being sent away from your family? My father mated with a human. I was their only offspring. And I *can't* shift. Can you even *begin* to imagine how alone I felt?"

A wave of pity crashed over Gyllir at the thought of a child living in a world where he was completely different from everyone else. "How did you manage?"

"I spent as much time as I could alone. I prayed and prayed to be the same as everyone else. To be able to shift. But I never got an answer from the Twin gods. I wasn't in *their* image. Then I discovered Humi. A god in *my own* image. He sent me a vision. A vision of something only *I* could achieve. To bring down the Twin gods and have the people worship Humi in their place. Everything I've done has been with that goal in mind. *I* will rule the clans and all will bow down to Humi, and to *me*, his ultimate servant, the only one truly in his image. Once I have all the clans under my rule, I'll seek a consort from one of the human kingdoms, and together we will found a new dynasty. The *Monarque des Chevaux* will finally cease to exist."

Horror quickly replaced pity as Gyllir realized just how warped Dreyi's vision was. While he felt deeply for the child so lost, isolated, and afraid, he truly feared the madness of the adult he'd become. "You can't punish an entire race for your childhood."

"Not *my* race." Dreyi spun away, hugging himself, and then stroked the mask of Humi's hideous face. "Soon my vision will be reality. When the people

see Humi remove the still beating heart of Eldfaxi, they will kneel at Humi's feet and beg for his blessing. The worship of the Twin gods will end with your death, and the true reign of Humi will begin."

Moving away from Gyllir, Dreyi headed to where Mani was laying out his costume. He pointed at Gyllir. "In a couple of minutes take him and secure him to the post at the side of the altar. The drug will wear off soon and I don't want him to struggle too much. After all, a god would hardly fear death."

Chapter Fourteen

Staggering into Stillir's room with Riddari leaning heavily on his shoulder, Kappi shouted for his physician who stood beside Stillir's bed. "Engill, I need help."

White faced, Brodir raced across the room to ease Riddari carefully to the floor. "Riddari, my love."

At the raw pain in his friend's voice, Kappi winced, his heart contracting. "He was protecting me."

"Let me see." As matter of fact as always, Engill pushed his way past Kappi, who suddenly felt redundant. He watched helplessly as Engill directed Brodir to bring strips of torn sheeting from Stillir's bed.

"I'm all right. It'll take more than a coward's cut to keep me down." Riddari groaned as Engill put pressure on the wound.

"You'll lie still, keep quiet, and let me stop the bleeding." Engill growled at his patient.

Handing the sheeting to Engill, Brodir stroked Riddari's face tenderly before looking up at Kappi. "What happened?"

"Dreyi has Gyllir. Laufi boasted of it to me. He's dressing Gyllir as one of the Twin gods, and, dressed as Humi, he will kill Gyllir before everyone at the shrine on the sacred hill, to show that Humi is all-powerful. There's an underground tunnel that leads from the palace to the hill. The people will not see them approaching the shrine. No one will realize it is Gyllir and Dreyi. They will only see Humi and Eldfaxi or Dynfaxi."

"What do you want me to do?" Brodir asked, his gaze flitting back to his injured lover.

"Stay with Riddari. I'd defeated Laufi when someone attacked me using the secret passage to get into the room. Whoever it was left a fragment of cloth behind when he tried to kill me. The device that opens the panel must be close by. If I can't find it, I'll take my men and storm the hill."

"No. No, listen." Riddari gasped out. "Let Brodir go through the secret tunnels—"

"I'm not leaving you." Brodir dropped to his knees and clasped Riddari's hand.

“I’m in good hands with your physician, am I not?”

“Of course you are.” Engill gave an impatient snort as if offended by the very notion anyone could think otherwise.

“Indeed, but Gyllir must be saved. Please, Brodir, for my sake. You must do this. Find the secret way to the tunnels and the shrine. Kappi, if you openly attack Humi at the sacred hill, our army, and even the people themselves, will stop you. *We* know it’s only Dreyi, but they do not. While Brodir goes through the secret passages, you must take your men and challenge him in his guise as Humi. How can a god refuse a challenge of a mere mortal?”

“There’s nothing you can do here, Brodir.” Engill patted Brodir’s arm, his gruff voice softening slightly. “I’ve administered what I believe is the right potion to help Stillir, and now all I can do is wait. I don’t need help with Riddari’s wound, but you can do something to help Kappi.”

Nodding slowly, Brodir leaned over Riddari and kissed him hard. “Don’t you dare die.”

Smiling, Riddari reached to stroke Brodir’s cheek. “I’ll be here waiting for you. You can nurse me fit again. Now go. Save Gyllir.”

“There’s no time to get more of my men.” Kappi was already halfway to the door. “I can spare you a few moments to help you uncover the secret to opening the passageway, and then I have to go.”

“Gyllir’s safety is paramount.” Brodir ran to catch Kappi up. “There’s a switch of some kind in that room. With or without you, I’ll find it.”

Chapter Fifteen

For a couple of moments Kappi worked in silence with Brodir as they pushed, prodded, and pressed anything that looked like it could activate a hidden switch in the vicinity of the cloth. It seemed that the task would be futile. Kappi was on the verge of leaving when an excited shout from Brodir had him run to see what he'd found.

"Here." Brodir stroked his fingers over some of the coloured stones that made up a pattern running around the walls of the room. "Feel them. Some of them are worn down."

Copying Brodir, Kappi stroked his fingers over the stones and felt slight depressions where, perhaps, many years of touches had created a wear mark in the soft rock. Splaying his fingers across the stones, Kappi pressed firmly.

"Yes! We've done it." Brodir punched the air before peering inside the hidden tunnel. "Are you coming this way?"

"No. We don't know how convoluted a journey this may be. Make sure you can at least re-open this entrance."

"Good idea." Brodir pulled out a torch from a sconce near the doorway and took it into the tunnel. The entrance closed behind him and a few seconds later swung open again. "If all ways out are like this, there won't be a problem. The switch inside is obvious."

"Make your way to the sacred hill. Be on your guard. If Dreyi makes a run for it, he knows these tunnels better than you do. I'm going to do as Riddari suggests. I'm going to get my fastest warriors and challenge Dreyi."

"Good luck, Kappi. May the Twins smile down on you."

"You, too, Brodir." Kappi pulled his friend into a hug before heading out of the room. He couldn't worry about Brodir or rely on him making it through what would be a rabbit warren of hidden tunnels. He knew his friend would do all he could, but Kappi's focus had to be getting to where Gyllir was Dreyi's prisoner, and rescuing his beloved.

Running to the courtyard where his men were gathered, Kappi pointed to three of his fastest men. "Shift into centaur form and armour yourselves. Prince Gyllir has been taken prisoner by Dreyi, who has turned traitor. We must rescue him. The rest of you follow as foot soldiers."

His men scattered to do his bidding and each second that passed felt like an eternity to Kappi. The ominous sound of the gong at the top of the sacred hill rang out, and Kappi's blood turned to ice in his veins.

His own breastplate affixed in place, Kappi wasted no time leaping astride the first of his men to appear in centaur form. The soldier circled his sword in the air and galloped toward the gates that led outside.

His men already swarmed toward the palace guards. "Hurt no one if you can help it." Kappi yelled out. "Only the traitor Dreyi is our enemy."

Several of his men wrestled the guards out of the way, disarming them while others unlocked the gate.

"Spread the word to the men in the encampment. I want half to remain here and half to follow us. Hurry, Gosi. Onward."

Rising on his hind legs, Gosi bellowed loudly before galloping at full speed toward the sacred hill.

The people of Gyllir's clan stared in shock and surprise as Kappi and his men thundered past. Kappi constantly prayed that no one would try to challenge him, but in acting as he had, there were no soldiers to stand in his way.

Reaching the sacred hill, Kappi dismounted from Gosi, pushing his way through people who stood or kneeled at the foot of the hill.

At the top, Gyllir, dressed as Eldfaxi, stood tied with his arms over his head. Beside him was Dreyi, wearing a headdress of the dark god.

"Behold the false god Eldfaxi. Some of you dared to worship him and his brother. Today I bring their reign to an end. Today I, Humi, your true god, will remove his still-beating heart. One twin is powerless without his other half. On your knees and bow to me."

"No!" Kappi raced halfway up the stairs before stopping and addressing the people below him. "This is no god. This is Dreyi who has turned traitor against King Stillir and Prince Gyllir."

"You dare speak thus?" Humi's voice boomed loudly and some people dropped to their knees. However, Kappi was heartened to see that others had risen and gazed up, and a loud murmur arose from the gathered crowd.

"If you are truly a god, smite me down." Kappi held out his arms, taunting Dreyi. "Why do I still live, *Dreyi*? Is it because as a man you have no power to

touch me?” Kappi moved step by step higher, getting closer to Dreyi and his beloved.

“Stay where you are.” Dreyi screeched. He held a knife out and pointed it at Gyllir. “His life is forfeit if you come closer.”

“Is that the action of a god? Would a god be afraid of meeting a mere man?”

“Prince Kappi is right. A real god would strike him down. Humi is no god. It’s Dreyi as he says, and the other is Prince Gyllir. Face Prince Kappi, face Prince Kappi.”

Kappi neither knew, nor cared, who shouted out, but the crowd picked up on the words and began to chant ever more loudly. Taking advantage of Dreyi’s obvious confusion, Kappi raced up higher. Now he was halfway to the summit.

“Stay where you are.” Dreyi aimed his dagger at Gyllir’s throat. “Mani, deal with him.”

A thin man, armed with a sword and dagger stalked down the stairs toward Kappi, who raised his sword. “He won’t save you, Dreyi. When I’ve dealt with him, you’re next. There’s no way for you down this hill.”

Eyeing Mani, Kappi was certain this was the man who’d killed Stillir’s soldiers, stabbing them in the back like a coward in the night, unseen and unheard. Waiting until Dreyi’s servant was still several steps above him; Kappi circled his sword and charged Mani. His strategy worked, the servant wasn’t used to direct conflict. He stumbled back and Kappi pressed forward.

“Whether I live or die, be assured that Gyllir will not be at your side.” Dreyi’s maniacal scream sliced through Kappi. He risked a glance up to the top of the hill, knowing that there was no way he could reach the top in time to save his mate.

The sly smile on Mani’s face enraged Kappi. If it was the last thing on this earth he did, Kappi would kill Dreyi and his evil, starting with his servant. Slashing left and right, the sound of metal on metal rang out and the smile vanished rapidly from Mani’s face.

A warrior’s yell rose and fell from the top of the hill. Kappi didn’t need to look. He knew Brodir’s cry as well as he knew his own. Now he was the one who smiled, as he bore down on Mani. The man didn’t try to run, Kappi would give him that much, but without the advantage of surprise he was no real challenge to a seasoned warrior. Feinting right and left, Kappi breached Mani’s defence and thrust the sword deep into the man’s chest.

Leaving Mani's body where it lay, Kappi ran up the steps, his only thought was getting to Gyllir. To his surprise, Dreyi was a good warrior, and the sound of the battle between him and Brodir rang out as their swords clashed again and again. Almost at the top, Kappi yelled out as Dreyi gave a shrill scream of rage and tossed a handful of blue dust that had been concealed in the folds of his cape, into Brodir's eyes.

Crying aloud in pain, Brodir clutched at his eyes with his free hand. Dreyi didn't strike him down, despite his helplessness. The priest was no longer interested in the warrior. His attention turned back to Gyllir.

His heart pounding and feeling like his lungs were about to burst, Kappi pushed harder to reach the top of the stairs. Hope faded in Kappi's heart as Dreyi reached his beloved, raising his sword high.

But the anticipated blow never came. Swinging his legs up, Gyllir struck Dreyi mid-chest with both feet. The blow sent the priest staggering back and his feet caught in his voluminous cloak. He screamed as he fell, the mask dislodging as Dreyi pitched head first down the stone stairs.

Dodging aside, Kappi watched as Dreyi came to rest, his head at an unnatural angle a couple of steps away from his servant. The priest wouldn't be a danger to them anymore. Turning away, Kappi continued to the summit. Brodir was already trying to free Gyllir, but his eyes were red and constantly watering from whatever Dreyi had thrown into them. Kappi pulled off the mask of Eldfaxi, and finished cutting his beloved free.

"Thank the Twins, you're safe." Kappi clutched Gyllir to his chest.

"And thanks to Brodir and to you." Gyllir laid his head on Kappi's shoulder.

"How are your eyes, Brodir?" Kappi looked over Gyllir at his friend who still dashed away tears. Despite which Brodir grinned back at him.

"Improving already. Although I'll need some assistance to make it down the steps safely."

"Wait here. I'll get Gyllir down and send one of the men up to help you." As tempted as he was to scoop Gyllir into his arms, Kappi opted to make sure he had a tight grip around his love's waist so that they could walk down the steps. Gyllir was a prince, and would wish to appear as such before his gathered clan. Kappi hesitated at the top step. "Dreyi is dead, struck down as he would try and kill Prince Gyllir. The reign of blood and of Humi, is over." He glanced at Gyllir who nodded almost imperceptibly.

“From this moment, we will return to worshipping the Twins, who protected me and Prince Kappi. The Bonding will still take place and it will be done with the blessing of the Twins.”

The roar of a great cheer rose up as Kappi kissed Gyllir’s cheek. Finally, they could look forward to the binding ceremony.

Chapter Sixteen

The return to the top of the sacred hill was one much anticipated by Gyllir. Below him, the gathering of the clans had begun and people milled around trying to find a good place to watch. At the summit with him were two warriors, one from Kappi's clan and one from his own, who were dressed as the Twin gods.

Standing with him and Kappi, were Riddari and Brodir. The warriors looked resplendent in matching loincloths of red and headdresses of multi-coloured feathers. His father looked fit and well, and wore a chiton and headdress in his favoured orange and gold. Stillir was fully recovered from his ordeal and now stood to the side of the new high priest.

Beside him stood Kappi, and Gyllir thought his lover had never looked so magnificent. Kappi wore a blue loincloth, a headdress in blue and green as well as several necklaces, and the earrings Gyllir had given him as a gift. Gyllir's loincloth matched Kappi's, but his headdress was gold and blue.

The priest stepped forward and his voice rang out. "The ceremony to bind the Princes Gyllir and Kappi will begin." He moved Gyllir and Kappi so that they stood side on to the gathered crowd below.

A roar from the clans rose up, and Gyllir felt his heart pounding in a mix of excitement and anticipation.

The priest held up his hands and silence descended. "Prince Gyllir, Prince Kappi, know now, that since your lives have crossed, you have formed ties between each other. The promises you make today, and the ties that are bound here, will span the years and greatly strengthen your union. With full awareness, know that you declare your intent to be bound before your family, your friends, and your clans. Do you still seek to enter this ceremony?"

"We do." Gyllir and Kappi answered as one.

The priest smiled and nodded. "Will you share yourselves freely and generously with each other, making time to be together?"

"We will."

Holding out his hand to the warrior representing Eldfaxi, the priest took a thin blue cord and draped it over Gyllir and Kappi's wrists. "The first binding is thus made with blue, symbolic of water, that your love may flow and fill you to

your depths. Will you each seek to ease the other's pain and suffering, sharing laughter and joy?"

"We will."

Reaching out to Riddari, the priest draped a green cord over their wrists. "The second binding is thus made with green, symbolic of the earth, that your love may be wise and nurturing, and your happiness abundant. Will you strive to keep your romance alive through daily actions and words of encouragement?"

"We will." Gyllir was almost squirming with excitement. He glanced at Kappi as the priest took a red cord from Brodir before adding it on top of the others.

"The third binding is thus made with red, symbolic of Fire, that your love may be bright and passionate. Will you both help each other to grow in spirit and wisdom?"

The priest smiled as Gyllir and Kappi answered. "We will."

Taking the last cord, a white one, from the warrior dressed as Dynfaxi, the priest let his hand rest on top of the four cords. "The fourth binding is thus made with white, symbolic of air, that your love may be as limitless as the sky, and filled with spirit." He tied the cords. "You are now bound together, your two lives joined by love and trust, into one life. The knots of this binding are not formed by these cords, but rather by your vows. For as always, you hold in your own hands the making or breaking of this union."

Removing the cords, the priest held them aloft. "As these cords are bound, so Bound are Gyllir and Kappi." He stood back as another rousing cheer roared out.

Laughing with joy, Gyllir stepped closer to Kappi. "My husband."

"My husband." Kappi wrapped his arms around Gyllir's waist and they kissed.

Easing apart slowly, they faced the crowd below. "As Kappi and I are bound, so shall our clans be. This is our hope and our dream. One we want you all to share."

As the gathering cheered, Stillir stepped forward. "My son and his husband will make excellent rulers, and will take our people forward. But for now, it's time to celebrate. Outside the palace walls, there is food and wine for all."

Watching the people head back toward the palace, Gyllir leaned against Kappi. “I don’t know that I could eat yet.”

“Good.” Kappi’s eyes twinkled as he looked at Gyllir. “As I thought we could return to the palace with Riddari and Brodir through the secret tunnels, and then you and I could have a private celebration before joining everyone.”

His love’s gaze darkened and his voice dropped as to be low and sultry, and Gyllir’s cock reacted to both. “I like that idea.” He took Kappi’s hand in his. “Let’s hurry.”

Chapter Seventeen

Already progress had been made in the tunnels. Stripes of colour were being painted on the walls, representing specific parts of the palace. The line they followed led back to the throne room. It was the first Gyllir had insisted be completed.

Once back in the palace, Gyllir and Kappi left Riddari and Brodir to their own entertainment and hurried to their suite of rooms. By the time they closed and locked the door, all Gyllir could think of was making love with his husband.

Each second it took to remove his clothing and jewellery served to send Gyllir's excitement higher, and by the time he was fully naked, he was also fully erect, as was Kappi.

He crossed the floor. Kappi embraced him as they kissed. Gyllir groaned when his cock rubbed against the length of Kappi's, the erotic sensation sending his arousal higher.

"Let's move to the bed." Kappi nibbled at the tip of Gyllir's ear. "I made sure all that we need was in place, before I left."

Hand in hand, Gyllir and Kappi stretched out on the bed. Gyllir sighed and then shivered as Kappi trailed kisses up his throat to nibble on his earlobe. "I've looked forward to this day from the first time I saw you."

"As have I." Kappi nudged Gyllir's legs wider apart and settled into the space between. He smiled down at Gyllir. "Your ears are very sensitive. Let me see if I can find anywhere else where you are so responsive to my kisses."

To Gyllir's mind, it seemed like every part of his body responded eagerly to Kappi. His nipples peaked at the touch of Kappi's lips, his stomach quivered when Kappi licked over it, and his cock was hard and weeping by the time Kappi nuzzled at his groin.

Moving away, Kappi held up a small amphora. "Before I can make love with you, I need to prepare you. Are you ready?"

"Yes." Gyllir nodded. He knew what to expect and spread his legs wider, offering himself to Kappi. What he didn't expect was Kappi's way of distracting him from the necessary preparations.

A low moan escaped him as the head of his cock was enveloped into the heat of Kappi's mouth and a single finger pressed inside him. Focusing on the pleasure, Gyllir tried to ignore the strange sensation of having Kappi's finger moving back and forth inside him. But at least it wasn't too uncomfortable.

When Kappi added a second, Gyllir felt fuller, and when a third pressed inside him, he wondered if he could truly take his lover's cock. Kappi remained patient and caring, never once pushing Gyllir beyond what he felt comfortable to do.

"It's time. Roll onto your side, my love, it'll be easier for you." Kappi guided Gyllir onto his left side and shuffled close behind him.

Excitement sizzled along Gyllir's veins as the head of Kappi's dick pushed against his entrance. "I'm ready." Unable to stop a groan escaping him as Kappi pushed inside, Gyllir panted as his lover held still. "Go on. Go on."

"Try and relax. You're much tighter now." Kappi whispered in Gyllir's ear and kissed his cheek.

"I want you so much." Gyllir twisted his head around to try and see Kappi.

"And I want you, but if you remain so tight, I won't manage it. Take a couple of deep breaths and push back."

Slowly Kappi pressed forward until fully inside. Gyllir held tightly to Kappi's thigh, waiting for his body to settle. He slowly relaxed as Kappi reached around him, stroking his softened cock and thrusting gently back and forth.

Covering Kappi's hand with his own, Gyllir moved to his lover's rhythm, his moans now from pleasure.

There was nothing that Gyllir could compare to the sensation. He felt as if Kappi was part of him, certain his own heart thrummed to the same beat as his beloveds. Then his lover's cock hit something deep inside him that made him see the stars, and his own dick ached with need.

They moved as one, pleasure building as the seconds slipped past. Gyllir gripped Kappi's hip harder as his lover thrust faster and sped up the strokes to Gyllir's cock. Gyllir could scarcely catch his breath. He was going to spill.

The cry from Gyllir's lips as he reached his climax was matched by one from Kappi. Their bodies shuddered together in a shared release that left Gyllir exhausted and sated. As he came down from his high, Gyllir could feel Kappi slipping from inside him.

“I love you,” Kappi whispered in Gyllir’s ear as his softened cock slid from Gyllir’s body, leaving Gyllir feeling empty.

“I love you, my husband.” Gyllir sighed as Kappi rubbed his back and down over his buttocks.

For the next few moments, they lay in one another’s arms, trading kisses and words of love until Kappi sighed heavily.

“We must join the others. You stay here. I’ll start the water to cascade for a shower. A bath would be better, but then we’d never join the celebrations.”

Gyllir smiled as he watched Kappi go through to the bathroom, and a moment later the sound of falling water reached his ears. Reluctantly he left their bed and followed Kappi.

In the bathroom, Gyllir stood under the shower on cool marble, and sighed as Kappi ran the soaped sponge over his body. The heat of the water and the subtle scent of rose were perfect. He wished they could have remained in bed, but that would come later. He smiled as Kappi finished by running his hands over Gyllir’s body.

“Just making sure I didn’t miss a spot.” Kappi winked and Gyllir laughed softly.

“My turn.” Taking the sponge from his lover, Gyllir made sure he thoroughly soaped Kappi’s body. Once rinsed off, they dried each other as they touched, tickled, and laughed with joy. Finally, they stood dressed and faced one another. “You look so handsome.” Gyllir ran a finger over Kappi’s broad chest.

“As do you, my love. I will be so proud to stand before the gathering with you at my side.” Kappi ran his fingers along Gyllir’s cheek and under his chin.

“Your idea to invite those people most influential within both our clans, to celebrate along with us inside the palace, was inspired.” Gyllir peered into his looking glass, making sure his eye makeup still looked perfect.

“A tactical move.” Kappi slid his arms around Gyllir’s waist and kissed his shoulder. “If they are involved from the moment we face them as a bonded pair, it will be difficult to claim one clan is favoured above another. Are you ready?”

Taking a deep breath, Gyllir faced Kappi, and nodded. “Yes, my husband.”

Side by side, Gyllir walked with Kappi, his head held high and his arm resting on that of his bonded mate. As they approached the main reception room, a fanfare rang out, and guards opened the doors for them.

To Gyllir's relief, there was no obvious division of the people who politely applauded their entrance. A courtier came and stood before them. "Their highnesses, Gyllir and Kappi. Presenting Prince Gyllir and Prince Kappi, le Monarque des Chevaux."

More applause followed and they moved farther into the room. Gyllir saw that his foster parents were with Stillir and Kappi's two sets of parents. They all looked relaxed and happy. He wasn't so naïve as to think it would be easy to rule so many people. But it was a start. He glanced at Kappi. "Time to greet our guests, my husband."

"Indeed." Kappi nodded. "Today is the first step on the road to uniting our clans."

"It may be a long and difficult road, but one I will gladly walk with you at my side." Gyllir turned to face his husband.

"I would walk until I reached the edge of the world with you beside me." Kappi slid his arms around Gyllir's waist.

Louder applause accompanied their kiss. No matter what the morrow might bring, Gyllir knew he would face it without fear with his soul mate at his side.

The End

Author Bio

Living in clean, green New Zealand, Pelaam is a best-selling, multi-published author of gay romance and erotic books. When not busy writing she can be found indulging in her other passions of cookery and wine appreciation.

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